

ON THE POETRY OF A. E. HOUSMAN

WHEN I was close upon sixteen there appeared a book of poems which was quickly recognised by the judges of literature as a classic. From that verdict there has never been any appeal. *A Shropshire Lad* is one of the great achievements of English poetry. The author's vernacular English is chiselled to a Greek perfection, his metrical mastery is triumphant. Until 1922 he published no further collection. To one familiar with *A Shropshire Lad*, Professor A. E. Housman's *Last Poems* betray a notable falling off. Very few of these pieces are worthy to rank with those of the earlier volume; and that which seems to me by far the best I well remember reading in some periodical (was it the excellent *Monthly Review*?) about thirty years ago, a masterpiece of verbal and rhythmic beauty.

'Tis mute the word they went to hear on high Dodona mountain,
When winds were in the oakenshaws and all the cauldrons
toll'd,
And mute's the midland navel-stone beside the singing fountain,
And echoes list to silence now where gods told lies of old.

The lapse into gross slang, in the dialogue that follows between everyman and the oracle of the human heart, is open to question; but the conclusion is worthy of the opening:

*The King with half the East at heel is marched from lands of
morning,
Their fighters drink the rivers up, their shafts benight the air,
And he that stands will die for naught, and home there's no
returning.*
The Spartans on the sea-wet rock sat down and combed their
hair.

Never, surely, has stark fatalism been more superbly rendered. The author was still young when

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he wrote this, and fresh from the triumph of his first volume. How different is the general level of the *Last Poems*! The old gospel of *carpe diem*, of stoic endurance, but also of manly contentment with a frugal country life, is repeated with weakened force and enfeebled conviction, the earlier fatalism has hardened into bravado and the old lapses into impiety are now much cruder and more blasphemous, so that God's laws are spoken of as 'foreign' to His creature! Atheism this certainly is not, but mere foolish blasphemy. Brooding irreligion has here lost all sense of the ridiculous.

The same decline may be remarked, I submit, in the later poetry of Swinburne. Interminable was his travesty of Queen Mary of Scotland, whom he professed to think 'something better than innocent' (which reminds me of Wilde's hyperbole about 'a dull honest man' being inferior to a romantic rogue, implying that dulness and honesty commonly went together); his adulation of such heroes as Mazzini and Victor Hugo continued in the most extravagant manner; but he found an innocent and beautiful theme in the beauty of childhood, which also relieved the monotony of his 'teaching'—that kings and priests should be beheaded, that the sixth commandment was deucedly inconvenient, and sea-bathing delightful. (With this last affirmation no 'reactionary' is likely to quarrel!)

A poet of some mark in the nineties, now seemingly forgotten, John Davidson, who drowned himself in the year of Swinburne's death and Meredith's, the author of *Fleet Street Eclogues*, lost his poetic gift in attempting to versify the doctrines of Nietzsche, whose own madness passed on to his disciple.

'He who denies the Being denies all being. Take the Word from the phrase and all meaning is lost. He who denies unity, denies the number made up of it.

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He who believes no longer in God has ceased to believe in anything. From Luther to Nietzsche, through Kant, one may trace, in perfect sequence, the degradation of man to that utter paganism of which the Hindu theories are the best expression. Take away the end of the world (which is also a beginning) and all order is at an end. What remains is simply chaos, with all its despair and horror, to which old Tathagata preferred non-being.' (C Claudel, *Letters to a Doubter*, 52.)

Truly after-Christian unbelief, grown hard and formal with advancing years, is void of inspiration. Mere negation is the gainsayer of life.

' Art after art goes out and all is night.'

A Shropshire Lad lives by its affirmations, of the grandeur and beauty of the visible creation, the reality of courage and sacrifice, the dignity of rural tradition; its very fatalism is but a veiled theism, however crossed with the rebellious denials and questionings which in his later work have come to predominate.

Such verses as this :

Oh, God will save her, fear you not :
Be you the men you've been,
Get you the sons your fathers got,
And God will save the Queen,

betoken a faith not yet quenched.

So sang our poet in 1887, on the Jubilee night that is one of my own early memories,

From Clee to heaven the beacon burns,
The shires have seen it plain,
From north to south the sign returns
And beacons burn again,

that night when indeed there ' streamed in crimson on the wind the Wrekin's crest of light.'

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There is however a notable difference between Swinburne's and Housman's irreligion. The former expressed his vehement hatred of the Catholic Church, to which his family had remained faithful through all the times of persecution, and wrote the hideous *Lines before a Crucifix*. The latter never, that I can remember, alludes to the Catholic Church at all, or to the Divinity of Christ, but quarrels with the ordinance of Providence.

that spring should vanish with the rose,
That youth's sweet-scented manuscript should close.

No one so dogmatic as your thanatist, whose very vehemence of denial arouses a suspicion that he dreads 'what dreams may come when we have shuffled off this mortal coil.' In vain he cries *Verweile doch, du bist so schön*, since 'all this is but a glimse or light shew of the euerlasting and inexplicable glorie of the saintes; nothing heere being stable, but varying and changing euermore, vntil death comes, that sweeps away goods, friends, pleasures, honors, powre and pompe, lands, and life, all at a clappe, so cleane as if they had neuer beene; the soule taken away and sent to giue his straight accounte for the vse of all those goods of his lord, lent him, to repay him with gayne; nis bodie tourned out to feede the wormes, and all those foresayd things, bestowed to other parties for them likewise to employ, and therefore to render a like reckoning, they know not how soone.' (*Women Saints* (1886) 4-5, dated c. 1610.)

The mood of Housman is akin to that of Henley. In all these poets of revolt it is still the things that matter which engage them, life and death, hope and despair, and 'that undiscovered country' of the hereafter, not the noisy nullities of to-day. Indeed Swinburne was no atheist, but, as one of his latest exponents claims, a rebel against the Power he recognised.

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And such, unhappily, is the dominant mood of our author's *Last Poems*. It never seems to have dawned upon him that the Catholic philosophy was even worth studying. This argues a certain narrowness of mental disposition. A man really agonised by 'the Great Enigma' should at least be willing to listen to a solution which satisfies millions upon millions to-day, as it did in centuries past. That the author of *A Shropshire Lad*, with its haunting unforgettable romance and beauty, may come at last to seek and to find revealed Truth will be the earnest prayer of all his Catholic readers.

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