

CHATTERTON LECTURE ON POETRY

A. E. Housman's Rejected Addresses

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I

THOMAS GRAY'S FRIEND AND COLLEAGUE JAMES BROWN recalled how quietly the poet approached his death: 'He never spoke out, but I believe from some little expressions I now remember to have dropped from him, that for some time past he thought himself nearer his end than those about him apprehended.'¹ Matthew Arnold was quick to pick up a hint so closely aligned with his own interest in the large implications of 'little expressions'. In their original context, he admits, these words 'fell naturally, and as if by chance, from their writer's pen', but 'let us dwell upon them, and press into their meaning, for in following it we shall come to understand Gray . . . *He never spoke out*. In these four words is contained the whole history of Gray, both as a man and as a poet.'² Crystallising a 'whole history' into just four words risks sounding ungenerous or strained, as Arnold recognises with his choice of 'contained', which balances a breezy confidence in his own powers of summary against the suspicion that writing contains the unruly contingencies of a life only in the way that one might try to contain a fire or a riot. But 'He never spoke out' is not the only phrase in Brown's letter which Arnold dwells on and presses into; 'nearer his end than those about him apprehended' is equally

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¹ 'Thomas Gray' (1880), repr. in R. H. Super (ed.), *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, 11 vols. (Ann Arbor, 1960–77), 9. 189. Place of publication for all other works cited is London unless otherwise stated.

² Arnold, 'Thomas Gray', p. 189. The phrase '*He never spoke out*' is applied to Housman by Archie Burnett in 'Silence and Allusion in Housman', *Essays in Criticism*, 53: 2 (2003).

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charged with emblematic significance, because according to Arnold what primarily prevented Gray from speaking out was an unhappy misalignment of character and circumstance:

If Gray, like Burns, had been just thirty years old when the French Revolution broke out, he would have shown, probably, productiveness and animation in plenty. Coming when he did, and endowed as he was, he was a man born out of date, a man whose full spiritual flowering was impossible.³

The idea that speaking out could be the historical equivalent of speaking out of turn is sympathetically echoed in Arnold's allusion to Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard' ('Full many a flower is born to blush unseen | And waste its sweetness on the desert air'),⁴ which acknowledges that in some ways Gray was in an even worse position than the anonymous ranks of the churchyard dead described in his poem. Whereas they were denied the receptive ears of an audience, flinging out words like seeds into the desert, his voice was not even permitted a full flowering, repeatedly stunted and stunted in its passage through the world. Although the survival of his name prevents him from being a 'mute inglorious Milton', Arnold suggests, muteness is not a matter of all or nothing: like an allusion, what Gray could bring himself to say is only a fragment of what might have been; his poems offer themselves to the reader not as a set of fully realised intentions but as something more like an anthology of disappointment.

It is not only writers 'born out of date' whose work is likely to register the reciprocal pressures which speech and silence can exercise on each other. Any act of writing involves choice, and choice requires rejection: deciding what to shut out, when to shut up, how to approach that moment where a design is both achieved and abandoned. This process is likely to be etched in especially sharp relief when writing a poem, because although, as Adrienne Rich points out, 'every poem breaks a silence that had to be overcome',⁵ in order to satisfy the requirements of its form a poem must also contain itself, emerging on the page as a shapely compromise of eloquence and muteness. However, few poets have set out to

³ Arnold, 'Thomas Gray', p. 201. Arnold compares Gray to his contemporary Joseph Butler, a man 'impelled by the endowment of his nature to strive for a profound and adequate conception of religious things, which was not pursued by his contemporaries, and which at that time, and in that atmosphere of mind, was not fully attainable' (p. 201).

⁴ Roger Lonsdale (ed.), *Gray, Collins and Goldsmith: The Complete Poems* (Harlow, 1969), p. 127.

⁵ Adrienne Rich, *What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics*, rev. edn. (New York, 2003), p. 85.

occupy this creative no-man's land with Housman's particular blend of self-assertion and self-restraint. 'If I were obliged, not to define poetry, but to name the class of things to which it belongs,' he explained in 'The Name and Nature of Poetry', 'I should call it a secretion.'⁶ It is a standard idea—poets from Pope to Eliot have referred to their poems as 'secretions'⁷—but Housman's use of the word has a particular edge, balancing as it does the twin loyalties of his verse to keeping secrets and confessing them, holding back and holding forth. Repeatedly, his writing invites interpretation and resists it, as if teasing his readers with the thought that a secret cannot be a secret unless someone else knows you have it.

There is a large gap between proximity and intimacy in Housman's verse, and it is seldom traversed by words:

Lovers lying two and two
Ask not whom they sleep beside . . .⁸

But now you may stare as you like and there's nothing to scan;
And brushing your elbow unguessed-at and not to be told . . .
(*ASL* XXIII, p. 25)

. . . before us
Goes the delightful guide,
With lips that brim with laughter
But never once respond . . .
(*ASL* XLII, p. 44)

When I heard I did not answer, I stood mute and shook my head . . .
(*MP* XLVI, p. 145)

⁶ A. E. Housman, 'The Name and Nature of Poetry' (1933), repr. in Christopher Ricks (ed.), *A. E. Housman: Collected Poems and Selected Prose* (Harmondsworth, 1989), p. 370.

⁷ *Of the Art of Sinking in Poetry*, ch. III, 'Poetry is a natural or morbid Secretion from the Brain' (Ricks's note in *Collected Poems and Selected Prose*, p. 515); *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933, repr. 1964), p. 145 n. Given his discriminating interest in how easily some forms of self-expression can ossify into thoughtless prejudices (discussed below), Housman may also have had in mind Gide's warning in *L'immoraliste*: 'I depicted artistic culture as a welling up in a whole people, like a secretion, which is at first a sign of plethora, of a superabundance of health, but afterwards stiffens, hardens, forbids the perfect contact of the mind with nature, hides under the persistent appearance of life a diminution of life, turns into an outside sheath, in which the cramped mind languishes and pines, in which at last it dies'; Gide's comment is discussed in Jeffrey Meyers, *Homosexuality and Literature, 1890–1930* (1977), p. 35.

⁸ *A Shropshire Lad*, XI (p. 15). All quotations from Housman's poems are taken from Archie Burnett (ed.), *The Poems of A. E. Housman* (Oxford, 1997). Further references adopt the section headings of Burnett's edition, abbreviated as follows: *A Shropshire Lad* (*ASL*), *Last Poems* (*LP*), *More Poems* (*MP*), *Additional Poems* (*AP*), *Notebook Fragments* (*NF*), *Light Verse and Juvenilia* (*LVJ*), *Latin Verse* (*LV*), followed by page number.

Even when speech is possible in Housman's verse it is rarely easy, whether describing a 'blackbird's strain' ('Then my soul within me | Took up the blackbird's strain', *ASL VII*, p. 11), in which full-throated bursts of bird-song are made to sound like a reproach to the stresses and tensions of a human voice, or using the blankness of the page to draw attention to the silence against which speech is always pressing:

In the land to which I travel,
The far dwelling, let me say—
(*ASL XI*, p. 15)

—where the dash both introduces utterance and threatens to cut it off. Some of these moments come close to being examples of paralipsis, a rhetorical sleight in which a speaker 'pretends to pass over a matter and so draws attention to it',⁹ as Shakespeare's Mark Antony flourishes Caesar's will before the mob:

Let but the commons hear this testament—
Which, pardon me, I do not mean to read—
And they would go and kiss dead Caesar's wounds . . .
Have patience, gentle friends; I must not read it.
It is not meet you know how Caesar loved you . . .¹⁰

So too, in Housman's poetry, withdrawals turn out to be confidences; circling a subject becomes a way of highlighting it rather than avoiding it. Even lines which drop away into the blank space of the margin can look as if they are pausing to gather their strength before picking up the thread of the poem again, so making his line-endings into both the breaking-points of his voice and the most concentrated hiding-places of his imagination. At their best, such moments transform his short poems into the literary equivalent of icebergs: small peaks of eloquence which rise above the indifferent surface of the page and are sustained by the hidden mass of the unsaid.

Ask me no more, for fear I should reply;
Others have held their tongues, and so can I,
Hundreds have died, and told no tale before:
Ask me no more, for fear I should reply—
(*AP VI*, pp. 151–2)

⁹ Brian Vickers, *In Defence of Rhetoric* (Oxford, 1998), p. 496.

¹⁰ William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, III. ii. 130.

The phrase 'no more' mattered to Housman, who could be reduced to tears by Milton's line 'Nymphs and shepherds, dance no more'.¹¹ This poem extends the logic of paralipsis into his syntax, which keeps appealing to the silent listener for a prompt before flinching back into a refusal to say any more, so dramatising the idea that loss is a process to be endured rather than a mere fact to be stated. But this double movement of approach and recoil is also carried in every other aspect of the poem: in the dash that follows 'reply', like an unanswered appeal for conversation, 'reply' in this stanza answering only to 'I' and itself; in the repetitions, which allow the speaker to carry on speaking without necessarily saying more; and especially in Housman's use of allusion. Even as Housman's speaker is reconciling himself to remaining alone, his lines reach out for company, like hands groping for each other in the dark. (The same is true of his use of rhyme: one of the most delicately insinuating patterns in *A Shropshire Lad* is that on each of the nine occasions 'alone' appears it is as a rhyme word.) The poem is generated and structured by the appeal 'Ask me no more', but this is itself an answer to Tennyson:

Ask me no more: what answer should I give?
 I love not hollow cheek or faded eye:
 Yet, O my friend, I will not have thee die!
 Ask me no more, lest I should bid thee live;
 Ask me no more.¹²

—just as Tennyson's poem was an answer to Keats:

Twice hast thou ask'd whither I went: henceforth
 Ask me no more! I may not utter it,
 Nor may I be thy love.¹³

Finally, hanging heavily over these lines as it does over so much of Housman's verse, there is the injunction he marked in his copy of the

¹¹ 'The Name and Nature of Poetry', *A. E. Housman: Collected Poems and Selected Prose*, p. 369; in the same lecture Housman also quotes Shakespeare ('Fear no more the heat o' the sun') and Blake ('Turn away no more').

¹² Alfred, Lord Tennyson, 'Ask me no more', in Christopher Ricks (ed.), *The Poems of Tennyson*, 3 vols. (Harlow, 1987), 2. 279.

¹³ John Keats, *Endymion*, IV. 755–8, in Miriam Allott (ed.), *Keats: The Complete Poems* (Harlow, 1970), p. 275; the passage is marked in Housman's 1888 copy of Keats's poems. Archie Burnett notes the parallel (*The Poems of A. E. Housman*, p. 467) and compares Thomas Carew's 'A Song', each stanza of which begins 'Aske me no more'.

Apocrypha: ‘Some man holdeth his tongue, because he hath not to answer: and some keepeth silence, knowing his time.’¹⁴

Housman had good private reasons for knowing why some silences might be both necessary and impossible to keep. ‘Ask me no more’ was almost certainly addressed to Moses Jackson, the Oxford contemporary to whom Housman devoted himself, but from whom, in the carefully chosen words of his brother Laurence, ‘there was no response in kind’.¹⁵ He was Housman’s first and lasting love. Housman once explained that ‘I did not begin to write poetry in earnest until the really emotional part of my life was over’,¹⁶ and given his double creative flowering in *A Shropshire Lad* (published soon after his break with Jackson) and *Last Poems* (published soon after he heard that Jackson was dying of cancer) a good case could be made for viewing all his poems as elegies, in which his rejection by one individual signalled a far greater loss that would continue to happen—the death of possibility. Housman’s lop-sided loyalty has often been singled out by critics seeking a creation myth to explain his career. Historians of homosexuality have been especially quick with their pity, usually weighing him unfavourably against Wilde as two different models of response to a time that enjoined them to keep silent.¹⁷ One is a prophet of gay pride, the other a relic of gay shame. Wilde put himself in the dock to make his notorious defence of ‘the love that dare not speak its name’; Housman hid himself away in Trinity College Cambridge, his refusal to speak out being seen by later critics as broadly equivalent to a refusal to come out. Wilde claimed to have feasted with panthers; Housman was rumoured to have introduced crème brûlée to Trinity high table. Wilde died on the cusp of the twentieth century but transcended his time; Housman lived on to 1936 burdened by an imagination that never outgrew its Victorian roots. In this view, summarised in Stephen Spender’s

¹⁴ Eccles. 20: 6, Housman’s marking is noted in Burnett (ed.), *The Poems of A. E. Housman*, p. 467.

¹⁵ Laurence Housman, *Alfred Edward Housman’s ‘De Amicitia’* (1976), p. 23.

¹⁶ Letter to Maurice Pollet (5 Feb. 1933), in Archie Burnett (ed.), *The Letters of A. E. Housman*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 2007), 2. 329.

¹⁷ See, e.g., Keith Jebb, ‘The Land of Lost Content’, in Alan W. Holden and J. Roy Birch (eds.), *A. E. Housman: A Reassessment* (Basingstoke, 2000), p. 38: ‘The possibility of a homosexual lifestyle, given a disguised but real treatment in Wilde’s writings, appears to be a non-issue in A. E. H.’s poetry’, and Ruth Robbins, ‘“A very curious construction”: masculinity and the poetry of A. E. Housman and Oscar Wilde’, in Sally Ledger and Scott McCracken (eds.), *Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 146: ‘It is difficult to think of a greater contrast than that of the poetry of Wilde and Housman. Where Wilde is verbose, pleasure-seeking, list-making and adventurous in form and substance, Housman is restrained, restricted . . .’.

part-admiring, part-admonishing characterisation of him as 'the lyricist of English repression',¹⁸ Housman's poems are a series of self-exposures masquerading as self-concealments, each one a precise but unwitting calibration of 'the pressures which social *mores* impose upon the individual voice'.¹⁹ The burden of these pressures in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has often been vividly described, particularly where conditions of active opposition find themselves being answered by forms of passive obedience. For Edmund Gosse, writing in the 1890s, 'the position of a young person so tormented is really that of a man buried alive'²⁰—a claim which reverberates in Freud's later comparison of repression to the choking deaths suffered in Pompeii,²¹ and surfaces again in memoirs of Housman like *A Buried Life*, written by the aptly named Percy Withers.²² But the tradition of depicting Housman as a victim of repression has been an unfortunate one, not least because often it has created the very problem it claims to describe.

'The most inveterate fault of critics', Hopkins observed, 'is the tendency to cramp and hedge in by rules the free movements of genius'.²³ Few have been able to resist the urge to create a version of Housman that is more narrowly predictable than his poems. This takes different forms according to each reader's priorities and blind-spots. Summary judgements are popular,²⁴ as are summaries of the poems which are themselves judgements on Housman's perceived limitations, such as the list of ingredients which Virginia Woolf thought made up the 'peculiar scent' of his poems ('May, death, lads, Shropshire'),²⁵ or Frank Harris's crushing review in *The Invention of Love*: 'No one gets off; if you're not shot, hanged or stabbed, you kill yourself. Life's a curse, love's a blight, God's

¹⁸ Stephen Spender, *The Making of a Poem* (1955), p. 158.

¹⁹ Geoffrey Hill, 'Tacit Pledges', in Holden and Birch (eds.), *A. E. Housman: A Reassessment*, p. 75 n.

²⁰ Cited in Colin Spencer, *Homosexuality: A History* (1995), p. 297.

²¹ On 'the equation between repression and burial' see 'Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's *Gradiva*' (1907), trans. James Strachey, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols. (1953–74), 9. 40.

²² Percy Withers, *A Buried Life: Personal Recollections of A. E. Housman* (1940).

²³ G. M. Hopkins, letter to A. W. M. Baillie (6 Sept. 1863), discussed in Robert Bernard Martin, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Very Private Life* (1991), p. 71.

²⁴ See, e.g., Stephen Spender's comment that 'what one might call the Essential Housman' might be reduced to 'perhaps less than fifty poems, in which Housman really says all he has to say', or E. M. Forster's even more reductive conclusion that 'about half-a-dozen' of *More Poems* 'are marvellous, and purists may wish that these alone had been printed'; both comments are repr. in Philip Gardner (ed.), *A. E. Housman: The Critical Heritage* (1992), pp. 377, 316.

²⁵ Virginia Woolf, letter to Julian Bell (2 May 1936) in Nigel Nicolson (ed.), *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, 6 vols. (1975–80), 6. 33.

a blaggard, cherry blossom is quite nice.²⁶ An alternative is to quote lines which are blinkered from the full imaginative range of their context, as when Mr Emerson in *A Room with a View* borrows four lines from *A Shropshire Lad* and then dismisses them as cripplingly one-sided:

In his ordinary voice, so that she scarcely realized he was quoting poetry, he said:

‘From far, from eve and morning
And yon twelve-winded sky,
The stuff of life to knit me
Blew hither: here am I.

George and I both know this, but why does it distress him? . . . Let us rather love one another, and work and rejoice. I don’t believe in all this world-sorrow.²⁷

‘I don’t believe in all this world-sorrow’—but Housman’s speaker continues by making it clear that neither does he:

Now—for a breath I tarry
Nor yet disperse apart—
Take my hand quick and tell me,
What have you in your heart.

Speak now, and I will answer;
How shall I help you, say . . .
(*ASL* XXXII, pp. 33–4)

Another critical gambit is to accuse Housman’s verse of being ‘adolescent’—a judgement which often says less about Housman than it does about the critic’s desire to keep him in a state of arrested development.²⁸ Take Harold Bloom’s regular returns to Housman’s lines about ‘The happy highways where I went | And cannot come again’ (*ASL* XL, p. 40): ‘Like many of Housman’s poems it has been in my head for sixty years. As a boy of eight, I would walk about chanting Housman’s . . . lyrics to myself, and I still do, less frequently yet with undiminished fervor.’²⁹ Such

²⁶ Tom Stoppard, *The Invention of Love* (1997), p. 86.

²⁷ E. M. Forster, *A Room With a View* (1908, repr. 1977), pp. 26–7.

²⁸ Christopher Ricks summarises the argument that Housman’s poetry is ‘adolescent’ (‘[a] word used with quite different valuations by critics as different as R. P. Blackmur, George Orwell, Conrad Aiken, W. H. Auden, and Hugh Kenner’) in his introduction to *A. E. Housman: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1968), pp. 4–5; the same volume reprints John Wain’s comment that ‘Housman’s major faults as a poet—the things that keep him a *minor* poet—are (a) the immature and commonplace nature of his subject-matter, all self-pity and grumbling; (b) the lack of any development’, p. 27.

²⁹ Harold Bloom, *How to Read and Why* (2000), p. 71.

incantations allow Bloom to conjure up his own past, as if to affirm that he has not changed his mind or his tunes in the intervening years, but they carefully ignore Housman's own refusal to settle into a single home-key, his skill at evading the patterns he has established for himself. At its best, this sort of cramping and hedging confuses the desire to pin Housman down with the desire to keep him in his place. At its worst, it resembles a set of variations on Housman's unhappy experience at school, where he was nicknamed Mouse and, according to his sister, 'boys would tread on him pretending they had not seen him'. Still, as she goes on to say, Housman was 'by no means the sort of boy to be downtrodden', and another story she tells about a tree planted to commemorate his birth might serve as an alternative emblem of his career: 'Alfred's tree was planted nearest to our family graves in the south-west corner of the churchyard. Some time ago it came to grief through age or storm and was cut down to a stump, which, however, sprouted instead of dying.'³⁰

The conjunction of Housman and graves is a natural one. Indeed, given the 'corpse-strewn landscape' of Housman's Shropshire,³¹ there is a special felicity in the stark title page of Richard Graves's biography *A. E. Housman: The Scholar-Poet*:

Graves

A. E. Housman³²

Poem after poem shows Housman striking out in different directions before circling back to the gibbet or the churchyard, as death exerts its gravitational pull. Individual lines warp their syntax to make the grave the permanent axis around which they revolve: 'There in their graves my comrades are, | In my grave I am not' (*MP XXXIX*, p. 138). The relentless downward pressure can create what look like creative misprints, where a dream of liberty is twisted away from America to another united state, the 'free land of the grave' (*MP XXIII*, p. 129), or tangle together creation and destruction by using 'grave' to mean 'inscribe': 'Tell me of runes to grave' (*MP XLV*, p. 143). Indeed, so often do Housman's poems seek dead ends that there is a glumly self-conscious humour in the conclusion of both volumes he saw through the press.

³⁰ Katharine E. Symons, *Alfred Edward Housman: Recollections* (Bromsgrove, 1936), pp. 8, 12.

³¹ Alan Hollinghurst, introduction to *A. E. Housman: Poems* (2001), p. x.

³² Richard Perceval Graves, *A. E. Housman, The Scholar-Poet* (1979), p. i.

A Shropshire Lad:

... When I am dead and gone.

THE END

(p. 66)

Last Poems:

... To air the ditty,

And to earth I.

THE END

(p. 109)

Set out like that, his poems can start to look like suicide notes, albeit of a peculiarly ineffective sort, given that, as Paul Valéry argued, unlike more pragmatic forms of speech a poem ‘does not die for having lived’, but instead is ‘expressly designed to be born again from its ashes’, forever renewing itself in the eyes and lungs of its readers.³³

It is this resilience which distinguished Housman’s voice during his life, and has helped to project it far beyond his death; his poetry makes the pressures of his time tell, in ways that are imaginatively enlivening rather than depressing or deadening, but he also outstrips this time through the very strength with which he observes it. In addressing the circumstances in which he wrote (‘address’ in the double sense of appealing to them and putting them to rights), his poems speak in a way that presses back against the cultural conditions which helped to shape them; to borrow Seamus Heaney’s fine insight into the possible worlds that poetry creates, Housman’s voice opens up ‘a glimpsed alternative, a revelation of potential that is denied or constantly threatened by circumstances’.³⁴ And if we sometimes find it hard to hear this voice, that may be not because it has nothing to say to us but because it has so successfully become our own.

II

The idea that Housman could speak out at all would have come as a surprise to some of his contemporaries. ‘Even in the most intellectual

³³ Paul Valéry, ‘Poetry and Abstract Thought’, repr. in *The Art of Poetry*, trans. Denise Folliot (1958), p. 72.

³⁴ Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry* (1995), p. 4.

company', Laurence Housman reported, 'he preferred to remain silent.' Wilfrid Blunt agreed: 'He would, I think, be quite silent if he were allowed to be.'³⁵ This could lead to problems; Percy Withers recalled how when they were out walking his chatter was often ignored by Housman, who preferred to express himself in other ways: 'Sometimes it would happen during the morning walk that he was morose and ill-tempered . . . and, one of the dogs crossing his path, he would lunge out with a foot, and appeared to derive satisfaction if the mean assault were effected. Those mornings were the most difficult.'³⁶ Himself a generous soul, Withers dismisses Housman's silence as no more than a personal quirk, like his preference for elastic-sided boots or sturdy underwear. But although Housman could certainly be 'difficult', many of his silences seem to have been a response to a more general difficulty: how to speak to someone in a way that discovers what you have in common without thereby exposing your differences. Far from revealing how unsociable he was, Housman's refusal to speak is just as likely to have been a sign of how far he idealised sociability, an ideal always likely to be disappointed by the risks and misunderstandings of ordinary conversation. He marked these lines in his copy of T. E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*:

There was my craving to be liked—so strong and nervous that never could I open myself friendly to another. The terror of failure in an effort so important made me shrink from trying; besides, there was the standard; for intimacy seemed shameful unless the other could make the perfect reply, in the same language, after the same method, for the same reasons.³⁷

Beside this passage, Housman wrote 'This is me.'³⁸ It may be that he saw this admission as a way of addressing his fears of being too unlike other people, too unlikeable, for his affections to be recognised and returned. On the page he could open himself to another, just as he did with his allusions, even if the act of reading also allowed him to keep intimacy literally at arm's length. But even here he worried that most replies were far from perfect, given the difficulty in knowing exactly how something on the page was being offered and so how it should be taken. Housman's unpublished poem about the need to separate from Moses Jackson ends

³⁵ Laurence Housman, *A. E. H.: Some Poems, Some Letters and a Personal Memoir by his Brother* (1937), p. 95; Blunt's comment is quoted in Archie Burnett, 'Silence and Allusion in Housman', p. 152.

³⁶ Percy Withers, *A Buried Life: Personal Recollections of A. E. Housman*, p. 55.

³⁷ T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, 2 vols. (1935), 2. 580.

³⁸ Laurence Housman, *A. E. H.*, p. 99.

with the plea 'Be good to the lad that loves you true' (*MP XXX*, p. 132); Jackson's last letter to Housman was signed 'Yours very truly'.³⁹ But how could one express true feelings to someone with such a different understanding of what it meant to be true?

This can produce a certain stiffness in Housman's own letters, which even to his family are signed 'A. E. Housman', almost as if they could have been written by someone else. It also produces a degree of wary self-involvement in his poetry, which often extends itself and then recoils, as if asking a question, pausing for a response, and then carrying on where it left off:

I met a statue standing still.
Still in marble stone stood he . . .
(*ASL LI*, p. 54)

You smile upon your friend today,
Today his ills are over . . .
(*ASL LVII*, p. 60)

Where you would not, lie you must,
Lie you must, and not with me.
(*LP XXXIII*, p. 102)

These syntactic stutters take a number of different forms. Lines curl back on themselves to reflect on the inconsequentiality of our hopes; or the gap between one line and the next is used to confirm that nothing has happened in this brief pause to change the direction of the speaker's thoughts:

Now are he and I asunder
And asunder to remain . . .
(*AP II*, p. 150)

Other poems offer miniature dramas of abandonment, as the speaker returns to his words in ways that could suggest either the blank repetitions of shock or the keening of grief:

He would not stay for me; and who can wonder?
He would not stay for me to stand and gaze.
(*AP VII*, p. 152)

Or, again self-consciously playing on the ambiguity of 'stay' (suggesting both pause and endurance), they respond to the speaker's loneliness by

³⁹ Laurence Housman, *Alfred Edward Housman's 'De Amicitia'*, p. 26.

asking for company and then rejecting it, narcissistically wrapping the lines up in themselves:

Stay, if you list, O passer by the way;
 Yet night approaches: better not to stay.
 (*AP XII*, p. 154)

What these examples share is the recognition that a voice unwilling or unable to make contact with others could retreat into a form of private brooding; someone who 'repelled advance' might produce verse that ended up sticking in a rut of its own making.⁴⁰ Similar anxieties animate much nineteenth-century poetry, and Housman would have come across them in the work of Matthew Arnold, who often worries that a shared language cannot articulate our most intimate longings, and that failing to take preventative measures will leave us with nothing in common but our loneliness:

And long we try in vain to speak and act
 Our hidden self, and what we say and do
 Is eloquent, is well—but 'tis not true!⁴¹

Arnold's poems cautiously offer themselves as just such preventative measures. A sentence such as 'Ah, love, let us be true | To one another!' starts by trying to distinguish this love from all other loves,⁴² and then breaks itself on 'true' to warn of the difficulty in being true to someone else. Rounding the corner of the line, though, it recognises the temptation to turn back on itself with the local chime 'true | To' before resisting it: 'true | To one another'. The appeal faces down its own fears and emerges braced by the ordeal, a lifeline thrown across a gulf of potential misunderstanding.

This need to find shadings of private significance within a public language might be true of any lover, whose protestations of single-heartedness always risk sounding shared or second-hand, just one more episode in the same old story. But the problem is likely to be especially acute for someone who finds his voice slipping into the grooves of commonplaces that can never speak for him. Consider the selective deafness in one of the *OED*'s definitions of 'reject': 'To repel or rebuff (one who makes advances); to refuse to accept, listen to, admit, etc. **b**) Of a woman: To

⁴⁰ G. U. Yule, cited in Graves, *A. E. Housman: The Scholar-Poet*, p. 168.

⁴¹ 'The Buried Life', in Kenneth Allott (ed.), *The Poems of Matthew Arnold* (Harlow, 1965), p. 274.

⁴² 'Dover Beach', in Allott (ed.), *The Poems of Matthew Arnold* (1965), p. 242.

refuse (a man) as lover or husband.⁴³ Dictionaries offer definitions rather than justifications, but they also draw attention to the intimate relationship between linguistic norms and norms of behaviour: the pressures of expectation that gradually mould words like ‘reject’ to fit the contours of social life; the dangerous ease with which everyday speech can settle into comforting but thoughtless routines.

From the start of his career, Housman recognised this as both a threat and an opportunity.

‘Hallelujah!’ was the only observation
 That escaped Lieutenant-Colonel Mary-Jane,
 When she tumbled off the platform in the station
 And was cut in little pieces by the train;
 Mary-Jane, the train is through ye,
 Hallelujah! Hallelulah!
 We will gather up the fragments that remain.
 (LVJ, p. 256)

Housman might have been attracted to this parody by the thought that the Salvation Army was already a parody of a real army—a mixed-sex troop where death could come only by accident—although the hint of deliberate malice in the train which cuts her in pieces opens the disquieting possibility that we are always at war with a world in which, to borrow the Resistentalist slogan, ‘things are against us’.⁴⁴ The joke of the poem is that Salvation Army hymns sometimes looked forward to taking a train to heaven, so there is a sly spoof of predestination in the way that ‘Lieutenant-Colonel Mary-Jane’ is drawn out until it is met with ‘train’, as if God had started using the railway tracks as a convenient way of organising his providential scheme. However, the sharpest bit of comic business is kept until last, because ‘Gather up the fragments that remain’ is itself a fragment of the Bible set to a new and sprightly tune: ‘Gather up the fragments that remain, that nothing be lost.’⁴⁵

Such fragments often rise to the surface of Housman’s verse, like the debris of a shipwreck, as the battered remains of old ways of thinking and speaking that no longer answer to present needs. Yet as Housman knew from his classical studies, what has happened to the Bible is what can happen to any speaker whose words are taken on by other voices. A

⁴³ *OED*, ‘reject’, 5.

⁴⁴ ‘Les choses sont contre nous’ is Paul Jennings’s parody of Sartre in his ‘Report on Resistentialism’, first published in *The Spectator* (1948).

⁴⁵ John 6: 12.

sentence he cut from 'The Name and Nature of Poetry' describes how difficult it is 'to tell the truth when one knows it, to find words which will not obscure it or pervert it';⁴⁶ but even if a writer did manage to find the perfect match between word and idea, like fitting a key to a lock, it could still end up being warped or corroded by misinterpretation. Housman's entire career as a classical editor could be viewed as an attempt to clear away these confusions. Faced with an author like Manilius, whose intentions had been muffled by the buzz and static created by two thousand years of editorial interference, his version set out to see the object as in itself it really had been: restoring the author's words to him; redeeming error; journeying into the past in search of a land of lost *content*. It was a habit of thought he extended to his reading of English poetry: his copy of William Allingham's British ballads,⁴⁷ one of *A Shropshire Lad's* key sources, is full of marginal jottings which suggest alternative readings for particular words and phrases, showing Housman's awareness that an oral tradition was especially vulnerable to producing lines that had taken a wrong turning over the years. The same habit of thought is also one he could turn to creative account, in lines that use sudden swerves of syntax to control the threat of error while simultaneously casting a wary ear on bits of second-hand speech:

Bells at sunrise making babel:
 Christ is born, I hear men say.
 (*NF XLV*, p. 186)

The reader is alerted to how quickly a message can be corrupted in the stretching out of 'bells' into 'babel', and this gives 'I hear men say' a slightly sceptical curl of the lip, reminding us how much trust and doubt will be involved in any information that arrives as hearsay. The *OED* has a helpful definition of 'hearsay' ('Oral tidings; report; tradition; rumour; common talk; gossip'), which not only generously accommodates the different forms of speech it could encompass, but also does not discriminate between them, and so suggests how easily 'common talk' might become infected with the self-generating rhythms of 'gossip'. Several of Housman's notebook fragments show him exploring a similar set of ideas:

⁴⁶ Letter to Laurence Housman (24 May 1933), in Burnett (ed.), *The Letters of A. E. Housman*, 2. 349.

⁴⁷ William Allingham, *The Ballad Book* (1892 edn., first published 1864); the volume is now in the library of St John's College, Oxford.

He called me all the names he knew,
 And that was more than he could spell;
 I gave him stuff to think of too,
 The tale about his sister Nell
 And Martin Hughes, and what folks thought
 And folks expected: then we fought.

(*NF XVIII*, p. 176)

The dangerous effects of such tittle-tattle are suggested in that sudden collapse of ‘folks thought’ into ‘fought’, warning how divisive gossip could turn out to be once its illusion of solidarity is stripped away. This is a common worry during Housman’s lifetime: both Kierkegaard and Hegel make some sharp observations on the damaging effects of ‘idle words’,⁴⁸ while religious tracts such as *Village Gossip Investigated* are equally suspicious of the false sense of community that gossip encourages:

The instances which have been introduced are mainly such as have come before the notice of the writer, (many of a more dangerous character being purposely omitted), who has tried to weave them into a somewhat connected narrative, earnestly hoping that all who read it may find some benefit to themselves, and convey some benefit to others in the strength of the prayer

‘Set a watch, O Lord, before my mouth: and keep the door of my lips.’⁴⁹

One problem with this hope is that the narrator risks sounding complicit with the very problem he is describing: those brackets around ‘many of a more dangerous character being purposely omitted’, which aim at a soothing confidence, could easily be taken as a gossipy aside. Yet it is hard to see how any story could altogether avoid the accusation of peddling gossip, given that the gossip’s key activities are also central to the workings of fiction: reporting, guessing, insinuating, surmising, telling tales. From *Cranford* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* to one of Housman’s favourite novels, Bennett’s *The Old Wives’ Tale*, this is something that Victorian novelists often play out and play on, as the relationship between narrator and reader—the intimacy that comes with shared knowledge—is used to reflect on the power of fiction to transform the world, while also questioning how far this differs from the tendency of gossip to twist the truth into the more compliant shape of a story. Poets are still more vulnerable to this charge, because their use of stanzas, rhythm and so on means that frameworks of ‘common talk’ are what they must write in, whatever they are writing about, and where the poet finds his voice set-

⁴⁸ See Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Gossip* (New York, 1985), pp. 16–18.

⁴⁹ ‘A. Bird’, *Village Gossip Investigated* (c.1895), Preface.

ting into the traditional measures of verse, it always risks weakening 'oral tidings', poetry's bardic origins, into little more than a form of refined cultural 'gossip'. 'The essential business of poetry, as it has been said, is to harmonise the sadness of the universe':⁵⁰ but how might the poet harmonise this sadness without it drowning out the melody of his own voice?

Housman's original title for *A Shropshire Lad* was 'Poems of Terence Hearsay': 'Terence' presumably because Housman's sense of exile chimed with the experience of an author originally brought to Rome as a slave, a stranger in a strange land; 'hearsay' because from the start of his volume he is concerned to show how the repetition of ideas can hollow them out into meaningless jingles.

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

Look left, look right, the hills are bright,
The dales are light between,
Because 'tis fifty years to-night
That God has saved the Queen.

Now, when the flame they watch not towers
About the soil they trod,
Lads, we'll remember friends of ours
Who shared the work with God.

To skies that knit their heartstrings right,
To field that bred them brave,
The saviours come not home to-night:
Themselves they could not save.

(*ASL* I, p. 3)

The first rhyme words of this lyric are 'returns' and 'again': appropriate for a poem about the Queen's birthday, perhaps, but the unpredictable reappearances of 'God save the Queen' in various mangled forms are not happy returns. 'The saviours come not home to-night: | Themselves they could not save': as so often in Housman, refrain is used to put the past in

⁵⁰ Letter to Katharine Symons (5 Oct. 1915), in Burnett (ed.), *The Letters of A. E. Housman*, 1. 346–7, referring to a passage in Leslie Stephen's *A History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (1876): 'Nothing is less poetical than optimism; for the essence of a poet's function is to harmonise the sadness of the universe.' Burnett notes that the passage is copied out on p. 44 of Housman's Notebook X.

its place. It sets the tone for the rest of the volume, which repeatedly upends clichés—‘Tis now the blood runs gold’ (*ASL V*, p. 8), ‘the morning clocks will ring | A neck God made for other use | Than strangling in a string’ (*ASL IX*, p. 13), ‘Let us endure an hour and see injustice done’ (*ASL XLVIII*, p. 52)—while suspiciously invoking the anonymous power of the public voice: ‘A Grecian lad, as I hear tell’ (*ASL XV*, p. 18); ‘miles around they’ll say that I | Am quite myself again’ (*ASL XVIII*, p. 20); ‘On banks of Thames they must not say | Severn breeds worse men than they’ (*ASL XXXVII*, p. 38).

As Housman grew older, retreating into the carefully chosen discomfort of his rooms in Trinity, he would have had good private reasons for distrusting the power of hearsay. The less he said, the more stories circulated about him. One concerned a dinner at which he and J. M. Barrie sat next to each other but did not exchange a word, after which Barrie wrote to apologise for being so shy, and Housman replied with exactly the same words, but with his own name correctly spelt.⁵¹ Another concerned Wittgenstein, who had even more spartan rooms above him in Trinity, and was desperate to use his lavatory; Housman replied that as a philosophical hedonist he would not grant the request.⁵² Colleges are both private and gossipy places, so it is not surprising that his silence resulted in other people eagerly swapping stories that seemed like spyholes onto his hidden life, a form of social revenge on the unsociable. But Housman was aware of how much conversation relies on borrowed words long before he went to Cambridge, and he could turn this in different directions, from gravely caricaturing snatches of received opinion in his letters (‘Cancer is worse, they say’),⁵³ to adopting a voice which carefully settled itself in the gap between discriminating politeness and thoughtless *politesse* (‘My heart always warms to people who do not come to see me, especially Americans, to whom it seems to be more of an effort’),⁵⁴ to the heart-breaking flatness of the note about Moses Jackson he wrote in his diary: ‘I heard he was married.’⁵⁵ His poems, too, frequently approach conventions of address before neatly sidestepping them, in ways that range from reply to retort to reproof. Comic ideas are given slow and solemn atten-

⁵¹ See Maas (ed.), *The Letters of A. E. Housman*, p. 262. Barrie’s letter to ‘Mr Houseman’ (one ‘so often misquoted’, according to the sales catalogue in which it appeared in 1936) is accurately quoted in Burnett (ed.), *The Letters of A. E. Housman*, 1. 529 n.

⁵² See Graves, *A. E. Housman: The Scholar-Poet*, p. 254.

⁵³ Letter to Percy Withers (4 May 1920), in Burnett (ed.), *The Letters of A. E. Housman*, 1. 439.

⁵⁴ Letter to Neilson Abeel (4 Oct. 1935), in Burnett (ed.), *The Letters of A. E. Housman*, 2. 496.

⁵⁵ Laurence Housman, *Alfred Edward Housman’s ‘De Amicitia’*, p. 34.

tion; serious ideas are set to jaunty tunes; sometimes his verse straddles both possibilities at once, as when he adopts a stanzaic form made popular by 'Drury's Dirge',⁵⁶ one of the parodies in Horace and James Smith's *Rejected Addresses* (1812), and uses it to carry a rhythm that could either be dragging its feet or kicking its heels.

Up, lad, up, 'tis late for lying:
 Hear the drums of music play;
 Hark, the empty highways crying
 "Who'll beyond the hills away?"
 (*ASL* IV, p. 7)

'Hear the **drums of music play**', or '**Hear the drums of music play**'? Light and cheery iambs play over a more cautious trochaic beat, and the result is disquieting, just as a military drummer's brisk tattoo can be slowed down to the muffled beat that accompanies death; the line both extends an invitation and reflects on where it could lead.

However, it is in the poems which address the unsettled, unsettling problem of homosexuality that Housman made his most far-reaching attempts to measure hearsay against a different voice, one which sounds both weary and urgent, despairing and demanding. Indeed, in its tonal flexibility and discriminating resistance to easy characterisation, it might be described as the voice of tolerance, especially if 'tolerance' is understood to mean not only the traditional virtues of generosity and patience, but also—a sense that was just starting to come into the language from mechanics—a legitimate variation from the norm.⁵⁷

III

'Shot? So quick, so clean an ending?' was written shortly after Housman read about a young Woolwich cadet who had killed himself, partly because he worried that his love too was of a kind that could not be answered, and partly because he worried that it could:

I wish it be clearly understood that I am not what it commonly called 'temporarily insane' . . . There is only one thing in this world that would make me thoroughly happy; that one thing I have no earthly hope of attaining . . . I have absolutely ruined my own life; but I thank God that, as yet, I have not morally injured—or 'offended', as it is called in the Bible—any one else. Now I am

⁵⁶ The same stanza is also used in *ASL* XXXV, *LP* VIII and *AP* I.

⁵⁷ OED, 'tolerance' 4b: 'the allowable amount of variation in any specified quantity' (from 1909).

quite certain that I could not live for another five years without doing so . . . Of the dreadful blow I am dealing to my mother and the few other people who care for me I am quite aware. . . . I hope that they will live to forgive and, perhaps, to forget me. May God, in His infinite mercy, forgive me for what I am doing. — HARRY C. MACLEAN.⁵⁸

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.

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.

(*ASL* XLIV, p. 47)

There is much in the cadet's suicide note that would have chimed with Housman: the strained use of Biblical language, working alongside the ghostly rhymes and dactylic beat which play across the proverbial phrasing of 'they will live to forgive and, perhaps, to forget'; the unhappy felicity of the cadet's name, Harry *Maclean*, grimly apt (on the page if not on the tongue) for one determined to have a *clean* ending; the way in which 'There is only one thing in this world that would make me thoroughly happy' strains between melodramatic posturing and modest self-restraint. Given his sceptical interest in the power of hearsay, Housman is especially likely to have sympathised with the scornful rejection of the officialese so often used to hush up such deaths, which holds 'temporarily insane' in quotation marks as one might pick up something unpleasant with a pair of tweezers. Housman takes the hint and stretches it further, by borrowing a word ('clean') regularly used by his contemporaries to fulminate against sexual transgression, but then opening it to ridicule by placing it in conjunction with the phrase 'in season'. This could refer to the warning in Ecclesiastes that to all things there is a season, 'A time to be born and a time to die . . . A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing . . . A time to keep silence, and a time to speak',⁵⁹ but in this context it seems awkwardly bound up with the idea that the cadet may have been going through a phase of what was euphemistically described as 'beastliness', as animals find themselves wanting to be more

⁵⁸ Reprinted as part of the coroner's report in *The Standard* (10 Aug, 1895) and cited by Archie Burnett in *The Poems of A. E. Housman*, p. 353; Housman kept a cutting of the report in his copy of *ASL* at XLIV.

⁵⁹ Eccles. 3: 2–7.

than just good friends when they are 'in season', and perhaps muddles it up too with the thought that a homosexual in the 1890s deserves no more sympathy than any other creature shot when it is 'in season'. At the same time, the poem makes it clear that abstract theories of human conduct are not always reliable guides to the actualities of human behaviour, just as the speaker's voice refuses to be satisfied within the boundaries of a set form. 'Shot? So quick, so clean an ending?'—but the line itself does not have a clean ending, going beyond our metrical expectations in a small rebellion against necessity. As the poem develops, masculine endings continue to be played off against feminine endings, possibly with half an ear on the ancient and stubborn theory that homosexuality is actually a compromise of the sexes, but with the effect of making the speaker sound both certain and uncertain at once. Like the lines about Oscar Wilde's trial which Housman wrote but chose not to publish ('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', *AP XVIII*, p. 157) the voice of this speaker sets public outrage against private indignation; it starts by agreeing with ordinary folk wisdom, but agrees so heartily it ends up sounding like a parody of compliance, as those repeated 'Oh's simultaneously hit a rhetorical peak of gloating and withdraw into private shock and regret. Like all of Housman's best poems, the tone settles into a polished double-act of knowing comedian and impassive stooge, straightforwardness and stealth. It is a tone which finely samples the unstable atmosphere in which these poems were written, and the unpredictable reaction which could be provoked by throwing a word like 'Invert' or 'Uranian' or, eventually, 'Homosexual' into conversation: sincerity and irony; praise and blame; acceptance and rejection. Like the reception that greeted Wilde's famous speech in the dock, it brings together 'loud applause mingled with some hisses'.⁶⁰

There are occasions on which this sort of equivocation could be an essential strategy. Graham Robb describes the tactics that might be needed in the nineteenth century to sound out someone's sexual preferences without being either beaten up or locked up, producing a rhetorical equivalent of the dance of courtship which Charlus performs in the vicinity of Jupien in Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, at once leading on and backing off. Characterised by 'labyrinthine syntax' and 'petticoat layers of allusion around the central silence',⁶¹ such encounters encouraged

⁶⁰ Newspaper report, cited in Paul Hammond, *Love Between Men in English Literature* (1996), p. 2.

⁶¹ Graham Robb, *Strangers: Homosexual Love in the Nineteenth Century* (2003), p. 149.

a form of speech which allowed admissions to be made and unmade in a breath.⁶² This can produce its own form of literary game in Housman. According to William Empson, ‘Obscurity in a writer may be due not to concentration, but to a refusal to speak out’;⁶³ but many of Housman’s poems are not even clear over how far they are being unclear; if they flirt with revelation, they also flirt with the prospect of not having anything to reveal, like the patter of a conjurer with nothing up his sleeves. A poem like this could mean everything or nothing:

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.

(ASL XXII, p. 24)

The pronouns here stage a teasing and elusive drama, as ‘we’, ‘he’ and ‘me’ revolve enquiringly around each other. The repetition of ‘turns’, carried over the line-break, dramatises the speaker’s excited double-take, but the look itself is wholly blank: invitation? warning? indifference? Is this the syntax of cruising, or just a self-conscious literary joke, based on the Latin root of ‘verse’ in ‘vertere’ (‘to turn’)? Like a number of words in the poem, such as ‘single’ or ‘My man’, it invites us to construct loving narratives and then smiles at us for getting ahead of ourselves.

The double plot of such poems makes their natural home pastoral, in which two worlds, two stories, come into uneasy contact with each other. But Housman did not need to rely on plot to suggest the different narrative possibilities open to the same set of events. The single word ‘lad’ is equally caught between two worlds. *A Shropshire Lad* was published at the end of a period that had seen a number of other lads in print: *Lads’ Love: An Idyll of the Lands of Heather*, *The Fighting Lads of Devon*, *War Times*; or, *The Lads of Craiggross*, *Lads of Kingston: A Tale of a Seaport Town*, *A Lad from the Country*, *The Luckiest Lad in Libberton*, and several more.⁶⁴ Many of these are boys’ adventure stories, but ‘lad’ can refer

⁶² Colim Toibín’s fictional biography of Henry James, *The Master* (2004), finely investigates the ambiguous allure of same-sex friendships at a time when personal reserve could signal mutual recognition rather than (or as well as) antagonism or indifference: ‘Everyone he knew carried within them the aura of another life which was half secret and half open, to be known about but not mentioned. In those years, you searched each face for what it might unwittingly disclose and you listened carefully for nuances and clues’, p. 5.

⁶³ Cited in Adam Phillips, *Side Effects* (2006), p. xi.

⁶⁴ Respectively by S. R. Crockett (1897), William Murray Graydon (1900), ‘Sarah Tytler’ [Henrietta Keddie] (1893), James Capes Story (1888), John Maddison Morton (1879), Ruth Lamb (1885).

to a young man (often a soldier) as well as a boy: the 'lads of Lunda' are 'handsome, athletic boys, brimful of animal life and happiness';⁶⁵ the 'lad of Lovelyn' is 'big, bronzed and bearded'.⁶⁶ What they share is a sense of geographical and historical displacement from the cultural centre: almost all the stories are set in the provinces and in the past; many involve a 'lad' leaving home, not always to return—a detail which would gain a new pathos when the word was adopted by poets of the Great War.⁶⁷ Two other features of these stories are likely to have been of particular interest to Housman. The first is that in the border ballads that lie behind *A Shropshire Lad*, a 'lad' is always potentially a sweetheart, as in the stanza marked by Housman which ends 'I never lo'ed a lad but ane, | And he's drown'd in the sea.'⁶⁸ (The same is true of Uranian poems written in the 1880s and 1890s, in which references to 'lads' uneasily attempt to reconcile a spirit of classical pederasty with lingering descriptions of youthful bodies.) The second feature is a sense of community: the *OED* records that from the 1880s, 'lad' could refer to 'Men of any age belonging to a group sharing common working, recreational, or other interests, esp. with the implication of comradeship and equality.'⁶⁹ This too animates Housman's poems, as the repetitions of 'lad'—a word which in *A Shropshire Lad* 'occurs sixty-seven times in sixty-three poems', as Cyril Connolly tetchily pointed out—call out for companionship while remaining anxiously separated from each other,⁷⁰ just as the title itself remains stranded between referring to an individual and a type.

The link between homosexuality and comradeship was a popular one in the 1890s. Laurence Housman belonged to the Order of Chaeronea, a secret society named after the 300 pairs of Theban lovers who died together in battle, brothers in arms, and the phrase most often associated with their fate was the 'love of comrades'.⁷¹ A delicately balanced phrase, pivoting around 'of' to suggest a form of perfectly reciprocated affection, it was echoed and re-echoed by so many different writers that it came

⁶⁵ Jessie Margaret E. Saxby, *The Lads of Lunda* (1887), p. 6.

⁶⁶ 'Old Cornish', *Ste, or the Lad of Lovelyn* (1898), p. 196.

⁶⁷ See Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, rev. edn. (2000), and Martin Taylor, *Lads: Love Poetry of the Trenches*, rev. edn. (1998).

⁶⁸ Allingham, *The Ballad Book*, p. 132.

⁶⁹ *OED*, 'lad' 2d (from 1886).

⁷⁰ Cyril Connolly, 'A. E. Housman: A Controversy' (1936), repr. in Ricks (ed.), *A. E. Housman: A Collection of Critical Essays*, p. 36.

⁷¹ See Matt Cook, *London and the Culture of Homosexuality, 1885–1914* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 125–42; the link with Whitman was first noted by William Whallon, 'A. E. Housman and "The Love of Comrades"', *Housman Society Journal*, 14 (1988), 51–4.

close to doing what it described, creating a democratic community brought together by a set of common ideals.⁷²

Walt Whitman:

I will make inseparable cities with their arms about each
other's necks,
By the love of comrades,
By the manly love of comrades.⁷³

Edward Carpenter:

Though there is historic evidence of the prevalence of the passion we may say of this period that its ideal was undoubtedly rather the chivalric love than the love of comrades.⁷⁴

John Addington Symonds:

Homer himself raises no question in our minds about the relation of lover and beloved. Achilles and Petroclus are comrades. Their friendship is equal . . . Still, it may be worth while suggesting that Homer, perhaps, intended in Hector and Achilles to contrast domestic love with the love of comrades.⁷⁵

Finally—more mournfully, more sceptically—Housman:

And Theseus leaves Pirithoüs in the chain
The love of comrades cannot take away.
(*MP V*, p. 119)

The love of comrades offered an alternative to the world of marriage, an elsewhere which had one foot in the present (the New World ruminations of Whitman) and one foot in the past (the Golden Age of Greece). Drawing out a Greek ideal like this could produce a sense of strain, cultural stretch-marks, as in the conversation about the Olympic Games between Wilde and some Cockney rent-boys which Frank Harris claimed to have overheard in the Café Royal: ““Did you sy they was niked?” “Of

⁷² The phrase also migrated into a number of Whitmanesque poems on bonds of friendship in the American army: see, e.g., John Hay, ‘Miles Keogh’s Horse’, on Custer’s last stand as proof that ‘the love of comrades, the honor of arms, | Have not yet perished from the earth’, *The Complete Poetical Works* (1916), p. 77; Richard Hovey, ‘Comrades’, on an old soldier’s nostalgia for Dartmouth College: ‘for the love of comrades only, thou!’, *Along the Trail* (1899), p. 45; Richard Watson Gilder, ‘When With Their Country’s Anger’, on the ‘noblest memory’ of soldiers: ‘the Love of Comrades,—| That flower forever blows’, *Poems* (1908), p. 274.

⁷³ Walt Whitman, ‘For You O Democracy’, *Leaves of Grass* (1881, reprinted in its original form in 1902 as one of the ‘Rejected Poems’), Michael Moon (ed.), *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings* (New York, 2002), p. 101.

⁷⁴ Edward Carpenter, *Homogenic Love, and its Place in a Free Society* (1894), p. 9.

⁷⁵ John Addington Symonds, *Studies of the Greek Poets*, 3rd edn. (1893), p. 103.

course,” Oscar replied, “nude, clothed only in sunshine and beauty.”⁷⁶ In Housman’s hands, similarly, references to ‘a Grecian lad’ or Shakespeare’s ‘golden lads’ (*LP* II, p. 73) can sound as if they occupied several times and places at once. Yet in his case these lyrical strains are both more knowing and more ambitious, as they resolve themselves into lines which not only hark back to the past but also reach out enquiringly into the future.

The modern conservative textual critic, Housman once noted, was ‘a creature moving about in worlds not realised’.⁷⁷ He was referring to the tendency of his rivals to blunder around inside a book like tourists who misunderstand or ignore local customs, but the same description might differently be applied to his own poems: what drives their sense of unappeased longing is his consciousness of moving about in a world not realised.

I see the country far away
Where I shall never stand;
The heart goes where no footstep may
Into the promised land.

(*MP* II, p. 115)

This could be the land of lost content: the famous poem about Shropshire’s ‘blue remembered hills’ is on the opposite page in Housman’s notebook, and the use of common metre then adds another layer of historical distance, making it sound like a muted chorus of ‘There is a green hill far away’. However, ‘the promised land’ could equally refer to the undiscovered country of the future, as the sudden reversal of the rhythm on ‘Into’ — ‘**Into the promised land**’ — shows present-tense speech urgently pressing up against a visionary ideal. Among Housman’s contemporaries, such pastoral thinking increasingly offered itself as a more optimistic alternative to the usual fate of same-sex relationships in literature: madness, exile, death.⁷⁸ As Robb suggests, with a carefully judged passing allusion to Housman, such geographical and historical displacements were also a way

⁷⁶ Frank Harris, quoted in Linda Dowling, *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (Ithaca, 1994), p. 145.

⁷⁷ One of Housman’s editorial notes to *M. Manilii Astronomicon Liber Primus* (1903), repr. in Ricks (ed.), *Collected Poems and Selected Prose*, p. 384.

⁷⁸ Summaries of the popular literary association of homosexuality and tragedy are given in Gregory Woods, *A History of Gay Literature: The Male Tradition* (New Haven, 1998), ch. 18, Meyers, *Homosexuality and Literature*, p. 18, and Robb, *Strangers*, pp. 209–16; as Robb observes, even in the hands of its defenders during the late nineteenth century, ‘Almost every scene of homosexual passion took place in or near the grave’ (p. 210).

of modelling alternative futures that writers might help to bring into being: 'The land of lost content was also a dream of future bliss.'⁷⁹ It is a mode of thought that may have been especially attractive to Housman because of the name he associated with both regret and desire: Moses Jackson, another Moses who would never see the promised land, although in his case as much through choice as historical necessity. But it is not necessary to personalise this mode of thought to recognise how often Housman returned to it—an imaginative pattern that is sunk into his writing like a watermark. It can be heard in his addiction to words beginning with 'un-'—unbegot, unbeknown, undone, unheeded, unkind, and many more—which, as in Hardy's poems, cast a shadow plot of fulfilment across a seemingly fated world, it being impossible to think of what is undone or unheeded without also thinking about how it might be done and heeded. It works its way into his stanzas, which can sound uncomfortably restrained, like miniature cages, but also show his skill as an escape artist, creating hidden entrances into alternative worlds more suited to his imaginings. It even makes its presence felt in his strategic placing of 'if',⁸⁰ a word which always embodies a small refusal of inevitability, or what George Steiner has described as one of grammar's 'passwords to hope'.⁸¹

It is certainly true that Housman sometimes shied away from such openness, and not only by making this 'promised land' into a patch of earth just big enough for a coffin—an imaginative trajectory that is traced both in his narratives and in the internal stitching of individual poems, as with the small but relentless shifts of *ASL* LIV from 'laden' to 'lad' to 'laid'.⁸² The lyric 'Oh were he and I together' was withdrawn from

⁷⁹ Robb, *Strangers*, p. 216; compare Mark Mitchell and David Leavitt (eds.), *Pages Passed From Hand to Hand: the Hidden Tradition of Homosexual Literature in English from 1748 to 1914* (1998), which cites Bayard Taylor's 1870 novel *Joseph and His Friend* as a plea for 'a valley of bliss . . . a new world where men might love each other without fear of conventional society' (p. 48), and Woods, *A History of Gay Literature: The Male Tradition*, ch. 9, 'Pastoral Elegists', on nineteenth-century uses of pastoral which inflect the traditional association of homosexuality and elegy with an alternative perspective that is 'forward-looking and capable of envisaging positive change' (p. 118).

⁸⁰ See, e.g., *ASL* IX ('A better lad, if things went right, | Than most that sleep outside', p. 13) and XXXIII ('If truth in hearts that perish | Could move the powers on high', p. 34).

⁸¹ George Steiner, *Grammars of Creation* (2002), p. 5.

⁸² With rue my heart is laden
For golden friends I had,
For many a rose-lipt maiden
And many a lightfoot lad.

By brooks too broad for leaping
The lightfoot boys are laid . . . (p. 58)

Last Poems when it was in page proof, while the Latin verses he added to his translation of Manilius, dedicated to Moses Jackson, adopted the Roman formula used when one soldier chose another, 'uirque uirum legi', but was buried away in a subclause, a confession about loving his comrade that was made to sound both central and peripheral at once:

*non ego mortalem uexantia sidera sortem
aeternosue tui sollicitare deos,
sed cito casurae tactus uirtutis amore
humana uolui quaerere nomen ope,
uirque uirum legi fortemque breuemque sodalem
qui titulus libro uellet inesse meo.*

[*LV*, p. 290]

[I did not endure, not I, to importune the stars that blast our mortal lot, or the eternal gods, but smitten with love for valour that would swiftly fall I resolved to seek a name with human help, and man to man I chose a brave and brief companion who should be willing to stand at the head of my book.]

Such comradeship does not last for ever, the poem concludes, and that seems to be that—a suitably downbeat ending for a relationship that never happened. The original draft, though, continued more optimistically:

*maioraque somnia mundo
attollens populis \gentibus attollens/ orientia signa futuris
at nostrum neutri conspicienda polus*

(*LV*, p. 291)

[. . . and greater dreams for the world; the heaven that holds up the rising stars for the peoples to come; but for neither of us to see . . .]⁸³

The lines were rejected, as if Housman wanted to protect Jackson from even a glimpse of what neither of them would see, but the same idea successfully made its way into another published poem, 'Hell Gate', where once again Housman imagines 'greater dreams for the world' than his own world seemed capable of satisfying.

The poem's speaker describes how he travels down to hell, thinking about what he lightly but equivocally refers to as 'the loves of men', until finally he recognises one of the sentries:

Then the sentry turned his head,
Looked, and knew me, and was Ned.
(*LP XXXI*, p. 99)

⁸³ Leofranc Holford-Strevens's translation, in Burnett (ed.), *The Poems of A. E. Housman*, p. 566.

A look of mutual recognition this time, rather than the lonely standing and staring that preoccupies other poems, and one that is potentially comic, with a meeting that brings together the idealism of Plato⁸⁴ and the square-jawed action of a Rider Haggard adventure story in a rhyme that is made to sound both perfectly inevitable and joyously unexpected. ‘The whole thing is on the edge of the absurd’, Housman noted; ‘if it does not topple over, that is well so far.’⁸⁵ But what ensures the poem’s status as a comedy rather than a farce is the way it too generously topples over beyond its own ending, as the two men leave Hell and gradually make the ascent back to life:

Silent, nothing found to say,
 We began the backward way;
 And the ebbing lustre died
 From the soldier at my side,
 As in all his spruce attire
 Failed the everlasting fire.
 Midmost of the homeward track
 Once we listened and looked back;
 But the city, dusk and mute,
 Slept, and there was no pursuit.

(p. 100)

Depart from me ye cursed *out of* everlasting fire? On one level the narrative is a redemptive reworking of Horace’s ‘Diffugere Nives’, in which the bonds of comradeship are tested against the chains of death, with the key difference that in this version of the story, as John Bayley points out, ‘The love of comrades *can* take away the chain, at least in the world of poetry and the imagination.’⁸⁶ At the same time, looking back at a fiery city starts to blur hell with Sodom, although this time the two people escaping are not a man and his wife—not even a man and his almost-wife, like the lovers in *The Eve of St Agnes*, another poem which these lines seem to have in their sights—but two men, walking out of the grave together. They do not speak, perhaps because they have nothing to say, but also perhaps because they silently understand each other; like so many fantasies of perfect comradeship in the period, the love that dare not speak

⁸⁴ Compare Phaedrus’s speech in the *Symposium*, quoted as evidence of the ennobling and enlivening character of same-sex love in Edward Carpenter’s *Homogenic Love*: ‘who would desert his beloved and fail him in the hour of danger? The veriest coward would become an inspired hero, equal to the bravest at such a time; love would inspire him’ (p. 23).

⁸⁵ Letter to J. W. Mackail (25 July 1922), repr. in Burnett (ed.), *The Letters of A. E. Housman*, 1, 506.

⁸⁶ John Bayley, *Housman’s Poems* (Oxford, 1992), p. 157.

its name is also the love that does not need to speak.⁸⁷ There is no pursuit, and like Forster's *Maurice*, another fictional space created to allow the imagination to press back against reality, the poem ends with the pair walking into the future, past the frontier separating the real world from the possible world which the last line represents. It is in every sense a moving poem. It is also Housman's most far-sighted and provocatively secular reworking of what he called 'the most important truth which has ever been uttered': 'Whosoever will save his life shall lose it, and whosoever will lose his life shall find it.'⁸⁸

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⁸⁷ See, e.g., the anonymous pornographic fantasy *Teleny; or the Reverse of the Medal* (1893), on 'the soft, hushed, and pleading tones of the lover who would fain be understood without words', repr. in Mitchell and Leavitt (eds.), *Pages Passed From Hand to Hand*, p. 243.

⁸⁸ 'The Name and Nature of Poetry', in Ricks (ed.), *Collected Poems and Selected Prose*, p. 364, quoting Luke 17: 29–33: 'the same day that Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven, and destroyed them all. Even thus shall it be in the day when the Son of man is revealed. . . . Remember Lot's wife. Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it.'

