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Housman Society Journal

Volume Forty-Three **December 2017**

The Chairman's Notes	*Peter Waine*	4
Chansons d'Outre-tombe	*Peter Sisley*	9
Faith Hymns and Poetry: An Excerpt from a Lecture	*Timothy Dudley-Smith*	46
'Arthur the King' and 'Arthur the Man' in Clemence Housman's *The Life of Sir Aglovale De Galis*	*Gabriel Schenk*	52
The Carnage of Bebriacum	*Andrew Breeze*	72
'A Distracting Entanglement': Examining Some Assertions in Peter Parker's *Housman Country*	*Alan James*	79
'Yours every truly': Signing Off with Housman	*David Butterfield*	100
Biographies of Contributors		106
The Housman Society and Journal		108

Chairman’s Notes 2017

It has been normal practice for the Society’s Chairman to open each Journal with a retrospective of the year’s calendar of events. The election of our new Chairman, Peter Waine, was reported in the Autumn Newsletter when Max Hunt as Secretary gave his summary of the year’s programme. It seemed more appropriate that Peter, himself a published poet, should begin his term of office by sharing with us a personal response to the Housman canon.

To a Housman enthusiast it is strange, almost bordering on the unfathomable, for anyone to read his poetry and not experience a response which is “more physical than intellectual”.

Be that as it may, we can at least know and be reassured that our Society is built on the firm foundations of a poet who mastered the art of poetic alchemy. To many – Auden, Orwell, Hardy and others – he was a giant. He might have written only 170 numbered poems and wanted, perhaps above all, to be recognised as a classicist; he might even in the opinion of some have been “unspeakably lonely, cruel” and to others to have looked like “an absconding cashier”; and yet to others still he was loyal, generous and witty. He might be such a conundrum that “so far from believing that man wrote *The Shropshire Lad* I shouldn’t even have thought him capable of reading it”. He might have turned down both the OM and the Poet Laureateship within twelve months – but I care not!

To me Housman is an intoxicating poetic combination, his collected poems always on my bedside table. Some of his lines are so powerful as to be almost painful.

Yonder see the morning blink.

or

The sighs that heave the grasses.

What is so clever about those lines? I don't really know and I have read most of what has been written about Housman. There is probably more chance of finding the Holy Grail or the true source of charisma or genius. Actually I don't really care. To me these lines, and many others, are descriptions of the everyday in an altogether ethereal form.

Whenever I arrive at Ludlow, the town nestled in its rural timeless idyll, I think of lines such as:

The orchards half the way
From home to Ludlow fair
Flowered on the first of May
In Mays when I was there.

I arrive but too late for Housman's generation; they have all departed, many before their time and there is an inevitable, unstoppable, salutary rather pathetic and sadistic note in "In Mays when I was there". Housman, that doom-laden romantic, certainly enjoyed his melancholy. "The lads that will die in their glory and never be old."

When I would muse in boyhood
The wild green woods among
And nurse resolves and fancies
Because the world was young.

Housman knows how to convey a point, to be almost hurtful if he wants us to share with him both his pain and the intense pleasure of his verse. He has given birth to such lines and with birth comes pain as well as pleasure.

When I depart from Ludlow going east I glance south towards the Malvern Hills, another landscape that inspired another genius, this time Edward Elgar, a landscape that was so integral to the composition of his

Cello Concerto that he once said that if its melodies ever seemed to float across the hills "don't be afraid – it's only me". As I leave I think of:

> When summer's end is nighing
> And skies at evening cloud.

from what is perhaps my favourite poem, *Last Poems* XXXIX.

> From hill and cloud and heaven
> The hues of evening died;
> Night welled through lane and hollow
> And hushed the countryside
> But I had youth and pride.

And that last verse:

> So here's an end of roaming
> On eves when autumn nighs
> The ear too fondly listens
> For summer's parting sighs,
> And then the heart replies.

And then the heart replies! I bet a pint in any pub in Ludlow that Housman was mighty pleased with himself when those lines popped out; no doubt he was exhausted, but he would have been elated, exhilarated, perhaps even confused – he was the midwife to the words – but he knew, he must have done, that he had captured something very special, like netting a feather floating in the air before it disappears again.

Did I say that *Last Poems* XXXIX was my favourite? What about *More Poems* XIV?

The farms of home lie lost in even,
I see far off the steeples stand,
West and away from here to heaven
Still is the land.

There if I go no girl will greet me,
No comrade hollo from the hill,
No dog run down the yard to greet me;
The land is still.

Somehow those last two lines are especially powerful and I cannot fathom why. I am equally embarrassed and annoyed both with Housman and myself! *More Poems* XIV should really have a health warning attached to it.

And I haven't even mentioned:

When lads were home from labour
At Abdon under Clee.

or

Young is the blood that yonder
Strides out the dusty mile.

Dusty mile! Why couldn't I or anyone else for that matter put together two unexceptional and not even particularly pleasant sounding words and compose something so special? Routine words turned into sheer delight. It is extraordinary.

And I haven't even deigned to dip into *A Shropshire Lad*.

I am honoured to be your Chairman. Housman is often regarded as the poet who most closely expresses that deep distinctive spell that the English countryside still holds over our predominantly urban society. John Clare is more descriptive of nature but that is very different. I have been Chairman of CPRE, the organisation established ninety years ago to campaign to protect the countryside. With my love of the English countryside, to have been chair of both organisations is an achievement almost on a par with writing “dusty mile”.

Peter Waine

Chansons d'Outre-tombe

by Peter Sisley

Note: This is the text of a talk given to the Housman Society on 29th April 2017 at the Charlton Arms Hotel, Ludlow. It is reproduced in exactly the same form as read, including showing the chancellor breaks. In the references to poems the abbreviations MP (More Poems) and AP (Additional Poems) are used throughout and, for ease of delivery, I have used Arabic rather than the Roman numerals favoured by Housman.

In the spring of 1922 A.E. Housman learnt that Moses Jackson, his greatest friend, was seriously ill – was, in fact, dying. In twelve days of April of that year he filled fifty-four pages of his notebooks with new poems or revisions of previous drafts. It had been over twenty-five years since he had written poetry at this intensity, but he had no time to lose if Moses was to receive a copy of this final tribute.

The book, the decisively named *Last Poems* was published on 19th October 1922 in a print run of 4,000 copies and was an immediate commercial success with many booksellers selling out on the day of issue. It was reprinted five times before the end of the following month.

On the day of publication Housman wrote to Moses Jackson in Canada enclosing a copy of the book. He tells Jackson that "The cheerful and exhilarating tone of my verse is so notorious that I feel sure it will do you more good than the doctors, though you do not know, and there are no means of driving the knowledge into your thick head, what a bloody good

poet I am." He goes on to say that "… I am an eminent bloke; though I would much rather have followed you around the world and blacked your boots." Housman duly received a lengthy letter of reply from Moses – what has become known in Housman circles as 'Mo's last letter'. Housman's final letter to his greatest friend was despatched on 4th January 1923 but was never read as Moses died while the letter was making its laborious journey across the Atlantic. Within that letter Housman described himself as "… a fellow who thinks more of you than anything in the world" and admitted that "… you are largely responsible for me writing poetry."

Last Poems contains a short introductory note by Housman:

> I publish these poems, few though they are, because it is not likely that I shall ever be impelled to write much more. I can no longer expect to be revisited by the continuous excitement under which in the early months of 1895 I wrote the greater part of my other book, nor indeed could I well sustain it if it came; and it is best that what I have written should be printed while I am still here to see it through the press and control its spelling and punctuation. About a quarter of this matter belongs to the April of the present year, but most of it dates to between 1895 and 1910.

In his own copy of *Last Poems* adjacent to his comments about spelling and punctuation he pencilled the words "vain hope".

A few months after the book's publication in a letter that Housman wrote to Robert Bridges, the Poet Laureate, he refers to Bridges' query about the finality of his decision to publish no more poetry with these words, "The title of the next volume will be *Posthumous Poems* or *Chansons d'Outre-tombe*." I have purloined those words as the title of this talk in which I wish to examine some of those poems from the grave, the twenty-year aftermath

of their publication and their impact on the public estimation of Housman's sexuality.

Well, Housman was true to his word and published no more poetry and wrote very little more after *Last Poems*. Perhaps the most notable exception was 'For My Funeral' which was to become *MP* 47.

O thou that from thy mansion
Through time and place to roam,
Dost send abroad thy children,
And then dost call them home,

That men and tribes and nations
And all thy hand hath made
May shelter them from sunlight
In thine eternal shade:

We now to peace and darkness
And earth and thee restore
Thy creature that thou madest
And will cast forth no more.

That poem was written in 1925 and handed to the Dean of Trinity in a sealed envelope to be kept until needed. Andrew Gow of Trinity considers that the words written on the envelope 'For My Funeral' were intended not as a title for the poem but merely a direction to the Dean.

The poem was duly sung at Housman's funeral in the Chapel of Trinity College on 4th May 1936.

*   *   *

I have here a copy of the last will and testament of A.E. Housman. It is a simple document appointing Barclays Bank as his Executor and Trustee. Bequests are made of £20 to George Penny, his manservant at Trinity, and £300 to his godson, Gerald Jackson. All his books and manuscripts were left to his brother, Laurence Housman, and the residue of his estate is split equally between his surviving siblings, Clemence, Kate and Laurence.

Of more interest to us are clauses 7 and 11. Clause 7 says:

> I direct my said brother Laurence Housman to destroy all my prose manuscript writings in whatever language and I permit him but do not enjoin him to select from my verse manuscript writing and to publish any poems which seem to him to be completed and to be not inferior in quality to the average of my published poems and I DIRECT him to destroy all other poems and fragments of verse.

Clause 11 says:

> I expressly desire and wish my desire to be made as widely known as possible that none of my writings which have appeared in periodical publications shall be collected and reprinted in any shape or form and I expressly forbid the Bank to allow the reprinting of any such articles the copyright of which is vested in myself.

The will is dated 17th November 1932.

*   *   *

The biggest mystery about Housman's will is why on earth he gave the job of his Literary Executor to Laurence whom he had always held in rather low esteem. In Cambridge he was surrounded by people who could have taken on the task with knowledge, vigour and competence. And yet he chose Laurence. I shall return to this conundrum later in my talk.

Now I suspect that any competent Literary Executor would have thought long and hard as to how he was going to comply with the terms of the instruction in Housman's will. The tricky bit, as I see it, is that little phrase "not inferior in quality to the average of my published poems." And it is not an easy assessment to make. If one is to take this instruction at face value, and an executor is certainly required to interpret the words accurately, then one has to establish exactly what the words actually mean. If one takes a rigid view on the words used then the arithmetic of the 'average' must work out something like this: in *A Shropshire Lad* there were sixty-three poems and in *Last Poems* a further forty-one; a total of one-hundred and four poems, and so the first job of the Literary Executor is to decide, in his opinion, which half of Housman's published poems can be considered to be best and use this yardstick as one's compass. 'Not less than the average' the will says. So there is a ban on publishing any poem less good than the fifty-second published poem in the league table. In other words Housman is instructing his Executor to only publish any poem which is superior to half the material that he had himself already published.

In his preface to *More Poems* Laurence Housman writes:

> The responsibility which has thus been laid on me is of a double character; for while I am anxious to include nothing that can do hurt to my brother's literary reputation, I am most reluctant to deprive his lovers of any poems, however minor in character, which are not inferior to others – also minor in character – which have already been published.

Here Laurence misses the point of his instruction entirely as the will makes no mention of 'minor in character', only 'completed' and 'not inferior in quality to the average'. But Laurence is up and running and thinks that because he has found a few inferior poems in his brother's published work then he has carte-blanche the approval to publish work of similar merit. In the *More Poems* preface Laurence continues:

> My main difficulty has been this: that while I would naturally wish to give any poem of minor merit the benefit of the doubt, and am therefore inclined to err on the side of leniency, I know well that his own decision would be likely to err on the side of severity.

Quite so! But why Laurence considered that poems of 'minor merit' passed the 'not inferior in quality' test is very difficult to comprehend.

In his will, in reference to any future publishing of poems, Housman uses the phrase, "I permit him but do not enjoin him," but Laurence seems to have confused this instruction with the sound of the starting gun for getting *More Poems* onto the bookseller's shelves without delay. Having only received his instructions in May 1936 he certainly didn't hang about as the book was published on 26th October that year in a print run of 13,937 copies, with a second edition of 7,500 copies printed in the following month. The book was simultaneously published in the United States and also there by 'The Book of the Month Club'. However the Literary Executor seems to have left a few editorial loose ends, as William White, the Housman scholar, discovered sixty-three variations in text between the English and American editions. Compare that with Housman's short note in *Last Poems*, "and it is best that what I have written should be printed while I am here to see it through the press and control its spelling and punctuation."

More Poems, although in my estimation failing the 'Average Test', contains many fine poems which will stand comparison with anything that had appeared in Housman's first two books of poetry, but the book did undoubtedly suffer some dreadful editing, for which Laurence must take full responsibility.

Here is *MP* 33, one of my personal favourites.

On forelands high in heaven,
'Tis many a year gone by,
Amidst the fall of even
Would stand my friends and I.
Before our foolish faces
Lay lands we did not see;
Our eyes were in the places
Where we should never be.

'Oh, the pearl seas are yonder,
The amber-sanded shore;
Shires where the girls are fonder,
Towns where the pots hold more.
And here fret we and moulder
By grange and rick and shed
And every moon are older
And soon we shall be dead.'

Heigho, 'twas true and pity;
But there we lads must stay.

Troy was a steepled city,
But Troy was far away.
And round we turned lamenting
To homes we longed to leave,
And silent hills indenting
The orange band of eve.

I see the air benighted
And all the dusking dales,
And lamps in England lighted,
And evening wrecked on Wales;
And starry darkness paces
The land from sea to sea,
And blots the foolish faces
Of my poor friends and me.

That poem, in its first incarnation in *More Poems*, contained three textual errors which a careful editor would have spotted, but not Laurence.

In that beautiful final verse,

I see the air benighted
And all the dusking dales,
And lamps in England lighted
And evening wrecked on Wales;

Laurence allows the printing of the word ‘in’ instead of ‘on’:

And evening wrecked in Wales.

What a howler! It just cannot be! The ear recoils at the sound. And Laurence, himself a published poet of forty years' standing, should have known that 'in' could never be the correct reading. The imagery is there for all to hear, and to see in the mind's eye: the Welsh hills standing out against one of Housman's crimson sunsets for-all-the-world like a perilous coastline, and the vessel coming to grief on the rocks, not in the rocks; it is obviously the wrong word. It is seriously sloppy editing.

Today the poem is restored to what it should be, but one feels for those original readers who suffered at the hands of this editor, and for those whose inner ear did not recognise that the word was printed erroneously.

Now, here's a little test for Housman enthusiasts. Who recognises this verse?

Where mixed with me the sandstorms drift,
And nerve and heart and brain
Are ashes for the air to lift,
And lightly shower again.

It's a tough question, but, in *MP* 2 [When Israel out of Egypt came] those lines are printed as the final verse of the poem. John Carter, Housman's bibliographer, when advising on setting the text for the *Collected Poems* in 1939 chucked out this verse as not belonging to that poem at all.

And throughout *More Poems* there are multiple errors which could have been avoided if Laurence had been a competent editor, or even if he had allowed himself enough time to do the job properly. Ultimately these errors have been eliminated from the text but Laurence's decision to include poems of a personal and perhaps biographical nature still reverberate today

as can been seen from some recently published articles in the *Housman Society Journal* where Housman's sexuality seems to have become more important than Housman's poetry. Within *More Poems* I count at least a dozen poems that are definitely of a personal nature and others that could be so construed.

Consider, for example, *MP* 34:

> Young is the blood that yonder
> Strides out the dusty mile,
> And breasts the hillside highway
> And whistles loud the while,
> And vaults the stile.
>
> Yet flesh, now too, has thorn-pricks,
> And shoulders carry care,
> Even as in other seasons,
> When I and not my heir
> Was young and there.
>
> On miry meads in winter
> The football sprang and fell;
> May stuck the land with wickets:
> For all the world could tell,
> The world went well.
>
> Yet well, God knows, it went not,
> God knows, it went awry;

For me, one flowery Maytime,
It went so ill that I
Designed to die.

And if so long I carry
The lot that season marred,
‘Tis that the sons of Adam
Are not so evil-starred
As they are hard.

Young is the blood that yonder
Succeeds to rick and fold,
Fresh are the form and favour
And new the minted mold:
The thoughts are old.

It is the fourth verse of that poem that presses the supposed biographical button:

Yet well, God knows it went not,
God knows it went awry,
For me, one flowery Maytime,
It went so ill that I
Designed to die.

Clearly, some argued, this poem referred to the year 1881, when Housman failed his final examinations at Oxford and his world came crashing about

his ears.

'Not so!' said others, arguing that this must be a reference to 1885, when Housman had his big falling out with Moses, went missing for a whole week, and, upon returning, packed and left their joint lodgings and went to live totally alone for the next twenty-five years until moving to Cambridge.

But there may be a third alternative; that the poem is biographical but refers to another incident in Housman's life of which we are unaware, or of an incident of which we are aware but would not consider as being grounds for contemplating suicide.

Or this is a fourth alternative; that this is not one of the biographical poems.

And how's this for editing? In that poem in its original form, Laurence printed the second verse as number five, the third verse as number two, the fourth verse as number three and the fifth verse as number four. So one's heart goes out to those early readers who thought that Housman's verse was falling away somewhat.

Some of these 'personal poems' are what one would expect to find in this final volume, this posthumous offering, such as *MP* 48:

> Good-night; ensured release,
> Imperishable peace,
> Have these for yours.
> While sea abides, and land,
> And earth's foundations stand
> And heaven endures.
>
> When earth's foundations flee,
> Nor sky nor land nor sea
> At all is found,

Content you, let them burn,

It is not your concern:

Sleep on, sleep sound.

That poem, 'Parta Quies', although it stands last in his final book of poems, was in fact the first poem of Housman's established work that was published – in *Waifs and Strays; A Terminal Magazine of Oxford Poetry* in 1881. Nonetheless, Laurence managed to print it in *More Poems* with an incorrect title and lines 4 and 5 completely different to the original printed text.

The poem was written as a tribute to his mother who died on his twelfth birthday, and although this talk today does not venture deeply into literary criticism, I believe that we can all agree that they are remarkably mature lines for an author who was no more than twenty-one years old when they were written.

Those opening words, 'Good-night; ensured release, imperishable peace' stand at the head of Housman's own memorial tablet here in Ludlow, which we shall visit this afternoon.

Yes, 'Parta Quies' is a personal poem, but the poems that, to say the least, raised a few eyebrows, were definitely biographical, as here, *MP* 31.

Because I liked you better

Than suits a man to say,

It irked you and I promised

To throw the thought away.

To put the world between us

We parted, stiff and dry;

'Good-bye,' said you, 'forget me.'

'I will. No fear,' said I.

If here, where clover whitens,
The dead man's knoll, you pass,
And no tall flower to meet you
Stars in the trefoiled grass,

Halt by the headstone naming
The heart no longer stirred,
And say the lad that loved you
Was one that kept his word.

One almost doesn't even need to read that poem because the opening lines say it all.

Because I liked you better than suits a man to say.

And the cat was out of the bag. 'Blimey' everyone said. 'Housman must be homosexual.' Now the world and his wife were claiming that in his two previous books of poetry these homosexual resonances were a clear and repetitive theme, easily spotted by any discerning reader.

Well, it really wasn't like that and there were no whisperings about Housman prior to the publishing of *More Poems* – but hindsight is a powerful tool. Here's *MP* 30:

Shake hands, we shall never be friends, all's over;
I only vex you the more I try.
All's wrong that ever I've done or said,

And nought to help it in this dull head:
Shake hands, here's luck, good-bye.

But if you come to a road where danger
Or guilt or anguish or shame's to share,
Be good to the lad who loves you true
And the soul that was born to die for you,
And whistle and I'll be there.

Carol Efrati lifted those words with the homosexual connotations in the final verse for the title of her book on Housman, *The Road of Danger, Guilt and Shame*, and I can recall Colin Dexter addressing this Society with a review – well, more a total demolition job on the book. Colin was infuriated with Efrati, indeed he became purple with rage over the opening two words in the book – 'Housman's homosexuality…' He was in a rage throughout his talk and I am sure that this is the only time in over forty years of the history of this Society that a lecture given to it by an internationally respected name was not reprinted in our Journal.

In *More Poems* there are two offerings that are clearly biographical as Housman incorporates personal names into the titles or the text.

MP 42 is titled simply 'A.J.J.', and although at publication very few people would have known that those initials referred to Adalbert John Jackson, Moses' younger brother, when the biographies started coming, then the world, aided and abetted by scurrilous rumours, began to add two and two together. And the answer that they came up with was that Housman and A.J. Jackson could have been lovers. Now, there is absolutely no evidence at all to support this conjecture but every time that this supposition is repeated it gains more traction until it almost reaches the point that it becomes accepted as fact in the public mind.

Here is how Alan Bennett, who one might have assumed would have been more sympathetic with Housman's plight than most, deals with the matter in his volume *Six Poets*.

> What was at the heart of his writings, at any rate to begin with, was an unrequited passion for a fellow Oxford undergraduate, Moses Jackson – a thoroughly straightforward, unreflective young man who, if he was ever aware of Housman's affection, chose that it should never be made specific. In a less single-minded character than Housman's, such a passion might have been expected to pass and be replaced by other, perhaps happier, affections. And insofar as Housman became friendly with Jackson's younger brother it may have done so.

'It may have done so'! Alan Bennett is a writer who has the magical ability to put one word after another and create beautiful prose – but here he is peddling the 'may' or 'might' or 'could', the 'nudge-nudge', the 'wink-wink'. Here Bennett dramatically fails D.R. Shackleton Bailey's first rule of biography: that one must always observe a strict line between fact and surmise.

I would prefer that Bennett actually read the poem, the biographical poem, and noted what Housman actually wrote in that final verse,

> The word unsaid will stay unsaid
> Though there was much to say.

This is biographical confirmation that Housman and Adalbert were not lovers.

The second 'named' poem in the book is in *MP* 44:

Far known to sea and shore,
Foursquare and founded well,
A thousand years it bore,
And then the belfry fell.
The streersman of Triest
Looked where his mark should be,
But empty was the west
And Venice under sea.

From dusty wreck dispersed
Its stature mounts amain;
On surer foot than first
The belfry stands again.
At to-fall of the day
Again its curfew tolls
And burdens far away
The green and sanguine shoals.

It looks to north and south,
It looks to east and west;
It guides to Lido mouth
The steersman of Triest.
Andrea, fare you well;
Venice, farewell to thee.
The tower that stood and fell
Is not rebuilt in me.

The name in this poem that presses the biographical button is, of course, Andrea, who was the gondolier that Housman employed on his occasional trips to Venice. The rumours here are that, again, Housman and his gondolier might, or could, or may have been lovers, again, without a shred of evidence to support the accusation. And the offending lines in the poem with its sexual connotation – if you're looking for it – 'the tower that stood and fell is not rebuilt in me', can be easily rebutted by noting that in poetical analysis sometimes a tower is merely a tower.

The final biographical poem that I would like to refer to in *More Poems* is number 45 ('Smooth between sea and land'), and I shall return to that, rather untypical, Housman poem later in the talk.

* * *

I'd like now to consider quickly the critical reception of *More Poems*, so here are a few extracts from newspaper reviews. Ivor Brown in *The Observer* said that:

> It was not, of course, to be expected that these last poems would enhance a name already great. They are his own rejected.

But he continued by saying that Laurence

> has saved from the flames close on fifty pieces of varying length. 'Mainly workshop material' he admits the volume to be. Well, if all the chips on the floor of English poetry were of this quality, our wealth would exceed all bounds.

Eugene Davidson in the *Yale Review* noted that:

> These forty-eight poems do not make a book of the standard of excellence of the poet's other two volumes. But about ten of them could appear in *A Shropshire Lad* or *Last Poems* and in no way detract from their perfection.

Neville Watts in the *Dublin Review* wrote:

> There are two absolute superlatives that may be applied at the outset to Housman's poetry: it contains more beauty and at the same time more sadness, than any other poetry of modern times.

But, speaking *of More Poems*, he added:

> The new volume will not supplant, or even accompany, its predecessors in our pockets or our affections.

E.M. Forster in the *Listener* admitted that he had approached the task of writing about Housman initially with hesitation, but had finally decided that "I *ought* to write about Housman, because I should do it so much better than anyone else." He concluded his article with the following words – and, over eighty years later, the question he poses remains unanswered:

> One wishes that he could have enjoyed the happy highways which he resigned in the body and possessed so painfully in the imagination, but he was not destined for vulgar pleasures. Perhaps he had a better time than the outsider supposes. Did he ever drink the stolen waters which he recommends so ardently to others?

* * *

Thus, as we have seen, there was a mixed reaction to the publishing of *More Poems*, but, on the whole, I think that Laurence got away with it, for he had supplied the British and American public with what they wanted: more of his brother's poetry. Anyone who had been a devotee of Housman since the early days of *A Shropshire Lad* had sustained themselves on just two slim volumes of Housman's poetry in forty-years. 'Leave them wanting more' is a philosophy that we all can appreciate, but perhaps AEH took it to extremes.

Laurence, however, failed to stop while he was ahead and his next excursion into the notebooks was definitely a step too far.

* * *

We have heard Laurence's reasons for his selections in *More Poems*, so it is difficult to understand how, just twelve months after its publication, he decided to introduce a further eighteen poems into his book *A.E.H. Some Poems, Some Letters and a Personal Memoir by his Brother* – what are now referred to as the 'Additional Poems'. In his book he makes some feeble and half-hearted attempts to justify his logic for this second selection, but his words are unconvincing and one is left with the conclusion that 'some poems' and 'some letters' needed a good deal of padding out in order to fulfil his obligations to his publisher. A little more of his brother's poetry would certainly help to plug that gap and simultaneously would do no harm at all to his sales.

Here is how Laurence attempted to defend the indefensible:

> But since I am now publishing a second selection, it may be well for me to explain why I am doing so.

But, unfortunately, he does no such thing:

> Several of the other poems were omitted from *More Poems* because a majority of those I consulted were mildly against them; in some instances I was so myself.

But he makes no attempt to explain how these poems have improved over the previous twelve months so that they now merit publishing or what has changed to allow their inclusion now, merely stating:

> In other cases, when conflict of opinion has been even, and my conscience left me free, I have decided for present inclusion of what was before rejected.

So, I hope that's all clear. He concludes his case for the Defence with these words:

> About the last poem [No. 18] I feel quite sure that though it is not of a high standard it says something that A.E.H. very much wished to say, but perhaps preferred not to say in his own lifetime. For literary reasons I omitted it from *More Poems*; for the reason already stated in the memoir I give it here.

For the record, I disagree with Laurence's opinion of the poem's literary merit.

> Oh who is that young sinner with the handcuffs on his wrists?
> And what has he been after that they groan and shake their fists?
> And wherefore is he wearing such a conscience-stricken air?
> Oh they're taking him to prison for the colour of his hair.

‘Tis a shame to human nature such a head of hair as his;
In the good old time ‘twas hanging for the colour that it is;
Though hanging isn’t bad enough and flaying would be fair
For the nameless and abominable colour of his hair.

Oh a deal of pains he’s taken and a pretty price he’s paid
To hide his poll or dye it of a mentionable shade;
But they’ve pulled the beggar’s hat off for the world to see and stare,
And they’re haling him to justice for the colour of his hair.

Now ‘tis oakum for his fingers and the treadmill for his feet
And the quarry-gang on Portland in the cold and in the heat,
And between his spells of labour in the time he has to spare
He can curse the God that made him for the colour of his hair.

This poem, *AP* 18, was written in 1895 when Housman was in his most intense period of writing *A Shropshire Lad*, and it coincided with the trial of Oscar Wilde who was sentenced to two years’ hard labour for his conviction under the gross indecency provisions of Section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885. That poem had rested undisturbed in the notebooks for over 40 years, so it is easy to agree with Laurence’s conjecture that his brother had no wish to publish it in his lifetime. The poem may have been written out of basic human compassion for Wilde’s plight but it could so easily have been interpreted as being pro-homosexuality or anti-establishment, and Housman never attempted to rock the boat. He rigidly conformed to the required standards of the day.

Many of the few poems in this latest offering by Laurence are

extremely short, perhaps only fragments of verse, or intended to become part of something lengthier, and in consequence these ‘Additional Poems’ are generally disappointing when considered as an entity.

AP 8, almost certainly, refers to Moses Jackson. This is the poem in its entirety:

> He would not stay for me; and who can wonder?
> He would not stay for me to stand and gaze.
> I shook his hand and tore my life in sunder
> And went with half my life about my ways.

* * *

The critical reception of the ‘Additional Poems’ in Laurence’s ‘Personal Memoir’ was, shall we say, critical. Desmond MacCarthy in the *Sunday Times* writes:

> I am sorry that Mr Laurence Housman should have taken this opportunity to print verses he did not think good enough to include among the posthumous *More Poems*. Housman’s direction forbidding in his will the publication after his death of any poems “inferior to the average of those already published” was in the editing of that volume interpreted leniently enough, but now it has been ignored altogether.

Desmond Shawe-Taylor in the *New Statesman* commenced his review with these words:

> Many people chide Mr Laurence Housman for the freedom with

> which he has interpreted his brother's instructions concerning his literary remains; and it is likely that the poet himself would be horrified at the publication of the latest (positively last) poems.

*   *   *

Housman had always refused publisher's requests for *A Shropshire Lad* and *Last Poems* to be joined together in a single volume, although he did not actually specify this preference in his will. But, in 1939, with the publication of the *Collected Poems*, this duly came to pass. His two books of poems that were published in his lifetime joined the much-flawed *More Poems*, the eighteen 'Additional Poems' from Laurence's 'Memoir' and a few poems and translations culled from earlier publications to form the canon of his serious poetry. The great majority of the textual errors in *More Poems* and 'Additional Poems' found their way into the *Collected Poems*, and, when the American edition was published in the following year, scores of new errors were introduced to confound the reader.

*   *   *

But Laurence's problems were only just starting. Let us return to the will. Clause 7 says:

> I direct my said brother Laurence Housman to destroy all my prose manuscript writings in whatever language and I permit him but do not enjoin him to select from my verse manuscript writing and to publish any poems which seem to him to be completed and to be not inferior in quality to the average of my published poems and I DIRECT him to destroy all other poems

and fragments of verse.

Let us consider that final instruction: 'I DIRECT him to destroy all other poems and fragments of verse' – in which the words 'I DIRECT' are in capital letters. The instruction is absolutely clear and unambiguous. So, how did Laurence cope with that instruction? Well, let's be brutally honest – not very well at all. He did not destroy the other poems and fragments; he sold them.

Let me run through the process of what occurred. Laurence's problem was how to comply with the instructions in the will which allowed him to retain manuscript material that had been published, or would be published, but to destroy all other poems and fragments. So, if there was a page of the notebooks that contained a manuscript of, say, 'Loveliest of Trees' from *A Shropshire Lad* he was permitted to keep it, but, if on the reverse of that page was workshop material which he was compelled to destroy then 'Loveliest of Trees' would have to perish with it. And so he hit upon what Baldrick from *Blackadder* would have called "A Cunning Plan".

In the example given above, Laurence took out his fountain pen and scribbled out all of the workshop material on the reverse of the page, applied glue to that surface and then stuck it down in a new folio thus revealing the manuscript copy of 'Loveliest of Trees'. Any permitted manuscript without workshop notes on the reverse would be glued into the album, while pages with workshop material on both sides were destroyed. There were, of course, many instances where permitted and forbidden material appeared on the same page and here Laurence would use his trusty pair of scissors to good effect creating ribbons of notebook and then scribbling-out and gluing, or destroying, as appropriate.

The end product of Laurence's endeavours was then sold to an American bookseller who, in turn, sold it on to a Mrs Whittall who, in the manner favoured by wealthy American philanthropists, donated it to the

Library of Congress. In due course they applied special solvents to the glue holding down the manuscripts and subjected the revealed deletions to infra-red and ultra-violet rays in order to reveal the text beneath. Laurence was horrified. But the deed was done – and it was to get much worse.

Commencing in, an American Housman Scholar, Tom Burns Haber, spent three summers in the Library of Congress studying the notebook remains, recording them, and, in spite of Laurence's efforts, trying to restore them to some form of chronological order. Three summers! I guess that Laurence might have spent three weeks on the notebooks preparing for his error-ridden edition of *More Poems*. And then, in 1952, Haber announced his intentions to publish his findings. Again, Laurence was horrified, but, given his role in the debacle thus far, he was unable to do much more than huff, puff and protest.

During 1952-4 the *Times Literary Supplement* was full of arguments from both sides of the Atlantic on the pros and cons of whether publishing this material was either ethical or legal. Charles Scribners' New York office, which sold the manuscripts, insisted that Laurence Housman had stipulated that the manuscripts be offered for sale without any contingent right of publication: Haber said that was not the case. William White, another American Housman scholar, who later revised the Carter and Sparrow Housman bibliography, weighed in with the argument that since Laurence had sold this material it was now in the public domain, and that AEH really should have destroyed this stuff himself if he didn't want anyone to see it. In England, John Carter, Housman's original bibliographer, got involved in the fray, as did John Sparrow, and the exchanges got rather nasty. Nevertheless, they kept the 'Housman Dilemma', as it became known, in the public eye.

In February 1955, Haber's book *The Manuscript Poems of A. E. Housman* was published, whose preface contains a statement concerning the public debate surrounding the propriety of using the Housman manuscripts in the Library of Congress. It notes that all legal objections had been withdrawn, in writing, by Laurence Housman and Barclays Bank,

the designated trustees.

A review of the book in the *Oxford Mail* by Mrs M. Stanier, which gave the background details to the controversial book, concluded with the words, “On artistic grounds, since it does nothing but disservice to the poet, it stands condemned.” In a letter to the Editor of the *Oxford Mail* Laurence Housman writes:

> It is a matter of deep regret to me that Mrs M. Stanier’s criticism of what has happened to the manuscripts of my brother A.E. Housman’s poems should be so largely justified. I made the great mistake of thinking that any manuscripts lodged at the Library of Congress would be treated with the same respect as those which I lodged at the British Museum; and for that reason I failed to take the commercial precaution of securing the copyright.

Well, nice try, but, just before we move on, it is only accurate to point out that Laurence lodged nothing at the Library of Congress. That was merely their ultimate resting place after he had sold them.

Laurence, now a frail old man in his nineties, was obviously distraught with these continuing problems of the previous twenty years and it must have blighted his final years. He died in 1959 but it was the mid-sixties before the American and English editions of *Collected Poems* carried the same text, and 1971 before the content of the book arrived at the accepted canon that we recognise today.

* * *

As an aside, when I say the accepted canon that we recognise today, I of course am not speaking of any suggested emendations made by Professor

Archie Burnett in his monumental edition of *The Poems of A.E. Housman* published by the Clarendon Press in 1997. You will note that I have not made use of any of those suggestions in today's talk. I am using the text, as amended, that Laurence Housman authorised back in the thirties.

But also – and this implies absolutely no criticism of Archie Burnett's edition – after a lifetime of reading the old text, my inner ear is unhappy at the new readings. It is like being brought up on the King James Bible and then being offended by the new English version. But it would be most interesting to look into Housman's *Collected Poems* a century hence and see which version has prevailed.

* * *

I would now like to return to a question that we left unanswered earlier in the talk: Why, when Housman had such a low opinion of his brother's abilities, did he entrust him with the job of his Literary Executor? He must have known that Laurence would mess it up, although I expect he couldn't possibly have foreseen what a spectacular pig's-ear Laurence would have made of the job. At Cambridge, Housman was surrounded by people eminently suited for the position of his Literary Executor who would have complied exactly with the instructions in the will. So why choose Laurence?

To answer that question I need to call upon our good friend 'Conjecture', but, I believe, my theory fits all the facts in the matter. Let me wheel out the evidence. Most of us mellow as we get older, and Housman proved that he was no exception to this general rule. Consider the following examples which are all concerned with proposed biographies, or as Housman might have considered it, invasions of his privacy. And also bear in mind Professor R.W. Chambers' assertion that Housman would suffer young fools better than old ones.

In September 1921, he wrote to Grant Richards, his publisher:

> Tell him that the wish to include a glimpse of my personality in a literary article is low, unworthy, and American. Tell him that some men are more interesting than their books but my book is more interesting than its man. Tell him that Frank Harris found me rude and Wilfrid Blunt found me dull. Tell him anything else that you think will put him off.

Douglas Goldring in his book *The Nineteen Twenties* tells of a meeting with Housman in January 1923 where he asked for permission to write his biography. I quote from the book:

> The flush of annoyance which immediately came into the old man's cheeks gave me my answer before he opened his mouth. The suggestion horrified them. He considered "that kind of writing most impertinent. A man should be judged solely by the value of his work."

Fast forward ten years to 1931, and while the answer is still 'No' the venom seems to have departed from his refusal.

In a letter to Cyril Clemens, President of The Mark Twain Society, of which Housman was an Honorary Vice-President, he writes:

> I am naturally flattered that you should entertain the idea of writing a biography of me, but neither you nor anyone else could possibly write one, and I certainly would give no assistance. I have sometimes thought of depositing in the British Museum a few pages to be published 50 years after my death. At present *Who's Who* gives all the external facts.

Now, I think the admission that Housman is thinking of writing a few pages for the British Museum rather interesting.

Two years later in 1933 Housman responds to the lengthy questionnaire submitted by Maurice Pollet:

> As some of the questions that you ask in your flattering curiosity may be asked by future generations, and as many of them can only be answered by me, I make this response.

And he responded in detail. And this, for Housman, really was ground-breaking stuff.

And, just nine days before his death in a letter to Houston Martin, a young American admirer:

> If I were well I could make a long reply to your kind but irrelevant letter of the 2nd inst., but I am so ill that I am not fit to discharge the functions of my office or of ordinary life, and my doctor is trying hard to send me back into a nursing home.

And what a letter that might have been!

The previous month in a letter to the same correspondent Housman writes:

> Do not send me your manuscript. Worse than the practice of writing books about living men is the conduct of living men supervising such books.

But, elsewhere in the same letter he says:

> I hope that if you can restrain your indecent ardour for a little I shall be properly dead and your proposed work will not be by its nature unbecoming.

And so it would seem that we have real evidence that Housman was dropping his guard about the impertinence of biographers and was, contrary to his earlier statements, actually supplying helpful information. In that last quotation, he admitted that a biography would not be unfitting. I believe that Housman, who had been the most private of men throughout his life, realised that it was inevitable that biographies of him would be written and, if that was so, it was best that the tale be properly told.

Housman, pursuing his trade as a Professor of Latin, had dedicated his life to accuracy – "a duty, not a virtue," he told us. And "the love of truth is the faintest of all human passions" was another of his very quotable quotes. Truth and accuracy mattered very much to Housman.

And I believe that if Housman had asked one of his Cambridge colleagues to take on the duty of his Literary Executor then poems like 'Because I liked you better than suits a man to say' may never have seen the light of day and could have been destroyed in an attempt to protect Housman's reputation – editorial discretion it would have been called: not completed or not up to the average – these decisions are very subjective. And without these posthumous poems the data for future biographers would be scant indeed and truth and accuracy would be the victims. The Housman story would not exist without Moses Jackson – "you are largely responsible for me writing poetry" he told Moses in his last letter. No poetry, no Housman story. We certainly would not be here today considering these things. Housman never did make the positive step of leaving his few pages for the British Museum, but it seems that he was unwilling to see Moses Jackson airbrushed out of history and was happy to leave the posthumous

poems as a clue to future biographers.

But it was never going to be easy for those biographers, as Housman was a very private man who had compartmentalised his life very efficiently. In the five years following his death, Andrew Gow wrote of the professor, Laurence Housman of the brother, Percy Withers of the occasional house guest, and Grant Richards of the author and dining companion. Nobody knew the whole story. In the fifties George Watson and Maude Hawkins tried, with very limited success, to expand the story into a full biography, but it was twenty years later that Richard Perceval Graves got anywhere near hitting the target although his widely ridiculed accusations of Housman consorting with male prostitutes in Paris made you wonder what else in the book had been put in for effect.

It has not been possible to write this lecture on 'Chansons d'Outre-tombe' without discussing Housman's sexuality which, I am aware, is something that many lovers of Housman's poetry would prefer not to consider on the ground that it is totally unimportant for appreciation of the poetry. And I agree. "A man should be judged solely by the value of his work," as Housman put it, but I feel that I must take this opportunity to put in my two pennyworth, if only to try and counterbalance what I believe to be some of the more preposterous accusations made against him in recent times, not least in the *Housman Society Journal*. And so I offer one short paragraph in an attempt to restore some sanity to the argument.

> As a young man Housman met and fell in love with Moses Jackson and in 1885, after a few years of friendship, it is believed that he told Moses about the extent of his feelings for him and was rejected. Moses emigrated to India and apart from on a few short return visits to England the two men never saw each other again. Housman withdrew into himself, worked hard and settled into an eminent academic career. It is recorded that he maintained that anyone who claimed to

have loved more than once had, in reality, never loved at all – and, as Alan Bennett pointed out, Housman never attempted to replace Moses with a compliant alternative. Housman was not driven by lust; he was merely the victim of love and, as we all know, we do not choose love but love chooses us. By the time he was thirty years old the emotional part of his life was already over and the memory of that lost love stayed with him for the rest of his days. No-one has ever suggested that Housman had a sexual relationship with Moses and there is no evidence, in spite of much research, to show that he had a sexual relationship with anyone else. To simply hang the label of 'homosexual' around his neck distorts the facts and would not accord with the ordinary man's understanding of the word. Perhaps 'Failed Homosexual' might be nearer the mark.

That is the biographical argument. The aesthetic arguments are legion.

*   *   *

The other couple of questions we left open relate to *MP* 45, and are much easier to handle.

Smooth between sea and land
Is laid the yellow sand,
And here through summer days
The seed of Adam plays.

Here the child comes to found
His unremaining mound,

And the grown lad to score
Two names upon the shore.

Here, on the level sand,
Between the sea and land,
What shall I build or write
Against the fall of night?

Tell me of runes to grave
That hold the bursting wave,
Or bastions to design
For longer date than mine.

Shall it be Troy or Rome
I fence against the foam,
Or my own name, to stay
When I depart for aye?

Nothing: too near at hand,
Planing the figured sand,
Effacing clean and fast
Cities not built to last,
And charms devised in vain,
Pours the confounded main

Now in that fifth verse Housman asks:

> Shall it be Troy or Rome
> I fence against the foam,
> Or my own name, to stay
> When I depart for aye?

Well, it was Rome that Housman fenced against the foam and one might have assumed that the question he posed had already been answered, because when the oldest extant draft of that poem was commenced in 1895 he was already Professor of Latin at University College. His predecessor, Alfred Goodwin, had been Professor of both Greek and Latin at UCL, but following his death the University decided to separate the Chairs. Housman applied for both positions, while expressing a preference for Latin. Whether this biographical poem suggests that in 1895 he was still considering his options is open to debate. My thoughts are that these words must have originated prior to the surviving drafts. And the second couplet runs:

> Or my own name to stay
> When I depart for aye?

Well, these days, I suppose we would call this the legacy question, but Housman is not being morbid by asking it. Housman's poetry is, of course, full of death and dying, gallows and suicides, churchyards and corpses, but it is all a stage setting – it's not the sort of seriously disturbing stuff that, say, Philip Larkin, brought into his poetry. Housman's attitude to death was calm and measured, as in these words he wrote in relation to his old pal, Arthur Platt, the Professor of Greek at UCL:

> His happy and useful life is over, and now begins the steady encroachment of oblivion, as those who remember him are in

their turn summoned away.

But Housman has done more than enough to avoid the oblivion that will come to most of us. He was one of those rare birds that attained real distinction in two very different facets of life: he is accepted as being the greatest Latin scholar produced in this country since Richard Bentley of the eighteenth century, and, at the end of his life, he was indisputably the world's most popular living poet – this trick being neatly achieved by outliving the other contenders for the title. His name will therefore live for as long as the classics and poetry and literature are cherished in this ever-changing world.

And so, in conclusion, I wonder how Housman may have considered what has happened to the things that he held dear during his lifetime. He might have views on the wisdom of having appointing Laurence as his Literary Executor, and he would certainly have regretted the fact that *A Shropshire Lad* was joined with his other poetry – "a silly notion" he called it – but he would, I am sure, be happy that his first book is still readily available as a single title over 120 years after publication, having never been out of print. The instructions in his will about not bringing together any of his writings in periodicals was ignored in the early '70s by his home printer, Cambridge University Press, in the edition by Diggle and Goodyear. The editors pointed out that his embargo would cease with the expiry of copyright and that it was far better that they did a good job in advance of that deadline rather than risk others doing a bad job in legal time. Even the Claud Lovat Fraser illustrations for *A Shropshire Lad* which Housman damned so vehemently back in the 1920's –"the act of a rhinoceros" – were finally printed with the verses for which they were intended by David Wishart of the Hayloft Press, where Kelsey Thornton, a great Housman enthusiast, admitted in the opening lines of his introduction that any editor of Housman has to be a compassionate traitor. And I guess that Housman would have accepted that his instructions were overruled essentially for the

benefit of his faithful public, who were kept on such short rations while he was in charge. And to all the writers over the years who have contributed to his enduring fame he might have reused the words that he accorded to Andrew Gow, who collated his *List of Adversaria* back in 1926:

> however deeply I may deplore the misdirection of so much industry, it is impossible not to be touched and pleased by the proof of so much kindness and friendliness and I thank you for it.

Over eighty years after his death, he still appeals to authors who can still find something new to write about him. In the last five years we have had books by Henry Maas, Richard Gaskin, Martin Blocksidge and Peter Parker, while Edgar Vincent's book will be published within the coming year. And the reason that the books keep on coming is that Housman, in addition to his major accomplishments, is such an interesting chap. The final words that he wrote in his epitaph to his old friend, Arthur Platt, I now borrow and apply to Housman himself:

> Yet what most eludes description is not the excellence of his gifts but the singularity of his essential being, his utter unlikeness to any other creature in the world.

Faith Hymns and Poetry
An Excerpt from a Lecture[1]

by Timothy Dudley-Smith

This leads to my fourth name in this section, A.E. Housman. With Stevenson's 'Requiem' in mind, here is Housman's memorial poem to Stevenson, entitled 'R.L.S.':

Home is the sailor, home from sea:
  Her far-borne canvas furled,
The ship pours shining on the quay
  The plunder of the world.

Home is the hunter from the hill:
  Fast in the boundless snare
All flesh lies taken at his will
  And every fowl of air.

'Tis evening on the moorland free,
  The starlit wave is still:
Home is the sailor from the sea,

1. This essay arose out of a lecture given to the Hymn Society in 2013. An extended version was printed as the Hymn Society's Occasional Paper, Third Series, No. 8, in 2016. The talk discussed poets who had also worked at hymn writing, poets with the occasional hymn in common use, poets conscripted later into the hymn books, and poets the author personally wished had written hymns. In the latter category, Timothy Dudley-Smith included Alice Meynell, Ronald Knox, Robert Louis Stevenson and A.E. Housman. The paragraphs on A.E. Housman are printed here with the kind permissions of the author and the Hymn Society.

The hunter from the hill.[2]

A.E. Housman's tribute to 'RLS' draws not only on classical writers, but on the *Authorized Version*. In 2 Timothy 2:26, you remember, we find '... that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will.' 'Flesh' in this context, and 'every fowl of air', are verbal echoes from Genesis and elsewhere. I once thought I would attempt to trace these Biblical echoes in Housman. Among the most generally noticed is 'earth's foundations' in 'Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries' where 'the foundations of the earth' is found in Job, Isaiah, and the Book of Hebrews. It is an expression that Housman uses in three other poems. But I soon gave up; and in fact the work has been meticulously done by Archie Burnett in his 1997 edition of the poems.[3] In 1934 John Sparrow wrote a paper on 'Echoes in the Poetry of A.E. Housman' and sent Housman a copy. In his reply, Housman (among numerous other criticisms!) told him, 'I see that you are not such a student of the Bible as I am.'[4]

With Burnett's definitive edition, I went through some of the poems, looking at Biblical echoes. In the single lyric already mentioned, 'Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries', Burnett lists resonances from the Psalms, Isaiah and Job in the Old Testament and Romans, Hebrews and the Book of Revelation in the New.[5] Housman also had what one of his friends called 'a vast store of hymnology' and could quote whole stanzas by heart.[6] Before we leave his tribute to Stevenson, we ought to note that Housman did not really want it republished, leaving it out of *Last Poems* when that appeared

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2. The *Collected Poems of A.E. Housman* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1939) 239. This poem was first published in *The Academy*, 22 December 1894.
3. Archie Burnett ed., *The Collected Poems of A.E. Housman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
4. Henry Maas ed., *The Letters of A.E. Housman* (London: Rupert Hart Davis, 1971) 356.
5. Burnett (as n.3) 411.
6. Percy Withers, *A Buried Life: Personal Recollections of A.E. Housman* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1940) 12.

nearly thirty years later.[7] Perhaps he felt that in the emotion of the moment (for Stevenson's death at the age of only 44 shook the whole literary world) he had worn his heart too plainly on his sleeve; or perhaps he felt it was a shade too facile; or, inevitably, too derivative – who knows?

Housman did, however, write a hymn for his own funeral, and lodged a copy in a sealed envelope with the Dean of Trinity College, Cambridge two or three years before his death. The metre is 76 76, and he wanted it 'to be sung to the tune of "Brief life is here our portion"', probably the German *Thule*, though at the Service on 4 May 1936 a different tune was chosen, *Christus der ist mein Leben* harmonized by J.S. Bach. We are not told whether AEH's prophecy was fulfilled, that 'unless forcibly restrained' the choir would want to add a Gloria to his careful lyric![8] The hymn in question, labelled (rather than entitled) 'For my funeral', is XLVII in the posthumous *More Poems*:

O thou that from thy mansion,
   Through time and place to roam,
Dost send abroad thy children,
   And then dost call them home,

That men and tribes and nation
   And all thy hand hath made
May shelter them from sunshine
   In thine eternal shade.

We now to peace and darkness
   And earth and thee restore
Thy creature that thou madest
   And wilt cast forth no more.[9]

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7. Burnett (as n.3) 481
8. Ibid., 461
9. Posthumously published as No XLVII in *More Poems* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1936). His publisher thought it significant (remembering the conventions of

Alas, it is so nearly a Christian hymn. It was not collected until 1936, or Percy Dearmer might not have been able to resist it for *Songs of Praise*. It was briefly considered for inclusion in *Common Praise* but the verdict went against it. The main reason, if memory serves, was Housman's widely-known and uncompromising atheism: he firmly declined the woollier word 'agnosticism', once declaring that 'The only form of Christianity that I profess is anti-Protestantism'.[10] You may know his comic stanzas (he was a master of comic verse) mocking the Salvation Army. Here is one:

> There is Hallelujah Hannah
>   Walking backwards down the lane,
> And I hear the loud Hosanna
>   Of regenerated Jane;
> And Lieutenant Isabella
>   In the centre of them comes,
> Dealing blows with her umbrella
>   On the trumpets and the drums.[11]

Even in this trifle his skill is noteworthy. Mark the natural word-order, the single emphatic inversion, the precision of stress and metre – what we should call 87 87 D; note also the accuracy of the rhyme, helped by the use of proper names, and the alternate feminine rhymes. There is also 'alliteration's artful aid', with the aspirate 'H' four times in the first three lines, the G and J of the fourth, and the labial 'L' dominating the last four.

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the 1920s) that 'thou' and 'thy' should be printed in lower case. See Grant Richards, *Housman 1897-1936* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1941) 283

10. See Laurence Housman, *AEH: Some Poems, Some Letters and a Personal Memoir by his Brother* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1937) 114; and S.C. Roberts, *Adventures with Authors* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966) 126-7.

11. Laurence Housman (as n.10) 133. The lines appear in a letter to Laurence, who had just published a book of devotional verse. AEH added: 'Perhaps I myself may write a Hymn-book for use in the Salvation Army.'

If Housman did this for fun, what might such skill have done for hymnody?

There are small clues to his professed unbelief to be found in the actual text of that funeral hymn. For one who knew his Bible so well (there are passages in his copy marked in pencil) it seems strange to have 'mansion' in the singular: might it be Zeus's mansion on Mount Olympus? And while the peace and darkness are those of the grave, 'thine eternal shade' accords ill with the Biblical pictures of God as light and heaven as a place of brightness. And of course there is no reference to Christ and his salvation. A further reason, confirming this, lies in the one poem Housman wrote which addresses Jesus directly. It is poignantly like a hymn, and yet it illustrates both why I include Housman among those I personally wish had written hymns, and also why his poems do not find a place in Christian hymnody; it is entitled 'Easter Hymn' and, apart from the Epigraph, stands first in the posthumous *More Poems*:

If in that Syrian garden, ages slain,
You sleep, and know not you are dead in vain,
Nor even in dreams behold how dark and bright
Ascends in smoke and fire by day and night
The hate you died to quench and could but fan,
Sleep well and see no morning, son of man.

But if, the grave rent and the stone rolled by,
At the right hand of majesty on high
You sit, and sitting so remember yet
Your tears, your agony and bloody sweat,
Your cross and passion and the life you gave,
Bow hither out of heaven and see and save.

I wish we could read this as honest doubt, to my mind and ear movingly expressed. Perhaps indeed it was, since we are none of us wholly

consistent. It is found as a first draft in 1894, and was revised for publication 28 years later when Housman was preparing *Last Poems*. He rejected it for that book but the fact that he revised it seems to represent how settled his unchanging views were in spite of its many echoes of the *Authorized Version* and the *Book of Common Prayer*. Housman's lyric gifts were such that it is no surprise that many composers should have set his poems as songs;[12] but that is a different matter from regarding them as hymns.

At the Hymn Society Conference in 2006 I quoted T.S. Eliot's remark, 'We would all write like Housman if we could.'[13] I take this to mean his strength of feeling, his precision and economy, his openness to inspiration and patience to wait for it, together with his diligent craftsmanship, unwilling to settle for anything but the best, and the accuracy of his ear for cadence, rhyme and metrical effect. How much I wish our modern hymnody – my modern texts – could in all of that inherit a portion of his spirit!

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12. Among them George Butterworth, Ivor Gurney, John Ireland, C.W. Orr, Arthur Somervell and Ralph Vaughan Williams. Housman was not enthusiastic, writing to his publisher, 'I am told that Vaughan Williams has mutilated another poem just as badly, to suit his precious music.' 8 July 1922: see Maas (as n.4) 198 = Burnett (as n.3) I.501.

13. Timothy Dudley Smith, 'Snakes and Ladders', *Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland Occasional Paper*, 3rd ser. 1 (2008) 12.

‘Arthur the King’ and ‘Arthur the Man’ in Clemence Housman’s *The Life of Sir Aglovale De Galis*

Gabriel Schenk

Clemence Housman (1861-1955) published four stories: *The Were Wolf* (a novella, 1896), *The Unknown Sea* (a short novel, 1898), *The Life of Sir Aglovale de Galis* (a novel, 1905), and ‘The Drawn Arrow’ (a short story, 1923).[1]

Of these, *Aglovale* is her most ambitious work, written over a fourteen-year period, between 1891 and 1905.[2] It is the biography of one of the knights of King Arthur’s Round Table, beginning in the character’s childhood and ending with his death. Aglovale de Galis is a troubled and angry character who commits a series of offences early in the novel. The most notable of these is leaving a knight to die so that he might take that knight’s lover ‘by frauds’, leading to the lady’s death – an implied suicide – once she discovers the truth. It is also a spiritual *Bildungsroman*, describing Aglovale’s moral development as he gradually turns away from his early life as a sinner, towards salvation, practising forgiveness and honesty even when they clash with the values of the reputation-based code of honour upheld by Arthur and his knights.

Critical attention has already been given to *Aglovale* in the pages of this journal. In Volume 5 (1979), Constance Scheerer argued that Housman

1. Clemence Housman, *The Were-wolf*, illus. by Laurence Housman (London: John Lane; Chicago: Way and Williams, 1896); *The Unknown Sea* (London: Duckworth, 1898); Clemence Housman, *The Life of Sir Aglovale de Galis* (Oakland: Green Knight, 2000); ‘The Drawn Arrow’, in *Thirty and One Stories by Thirty-And One Authors*, ed. by Ernest Rhys, C.A. Dawson Scott (New York: Butterworth, 1923), reprinted in *Tales Before Tolkien: The Roots of Modern Fantasy*, ed. by Douglas A. Anderson (New York: Ballantine, 2005) 269-81.

2. Douglas A. Anderson, introduction, Housman, *Aglovale*, 5-10 (7).

depicts King Arthur as a Romantic hero, and Aglovale his antithesis, exposing 'the dangers inherent in a world which choses Romanticism as its idol.'[3] In Volume 31 (2005), Peter G. Christensen gave a critical analysis of the structure, themes, and literary context of the work, concluding that it highlights criticism of Arthurian society also found in Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*.[4] This article continues the critical analysis of Arthur in the novel, but focuses on the portrayal of Arthur as a novelistic character with private and public sides, not only a literary type or figurehead for a society. Unlike Malory and Tennyson – the two most influential writers of Arthurian literature at the time *Aglovale* was published – Housman considers Arthur as if he were the same as any other character, including the more obviously-flawed Aglovale. He is a soul awaiting judgement.

This insightful and multi-layered depiction of Arthur is one of the reasons why *Aglovale* is worth reading and studying, although not everyone agrees that it is. For critic Raymond E. Thompson, 'the plot… rambles'; for scholar John Christopher Kleis, the book is 'ostentatious, ill-plotted, and virtually unreadable.'[5] However, the novelist Ellis Peters called it 'the finest work on an Arthurian theme since Malory', and the left-wing writer Reginald Reynolds described it as 'the most amazing book' he had ever read.'[6]

Many of the negative responses object to how Housman wrote *Aglovale* in the same style as Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*, with some

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3. Constance Scheerer, 'Looking Past Romanticism: Clemence Housman's Presentation of the Romantic Hero', *HSJ* 5 (1979) 20-6.

4. Peter G. Christensen, 'Clemence Housman's Attack on King Arthur in *The Life of Sir Aglovale de Galis*', *HSJ* 31 (2007) 63-88.

5. Raymond H. Thompson, *The Return from Avalon: A Study of the Arthurian Legend in Modern Fiction* (Westport and London: Greenwood, 1985, p. 64; John Christopher Kleis, review, *Arthuriana*, 11.1 (2001) 120-1.

6. [Ellis Peters] Edith Pargeter in *Writer's Choice: A Library of Rediscoveries*, ed. by Linda Sternberg Katz, William A. Katz (Reston: Reston, 1983) 58; Reginald Reynolds, 'The Third Housman', *English*, 10.60 (1955) 208-14, at 208.

lines even being copied verbatim.[7] Kleis takes issue with the 'oppressively anachronistic' style, and the early reviewers writing in *Academy* and *Saturday Review* complained how this 'intolerable… imitation' was a 'grotesque compromise.'[8] Even if we ignore the language Housman used, there are other objections to medievalist rewriting. For Tennyson, writing in blank verse and contemporary poetic diction, the concern was not language but subject matter. He voices this concern in *The Epic* (1842), when a character discusses the value of nineteenth-century Arthurian literature:

> 'Why take the style of those heroic times?
> For nature brings not back the Mastodon,
> Nor we those times; and why should any man
> Remodel models?'[9]

Tennyson's eventual response to that question was that later writers could remodel models if the model in question was hitherto flawed. In the epilogue to *Idylls of the King* (1873), Tennyson extols the 'ideal manhood' of his own version of Arthur, in contrast to the half-realised 'gray king' of medieval writers, '[t]ouch'd by the adulterous finger of a time / That hovered between war and wantonness.'[10] Tennyson justified his medievalism by arguing that he was setting the record straight – rewriting Arthur's character,

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7. One example is Percivale's speech in 10.10 (Caxton), which is copied in Housman, *Aglovale*, ch. 8, p. 92.

8. 'Literature: Subjects of Modern Romance', *Academy*, 7 Oct. 1905, 1025; 'The Life of Sir Aglovale de Galis', *Saturday Review*, 28 Oct. 1905, 563. Australian papers were more positive: *The Evening News* commended the book's 'distinctly good' style, and *The News*, reviewing the reprint in 1954, thought 'The language of "Morte d'Arthur" is effectively used': 'Recent Publications', *Evening News*, 3 Sep. 1906, 9; 'New Light on a Legend'. *News*, 4 June 1954, 23.

9. Alfred Tennyson, 'The Epic' in *Poems*, 2 vols (Boston: Ticknor, 1842), II.1-3, at 3.

10. Tennyson, 'To the Queen', in *Idylls of the King*, ed. by J.M. Gray (London: Penguin, 1983) 301-2, at 302, ll. 43-4.

in particular, to be a hero according to his own requirements: monogamous, non-belligerent, Christ-like.

However, Housman was writing at a different time in the reception of the Arthurian legend than Tennyson: by the time Housman began writing *Aglovale*, the record to set straight was no longer Malory's, it was Tennyson's, due to the huge popularity and wide dissemination of the *Idylls*, which for many supplanted *Morte Darthur* as the primary source of the legend.[11] As the critic Clement Scott wrote of the 1895 stage production *King Arthur*, 'we come to the theatre with our minds saturated with and steeped in the Tennysonian version of the Arthurian legend.'[12]

Housman bypassed Tennyson's version of the legend and went back to Malory, who is cited throughout the notes, and referenced on multiple occasions as the narrator's 'dear master'. For Housman's brother Laurence, writing about *Aglovale* in 1951, the decision to go back to Malory's Arthur meant that the 'true story of King Arthur and his Round Table', which had been bowdlerised by 'the smug taste of the Victorian public', could be recovered.[13] 'People who read Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* think they know all about it [the Arthurian story]. They know next to nothing,' he claimed, citing Arthur's incest and his murder of the May-born infants, as well as Arthur's complicated relationship with Lot's offspring, as examples of what most people did not know. Tennyson's *Idylls* do not explore these aspects – Laurence thinks Tennyson was 'afraid of his material' – and some Victorian editions of Malory, such as Edward Strachey's 1868 version,

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11. When the first four parts were published in 1859, they sold 11,000 copies in one month in the United States alone. A further four parts, included in *The Holy Grail and Other Poems* in 1870, had a pre-publication order of 40,000 copies in the United Kingdom. See James D. Hart, *The Popular Book: A History of America's Literary Taste* (Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, [1950]) 131. See Ciaran Cronin, *A Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. by Richard Cronin, Alison Chapman, and Antony H. Harrison (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002) 357.

12. Clement Scott, 'King Arthur', in *From 'The Bells' to King Arthur* (London: MacQueen, 1896) 371-84, at 374.

13. Laurence Housman, 'A Story of Truth Without Honour', *HSJ* 33 (2007) 40-5, at 41. The article was broadcast on BBC radio in 1952.

followed *Idylls* as an example of how 'we may deal best with this matter for modern uses', removing details such as Arthur's incest in order to 'remedy the moral defects' of Malory's text.[14] Even in 1907, two years after *Aglovale* was published, Francis Coutts removed Arthur's incest from his version of the story.[15]

In Housman, Arthur's unknowing incest with his half-sister Morgause is referred to early in the plot, when Mordred is described as the 'son and nephew of King Arthur'.[16] The 'horrid deed' Arthur committed when he attempted to kill the infant Mordred, and in so doing killed 'many May-day innocents', is mentioned near the end of the novel.[17] Housman also returns to Malory to inform other parts of Arthur's characterisation. In the battle against the eleven kings, Malory's Arthur 'ferde wood as a lyon' and slaughters twenty knights before resting.[18] Tennyson's Arthur is 'mightiest on the battle-field', but there are no details as to how he fights, and certainly no sense of a lion-like ferocity.[19] In Housman, Arthur is closer to Malory's warrior king: he 'bore down' upon his enemies whilst they were still grieving for their dead.[20] Arthur's fierceness also extends to his manner away from the battle-field. For Aglovale, Arthur's disapproval is described using metaphors of weaponry: his 'looks bit like swords', and his 'words struck like spears'. Even his 'face is a very sword'.[21]

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14. Ibid., 41; Sir Edward Strachey, introduction, *The Globe Edition. Morte Darthur: Sir Thomas Malory's Book of King Arthur and his Noble Knights of the Round Table* (London: Macmillan, 1868) vii-xxxvii, at xviii.

15. Coutts removes the incest because, he argues, 'unconscious incest no longer acquires dignity from belief in a special divine retribution.' Francis Coutts, preface, *The Romance of King Arthur* (London and New York: Lane, Bodley Head, 1907) v-viii, at vii-viii.

16. Housman, *Aglovale,* ch. 2, 21.

17. Ibid., ch. 26, 272.

18. Syr Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur: The Original Edition of William Caxton*, ed. by H. Oskar Sommer, 3 vols (London: Nutt, 1889-91), I.1.15, 56.

19. Tennyson, 'Gareth and Lynette', in *Idylls*, 49, l.486.

20. Housman, *Aglovale,* ch. 1, 18.

21. Ibid., ch. 26, 269; ch. 19, 213.

By emphasising Arthur's fierceness and sinful past, Housman makes her Arthur closer to Malory's than Tennyson's, but that does not mean her Arthur is a carbon copy. The most noticeable characteristic Housman gives Arthur is his repeated use of 'well, well' in his dialogue, the phrase 'denoting surprise, resignation, or acquiescence' according to the OED.[22] In Malory the phrase appears three times, and is used only once by Arthur, when he learns of the treachery of Lancelot, but in Housman it appears thirteen times, and is uttered by Arthur six times – the most any character says it – always as an independent exclamation.[23] At every occurrence it seems to be at odds with the grave situations in which it is employed. The clearest example occurs in the last lines of the novel, when Arthur is told which of his knights died guarding Guenever, and then asks:

> 'Sir Aglovale de Galis? What of him?'
>
> 'Sir Aglovale is dead.'
>
> At that the king breathed a deep breath that was no sigh.
> 'Well, well!' said Arthur.

Considering the gravity of the news, and the intense nature of their last conversation the night before, when Aglovale openly criticises his king, Arthur's response is anticlimactic as well as obscure. Housman takes

22. 'well, adv.', in *OED Online*, Oxford University Press: http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/226983, s.v. 24. a.

23. Malory, *Morte*, Sommer, I.20. 15, 823-4. The phrase is also used by Dinadan and Gawaine: Malory, *Morte*, Sommer, I.10.48, 491, and 20.12, 817. In Housman, 'Well, well!' is Arthur's response upon hearing that Percivale is avoiding his brother (on this occasion said twice); seeing Aglovale fail to heal Sir Urre's wounds (perhaps said sarcastically, considering his low opinion of Aglovale); listening to Aglovale admit his sins; learning that Aglovale has refused to help Launcelot rescue Guenever; and finally upon hearing that Aglovale has died. Housman, *Aglovale*, ch. 11, 119 and 120; ch. 24, 252; ch. 26, 269; ch. 26, 270; ch. 28, 299. Kay uses the phrase four times, but never as an independent exclamation.

Malory's language but uses it to achieve a different effect, repeating it more frequently and in a different context. 'Well, well' makes Arthur seem simple-minded due to a stubborn refusal to engage more thoughtfully or emotionally with a situation.

Housman also modifies the details of Arthur's death from the best-known version popularised by Tennyson, in which a mortally wounded Arthur is tended by Queens and taken on a barge to Avalon, where he will be healed. Tennyson is writing in a long tradition of writers, from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century, who speculate that Arthur does not die and may return at a future date.[24] Malory is more sceptical; he describes Arthur departing on the barge, but does not state that he will certainly return, only that 'somme men say in many partyes of Englond that kyng Arthur is not deed'. He also mentions a buried body who may, or may not, have been Arthur's.[25] Housman goes back to Malory but, unlike Tennyson and numerous others, does not expand on the possibility of Arthur's immortality; she expands the idea that Arthur is definitely dead. According to Housman, the three Queens 'hated' Arthur, and 'took keep of King Arthur to ensure that he should die and not live on by enchantment… So he died, and they buried him.'[26] Housman goes back to an older source and takes a different path, avoiding the idea of a messianic or God-like return. Her Arthur is merely a man like any other, who dies like any other, in contrast to Tennyson's version, who is God-like (he forgives 'as Eternal God / Forgives') and specifically Christ-like ('My God, thou hast forgotten me in my death' says Arthur before his final battle, echoing Christ on the cross: 'my God, why hast thou forsaken me?')[27]

Something of the God-like status of Arthur – found in Tennyson's

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24. For an overview see Henry H. Peyton, 'The Myth of King Arthur's Immortality', *Interpretations* 5.1 (1973) 55-71.

25. Malory, *Morte*, Sommer, I.21.7, 851; 21.6, 851.

26. Housman, *Aglovale*, ch. 14, 164.

27. Tennyson, 'Guinevere', in *Idylls*, ll.541-2, p.283; 'Passing of Arthur', in *Idylls*, l.27, p.288; Matthew 27:46 (King James Version).

descriptions and the myth of Arthur's immortality – remains in Housman, in the form of his reputation as a king. According to the narrator, Arthur is 'the greatest King in all the world, upright, noble, righteous, could rule nations wisely and well, and had learned to rule himself.'[28] This is not the full picture of the character, however. Towards the end of the novel, Aglovale is called to the king's side, where he delivers a long speech criticising Arthur 'man to fellowman [*sic*]'.[29] The narrator concludes that 'the justice of God awaited Arthur to smite low his honour, and bring him as a mere man to worship the law he had broken and overborne.'[30] This 'law' is Christian moral law, rather than the law of Arthur's court. Aglovale's speech references Arthur's unknowing incest and his accidental infanticide, as well as the inability to stop the feud between the families of Lot and Pellinore, and his failure to punish atrocities committed by both sides in that conflict. These do not affect Arthur's status as 'the greatest king', but they are still failures that affect how Arthur, as a private individual and human being, will be judged before God. In another example, Arthur *qua* man acts more positively than Arthur *qua* king. Arthur *qua* king

> had no force to rule his sister's son... Yet in this defect of Arthur the King, the heart of Arthur the man was proved noble in its weakness; for... affection grew between him and these nephews.[31]

Housman even makes a further distinction between Arthur as a private man and Arthur as a soul. The following passage refers to the effects of the Pellinore/Lot conflict, and its lack of resolution:

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28. Housman, *Aglovale*, ch. 26, 273.
29. Ibid., 276.
30. Ibid., 275.
31. Ibid., 273-4.

> Though latent dread troubled the King, never did any personal apprehension cramp him down; but his soul was daunted, seeing the wrong he had done not to be dead and gone, neither lived down nor redeemed.[32]

In these passages Housman is going further than simply returning Arthur to Malory's 'true' version (to use Laurence's term); she is dissecting the components that make up the figure of Arthur, revealing a great king, a man who made mistakes, and a soul awaiting judgement.

The different aspects of Arthur are furthermore said to have different faces: Kay asks Arthur to show him 'either the face of my king or the face of my beast-brother'.[33] Here, 'face' refers to the external characteristics of Arthur, indicating his disposition and mood. Faces are frequently referred to throughout *Aglovale*. Arthur's response to the tolling bells of Carlisle, signalling the morning of Guenever's execution, is to utter the following prayer: '"Ah, God, but keep me my face!"'[34] Arthur's desire to 'keep' his face is similar to the idea of 'saving' face, a meaning the OED dates to 1836.[35] It is possible that Arthur only means to keep a passive, unemotional appearance befitting a king, but since his prayer comes just after Aglovale's criticism of his personal character as being at odds with his public reputation, it is more likely that he wants to keep the appearance of his good character intact in the eyes of his court, now that he knows that Aglovale has seen through it. Arthur's face is also related to his character and judgement. In one section, he does not allow Aglovale to tell the court about his adventures, and Aglovale suspects that Arthur is trying to cover up 'his nephews' villainy', but 'before the face of Arthur so dishonouring a suspicion could not stand. The face of Arthur, sombre to sadness, altered

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32. Ibid., 274.

33. Ibid., ch. 27, 278.

34. Ibid., 279.

35. 'face, n.', in *OED Online*, Oxford University Press: http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/67425 s.v. P8. h (b)

before his eyes... Suddenly Aglovale understood: Arthur held him an approved liar worth no credence.'[36] The ability to judge internal feelings from external appearance extends to Aglovale, whose 'guilt looked out of his blasted face for all to see', when accused of wrongdoing.[37] 'Face' additionally refers to the judgement of individuals or a collection of people: Aglovale says that Launcelot 'has spoken for me when your [Arthur's] face was set against me', and Launcelot says that Aglovale 'heeds not the face of man nor the breath of man'.[38] When Arthur prays to 'keep' his 'face', he is not only alluding to his reputation and honour, but also an important part of his identity: the means by which other characters judge and understand him, and a representation of his judgement against others.

The fact that Arthur prays for his face, rather than his wife, more generally suggests that the way he appears and presents himself is of great importance in the novel. This is supported by the description of Arthur's and Lot's tombs, fashioned by Merlin at Arthur's command. Around Lot's tomb there are 'twelve tapers... upheld by images of kings vanquished, they lighted up an image of King Arthur triumphant.'[39] Lot is buried in an adjacent tomb to Arthur's, and 'above the tomb of Lot, his [Arthur's] worldly power stood figured.'[40] Designing one's tomb before death, in order to express worldly power, recalls the actions of pharaohs and emperors, and enforces the impression of Housman's Arthur as a man overly concerned with his appearance, demonstrating a desire to control his 'face' that extends to posterity.

Indeed, Housman's Arthur is trapped in a value system that prioritises courtly reputation above all else. This system is partly based on an idea of 'worship' found in Malory. The word 'worship' occurs 384 times in *Morte Darthur*, where it denotes both reputation and a personal ideal.

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36. Housman, *Aglovale*, ch. 17, 194.
37. Ibid., ch. 4, 44.
38. Ibid., ch. 26, 270; ch. 25, 264.
39. Ibid., ch. 14, 154.
40. Ibid.

Raluca Radulescu summarises it as a fulfilment of duty to the Round Table according to the Pentecostal Oath, and a reward for knightly prowess that is defined by courage, strength, and accomplishing quests.[41] Housman uses 'worship' almost as frequently as Malory, but unlike Malory, exposes the masculine, socially-constructed nature of the worship system, observing it through Aglovale on the outside looking in.[42]

In both Housman and Malory, the primary means of accruing worship is through success in tournaments or on the battlefield. Aglovale is told that he will 'win no worship' with his body after suffering a serious injury, but this is a progressive step in his spiritual journey as he is forced to forego his 'old lust for earthly worship' and concentrate on godlier virtues.[43] It is also a turn away from masculine power. Another such turn comes after he is assumed to have raped a maiden because of his reputation as a bad knight. When his innocence is proved, he is described as 'passing good, gentle, and honest' – not strong or full of worship.[44] This dissension from Arthur's worship system is one way in which Housman's politics intersect with her writing, as the importance of moral standards in male sexual behaviour would later become a major tenet of the suffragette movement.[45]

Another aspect of Arthur's 'worship' system that is criticised by Housman is its emphasis on public performance and chivalric ritual. The artificial nature of worship is exposed when Aglovale fights another knight in a trial by combat, after he is accused of a crime. If Aglovale is guilty, he will be killed, and if he is innocent, God will ensure that he will win.[46]

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41. Raluca Radulescu, *The Gentry Context for Malory's Morte Darthur* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2003) 83-4.

42. The word 'worship', along with its derivatives, appears in *Aglovale* 105 times in 98,000 words. In Malory it appears 384 times in 348,000 words.

43. Housman, *Aglovale*, ch. 23, 248; ch. 3, 42.

44. Ibid., ch. 22, 240.

45. Christabel Pankhurst coined the slogan 'Votes for Women, and Chastity for Men' in 1913. See David Brooks, *The Age of Upheaval: Edwardian Politics, 1899-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995) 155.

46. For an account and discussion of trial by combat in Malory, see Jacqueline

Aglovale defeats the knight he is fighting, Sir Grifflet, who refuses to yield. Arthur will not call off the fight, because he deems that Grifflet would rather lose his life 'than give occasion against the worship of the Table Round'; Aglovale must kill Grifflet, even though he is 'so noble a knight', according to the worship system used in Arthur's court.[47] Because Aglovale does not want to kill Grifflet, Launcelot decides to take Grifflet's place so he can defeat Aglovale, enabling him to yield honourably. This trial seems particularly absurd because the court knows that Aglovale is guilty. When he was first accused of his crime, he replied honestly rather than giving the 'right answer', which would have been, 'prove it on my body.'[48] His mistaken answer is met with 'an angry hum', and Aglovale believes that this one time he 'answered unknightly' was the 'most dire offence in your [Arthur's] sight', as if his lapse from protocol was worse than any of the crimes he committed.[49]

Arthur is in a difficult situation of his own at the end of the novel, when he must decide how to respond to Launcelot and Guenever's adulterous affair. In this case, Arthur's honour is said to be at stake, rather than his worship, but the difference between the two terms is barely perceptible in this context, and Malory uses both words interchangeably. In Malory, 'honour' (like worship) denotes high status and renown: Derek Brewer cites the example of Uther, who is not dishonoured by his desire to seduce another's wife, but Ygraine and her husband would be dishonoured if Ygraine succumbed to Uther.[50] There is clearly, as Brewer writes, a 'strained relationship' between honour/worship and morality in Malory, and Housman focuses on and elaborates this strain in her novel, through

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Stuhmiller, '*Iudicium Dei, iudicium fortunae*: Trial by Combat in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*', *Speculum* 81.2 (April 2006) 427-62, at 427-8.

47. Housman, *Aglovale*, ch. 4, 53.

48. Ibid., ch. 4, 44.

49. *Ibid.,* ch. 26, 269.

50. Derek Brewer, 'The Compulsions of Honour', in *From Arabye to Engelond: Medieval Studies in Honour of Mahmoud Manzalaoui on his 75th Birthday* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1999) 75-92, at 85.

the example of Arthur, whose predicament again concerns threats to his social standing that force him to act in particular ways.[51] It is well known that Guenever has committed adultery – 'the long dishonour done to Arthur was uncloked [*sic*]' by Agravaine and Mordred – and Arthur is faced with two possible ways in which he can react, outlined by Housman in a long passage at the end of the novel:[52]

> But now Arthur must needs learn; for before him lay two ways, one way of honour, and one of honesty, dolorous both, and leading to shame and loss. By the way of honour lay no fair issue. Could he sleep on his bed defiled and call it sweet, were Launcelot so to answer for it with his great might? Were he so to choose, then might such noble custom and order as he had exalted stand, but to stand out as a ghastly mockery, revolting to scorn all the honest part of man: a rotten pretence indeed.
>
> And no fair issue would he find by the way of honesty, but open dishonour and great loss, though the name of wittol he should purge away with blood and fire. Also that way he went to lose the better part of his knights of the Round Table, who would not abide by their lord and king when, by the rule and custom he himself had established, himself he would not abide.[53]

Should Arthur pardon Launcelot after he has successfully defended his honour in battle, or punish Launcelot based on the evidence, ignoring his highly-regarded status? Housman does not enter Arthur's personal thoughts in the above passage, but instead attempts to judge his position

51. Ibid.
52. Housman, *Aglovale*, ch. 25, 258.
53. Ibid., 275.

objectively, arranging all the facts as if Arthur himself was on trial. The role of Arthur as 'lord and king' affects the detailed of the options available, but the actual act of choosing one of the options is framed as if it were a matter of personal development: he 'must needs learn', like the knights who learnt to follow truth over honour in the Grail quest, described in the preceding paragraph.[54]

Arthur's choices can be characterised as acting either for public recognition or private fulfilment. Acting according to honour and worship is to follow the path of social conventions, and acquiring high status and approval from others; acting honestly is the path of focusing on one's own moral character, and speaking the truth even if it contradicts etiquette or damages one's reputation. Housman exacerbates Arthur's quandary from the account found in Malory by describing Launcelot's rescue of Guenever as if it were another trial by combat, referring to a knight who might 'stand for him' against Launcelot, 'body to body in battle' when he tries to rescue Guenever.[55] As no knight still lives who could defeat Launcelot, allowing him to use 'his great might' to settle his innocence would amount to an automatic pardon, exposing the limitations of trial by combat to an even greater extent than the fight between Aglovale and Grifflet.[56] In Malory, by the time Guenever is about to be executed, Arthur has already chosen to avoid trial by combat in favour of the honest approach, as Housman would term it, letting others catch Lancelot in the act and then condemning Guenever to be burnt.

Housman does not describe which path Arthur takes, because Aglovale dies trying to prevent Guenever from being rescued by Launcelot, and the narrative ends with the passing of its protagonist. In Malory, Arthur's dilemma is resolved partly by the Pope, who orders Lancelot to give Guenever back to her husband, and then, finally, by Lancelot and Guenever when they retire to lives of religious devotion. In Housman, the issue is left

54. Ibid., ch. 26, 274-5.
55. Ibid., p. 275.
56. Ibid.

open and unresolved; rather than present a solution, she emphasises how irreconcilable public honour and private virtue are, in the system of worship and prestige at the centre of Arthur's court. Arthur's personal development never reaches a conclusion, either: his private soul and public image are always in contrast. The knights who returned from the Grail quest found that 'the appraisement of man for honour turned to confusion', and only 'pure integrity… found favour from on high', but this wisdom does not reach many in Arthur's court, as 'few learned by that teaching, and Arthur was not of these.'[57] For Scheerer, Arthur's inability to learn spiritual wisdom is his own fault: comparable with C.S. Lewis's assertion that 'Satan *wants* to go on being Satan' in *Paradise Lost*, so too does Housman's Arthur want 'to go on being King Arthur', choosing to follow his own system of earthly worship.[58] Scheerer points to Arthur's 'puzzled and inadequate' response to Aglovale's criticisms as evidence that he does not understand, or chooses not to understand, his own faults.[59] Arthur is too invested in his own system of reputation to know what he should do as a man.

According to the narrator, Aglovale is 'the worst knight that ever Arthur made' because of his public 'fall to truth and dishonour'.[60] The juxtaposition of truth and dishonour suggests that a person cannot be entirely truthful without having some dishonour, reaffirming how, in Housman, honour is essentially an artificial quality. Privately, however, Aglovale is the model that Arthur as a man should follow. Arthur does not recognise this, but Launcelot does; he tells Aglovale that he envies him above all else, and wishes he were 'such a man' as him.[61] Launcelot enters Arthur's hall with 'high acclaim and gladness', followed by Aglovale who enters 'like a

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57. Ibid.

58. C.S. Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost: Being the Ballard Matthews Lectures Delivered at University College, North Wales, 1941, Revised and Enlarged* (New Delhi: Atlantic, 2005) 98. Original emphasis; Scheerer (as n.3) 25.

59. Ibid. Arthur's decision to ignore truth is also found in Malory – 'for the kynge had a demynge / but he wold not here of hit': Malory, *Morte*, Sommer, I.20.2, 799.

60. Housman, *Aglovale*, ch. 26, 273 and 276.

61. Ibid., ch. 24, 257.

ghost' – but Launcelot has a 'guilty heart', and Aglovale has no secrets.[62] Arthur seems to be the ideal king and Launcelot the ideal knight, within a social system that values prowess and strength, but neither is presented as an ideal human when judged outside that system. Instead, it is Aglovale who, having overcome his 'old lust for earthly worship', stands as a model of Christian virtue by the end of the novel: a model that challenges Arthur's decisions as king, and brings his private morality into further disrepute.

Aglovale's virtuous transformation begins after he is beaten, stabbed, and thrown into a lake with stones tied around his waist by Gaheris and Agravaine, two rival knights. Their attack is one part of a long feud between the lineages of Lot and Pellinore. Gaheris and Agravaine wait until they see bubbles of air appearing on the surface and then leave, but a fisherman, who has been hiding nearby, rescues Aglovale before he is drowned. Aglovale recovers in the fisherman's house, but during the night he hears screams of distress from his attempted murderers, who have become stuck in the dark quagmire. He leaves his lodgings, and, at risk to his own safety, pulls his enemies out of the mud and onto solid land. The deed is given divine blessing when a statue of Jesus extends its arm towards Aglovale, recalling a medieval tradition of knights who forgive blood feuds being granted visions of Calvary shrines coming alive.[63] Despite this, he feels 'utterly ashamed' of his charitable deed, because of the 'treason' of helping the enemies of his family, on whom he might have taken vengeance with no loss of honour to himself.[64] He keeps his charitable actions a secret, and when Gaheris finally learns who rescued him, at the end of the novel, he is astonished that Aglovale never took credit for his rescue. Gaheris says he

62. Ibid.

63. For example see Edward Burne-Jones's *The Miracle of the Merciful Knight*, 1863, watercolour and bodycolour, Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery, Birmingham, inspired by the story of Giovanni Gualberto in [Kenelm Henry Digby], 'The Forgiveness of Injuries Required by the Spirit of Chivalry', *The Broad Stone of Honour: Or the True Sense and Practise of Chivalry*, 5 vols (London: Lumley 1848) II.238.

64. Housman, *Aglovale*, ch. 15, 174.

would have 'published his [Aglovale's] worship to my own shame', but by not seeking worship, Aglovale has dismantled the importance of the honour system. For Gaheris, Aglovale's actions 'blast and crush the pattern of our knighthood', and therefore undermine an integral part of Arthur's rule.[65] Aglovale's behaviour also leads to his redemption: by the end of the novel he seems saint-like, when Gaheris wants to be buried with a sliver of his heart, described as 'a holy relic', so that he may have 'peace in the grave'.[66] In Housman's two other novels (*The Were-wolf*, 1896, and *The Unknown Sea*, 1898), the sanctification of the protagonists' bodies is the way their heroism is expressed, and in her short story 'The Drawn Arrow', the hero sacrifices his mind and ultimately his body for his king, demonstrating the ultimate level of loyalty.[67] Aglovale joins Housman's list of self-sacrificial heroes. Arthur does not.

Allen J. Frantzen, in his study on chivalry, argues that vengeance and forgiveness are two integral but opposed components of chivalry in conceptions from the middle ages to the twentieth century.[68] In Malory, for example, although the desire to avenge is often expressed by knights – including Arthur, who is 'passyng glad that he myghte be auengyd vpon sire Mordred' in his final battle – it is tempered by the rule of mercy, part of the Pentecostal oath Arthur swears his knights to.[69] Mark Girouard argues that nineteenth-century conceptions of chivalry 'worked in favour of war', promoting battle as an honourable and manly activity, but for Frantzen, this is not the whole case; many nineteenth-century writers and painters

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65. Ibid., ch. 27, 282.

66. Ibid., 296-8.

67. In *Were-wolf*, the protagonist's blood is like 'holy water' when he sacrifices himself to kill a were-wolf. In *Sea*, the virtuous protagonist's bloody wounds make him seem like 'Christ Himself': Housman, *Were-wolf*, 106; Housman, *Sea*, ch. 15, 253.

68. Allen J. Frantzen, *Bloody Good: Chivalry, Sacrifice, and the Great War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) 17-22.

69. Malory, *Morte*, Sommer, I.21.3, 843.

emphasised forgiveness and mercy as the most important knightly virtues.[70] Both virtues are found in Housman's work: forgiveness and mercy from Aglovale, and action and prowess from Arthur, who prefers 'the stout heart and arm than the good head'.[71] Nathan Comfort Starr writes that 'Arthur's is a violent, lawless age' in Housman's novel, where 'the high heroic is gone', and the focus is on brutality and violence.[72] This is not entirely true: whilst Arthur's masculine, strength-focused worship system is promoted by many of the characters including the king himself, Aglovale's dismantling of that system, by honest words and anonymous self-sacrifice, lays the foundation for a different type of godly, non-violent heroism.

Housman was a committed and morally conservative Anglican, but also someone connected to contemporary feminist politics; once *Aglovale* was finished she became a full-time suffragette activist, and was even incarcerated for political resistance.[73] Elizabeth Oakley asks why Housman, 'a committed feminist on the brink of suffrage activities by the time she finished her book, chose such male-oriented subject matter and passes over important female characters such as Guenevere.'[74] One possible answer, Oakley suggests, is that in writing *Aglovale* Housman was crossing gender boundaries, choosing (at the time) a conventionally male subject matter, and engaging in her own academic scholarship, a mostly male preserve in 1905.[75] For Christensen, Housman's decision to focus on a minor character

70. Mark Girouard, *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981) 276. Frantzen, *Bloody Good*, 17-18.

71. Housman, *Aglovale*, ch. 2, 26.

72. Nathan Comfort Starr, *King Arthur Today: The Arthurian Legend in English and American Literature 1901-53* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1954) 5.

73. See Elizabeth Oakley, *Inseparable Siblings: A Portrait of Clemence and Laurence Housman* (Studley: Brewin, 2009) 36.

74. Ibid., 61-2.

75. As well as providing scholarly notes at the end of the novel, Oakley notes that Housman made her own edits on Malory's text, amending parts of A.W. Pollard's 1900 edition of Malory by using Sommer's unexpurgated Caxton text

from Malory, and to depict Arthur in a way that opposes the popularly accepted version of the figure, is itself an act of rebellion, which fits in with the author's political radicalism.[76] The poet Lex Banning also considered the question, suggesting that one of the text's central ideas was consistent with Housman's political views: 'Aglovale's fanatical and tragic preference... for Truth above Honour was exactly the sort of trait which would appeal to Miss Housman.'[77]

It is not necessary to fit Housman's fiction in with her later life as a suffragette activist; in choosing a medieval topic, and going back to a medieval source for inspiration, areas to expand, and rewrite, Housman compartmentalises her novel from her contemporary life. Just as Arthur has one life as a great king and another as a soul in judgement, so can Housman have one life as a suffragette and another as an author. The question Housman poses in the novel is not 'can you be both?' but 'do your lives have the best type of value?'

Aglovale is of literary value for its multi-layered portrayal of Arthur, describing his private as well as public persona, and analysing the character's actions that most other writers, including Tennyson, ignored. Housman's was the first major work to do this, but it has since become a common approach for Arthurian writers, the most notable example being T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* (1958), although White is more positive about Arthur than Housman. White, like Housman, also ignored Tennyson in favour of Malory.[78]

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from 1889-91: ibid., 62-3. We get a sense of how male-dominated the field of Arthurian literature and scholarship was from a review in 1905, which assumes that Clemence is 'Mr Housman': 'Literature: Subjects of Modern Romance', *Academy*, 7 Oct. 1905, 1025.

76. Christensen (as n.4), 85.

77. Lex Banning, 'Fanatical Knight at Arms', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 June 1954, 10.

78. The genesis of *King* occurred in 1936, when White re-read Malory's *Morte Darthur* and discovered that 'the characters were real... Arthur, Lancelot, and even Galahad were really glorious people – not pre-Raphaelite prigs'. White

In 1944, Laurence Housman corresponded with his American friend Grace M. Martin on his sister's literary work. He regretted that 'so few people know of' *Aglovale*, but noted that 'a few people say it is the most remarkable book they have ever read.'[79] Two years earlier, in 1942, White was trying to persuade Bill Collins to publish his own Arthurian pentalogy, and argued that 'you can only write one of two kinds of book about Arthur… One kind is the book that must be read by scholars, even if they dislike it, 1,000 years hence... And the other kind is the kind which will be read by everybody 1,000 years hence.'[80]

It seems doubtful that everybody will be reading *Aglovale* in the year 2905; but scholars, perhaps, will still be reading it. And a few others may think it the most remarkable book they have ever read.

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attempted to convey the 'reality' of Malory's characters by making them seem flawed. As the narrator in *King* notes how '[a]n observer of the present day, who knew the Arthurian legend only from Tennyson and people of that sort, would have been startled to see that the famous lovers [Guenever and Lancelot] were past their prime': letter from T.H. White to L.J. Potts, 14th Jan. 1938, in *T.H. White: Letters to a Friend: The Correspondence between T.H. White and L.J. Potts*, ed. by François Gallix (Gloucester: Sutton, 1984) 86-8, at 86; T.H. White, 'The Candle in the Wind', in *The Once and Future King: The Complete Edition* (London: Voyager, 1996) ch. 3, 574.

79. Letter dated June 13, 1947. Reproduced in Frank R. Giordano, Jr., 'Letters of Laurence Housman to Grace M. Martin', *Colby Library Quarterly* 10.2 (June 1973) 89-111, at pp.6-7.

80. Unpublished letter from T.H. White to Jonathan Cape, 23 May 1942, p.5, in 'Trouble With Collins', T.S. Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas.

The Carnage of Bebriacum

by Andrew Breeze

Bebriacum, east of Cremona in north Italy, gave its name to two battles of 69 CE. In the first, troops of Vitellius routed those of Otho, who thereafter killed himself (16 April). In the second, forces of an absent Vitellius were themselves defeated; he was caught two months later in Rome and executed (20 December), allowing Vespasian to become emperor.

Our concern here is, however, not struggles for power but textual scholarship. The name of the battles has been unclear, like their location; yet we may find an answer if we turn to Juvenal as edited by Housman. The battle is mentioned in lines 104-9 of the second satire, mocking the effeminacy of Otho (actively homosexual and a lover of Nero himself, according to Martial and Suetonius).

> nimirum summi ducis est occidere Galbam
> et curare cutem; summi constantia civis 105
> Bebriaci campis solium adfectare Palati
> et pressum in facie digitis extendere panem,
> quod nec in Assyrio pharetrata Semiramis orbe
> maesta nec Actiaca fecit Cleopatra carina.

'It took a real leader to kill Galba while keeping one's complexion smooth; it took a real citizen on the field of Bebriacum to aim for the Palatine's solid rewards, while squeezing a face-pack. Not even Semiramis with her quiver did that in the land of Assyria, or despairing Cleopatra on deck at Actium.'

The translation uses Housman's proposed reading of *solium* as *spolia*, with *constantia* as a participle, so that (in his words), 'The carnage

of Bebriacum was the price paid for sovereignty.'[1] If, however, *solium* is retained, the sense may be the weaker one of 'to camp in palatial splendour' (on the field of battle).[2]

More challenging is Juvenal's *Bebriacum*. It is unique. Tacitus and the Elder Pliny give *Bedriacum*, Suetonius and Plutarch have *Betriacum* (as AEH noted). Historians use the second or sometimes the third, but never the first. In this paper we seek to prove (on, one hopes, Housmannian principles) that the first is correct and the others corrupt. The reasoning is thus. *Bebriacum* is Celtic. Its suffix is common in Gaul and has British equivalents. They include (as we shall see) *Bravoniacum* ('place of mill-stones', 'place of querns') or the Roman fort at Burwens, near Penrith, Cumbria; *Eburacum* ('place of hogweed', and not 'yew trees', which hate poorly-drained soil) or the City of York; *Sulloniacis* ('at lands belonging to Sullonios') near Edgware in north-west London; and *Vagniacis* ('at the places of damp meadowland') or Springhead, near Gravesend, Kent. Such forms should indicate which of *Bebriacum*, *Bedriacum*, and *Betriacum* is the likeliest reading, show what the toponym means, and help locate it.

Before that, a look at classical scholarship. There is a full account by Hellegouarc'h, who summarized the problem thus. Although citing Mommsen and the Peutinger Table for Bebriacum as 32 kilometres east of Cremona, and so by the modern town of Calvatone, he preferred Kenneth Wellesley's arguments for a site three kilometres south, near Tornata, by an important road-junction. He gave variants of the name, with *Bebriacum* in Juvenal and his scholiast against those in Tacitus, Pliny, Josephus, Suetonius, Plutarch, and Eutropius. Hellegouarc'h noted how Heer in 1893 argued for Juvenal's reading as the original, representing Gaulish *beber* 'beaver' (supposedly found in the Gaulish place-names *Bibrax* and *Bibracte*), and according with the description elsewhere in Tacitus of an ambush *Ad duodecimum a Cremona, locus Castorum vocatur*, 'A douze milles de Crémone, au lieu dit <<Les Castors>>'. The name figures in Orosius as *Castores* and in Suetonius as *ad Castoris*, on which Hellegouarc'h remarked

1. *D. Iunii Iuvenalis Saturae*, ed. A. E. Housman (Cambridge, 1931[2]) xliv, 10.
2. Juvenal, *The Sixteen Satires*, tr. Peter Green (Harmondsworth, 1967) 79.

'il peut s'agir d'un temple consacré à Castor et Pollux' (because Servius in commenting on *Georgics* 3.89 explained *Castores* as meaning the divine pair). He still thought that this temple of the Dioscuri might be a fantasy, and a reference to beavers more probable. Hellegouarc'h nevertheless observed how Heer's proposal on this was contested by Valmaggi in 1895-6, Helmreich in 1896, and Passerini in 1940, the last preferring the reading *Betriacum* 'estate of Betrius', a centurion of that name being known from an inscription.[3]

The battles themselves are perennially discussed. There is a minute account of the first engagment, with a map. It locates 'Bedriacum' a kilometre south-east of Tornata, and 'Locus Castorum' fourteen kilometres west, on the road to Cremona.[4] A discordant comment comes from the Teubner Juvenal, with citation of R. G. M. Nisbet's opinion that *summi constantia civis Bebriaci campis* is spurious.[5] If we can defend *Bebriacum* against *Bedriacum*, Nisbet's arguments will lose force. Juvenal may be seen as using an authentic source. As for the second battle, Vitellius lost over 30,000 men, with a massacre thereafter at Cremona, sacked by the victors.[6] Bedriacum, 'insignificant as its modern successor Tornata', was for all that destined to be 'famous and ill-omened in Roman history'.[7] The 'fog of war' on events there is endless, despite a visit to the site by Plutarch with his friend Mestrius Florus, who pointed out a temple where he saw 'corpses piled so high that they touched the gable' by the time the field was cleared of its dead.[8]

More recently, Rhiannon Ash observes that the village of Bedriacum is 'notorious, yet curiously obscure', because ancient geographers never mention it and even its name fluctuates. It was forty Roman miles west of

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3. Tacitus, *Histoires: Livres II & III*, ed. Henri Le Bonniec and Joseph Hellegouarc'h (Paris, 1989) 171-2, 173.
4. C. L. Murison, *Galba, Otho, and Vitellius* (Hildesheim, 1993) 106-7, 178.
5. *D. Iunii Iuvenalis Saturae Sedecim*, ed. James Willis (Stuttgart, 1997) 16.
6. Barbara Levick, *Vespasian* (London, 1999) 50.
7. Kenneth Wellesley, *The Year of the Four Emperors* (London, 2000[3]) 55.
8. Gwyn Morgan, *69 AD: The Year of Four Emperors* (New York, 2006) 132-3.

Verona, twenty Roman miles east of Cremona. She takes *Ad duodecimum a Cremona, locus Castorum vocatur* in Tacitus as alluding to the twin gods Castor and Pollux, who 'probably had a shrine there, perhaps the ancient temple surrounded by corpses' and witnessed by Plutarch's guide. If the village of Bedriacum, with the main camp of the Othonians outside it, was twenty miles east of Cremona, the battle itself was four miles east of the city, giving the defeated a long day's march to cover in their panic.[9] *Castores* is now described as eighteen kilometres from Cremona, on the road to Bedriacum.[10] Whatever else is confusing in these accounts, Bedriacum and *Locus Castorum* were evidently different places and must be treated separately.

Now for Celtic philology. The British-Latin *Sulloniacis* already mentioned was discussed by David Ellis Evans, who took the first element as a personal name with *Sul*-.[11] Rivet and Smith quoted *Bebriacum* in the context of *Bibra*, a Roman fortlet at Beckfoot (near Silloth on the Cumbrian coast), and *Bibroci*, a people of south-east Britain mentioned by Caesar (and perhaps living in the Tonbridge region of Kent). They explained the first place-name as 'female beaver', citing Common Celtic *bibros* and Gaulish *bebros*, reconstructed forms meaning 'beaver'. For the two British terms the senses might respectively be '(stronghold of the river called) beaver' (the fort being called after a nearby stream, as was Roman practice) and 'beaver-people'. Rivet and Smith cited Tacitus for *Bebriacum* as 'locus castorum' and so a place of these animals, as they also thought likely for the massive Gaulish hillfort of *Bibracte*. They dealt as well with *Bravoniacum*, *Eboracum*, *Sulloniacis*, and *Vagniacis*.[12] Yet one must say again that, despite the belief of Rivet and Smith in *Bebriacum* and *Locus castorum* as the same place, this cannot be so. The two locations were nine miles apart. Any similarity in meaning is accidental.

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9. Tacitus, *Histories: Book II*, ed. Rhiannon Ash (Cambridge, 2007) 139, 144, 194.

10. Tacitus, *Historias: Libros I-II*, ed. Antonio Ramírez de Verger (Madrid, 2012) 254, n.111.

11. D. Ellis Evans, *Gaulish Personal Names* (Oxford, 1967) 472.

12. A. L. F. Rivet and Colin Smith, *The Place-Names of Roman Britain* (Princeton, 1979) 268, 275-6, 356-7, 463, 485.

On the question of etymology, the *Bibrax* and *Bibracte* mentioned by Caesar are less illuminating than one would hope. The first was a fortified town between Laon and Reims in northern France, the second was the capital of the Aedui, near Autun (south-west of Dijon). Whatever the case for the former, the second hardly means 'place of beavers', because the *oppidum* stood on a dramatic outcrop of rock 800 metres above sea-level.[13] Beavers live in streams, not on hill-tops. We must think again. *Bebriacum* was itself noted by Patrick Sims-Williams (citing Paul Russell for -*aco*- as a Celtic formation).[14] It appears too on an archaeological map of Celtic Europe.[15] What it means is more elusive. Falileyev, after calling -*ako*- a 'well-attested suffix' in Celtic toponyms, listed attestations of *Bedriacum* from ancient writers, but thought the first element 'obscure'. He was also non-committal on *Bibracte* ('obscure'), despite proposals by Nègre after Vendryes for a Celtic word meaning 'endroit fortifié', Delamarre for a link with beavers, Vendryes himself for a cognate of Greek *phrásso* 'I fence in, fortify', and Sims-Williams for 'beaver-dam', a metaphor for a *murus gallicus*.[16] The last is fanciful. If there is a link with beavers, it may be from a personal name (compare *deae Bibracti* in an Autun inscription cited by these authorities).

So we have scholarly disarray and hesitation. However, one thing may be agreed on for *Bebriacum*. The suffix -*aco*- is a telltale Celtic symptom, with the sense 'pertaining to' or 'infested by'. It brings us back to *Bravoniacum*, *Eburacum*, *Sulloniacis*, and *Vagniacis*, with the same structure as *Bebriacum*.[12] They imply the following. A Cumbrian fort was built where mill-stones were quarried; the site of York was thick with hogweed; lands in Middlesex belonged to Sullonius, a Briton; a place in Kent had meadows kept moist by a spring-line. *Bebriacum* was, therefore, either a place known for beavers (Gallo-Latin *beber*) as other places were

13. J.-J. Guillaumet, 'Bibracte', in *The Celts*, ed. Sabatino Moscati (Milan, 1991) 519.

14. Patrick Sims-Williams, *Ancient Celtic Place-Names in Europe and Asia Minor* (Oxford, 2006) 199.

15. John T. Koch, *An Atlas for Celtic Studies* (Oxford, 2007) 78.

16. Alexander Falileyev, *Dictionary of Continental Celtic Place-Names* (Aberystwyth, 2010) 6, 70, 74.

known for querns, hogweed, or lush pasture; or, as *Betriacum*, it was the domain of someone called Betrius.

Of these, the first is the better answer. The ancient Po Valley was notorious for marshes; modern maps show Tornata as on flatlands with water-filled ditches. Before the land was drained and its woods cut down, it might well have been home to beavers, creatures to be found in much of nineteenth-century Europe, and still surviving in Provence (in the Camargue marshes) and Norway. The trouble with the alternative *Betriacum* is that *Betrius* is a rare name and not Celtic, so that one would not expect to find it with -*aco*-. As for *Bedriacum*, used by almost every historian of Rome, it has the defect of meaning nothing. On the Housmannian principle that we should favour a reading which makes sense over one that does not, Juvenal's *Bebriacum* 'place infested with beavers' is preferable to *Bedriacum* and *Betriacum*, where the meaning is poor or non-existent.

Finally, *Locus Castorum*. Tacitus obligingly puts it twelve Roman miles east of Cremona. Murison located it west of the modern hamlet of Ronca de' Golferani, where the *strada provinciale* from Cremona to Calvatone follows the ancient highway. A reference to the Dioscuri may be doubted. It would be satisfying to imagine here a roadside temple of Castor and Pollux, matching the figurehead of the Twins on the ship that brought St Paul to the Bay of Naples (Acts 28:11). In place-name studies, however, the prosaic has a strength which the picturesque lacks. *Locus castorum* 'place of beavers' is intelligible for ancient wetlands near Cremona. *Locus Castorum* 'place of Castor and Pollux' has no such force. Until equivalents for it are produced, we shall be wise to reject it.

So we conclude as follows. Juvenal's *Bebriacum* is a better reading than the *Bedriacum* and *Betriacum* of prose writers. It means something; it accords with former local topography; as a Celtic form it was liable to corruption by native speakers of Greek or Latin, to whom it had no obvious sense; the place being small, textual error passed without notice; the variants in -*d*- and -*t*- may even be explained by dissimilation of identical sounds within a word (as with Italian *pelegrino* from Latin *peregrinus*). Although ancient historians will doubtless write 'Bedriacum' for decades to come, there is no justification for the form. Its use is a vice sanctioned by custom,

like drunkenness at Elsinore. As a bad reading corrigible by reference to the Celtic languages, it is far from alone. ‘Bodotria’ (the Forth), ‘Coritani’ (a people of the Leicester region), ‘Durotriges’ (a people of Dorset and Somerset), ‘Ictis’ (St Michael’s Mount), ‘Lavobrinta’ (the Severn), ‘Mons Graupius’ (Bennachie, Aberdeenshire), and ‘Portus Adurni’ (Portchester) on maps of Roman Britain mean nothing as they stand, but can be made intelligible by emendation after comparison with early Welsh or Irish. We may therefore close with a salute to Housman himself, masterly in the application of thought to textual criticism, who in his edition of Juvenal was completely justified in retaining *Bebriacum*.

‘A Distracting Entanglement’: Examining Some Assertions in Peter Parker’s *Housman Country*

by Alan James

Peter Parker’s 2016 book, *Housman Country*, offers to do something that is long overdue.[1] As its Preface announces:

> My principle intention has been to investigate what I have called ‘Housman Country’, an English sensibility in which literature, landscape, music and emotion all play their part, and which finds one of its most perfect expressions in Housman’s poetry.

It would be reasonable to see this as a quest for the mystical, or at least emotional, concept of Shropshire as an emblem of ‘England’ that appears in Housman’s poetry, and to which several generations of English readers have responded enthusiastically. Generally speaking, Mr Parker delivers on his promise. We should be especially grateful for his chapters on ‘English Landscape’, ‘English Music’ and ‘The Rediscovery of England’, which are delightfully wide-ranging in the scope of their research and lead to many satisfying insights.

In his Preface Mr Parker also writes: ‘There remain whole areas of Housman’s life and work – notably his career as a classicist – that do not come into this book.’ That is understandable. Very few young people today have even studied Latin, and fewer still would be able to make much sense of Housman’s lifetime task of struggling with the text of Manilius. Any present-day writer would be excused for not including such arcane material in a book titled *Housman Country*.

Unfortunately, there is another ‘whole area of Housman’s life and

1. Peter Parker, *Housman Country: Into the Heart of England* (London: Little, Brown, 2016).

work' that Mr Parker feels very free to speculate on. The main text of his book runs for 389 pages, and by my quick count at least 74 of these pages are concerned with what Mr Parker asserts to be Housman's homosexuality. So what Housman himself saw as his 'day job', his Latin critical emendations, counts for nothing; while what has been alleged about his sexuality takes up a considerable part of Mr Parker's book.

This emphasis on Housman's supposed homosexuality, which has been gathering pace over recent decades, would make sense if his poems actually displayed that tendency. To a lesser extent, this voyeuristic trend might also possibly be excusable if we knew anything at all about Housman's private sexual life that would help us to interpret his poems. The fact is that we don't. As Mr Parker himself says:

> The truth is that although we now know a good deal about Housman's emotional life, we still know absolutely nothing about his sex life… The Parisian male prostitutes and the affair with the Venetian gondolier, referred to in some books as if established fact, not only have no verifiable substance but have been more or less conclusively proved to be biographical misreadings. (p. 134)

Despite this unequivocal statement, Parker mentions homosexuality on almost a fifth of his pages, implying that this version of sexuality is important in understanding Housman's poems. He also frequently states that Housman *was* a homosexual, as if the charge were proven by mere aggregation, rather than by firm evidence. More than once Mr Parker claims there is a 'homosexual subtext' to some of the poems (e.g. on pages 245 and 269). He refers to the 'distinctly homophile underpinning' of *'Epithalamium'* (p.75). Perhaps even worse, by referring to 'the homosexual undercurrents running through Housman's poetry' (p. 133) he implies that this is one of the recurring and underlying themes of Housman's work as a whole.

But why? If, as Mr Parker concedes, we 'still know absolutely nothing about [the poet's] sex life', why not just leave it at that? Why not simply adopt Housman's own attitude to personal feelings as expressed in these lines about Adalbert Jackson (in *MP* XLII):

> The word unsaid will stay unsaid
> Though there was much to say;
> Last month was time enough: he's dead,
> The news must keep for aye.

As a self-confessed heterosexual, and as a lover of Housman's poetry for more than four decades, I find it irksome that the issue of his sexuality keeps recurring in book after book, article after article. I say this not because I care greatly about whether a superb artist had sexual preferences that don't appeal to me, but because I cannot see any evidence for these preferences in his poetry – which is what matters most as far as I am concerned. This article therefore aims to analyse the poems themselves to investigate whether or not they hold any clear justification of Mr Parker's approach.

Perhaps I should also confess, at this point, that in my days as an undergraduate studying poetry we were constantly enjoined to focus only on the words that appear on the page. If in his private life Swinburne was over-fond of brandy, or if Coleridge couldn't keep his mouth shut, or if John Clare ended up in a lunatic asylum, or if Byron committed incest, we were told that these issues were irrelevant unless they impacted on their poems. So perhaps I am old-fashioned in this respect. However, there are moments in his book when Mr Parker appears to be on the verge of agreeing with me. For instance, on page 37 he writes:

> Housman evidently believed that a writer's work should stand and be judged on its own merits without any reference to life of the person who wrote it.

And:

> We can draw our own inferences from these facts about Housman, but they remain no more than that. (p.135)

And:

It is always dangerous to read poems biographically, but…' (p.76).

So back to Mr Parker's book, which is, after all, called *Housman Country.* And specifically, back to Housman's poems. Parker claims that Housman disclosed the 'homosexual undercurrents' of his Muse in a small number of the published poems, but that he also often used certain words and phrases in a way that would be recognised as a form of code by young homosexuals in those decades.

One of these words is 'trouble'. Mr Parker correctly notes that variants of this term 'frequently recur in [Housman's] poetry' (p.120), but characteristically adds that the word is used 'as a catch-all, perhaps … but also with a more specific meaning.' He does not need to specify that other meaning: he spends so many pages on the allegation of homosexuality that the implication is clear.

Yet Mr Parker seems to be unaware of the fact, pointed out by J. Enoch Powell, that the word 'trouble' is one of Housman's many references to the Bible. Powell noted that the phrase from *MP* VI, 'when trouble came', echoes *Job* III, 26: 'I was not in safety; neither had I rest; neither was I quiet; yet trouble came'.[2]

Similarly, Mr Parker quotes, with apparent acceptance, Paul Fussell's comment on the word 'lad': 'In Great War diction there are three degrees of erotic heat attaching to three words: *men* is largely neutral; *boys* is a little warmer; *lads* is very warm… As *men* grow more attractive, they are seen as *boys*, until finally, when they are conceived as potential lovers, they turn into *lads*… The lads who populate the poems and memoirs of the Great War have about them both the doom of Housman's lads and the pederastic allure of John Gambrill Nicholson's.' (p.319)

For all I know there may well have been a specifically erotic tinge to the word 'lads' in whatever homosexual subculture existed during the Great

2. Ian R. Maxwell, 'A. E. Housman', in *Some Modern Writers: Two courses of Sydney University extension lectures* (Sydney: Australasian Medical Publishing Company Limited, 1940).

War; but *A Shropshire Lad* was probably the most popular book of poetry carried into that war by the almost nine million British Imperial troops who participated. It would be absurd to imply that the majority of these young men could have had any sense that 'lad' might mean anything other than the Oxford English Dictionary's 'Boy, youth, young fellow'.

If we were to accept the idea that a particular subculture's special, jargon-like, use of a particular word should be retrospectively attributed to the majority of the linguistic community, who supposedly used that word differently, it would be possible to distort the line (*ASL* XXIII):

> The lads in their hundreds to Ludlow come in for the fair

to imply that the Ludlow fair in the 1890s was some sort of homosexual conference, or gay Mardi Gras. Of course it wasn't, and the suggestion is nonsensical.

I have no doubt Mr Parker is right in saying that some homosexuals have found consolation in Housman's poems. So too, no doubt, have many other lads – and lasses – who were 'troubled' for quite different reasons. The fact that some of his admirers appreciate his poetry in the light of their own problems does not mean that Housman shared those precise problems. And yet *Housman Country*, while admirable in many ways, perpetuates that false idea by enlisting such a large number of homosexual admirers of Housman's poetry.

Perhaps the strangest of these is the admittedly troubled young homosexual, E. M. Forster. On page 128 Mr Parker quotes Forster as reporting that in a discussion with a Classics scholar he:

> ventured to hazard that *A Shropshire Lad* concealed a personal experience. [J. S.] Phillimore agreed. Instantly my own conjecture became more vivid to me, and I realized that the poet must have fallen in love with a man. He happened to accompany my own development from subconscious to conscious [awareness of his own homosexuality], and that is why he is surrounded by an extra emotion.

So a disturbed young man has an impetuous 'conjecture' that Housman shared his own problems, and that is apparently significant enough to be included in a book about *Housman Country*. The poet also wrote about suicides, but didn't kill himself; and fratricides, but is not alleged to have murdered any of his brothers; and even what many contemporary readers would have agreed sounds like heterosexual prostitution (*LP* XXI), but is not alleged even by his denigrators to have employed whores.

Haven't we all, at some stage in our adolescence, been in the situation of E. M. Forster: having an emotional problem of one kind or another, and projecting it on to a book, a poem, a piece of music, a film? In effect, of using a work of art as a psychological Rorschach blot? For this reason I don't think it sheds much light on Housman to quote E. M. Forster's immature emotional reaction to Housman's work, and I think it is equally pointless to dwell on two common words in Housman's verse, 'trouble' and 'lad'. These two words may have had a special meaning in whatever homosexual subculture existed during the Great War, but would not have been interpreted in that way by most of the young soldiers who marched to their likely deaths with *ASL* in either their breast pockets or their heads.

I have dwelt on these two very common words in Housman's poetry to suggest that Mr Parker is wrong to present them as having an obvious homosexual loading, and I have noted the tendency of disturbed young people to project their problems onto artists they admire. It is now time to examine the specific poems that are adduced to justify Mr Parker's claim about 'the homosexual undercurrents running through Housman's poetry'. Those poems are: 'The Street Sounds', 'Look not in my eyes', *'Epithalamium'*, 'Shot? So quick, so clean an ending', 'Oh who is that young sinner?' and 'The Merry Guide'.[3]

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3. Mr Parker might perhaps have been on firmer ground with *LP* XVIII. But on page 132 he writes that a memoir by E. M. Forster 'is prefaced with the second stanza, unattributed, of 'The rain, it streams on stone and hillock', a poem Housman had written in memory of his brother Herbert and included in *Last Poems*.' Presumably Mr Parker has no wish to accuse Alfred and Herbert of incest. In fact it seems that *LP* XVIII was commenced several years before Herbert's death in 1901 – although Housman may perhaps have been inspired by an apprehension that his soldier-brother might be killed in action.

Mr Parker comments on these poems in general (p.125):

> It did not take too much reading between the lines of some of the poems to realise what Housman was saying, and although most public comments about the nature of such poems were either discreet or obtuse, certain people were not prepared to play ball.

Presumably the word ‘obtuse’ here refers to the ‘financial expert’ who described *ASL* as the ‘filthiest book I have ever read: all about rogering girls under hedges’ (p. 122). The financial expert was not entirely wrong. There are at least suggestions of specifically heterosexual encounters in *ASL* V, VI, X, XII, XXI, XXV, XXVI, XXVII, XXXIV; LIII, *LP* VII, XVI, XXII, XLI; and *MP* XVIII. In many others the gender of the lover is not specified. Neither is it in Browning’s ‘Meeting at Night’, Christina Rossetti’s ‘I loved you first, but afterwards your love’, Shakespeare’s Sonnet 116, or Donne’s ‘The Good-Morrow’, to name but four popular love poems that are usually given a heterosexual reading.

More specifically, let’s consider the works singled out by Mr Parker for their ‘homosexual undercurrents’. *ASL* XXII reads:

> The street sounds to the soldiers’ tread,
> And out we troop to see:
> A single redcoat turns his head,
> He turns and looks at me.
>
> My man, from sky to sky’s so far,
> We never crossed before;
> Such leagues apart the world’s ends are,
> We’re like to meet no more;

What thoughts at heart have you and I
  We cannot stop to tell;
But dead or living, drunk or dry,
  Soldier, I wish you well.

Here the narrator makes eye contact with a passing soldier. The era is presumably that of the Boer War, in which Housman's youngest brother died in action. The poet speculates on the difference in life-experience between himself and the soldier, and wishes him well. There really shouldn't be much more to say. If eye contact were a sin, anyone who 'looks at' a young child on a crowded beach could be accused of paedophilia.

Yet Mr Parker comments on this poem:

> The glance exchanged between the redcoat and the onlooker in 'The street sounds to the soldiers' tread' (XXII) is no more than that, though charged with an erotic possibility that fizzles out almost as soon as it is ignited. (p. 122)

Moreover:

> it is unclear just how innocent his [Housman's] interest was. It certainly seems less innocent when in 'The street sounds to the soldiers' tread' (XXII) 'A single redcoat turns his head' to look directly back at the admiring poet. One does not find this kind of glance, this kind of exchange, in Kipling. (p. 284)

Mr Parker must have a word, one day, with the Kipling who wrote of two military foes in *The Ballad of East and West*: 'They have looked each other between the eyes, and there they found no fault.' Eye contact is simply not sexual union, nor necessarily the anticipation of or desire for it. (Although in *ASL* V, 'Oh see how thick the goldcup flowers', the young man trying to seduce a girl *does* say, 'Oh, look in my eyes then, can you doubt?')

The second poem is XV from *ASL*:

> Look not in my eyes, for fear
>   They mirror true the sight I see,
> And there you find your face too clear
>   And love it and be lost like me.
> One the long nights through must lie
>   Spent in star-defeated sighs,
> But why should you as well as I
>   Perish? gaze not in my eyes.
>
> A Grecian lad, as I hear tell,
>   One that many loved in vain,
> Looked into a forest well
>   And never looked away again.
> There, when the turf in springtime flowers,
>   With downward eye and gazes sad,
> Stands amid the glancing showers
>   A jonquil, not a Grecian lad.

Mr Parker comments:

> Narcissus had become a popular figure in homosexual literature, partly because of his rejection of Echo for the beautiful youth he finds in the pool (something of a distortion of Ovid's narrative), but also because the story provided a covert way to write about one beautiful youth falling in love with another. The usual suspects line up... (p. 123)

He then goes on to enlist Edward Carpenter, André Gide, Oscar Wilde and S.

S. Sale, all of whom wrote supposedly homosexual poems about Narcissus.

Regardless of however many allusions to Narcissus may be found in 'homosexual literature', it seems to me that Housman's poem reads perfectly well as a statement from a man to a woman. Admittedly, Mr Parker concedes that 'the beloved could, at a stretch, be a woman, but the mirror imagery of the poem would not really work if the two lovers were of a different gender.' But in reality the charming mirror imagery with which the poem opens is typically undercut by the last four lines: the Grecian lad has, after all, been changed into a jonquil.

The third poem, *'Epithalamium'*, *LP* XXIV*,* generally acknowledged to be about the marriage of Moses Jackson, reads:

He is here, Urania's son,
Hymen come from Helicon;
God that glads the lover's heart,
He is here to join and part.
So the groomsman quits your side
And the bridegroom seeks the bride:
Friend and comrade yield you o'er
To her that hardly loves you more.

Now the sun his skyward beam
Has tilted from the Ocean stream.
Light the Indies, laggard sun:
Happy bridegroom, day is done,
And the star from Œta's steep
Calls to bed but not to sleep.

Happy bridegroom, Hesper brings
All desired and timely things.
All whom morning sends to roam,

Hesper loves to lead them home.
Home return who him behold,
Child to mother, sheep to fold,
Bird to nest from wandering wide:
Happy bridegroom, seek your bride.

Pour it out, the golden cup
Given and guarded, brimming up,
Safe through jostling markets borne
And the thicket of the thorn;
Folly spurned and danger past,
Pour it to the god at last.

Now, to smother noise and light,
Is stolen abroad the wildering night,
And the blotting shades confuse
Path and meadow full of dews;
And the high heavens, that all control,
Turn in silence round the pole.
Catch the starry beams they shed
Prospering the marriage bed,
And breed the land that reared your prime
Sons to stay the rot of time.
All is quiet, no alarms;
Nothing fear of nightly harms.
Safe you sleep on guarded ground,
And in silent circle round
The thoughts of friends keep watch and ward,
Harnessed angels, hand on sword.

This is, of course, written in the formal style of a traditional wedding poem, which would seem to be a suitable exercise for a classicist. But Mr Parker singles outlines 5 to 8, commenting:

> It is not known who acted as Jackson's groomsman, or best man, but Housman, in his idealisation of the scene, steps up to hand over his friend to Mrs Chambers, who might have been less than flattered at being described as someone who loved her new husband hardly more than the reluctantly yielding Housman did. (p. 75)

It might equally be true that only a reader who was already convinced that Housman's affection for Jackson was sexual would take issue with what might otherwise be regarded as a heartfelt compliment.

Mr Parker *does* add:

> The distinctly homophile underpinning of this poem is reinforced by Housman's appropriation of Sappho, a poet who – though little is known about her life – had become associated with female homosexuality.

Perhaps at this point Mr Parker should have prefigured his later statement, already quoted here:

> The truth is that although we now know a good deal about Housman's emotional life, we still know absolutely nothing about his sex life.

At any rate, to be influenced by the artistic output of a Greek poet who is – rightly or wrongly – seen as homosexual is hardly evidence of complicity.

In the context of *LP* XXIV Mr Parker also suggests (p. 149) that there is something ominous in a letter Housman wrote to Pollard regarding Jackson's death: 'Now I can die myself: I could not have borne to leave him behind me in a world where anything might happen to him.'

It is a pity that he didn't balance this quote with Housman's reaction to the death of Sophie Becker and the Wise sisters: 'On telling Withers about the death of Sophie, Housman's 'voice faltered, his whole frame seemed shaken, as he told the brief story,' adding that now the Wise sisters were also dead 'how comfortably he could meet death now his three friends were at peace.'[4] Either both of these statements were Housman mannerisms, or else the armchair analysts should also speculate on Housman's relationship with Sophie Becker and the Wise sisters.

The fourth poem is *AP* XVIII. It reads:

Oh who is that young sinner with the handcuffs on his wrists?
And what has he been after that they groan and shake their fists?
And wherefore is he wearing such a conscience-stricken air?
Oh they're taking him to prison for the colour of his hair.

'Tis a shame to human nature, such a head of hair as his;
In the good old time 'twas hanging for the colour that it is;
Though hanging isn't bad enough and flaying would be fair
For the nameless and abominable colour of his hair.

Oh a deal of pains he's taken and a pretty price he's paid
To hide his poll or dye it of a mentionable shade;
But they've pulled the beggar's hat off for the world to see and stare,
And they're haling him to justice for the colour of his hair.

Now 'tis oakum for his fingers and the treadmill for his feet
And the quarry-gang on Portland in the cold and in the heat,
And between his spells of labour in the time he has to spare
He can curse the God that made him for the colour of his hair.

4. Martin Blocksidge, 'A. E. Housman's Early Biographers', *HSJ* 42 (2016) 50.

This work is generally thought to refer to the conviction and sentencing of Oscar Wilde for homosexual offences. Mr Parker predictably implies that Housman's sympathy for Wilde results from homosexual fellow-feeling. In fact, there were at least two other possible attitudes to Wilde's tragedy.

From a general sense of humanity it could be argued that Wilde's sentence to two years' hard labour was excessive. Another artist who famously succumbed to a homosexual scandal was the painter Simeon Solomon, who in 1873 was sentenced to eighteen months in prison. When later arrested for a similar offence in France, the appropriate sentence was considered to be three months. Even people who disapproved of Wilde might have thought the French penalty more humane.

A quite different attitude was demonstrated by the poet Ernest Dowson, who seems to have taken a reformist position. After Wilde's release from prison, Dowson and Wilde met up at Dieppe, where Dowson tried to convert the dramatist to 'a more wholesome taste' by contributing toward the cost of a visit by Wilde to a heterosexual brothel.[5]

Mr Parker says: 'It is clear from [*AP* XVIII] where Housman stood on the nature-versus-nurture arguments about what 'caused' homosexuality.' While I agree with this interpretation, I cannot accept the implication that Housman must have been a homosexual to arrive at this position. In discussing 'Oh who is that young sinner' it may be significant that Thomas Carlyle's influential 1837 work, *The French Revolution: A History*, stressed that French aristocrats with blond hair were particularly targeted for murder by the usually dark-haired revolutionaries. If Housman had Carlyle's work in mind when he hit upon hair colour as emblematic of a natural condition which does not indicate criminal intent, it might suggest that his sympathy for Wilde was of a moral nature rather than a matter of fellow-feeling.

The fifth poem is *ASL* XLIV. It reads:

> Shot? so quick, so clean an ending?
> Oh that was right, lad, that was brave:
> Yours was not an ill for mending,
> 'Twas best to take it to the grave.

5. W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: MacMillan, 1966) 327.

Oh you had forethought, you could reason,
And saw your road and where it led,
And early wise and brave in season
Put the pistol to your head.

Oh soon, and better so than later
After long disgrace and scorn,
You shot dead the household traitor,
The soul that should not have been born.

Right you guessed the rising morrow
And scorned to tread the mire you must:
Dust's your wages, son of sorrow,
But men may come to worse than dust.

Souls undone, undoing others,
Long time since the tale began.
You would not live to wrong your brothers:
Oh lad, you died as fits a man.

Now to your grave shall friend and stranger
With ruth and some with envy come:
Undishonoured, clear of danger,
Clean of guilt, pass hence and home.

Turn safe to rest, no dreams, no waking;
And here, man, here's the wreath I've made:
'Tis not a gift that's worth the taking,
But wear it and it will not fade.

Mr Parker convincingly relates this poem to the 1895 suicide of a nineteen-year-old military cadet named Henry Maclean. He quotes the suicide note Maclean left behind, pointing out that 'There is in fact no hard evidence to explain why Maclean shot himself …' (p. 111) Yet characteristically he adds:

> Many readers would have guessed what the 'ill' was that drove the lad in 'Shot? so quick, so clean an ending' to kill himself, just as Housman guessed what prompted Harry Maclean's suicide. The vocabulary is very much that of the period used to describe homosexuality, euphemistic but doom-laden: 'disgrace', 'mire', 'undone', 'wrong', 'danger', 'guilt'. (p.113)

These words could of course refer to many of the other possible 'troubles' that might lead to suicide, not all of them of a sexual nature. It is curious that Mr Parker mentions another suicide by a nineteen-year-old cadet (p. 358), this one a lad called Julian Hurd who shot himself in 1951. The relevance is that Douglas Hurd thought his brother's reading of Housman may have contributed to his suicidal mood. Mr Parker comments: 'Unlike [Maclean], there was no evidence that Julian was experiencing any romantic or sexual troubles.' As we have seen, there is no evidence that Maclean was suffering in this way, either – but the point is that Mr Parker acknowledges in discussing this parallel case that sensitive young men might kill themselves for reasons that do not involve sexual orientation.

The last poem specifically cited by Mr Parker as having a homosexual undercurrent is 'The Merry Guide' (*ASL* XLII):

> Once in the wind of morning
> I ranged the thymy wold;
> The world-wide air was azure
> And all the brooks ran gold.

There through the dews beside me
Behold a youth that trod,
With feather cap on forehead,
And poised a golden rod.

With mien to match the morning
And gay delightful guise
And friendly brows and laughter
He looked me in the eyes.

Oh whence, I asked, and whither?
He smiled and would not say,
And looked at me and beckoned
And laughed and led the way.

And with kind looks and laughter
And nought to say beside
We two went on together,
I and my happy guide.

Across the glittering pastures
And empty upland still
And solitude of shepherds
High in the folded hill,

By hanging woods and hamlets
That gaze through orchards down
On many a windmill turning
And far-discovered town,

With gay regards of promise
And sure unslackened stride
And smiles and nothing spoken
Led on my merry guide.

By blowing realms of woodland
With sunstruck vanes afield
And cloud-led shadows sailing
About the windy weald.

By valley-guarded granges
    And silver waters wide,
Content at heart I followed
With my delightful guide.

And like the cloudy shadows
Across the country blown
We two fare on for ever,
But not we two alone.

With the great gale we journey
That breathes from gardens thinned,
Borne in the drift of blossoms
Whose petals throng the wind;

Buoyed on the heaven-heard whisper
Of dancing leaflets whirled
From all the woods that autumn
Bereaves in all the world.

And midst the fluttering legion
Of all that ever died
I follow, and before us
Goes the delightful guide,

With lips that brim with laughter
But never once respond,
And feet that fly on feathers,
And serpent-circled wand.

Mr Parker comments:

> Homosexual readers would also have been alert to the gentle irony of [*ASL* XLII], in which the poet encounters an attractive young man clad in little but a feathered cap and winged sandals… Like most such young men, this one spells trouble. The teasingly seductive youth refuses to answer the poet's questions about their destination, or even speak at all, merely laughing and beckoning as he lures him to the realm of the dead.

If that summary were an adequate reading of the poem, I suppose Mr Parker's suggestions would be more tenable. However, there is nothing in Housman's actual words to justify the statement that the youth is 'attractive' or 'teasingly seductive'. The guide may be cheerful of mien, and 'delightful' in the eyes of the speaker, but these characteristics do not have to equate to attractiveness or seduction. In fact, it seems to me that the youth may actually be the speaker when he was younger: the 'we two' who 'fare on forever' are a direct parallel to 'the man of bone' who accompanies the speaker in *ASL* XLIII, 'The Immortal Part'.

Nor is there any evidence in the poem itself that the guide is 'clad in little but a feathered cap and winged sandals'. These garments are listed because they (and also the 'serpent-circled wand') are traditional attributes

of Mercury/Hermes. It is understandable that a classicist writing a book of poetry in which death and mortality are such recurring themes should introduce the figure of a psychopomp. And while it is true that Mercury/Hermes was often depicted semi-naked, the youth in this poem is moving through a landscape of hamlets, towns, mills and granges: clearly, through Housman Country. If he were dressed as Mr Parker suggests he could expect to end up in Shrewsbury jail.

That encapsulates the problem I have with Mr Parker's insistence on a homosexual undercurrent in Housman's work. Not only is it not there, but the futile search for it leaves less room for serious analysis of the poetry itself. For instance, it would have been interesting to learn Mr Parker's thoughts on Housman's appropriation of the figure of a Greco-Roman god who is a conductor of the dead to the afterlife; and perhaps on the role of this poem in the overall structure of *A Shropshire Lad*. Instead, the psychopomp aspect is ignored, and in its place we are offered the figure of a 'teasingly seductive' rent-boy.

In this essay I have concentrated on the poems where Mr Parker makes some effort to justify a homosexualist interpretation. Other Housman lyrics are mentioned in this context throughout Mr Parker's book, but without analysis – as if saying something like 'he may well have had in mind'[6] becomes evidence if repeated often enough. It doesn't; but *Housman Country* is neither the worst nor the first study to fall into this irksome trap, and it is unlikely to be the last.

The harm done by this general approach to Housman's poetry arises from the fact that most readers know nothing about the homosexual jargon or subculture of the 1890s or the Great War. They are therefore in no position to argue with a writer who, claiming such knowledge, stands on a soap-box and proclaims: 'Nothing may be known about Housman's sexual life, but I am convinced he was a homosexual. Additionally, in his poetry he often used homosexual code-words, including 'and' and 'the'. What

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6. See, for example, the reference on p. 149 in *Housman Country* to 'If truth in hearts that perish'

is more, a lot of self-proclaimed homosexuals like his poetry. Therefore Housman is the laureate of homosexuality, and anyone who disagrees must be a homophobe.'[7]

Of course Mr Parker doesn't go quite this far. But surely it would be better to engage with the actual words of the poems?

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7. A. E. Housman, 'The Application of Thought to Textual Criticism' (1921): 'And, what is worse, the reader often shares the writer's prejudices, and is far too well pleased with his conclusions to examine either his premises or his reasoning. Stand on a barrel in the streets of Bagdad, and say in a loud voice, 'Twice two is four, and ginger is hot in the mouth, therefore Mohammed is the prophet of God', and your logic will probably escape criticism; or, if anyone should by chance criticise it, you could easily silence him by calling him a Christian dog.'

‘Yours very truly’: Signing Off with Housman

by David Butterfield

Perhaps Housman’s most moving letter – and certainly his most famous – is the last that he wrote to Moses Jackson on 4 Jan. 1923.[1] For all the feeling it carried, it failed to reach ‘dear Mo’ before his death ten days later. The letter closes with the words ‘Yours very truly’. This same phrase was also used by Jackson in his last letter to Housman, of 23 Nov. 1922.

I do not propose to offer any privileged insight or speculative guess about why in particular Housman chose this phrase for his correspondence with Jackson, nor do I have access to evidence about whether it varied from the latter’s usual practice. However, investigation of Housman’s wider epistolary practice reveals that the sign-off occupies a particular space in his correspondence. Just to give a brief point of contrast, we may observe that when Housman wrote to the third of that close trio of undergraduate chums, Alfred Pollard, about Mo’s death (on 17 Jan. 1923), he closed that poignant message with his much more typical coda to friendly and informal letters, ‘Yours sincerely’.

What follows is a rough sketch of Housman’s practice in closing letters. It will be easiest to begin with family members. To such close relatives, he was meticulous in using valedictory phrases of explicit affection. To his stepmother, Lucy Housman, he typically signed, ‘Your loving son’ (x17: 1873-1904), or in some early letters ‘Your affectionate son’ (x4: 1875-8). In the one letter to his father, Edward Housman, of 12 Feb. 1878, he signed off with ‘Your loving son’ (x1: 1878). To his sister, Katharine Housman (later Symons), he always wrote ‘Your affectionate brother’, when a valediction was given (x93: 1881-1936); in some of his last letters, perhaps significantly, he expanded this closure to ‘Love from your affectionate brother’ (3 Dec 1934, 31 March 1935, 1 June 1935, 22

1. For a transcription of this letter and further context, see Andrew Jackson, ‘A Pivotal Friendship’, *HSJ* 36 (2010) 45-53, along with D.S. M^c^Kie, ‘Jacksoniana’, *HSJ* 37 (2011) 129-63, at 129-35.

Aug. 1935, 18 Jan. 1936). The same sign-off 'Your affectionate brother' (when one appears) was used in letters to Laurence Housman (x61: 1894-1936); it is not extended with 'Love from' in the same way.[2] His sister-in-law Jeannie Housman received the regular parting formula of 'Yours affectionately' (x20 1929-36), although that was extended to 'Yours always affectionately' on 17 July 1935.

Similar formulas are used with more remote relatives: to his nephew Denis Symons, we find 'Your affectionate uncle' (25 Feb. 1932, 6 July 1932, 11 Dec. 1935), preceded by 'Love to Phyllis' (Denis' wife) and their young family. In the one surviving letter to Phyllis Symons, of 12 July 1932, the close is simply 'Yours affectionately'. To his godson Gerald Jackson, he regularly wrote 'Your affectionate godfather' (x52: 1927-36), which he once (on 15 Oct. 1930) playfully expanded to 'Your affectionate though inefficient godfather'. To his godmother, Elizabeth Wise, 'Yours affectionately' was typical (x4: 1878-1905), alongside two early variants: 'Very affectionately yours' (5 Apr. 1877) and 'Always yours affectionately' (early 1879).

At the other end of the spectrum, Housman's letters of a formal nature always closed with 'Yours faithfully' – or, in yet more formal contexts – 'I am yours faithfully'. Such closures, as is to be expected, were matched by opening addresses to 'Dear Sir' or similar. The first such was addressed to the Bursar of St John's College (4 Dec. 1882); the last to the Richards Press (20 Mar. 1936).[3]

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2. However, Housman twice made play of the formula by adding a parenthetic barb: on 24 Dec. 1896, when his poetry had been accidentally attributed to Laurence, he added '(what a thing is fraternal affection, that it will stand these tests!)'; on 11 Dec. 1922, in the wake of *Last Poems*, he appended '(though I have received a press-cutting which authoritatively states that we are not brothers)'.

3. On one occasion the phrase was expanded to 'Yours faithfully and obliged' (11 May 1901), when thanking his colleague Prof. Denison Ross for lending some formal attire. Occasionally this close was extended to '(I am) yours very faithfully': on 2 Jan. 1901, to John Purves (addressed as 'Sir') when refusing to offer any new writing; on 19 Nov. 1902, when stating the publisher of his verse; on 23 March 1903, asking G.F. Hill for numismatic advice; on 25 March 1903, when agreeing to W.G. Hutchinson's request to reprint *ASL* LXII; on 11 Aug 1903 ('I am, dear Duchess of Sutherland, yours very faithfully'), when

For especially formal contexts, Housman signed off as an 'obedient servant': 'We have the honour to be, Sir, your obedient servants' (9 Oct. 1890), when complaining with fellow signatories about malpractice in the trade marks division of the Patent Office; 'I have the honour to be, My Lords and Gentlemen, your obedient servant' (19 Apr. 1892), when applying to the Council of UCL for a Professorship in Latin/Greek; 'I am, Sir, your obedient servant' (12 Mar. 1894), in a letter to the Editor of *The Standard*; 'I am your obedient servant' (17 Feb. 1905), when refusing an honorary degree from UCL; 'I am, Madam, your highness' obedient servant' (1 May 1923), when granting permission to Princess Marie Louise, Queen Victoria's granddaughter, to reprint some of his poetry for Queen Mary's Dolls' House.[4]

What emerged to be his standard closural formula to informal recipients, i.e. personal friends and closer colleagues, was 'Yours sincerely'. The earliest signs of this phrase are, as stated above, visible in his letters as an undergraduate to Alfred Pollard: two letters of 1880 close with 'Very sincerely' and 'Yours ever sincerely'.[5] However, the simple close 'yours sincerely' only becomes relatively frequent in the early years of the twentieth century. In the end, it survives as the coda to over 1,200 letters.

But there is a frequent intermediary close, standing between acknowledged familiarity and professional formality, namely 'Yours very truly'. This sign-off is not found in a letter before Housman was 28, although evidence is comparatively sparse for these earlier years. We thus first see this close in a letter of 1887 that Housman wrote to Aldis Wright about his submission to the *Journal of Philology* (which Wright co-edited). The same phrase recurs later, in 1891, when writing to the Oxford Latinist – and his former examiner – Robinson Ellis. But signs start to exist in the 1890s that 'Yours very truly' is emerging to be Housman's phrase of choice for correspondents whose identity and character he knows, but with whom

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sending a poem to the Duchess of Sutherland for a poetic anthology; on 18 May 1914, to give the composer L.J. Downing permission to set *ASL* XLIX.

4. Several formal letters, including many printed in newspapers and testimonials for former pupils, generally lack an explicit close.

5. The extant later letters read simply 'Yours sincerely'.

he has had little or no prior acquaintance in person.[6] To begin with, these instances are primarily academic, but there is also an important letter of 17 June 1896 to the poet P.G.L. Webb.

Housman's most frequent correspondent, Grant Richards, proves to be a neat a case in point of his epistolary practice. In their first letters, of 1898-9, Housman signed off to his addressee (first 'Dear Sir', then 'Dear Mr Richards') with 'Yours very truly'; since he had evidently had some formal dealings with him in person, this was deemed appropriate. But in a letter of 12 Oct. 1902 he opened with: 'Dear Richards, If I may drop the Mr.' A letter with this less formal opening – as informal as Housman's letters would ever get outside the family – closes with 'I remain | Yours sincerely'. Thereafter, every letter (not postcards)[7] to Richards – many hundreds in number – closed with 'Yours sincerely', the warmest sign-off he gave to non-relatives.

His practice throughout this letter-filled life was quite uniform. To take the totals as a whole for his extant correspondence, 'Yours sincerely' accounts for 53% (and 'I am y.s.' 6%), 'Yours very truly' for 15% (and 'I am y. v. t.' 6%), and 'Yours faithfully' for 13% (and 'I am y. f.' 3%). These three formulae thus account for over 80% of his surviving epistolary output. As his habits crystallised further through the twentieth century, we see 'Yours sincerely' and (especially from 1924) 'Yours faithfully' become commoner, gradually restricting the deployment of 'Yours very truly'. Although 'Yours very truly' outstrips 'Yours sincerely' in 1903 (12: 10),

6. This formula is extended to 'yours very truly and with thanks' in a letter of 30 Apr. 1934 to Blanche Trollope, the neighbour of Housman's godmother Elizabeth and her son Ted, to thank her for passing on the sad news of his death. The simple 'I am yours truly' occurs four times: to Ellis Roberts (31 Oct. 1898), when rejecting the request to write something on demand; to Laurence Binyon (on 3 Feb. 1905), when stating that he will not at that point be doing anything further with *ASL*; to a Mr Thompson (on 16 March 1909), when refusing to write verses to order for a University of London fundraiser; to Harold Monro (on 20 Aug. 1929), when agreeing for his 'Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries' to be included in an anthology.

7. On postcards, the restriction of space allows for greater informality. His regular close is a simple 'Yours' (often 'Yrs'). This is first attested to Grant Richards 1900 and reappears another 43 times.

in every year from 1904 to 1935, 'Yours sincerely' can be seen to be the commoner close. However, in the four months of 1936 - when Housman was evidently cognisant that his time was limited, 'Yours very truly' (x11) marginally outstrips 'yours sincerely' (x8) once more. Exceptions from these three formulae, and the other closes stated above, are rare.[8]

Closer investigation of 'Yours very truly' reveals it to be deployed primarily in cases where the recipient was on friendly terms with Housman, but they had not met socially in the past. In many cases, one can witness Housman moving from the less to the more informal formula after he had met his correspondent, as with Walter Ashburner (with occasional exceptions) Cyril Clemens; in other cases, such as Houston Martin and Isidore Brussel, a gradual opening-up during his correspondence allows for a similar shift to 'Yours sincerely'. But other regular correspondents, such as the indefatigable Charles Wilson, were destined to remain in 'Yours very truly' territory. It follows, then, that 'Yours very truly' serves as the special marker for letters to physically distant but warmly acknowledged friends. Given the nature of Housman's correspondence, the majority of these recipients were younger men who admired Housman's poetry intensely.

Let us return, then, to Moses Jackson. It seems that the same phrase we see in Housman's last letter, 'Yours very truly', was the epistolary close deployed in the other extant letters he wrote to Moses, i.e. the six written between 1911 and 1923: the letter of 14 Oct. 1917 can be seen in the Sotheby's 2010 catalogue to close with this formula. While no firm conclusion can be reached about Housman's particular choice of wording

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8. A letter to Thomas Hardy of 17 Oct. 1919 signs off with 'Believe me, always sincerely yours', in which he responds to Hardy's acknowledgement of his contribution to an anniversary anthology'. 'Yours always sincerely' closes a letter of 27 Jan. 1928 to Witter Bynner, thanking him for a gift of poetry; 'Always yours very truly', ends a letter of 17 May 1928 to Lady Gosse on the death of her husband Sir Edmund; 'Yours with every good wish and thought' closes a letter of 3 July 1935 to Mary Withers, wife of Percy, in which he observes that 'I was glad to hear that you said I seemed happy'. Rather unusual is 'I am yours ever', in a letter to the poet Edmund Gosse of 27 Jan. 1915. In the nine other letters to him, Housman signs off with the simple 'Yours sincerely' (once 'I am'). There is only instance of 'Yours and obliged', in a letter to Sydney Cockerell of 8 July 1934 that politely refuses the request to sit for a portrait.

when signing off to M.J.J., it does emerge as striking that Housman chose to address his boon-companion as an undergraduate, ‘the man who had more influence on [his] life than anybody else,’ a man to whom he probably did once reveal his innermost thoughts, in the semi-formal terms of ‘Yours very truly’, even in such lively and relaxed letters that open – quite remarkably – with ‘My dear Mo’.

Biographies of Contributors

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