

"Star-Defeated Sighs": Classical Cosmology and Astronomy in the Poetry of A. E. Housman

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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. E. Housman, *A Shropshire Lad* XV)

A. E. Housman is renowned as the scholar-poet who in his lifetime published two slim volumes of verse – *A Shropshire Lad* (1896)¹ and *Last Poems* (1922)² – a much larger volume of classical papers, and an edition of Manilius' *Astronomica* that remains the definitive Latin text to this day. Although Housman had little sympathy with Manilius's stoical beliefs about the operation of divine reason in the universe, both the poems and the *Astronomica* share the sense of human beings playing out their lives in a cosmos where stronger impersonal forces are at work. Since *Astronomica* is an extended astrological text, this is, of course, to be expected; in the poems, the cosmological and astronomical references are more subtly exploited and are derived from other classical authors, such as Lucretius, and Housman's own extensive knowledge of astronomy. Nevertheless, an awareness of such sources and references remains crucial for a fuller understanding of Housman's poetic achievement.

The purpose of this article then is twofold. Firstly, and by way of setting a context for the second part, I seek to show briefly how Housman's poetry can be read as part of a more general struggle (shared by writers such as Tennyson, Browning, Hardy, Swinburne and Meredith) that took place in Housman's lifetime to confront the implications of advances in evolutionary theory, cosmology, and astrophysics, and to formulate a wider synthesis that integrated the objective facts of science with the subjective reality of human experience. Secondly, and primarily, I aim to show how an understanding of specific traditions in classical philosophy, and Housman's own expertise in spherical astronomy (itself a necessary adjunct to his classical scholarship), considered in the context of Housman's own worldview and his personal life, illuminates the reading of Housman's verse.

The reconsideration of man's place in nature was a process that acquired a particular urgency in the second half of the nineteenth century. As Pamela Gossin observes in her similarly-intentioned treatment of the work of Thomas Hardy:

Victorian Culture was uniquely situated to integrate its knowledge of astronomical and cosmological history – ancient to near modern – with its own emergent and every more urgent attempts to understand and explain humanity's place in the cosmos. (58)

This more general quest by Victorian writers has, of course, been the subject of numerous critical studies, but Housman has rarely been singled out as an exemplary figure in this regard.³ This may be due to his perceived status as a minor poet

compared to say Browning, Tennyson or Hardy, or more simply because his confrontation with the implications of scientific materialism is less overt. Tennyson openly confessed in his poem "Parnassus" to the two "terrible Muses" of Astronomy and geology that influenced much of his work; and Hardy explicitly deals with the challenges of geology, astronomy and evolution in such novels as *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873), *Two on a Tower* (1882) and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891). But the troubles of Housman's Shropshire lads and the more personal voices in *Last Poems* do not immediately lend themselves to an analysis in terms of scientifically induced existential angst. Nevertheless, I would like to maintain that a careful reading of Housman's poetic output in the context of his classical studies, his personal life and contemporary debates concerning the validity of scientific materialism, shows that he was similarly engaged in the task of making sense of life (and his own life in particular) in a universe increasingly succumbing to scientific as opposed to theological explanation.

Housman recruited two disciplines in particular to his central poetic purpose: cosmology (primarily the ideas advanced by the Roman poet Lucretius) and astronomy. In his scholarly work, Housman was not primarily concerned with Lucretius as a classical author (although he did publish a few papers on the subject) but was clearly familiar with his writings. Moreover, as we shall see, Lucretius was a classical authority frequently invoked in nineteenth century debates concerning atomism and evolution. In astronomy, however, Housman had a longstanding amateur interest and, moreover, developed a mastery of spherical astronomy (i.e. the apparent movements of the planets and stars on the celestial sphere irrespective of the theoretical system designed to explain them) and the history of astronomy in order to assist with his work on Manilius and other authors. Both cosmology and astronomy were used to explore the position of man in the natural world. But to this mix we must also add a defining ingredient of Housman's personal life: his unrequited love for Moses Jackson who he first met as an undergraduate at Oxford – an attraction which Tom Stoppard neatly summarised as an "unremitting, lopsided, lifelong, hopeless constancy to a decent chap who was in no need of it, temperamentally unfitted for it, and never for a moment inclined to call upon it" ("The Lad"). Housman sent a copy of *Last Poems* to Jackson remarking in a humorous vein that "you are largely responsible for my writing poetry and you ought to take the consequences" (qtd. in Graves 189).⁴ It is this distinctive fusion of a materialist ontology and frustrated human desires played out under a sky where, as Tennyson put it "[t]he stars . . . blindly run" that provides one of the keys to understand Housman's poems and points to their essential philosophical and emotional coherence.

Housman and Classical Philosophy: the Stoics and Lucretius

Housman's most notable work of scholarship was his edition of the *Astronomica* of Marcus Manilius. It was a work that occupied him for over 25 years and one that finally appeared in five volumes (published at his own expense) between the years 1903 and 1930. Manilius was a Roman poet living sometime during the 1st century AD under the emperor Augustus (and possibly Tiberius) and is known to posterity only through his authorship of *Astronomica*. Whilst the *Astronomica* is largely concerned with astrology, the author also tries to advance his own Stoic beliefs whilst simultaneously attempting to discredit the Epicureanism of Lucretius. Housman was under no illusion about the talents of Manilius, regarding him a third rate poet and someone who was also confused in his astronomy. Despite Housman's masterly

rendering of the text, the work has never held much interest for modern readers. When G. P. Goold (one of Housman's successors in Latin at UCL) published a version in English in 1977 this was the first complete English translation since 1697 and it remains the most recent.

According to the Stoicism of Manilius, the universe can be divided into two states: passive matter and active reason or fate. Fate represents the working out of the Universal mind (or logos) that shapes the behaviour and destiny of things on the earth. In such a world, the proper virtuous response is to use reason to control the passions, to follow where Nature leads, and so achieve an inner calm. Stoicism also provided a philosophical basis for the acceptance of the truths and efficacy of astrology. In this system, the universe is orderly and rational and held together by the operation of the logos. The logos is equated to a divine fire, to be found in the stars and also the human soul. This stoic divinity is favourably disposed towards humankind (an idea that Housman would have found hard to accept) and its intentions can be revealed through the study of astrology. Thus in Goold's translation we read Manilius arguing that by the recognition of our fate we free ourselves from worry and learn that "each one must bear his appointed lot" (225). Furthermore:

God and all-controlling reason, then, derives earthy beings from the signs of heaven; though the stars are remote at a far distance, he compels recognition of their influences, in that they give to the peoples of the world their lives and destinies and to each man his own character. (Manilius, *Astronomica* 2: 80-86; Trans. Goold 89).

Early readers of *A Shropshire Lad* were struck by what they took to be its inherent stoicism. Charles Sorley called Housman "startlingly stoical" (201); Haber (an astute Housman scholar) summarised the tenor of his poems as "If the present hour offers no reward worth pursuing, Housman may counsel the refuge offered by stoicism" (*A.E. Housman* 138); and Nisbet, reviewing Ricks' *Collected Critical Essays* observed that "Housman's thought is Stoic" (321). The label is understandable if we inspect his verse. In *LP IX*, for example, we are told that

The truths of our proud and angry dust
Are from eternity, and shall not fail,
Bear them we can, and if we can we must.

Similarly, in *ASL XLVIII* we read how "earth and high heaven are fixed of old and founded strong" and how "high heaven and earth ail from the prime foundation"; the solution being to "Let us endure an hour and see injustice done". In *ASL LI* – a poem inspired by visiting the Greco-Roman statues in the British Museum – the stoic response to misfortune acquires a more personal dimension and seems to be informed by his repressed homosexuality. In the poem, a male statue from distant antiquity confides that he too has different thoughts to the majority of men: "I too survey that endless line/ Of men whose thoughts are not mine"; concluding with the advice to Housman:

Courage, lad, 'tis not for long
Stand, quit you like stone, be strong

But as is often the case in Housman the argument is subverted from within, and the price of such stoic resolve is the negation of manhood:

And light on me my trouble lay,
And I stepped out in flesh and bone
Manful like a man of stone

Whether Housman's characters in *A Shropshire Lad* are inherently stoic, however, is a debateable point; it is also questionable whether Housman himself is advocating a stoic response to life's travails. The crucial point is the identity of the voices in the poems and the realisation that the narrator in the poems is not necessarily Housman the man. Indeed, Housman had originally intended his first volume of verse to be called "The Poems of Terence Hearsay" and two poems in the collection (*ASL* VIII and LXII) refer to Terence by name. The title was possibly conceived to enable him to confound any identification of the poet with the Latin scholar A. E. Housman. It also gave Housman a poetic mask to wear to separate the voice in the poems from that of his academic writing. Even the surname "Hearsay" is a contrast to his scholarly work where nothing is accepted on hearsay but only on the basis of evidence and the exercise of sound judgement.⁵ But Terence is not the only character in the poems. The lad is variously conceived as the soldier, the innocent rustic, the adolescent coping with the onset of manhood, the sinner, and even the dead. Moreover the poems are often overlaid with an ironic countervoice or even, as Ricks observed, an inherent "tug of contraries" (*The Nature of Housman's Poetry* 169). Clarence Lindsay thought he could detect four voices in the poems: the "silly lad" with no ironic awareness; the speaker addressing the silly lad; the ironic commentator; and the "duplicitous voice where imagery and sense are at odds and perform an anti-romantic critique (345). Amid this multiplicity of voices we might ask 'Could the real Housman stand up?' But the strength of his poetry, of course, is that he doesn't, and the separation of poet and persona is crucial to his art. Leggett goes so far as to argue the private emotional life of Housman is not particularly relevant to understanding his poems, suggesting that: "The persona thus becomes a kind of Yeatsian mask or antiself, the opposite of all that the poet represents in his private life" (331).

It is this distinction between the poet and the personae of the poems that is crucial and undermines any attempts to read any coherent advocacy of Stoicism in the verse. Yet many did, forcing Housman to complain in a letter to J. B. Priestley that:

I wish people would not call me a Stoic. I am a Cyrenaic, and for the Stoics, except as systematisers of knowledge in succession to the Peripatetics, I have a great dislike and contempt. (*Letters* 1: 571)

This was no off-the cuff remark for in another letter twelve years later he wrote to Houston Martin that: "In philosophy I am a Cyrenaic or egoistical hedonist" (*Letters* 1: 527-8).⁶

On the basis of this evidence I think it fair to say that despite Housman's preoccupation with Manilius (which does not begin until many years after writing *A Shropshire Lad* anyway) and the response of some readers, Housman's verse is not first and foremost an exploration of Stoic philosophy, a tradition, we must conclude, for which Housman had little respect.

It is ironic that Lucretius, the very thinker who Manilius tried to discredit, provides a more serious subtext to Housman's poetry than the stoicism of Manilius. Housman's familiarity with Lucretius has been well documented: Housman published four papers on Lucretius in his lifetime and a fifth was published after his death (Haber, 'Housman and Lucretius'); and in the latter part of his academic career (c.1927) he gave lectures on the subject (*Letters* 2: 48). Although the earliest paper, *Lucretiana*, was published in 1897, one year after the publication of *A Shropshire Lad*, it is clear that Housman was very familiar with Lucretius at the time of writing the poems (Naiditch, *Problems in the Life*). Although Housman could be mercilessly scathing about the scholarship of others, pouncing on any perceived lapse of judgement or technical error, he was fulsome in his praise for Munro's 1860 and 1864 edition and translation of Lucretius, writing about Munro that:

In his Lucretius he produced a work more compact of excellence than any edition of any classic which has ever been produced in England. ("Cambridge Inaugural lecture" 299)

Titus Lucretius Carus (c.99BC-55BC) was a Roman poet and philosopher living during a period of turbulence and civil strife in Rome. His only surviving work is a long poem, *De Rerum Natura* (On the Nature of Things), addressed to his friend Gaius Memmius, a Roman statesman, tribune of the people, and, according to Ovid, an accomplished orator and the author of a number of erotic poems. *De Rerum Natura* was written, says Lucretius, to free humanity from fear and superstition, especially the fear of the gods and the fear of death. It attempts to do so by expounding the ideas of Epicurus and offering a purely naturalistic explanation of phenomena. The central tenets of Lucretius's Epicureanism (in terms of epistemology, ontology and ethics) are:

1. Empiricism: all knowledge is derived from the senses.
2. Materialism: the world is made up of only of atoms and the void. Even the soul is just an assemblage of atoms that disperse after death. The soul, therefore, is not immortal.
3. Hedonism: the 'good' is not an absolute ideal or a metaphysical abstraction but is to be equated with pleasurable sensations.

As soon as *A Shropshire Lad* appeared in 1896, Lucretian themes were noted by people who had no awareness that Housman was a Latin scholar (he was then a Professor of Latin at UCL). An anonymous reviewer (though one seemingly of a Christian faith) detected the influence of the Greek atomists with dismay, saying of Housman that: "he is a philosopher, a disciple of Democritus, and holds that we are not spirits as the best men have thought" (qtd. in Gardner 68). One remarkably prescient review of *A Shropshire Lad* came from the pen of William Archer. Writing for the *Fortnightly Review* in August 1898, Archer observed that:

Mr Housman is no Shropshire Burns singing at his plough. He is a man of culture . . . and I think he has an Elzevir classic in the pocket of his smock frock. But it is not Theocritus, not the Georgics or the Eclogues; I rather take it to be Lucretius. (qtd. in Gardner 76)

There are indeed numerous parallels between the philosophy of Lucretius and the general thrust of Housman's poetry (Haber, *A. E. Housman*). One of these is that the world was not fashioned for human comfort. In Munro's translation Lucretius writes:

I would venture to affirm, and led by many other facts to maintain, that the nature of things has by no means been made for us by divine power: so great are the defects with which it is encumbered. (Lucretius part V, lines 196-199; Trans. Munro 120; see also: Lucretius II. 180-1)

Housman espoused similar sentiments. In a letter to Gilbert Murray, for example, he observed:

do you think you can outwit the resourceful malevolence on nature? . . . It looks to me as if the state of mankind always had been and always would be a state of just tolerable discomfort. (*Letters* 1: 120)

This theme is recurrent in Housman's poetry (although for reasons noted earlier in the discussion of Stoicism it would be wrong to see in all the poems the voice of Housman the philosopher). In *More Poems* VIII (published after the death of A E Housman) we read of "The toil of all that be / Helps not the primal fault, . . .".⁷ *LP* XII is more explicit that the "laws of God" and "the laws of man" were alien to him:

And how am I to face the odds
Of man's bedevilment and God's?
I, a stranger and afraid
In a world I never made.

Similarly in *ASL* XLVIII we read that ". . . high heaven and earth ail from the prime foundation".

The world may impede our happiness but Lucretius is concerned to allay our fear of death by arguing that we are as senseless in the state of death as we were in the state of non-being before we were born; and since we do not fear the latter we should not fear the former. Lucretius writes that:

. . . death therefore to us is nothing, concerns us not a jot, since the nature of the mind is proved to be mortal . . . So now we give ourselves no concern about any self which we have been before, nor do we feel any distress on the score of that self. (Lucretius III. 830-860; Trans. Munro 177)

This is one of the consolations offered in *ASL* XLVIII: in the face of hardship we can "call to thought, if now you grieve a little/The days when we had rest, O soul, for they were long . . . Then it went when with me, in days ere I was born."

Lucretius praises Epicurus for removing from men's minds both the fear of death and enslavement to superstition (Lucretius I. 62-145); he also argues that it is fear of death that is responsible for evil (Lucretius III. 31-93). In *LP* III (a poem originally intended for *ASL*) the young man who kills Hectate (the "Queen of air and darkness") escapes his own fear of death. When Hectate curses that the slayer will die tomorrow the narrator of the poem replies:

O Queen of air and darkness
 I think 'tis truth you say,
 And I will die to-morrow;
 But you will die to-day.

A similar set of ideas helps elucidate *LP XXV* ("The Oracles"). The first stanza declares that the oracles of Dodona and Delphi "where gods told lies of old" are now silent. The one source of truth however is the "heart within that tells the truth and tells it twice as plain". This "truth" is that the soul is mortal, and yet it is one that can be borne just as the Spartan's bore the news of Xerxes's army approaching from the east: "The Spartans on the sea-wet rock sat down and combed their hair."

Housman was not the only thinker of this period, however, to take a keen interest in the ideas of Lucretius. Frank Turner has shown how from about 1870 to 1910 interpretations of Lucretius served as one of many conflict zones for debates between scientific naturalism and Christian apologetics (335). Turner's essential argument is that Christian thinkers, feeling marginalised by advances in science, were keen to suggest that the philosophical naturalism and materialism of such thinkers as T. H. Huxley, John Tyndall, Herbert Spencer and W.K. Clifford were really just re-hashed versions of the ideas set forth by Lucretius in the 1st century BCE. This depiction enabled theists to attack scientific materialism as outdated and flawed. Another secondary advantage, according to Turner, was that the use of Lucretius as a platform for this debate pointed to the continued relevance of the classics at a time when classical education felt under attack from the demand (especially by Huxley) for a more science-based curriculum in schools and colleges.⁸ As Turner summarises: "Lucretius became a pawn in the struggle for cultural dominance between men of science and men of religion" (Turner 338).

John Holmes also considers the revival of interest in Lucretius from the 1860s and attributes it to three factors: better editions and translations (e.g. Munro's 1864 edition); the growth of secularism; and the firmer establishment of modern atomic theory in physics and chemistry (Holmes, "Lucretius"). I think we can add to this list the fact that Lucretius could be portrayed as a forerunner of Darwin whose own reputation grew steadily from 1859 onwards. In an introduction to a volume of poems written by George Romanes, one of Darwin's followers, Herbert Warren, then Professor of Poetry at Oxford, chose, for example, to comment on the writings of Darwin in the following terms

There is no passage in the verse of his grandfather Erasmus so poetical as the concluding page of *The Origin of Species*, a passage which reminds the classical scholar of nothing so much as of Lucretius, even as Lucretius more than any other ancient seems to anticipate in some of his observations and generalisations Darwin himself. (x)

Like Darwin, Lucretius also speculated about the emergence of life on earth, even at one point coming close to an account of natural selection (Cartwright). But it is the sheer scope of Lucretius' ideas that is impressive. *De Rerum Natura* is presented in a series of six books dealing with the following topics: matter and space; movements and shapes of atoms; life and mind; sensation and sex; cosmology and sociology; meteorology and geology. This is why it appealed to the movement of

scientific naturalism in the late Victorian era: it gave historical precedence and classical kudos to the sense that scientific materialism could, given time and intellectual freedom, encompass and explain the working of the entire universe. In this respect Darwin added the final touches to the Lucretian project: the removal of teleology from the natural world and the location of life and the origin of humankind in material processes governed by natural law. Moreover, Lucretius had considered as a poet and a man what the implications of this world view were for human life. Like Darwin, he had looked into the abyss and not flinched.

For many Christians, however, the ideas of Lucretius were, understandably, anathema, and *De Rerum Natura* was frequently attacked. In 1868 Tennyson published his poem "Lucretius" in which he repeats the anecdote (probably apocryphal) first started by St Jerome that the cold-hearted Lucretius, for all his rationality, was driven mad by a love potion administered by his wife and ended his life by suicide. As John Holmes has recently observed, Tennyson also uses the figure of Lucretius in this poem to explore the implications of Darwinism. As Holmes notes:

"Through *Lucretius*, Tennyson pathologises Darwinism, presenting the Darwinian world view as misguided even to the point of madness". (*Darwin's Bards* 246)

But by the end of his undergraduate days Housman had lost his Christian faith. In a revealing letter he claimed that he was "a deist at 13 and an atheist at 21" (*Letters* 1: 328). In his writings Housman is never explicit about his attitude to the debates of his day concerning the scope and adequacy of scientific naturalism, but he probably had in mind the religious and philosophical implications of the work of Darwin, Spencer, Huxley and Tyndall, when he observed in his 1892 "Introductory Lecture" that:

Man stands today in the position of one who has been reared from his cradle as the child of a noble race and the heir to great possessions, and who finds at his coming of age that he has been deceived alike as to his origin and expectations; that he neither springs of the high lineage he fancied, nor will inherit the vast estate he looked for". ("Introductory Lecture" 272)

As I have shown elsewhere, Housman also explicitly embraced Darwin as someone of a Lucretian frame of mind, referring to Darwin in his 1909 Latin address from UCL to Cambridge University (written for the centenary celebrations of Darwin's life) as someone who was fortunate "*rerum potuit cognoscere causas*" (to understand the causes of things) – the same epithet used by Virgil to describe Lucretius (Cartwright 21).

Both Darwin and Housman were enthralled by the natural world and both sensate to its aesthetic pleasures whilst fully aware of its indifference to human suffering. Lucretius seems to hold a similar position and, although the majority of *De Rerum Natura* is about how gods are not responsible for natural phenomena, at the start of the poem he appends a hymn to Venus as the creative force behind Nature: "thou then are sole mistress of the nature of things" (Trans. Munro 20). This sense of a Lucretian and Darwinian Nature stripped of ultimate meaning and concern for human affairs, and yet, like Venus, irresistibly seductive is conveyed in one of Housman's most popular poems: "Tell me not here, it needs not saying" (*LP* XL) in

which he combines a frustrated eroticism with a repudiation of the pathetic fallacy. In this single graceful poem, Housman fuses together his intellectual conviction that Nature is "heartless, witless" and blind to human desires, with powerful erotic feelings of devotion ("soft Septembers", "blanching Mays") and the bitterness of betrayal and unrequited love. This is one of several occasions where Housman overtly challenges the pathetic fallacy of a feeling nature (compare, for example, *LP XXVII*).

But it was the materialism of Lucretius that Housman seems to have found most compelling. For Lucretius the soul is a material thing that passes out of the body and disperses abroad at the end of life, and Housman's ontology is similarly materialistic (see: *ASL XXXII*; *LP I*). Haber notes the "unending cycle of atomic dissolution and recombination in the poet's work" (*A E Housman* 164). Housman's disbelief in an afterlife is sardonically conveyed in *ASL XLIII* ("The Immortal Part"). The poem reverses the normal expectations of Christian dualism: the inner voice that speaks to the narrator in the poem comes not from an immortal soul but from the enduring bones – the part of the body that will last the longest. The bones point out that the soul will eventually be "slain/ And the man of bone remain". The poem ends with a very Lucretian set of phrases

Before this fire of sense decay,
This smoke of thought blow clean away,
And leave with ancient night alone
The steadfast and enduring bone.

Burnett notes the similarity between this poem and Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* III. 436–7, (353) to which we can add *De Rerum Natura* III. 596-8, which in Munro's translation reads: "the power of the soul gathering itself up from the inmost depths of body has oozed out and dispersed like smoke" (71). Hence life, in *De Rerum Natura*, is merely a temporary manifestation of essential components (i.e. atoms). Lucretius speaks of

. . . those seeds which constitute wind and heat, cause life to stay in the limbs.
Therefore vital heat and wind are within the body and abandon our frame after
death." (Lucretius III. 126-8; Trans. Munro 60)

This theme underlies one of Housman's most delightful, haunting and deservedly popular short poems, *ASL XXXII* "From far from eve and morning", where the poet considers the place of human contact in a material universe.

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

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;
 Ere to the wind's twelve quarters
 I take my endless way.

The opening line suggest that the constituents of life have been temporarily gathered from across vast distances of space and time, with "from eve and morning" recalling perhaps the fall of Hephaistos from heaven in Milton's *Paradise Lost* (itself a line evoking the immensity of the post Copernican universe): 'From Morn / To Noon he fell, from Noon to dewy Eve' (742-3). The chaotic arrangement of the matter of life before it assembles from all directions into a sentient being is further reinforced by the idea of the "twelve winded sky".⁹ The repetitions of the letter 'f' in "stuff of life", followed by a parallel repetition of 'h' in "hither" and "here" and later "hand", "have" and "heart" give a breathless sensation to the arrival (and survival) of life. The fleeting nature of life is enforced by the urgency that adheres to the word 'Now' and the subordinate clause "for a breath I tarry . . ." set off between dashes. The narrator is metaphorically and literally pausing for breath in the brief interlude between the incoherent state of life's components and their ultimate dispersal to the winds. Housman seems to explicitly identify life with the physicality of breath reaffirming what so terrified Tennyson in *In Memoriam* that "the spirit does but mean the breath" (part LVI, line 7). The brevity of life is further driven home by the injunction to "take my hand quick" with the word quick echoing the very process of a life temporary quickening. The last two lines foretell the dispersal of the stuff of life back into the chaos, a process that takes place in all directions ("the wind's twelve quarters") and one that is endless. The poem reflects the mutability of things as described by Lucretius but is also consistent with the Darwinian view of life as something impermanent and forever shifting.

Interestingly, Tennyson's poem *Lucretius* envisages a similar scene of the endless clashing of atoms when Lucretius (the narrator in the poem) remembers a dream:

. . . Terrible: for it seem'd
 A void was made in Nature, all her bonds
 Crack'd; and I saw the flaring atom-streams
 And torrents of her myriad universe,
 Ruining along the illimitable inane,
 Fly on to clash together again, and make
 Another and another frame of things
 For ever . . . (lines 36-43)

In his insightful Darwinian reading of this poem, John Holmes shows how the disgust towards sexuality expressed by Lucretius in the poem is Tennyson's positing of the "moral and psychological challenge" of Darwinism (*Darwin's Bards* 256). Tennyson's Lucretius realises that in a material worldview he is merely another type of animal subject to base and beastly sexual instincts that fill him with disgust, a conclusion that drives him to despair. Tennyson's own solution was to repudiate the notion that Darwinism could satisfactorily explain the origin and evolution of life.

In *ASL XXXII*, however, Housman reaches different conclusions, identifying redemptive qualities in moments of desire and affection. During the brief emergence

of life from the clashing of atoms, the essential and necessary thing is to make human contact and attend to the heart's affections - "take my hand quick and tell me / What have you in your heart"- and to proffer help and solace: "how can I help you, say". As a theist, Tennyson was obliged to refute Lucretius whereas Housman embraced him.

Housman rejected Christianity but he composed one poem, *MP XLVII*, that superficially seems to have a religious theme. The poem is sometimes erroneously given the title "For my Funeral" but this seems to have been an instruction added to the poem by Housman and not a title. The funeral service was held in Trinity College Chapel on May 4th 1936, during which the poem was sung. Haber, however, considers the poem to be "a deceptive trap for the righteous" and "his final sardonic jest with God and man" (*Housman and Lucretius* 177). The jest is that although the poem reads superficially like a supplication to God to embrace his departed soul, the fact that "thou" and "thee" are not capitalised indicates that Housman is really writing to Nature, asking that she reabsorbs his compound elements into the ceaseless Lucretian atomic flux:

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

Evidence that Housman's thoughts may have lain in this direction is provided by his poem "Parta Quies" (rest is won). Although not published until after Housman's death (as the last poem, XLVIII, in *More Poems*, assembled by his brother Laurence), Housman wrote this as early as 1881 for an Oxford magazine (Burnett 462). It is a poem that melds a biblical view of the Apocalypse with a Lucretian view of death as a final state of non-being:

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.

Mackenzie suggests that Housman uses this device to "subordinate the Christian vision to the Lucretian" (162). The fleeing of "earth's foundations" suggests a final destructive act. Lucretius himself had no doubt that the earth was finite and one day would be destroyed:

With good reason therefore all things perish, when they have been rarefied by the ebb of particles and succumb to blows from without . . . In this way the walls too of the great world around shall be stormed and fall to decay and crumbling ruin. (Lucretius II. 1141-1148; Trans. Munro 55; see also: Lucretius VI. 100-110)

This same sense of final destruction is found in *ASL L* ("Where doomsday may thunder and lighten / And little will matter to one") and in *MP XLIII* (" . . . on through night to morning/The world runs ruinward").

Housman and Astronomy

The other science that Housman drew upon in his poems was astronomy. Throughout the Victorian period astronomy was a branch of science that had a strong popular and amateur following. Housman's own interest began at an early age. In a letter to Maurice Pollet, written towards the end of his life in 1933, he noted how in his school days he eagerly he read a "little book" on astronomy he found in his parents' house, and how thereafter astronomy became a life-long interest (*Letters* 1: 328). In his recollections of Alfred Housman, his brother Laurence recalled how the three brothers played a game on the lawn in their garden at Bromsgrove, forming a sort of human orrery with Laurence the sun, Alfred the moon and Basil the Earth (see: Graves 8). When Housman was fourteen he wrote a poem for a school competition about Sir Walter Raleigh. In it he reflects on the idea that travelling brings other constellations into view (an idea he exploited in his later verse, especially *LP XVII*):

He flies to other lands afar
The lands beneath the evening star
Where fairer constellations rise . . . (*Poems of A E Housman* 193)

Housman's impressive knowledge of astronomy at a professional level is demonstrated in his later classical scholarship where he applied his sound understanding of the history of astronomy and the movements of the heavenly bodies as they appear to earth-bound observers (sometimes called spherical astronomy) to the exegesis and emendation of classical texts. Housman could be merciless in correcting the errors of his peers. In a withering comment on an article by an American scholar Professor Harry (who had interpreted lines in Euripides' *Agamemnon* as a description of the stars and planets in the dawn sky) Housman gleefully pointed out that:

His description of dawn is a description of what never happened even in Kentucky, and shows that his attention was chiefly fixed, as it naturally would be, on the squirrels. ("Aster Seirios in Eur. I A. 6-7." 267)

Having impaled his victim on a technical error, Housman proceeds to dismember him, showing that Professor Harry had made both astronomical and textual errors in attempting to identify the star referred to by *Agamemnon* in the play as Aldebaran, whereas it could only have been a planet.

An even more impressive display of erudition is to be found in his commentary on the editing of a poem (number 678) previously examined by various scholars and included in the *Latin Anthology* edited by Alexander Riese in 1869. Housman demonstrates that the attempts of Riese and others ("these well-intentioned but ill-informed editors") to understand the period of revolution of the planets in the poem is flawed by an improper understanding of how the revolutions would have appeared to an ancient observer using a geocentric system. According to Housman, Riese and others made the error of using heliocentric figures for the periods of the revolutions of the planets, which were obviously anachronistic ("*Anth. Lat. Ries. 678.*")

It would seem natural therefore that Housman should use astronomical imagery, with all its long history of resonance between the microcosm and macrocosm and its flexible metaphorical qualities, in his verse. The place of

astronomical concepts in Housman's verse has been touched on by earlier critics but never with the thoroughness the subject warranted. In examining the influence of astronomy on Housman's verse, Tom Burns Haber observed that many of Housman's poems unfold and conclude in a circular manner, reflecting, he maintained, the crucial importance of apparent circular motion in astronomy (*A E Housman: Astronomer-Poet* 154). Haber noticed that the last line or two in Housman's poems were typically echoes of the opening lines in terms of key words, thoughts or even whole phrases. Perhaps the most striking example is *ASL XXXVI* which even deals with the poetic conceit that on a spherical earth walking in a straight line will eventually bring the observer back to the starting point – although the poem itself is about love and separation. Given the central metaphor of the poem, one might object that in this case the circularity is hardly surprising, but Haber estimates that about one in three poems have this form. An obvious example is the well known *ASL II* which starts with "Loveliest of trees the cherry now" and ends with "To see the cherry hung with snow". Haber attributes this device of Housman to his preoccupation with astronomy, suggesting that he transposed the concepts of cycles, circles and revolution, so crucial to spherical astronomy and astrology, to the structure of his poems. I suspect here that Haber may have uncharacteristically overstated the case: some of the examples he gives do not so convincingly fall into this form and the very nature of poetry often invites circular closure.

Whether the poems have inherent circularity or not is a moot point, but one thing many of the poems do convey is a strong sense of the earth's diurnal motion. In poetry generally, of course, dawn, evening and dusk can all take on symbolic connotations, but this is especially evident in Housman. In *LP XXXVI* ("Revolution") the poem's most vivid image is the shadow cone ("The vast and moon-eclipsing cone of night") formed by the interruption of the sun's light by the bulk of the earth. The poem ends with the observation that at midday the shadow cone crosses the nadir and menacingly "begins to climb".¹⁰ "Revolution" is placed near the end of *Last Poems*. Significantly, the very last poem (*LP XLI* or "Fancy's Knell") also concludes with the approach of night: "The lofty shade advances". "Fancy's Knell" is an appropriate poem to stand at the end of the last volume of verse Housman published in his lifetime. Although the village mentioned in the poem (Abdon under Cleve) does exist, he did not wish to claim topographical accuracy for the verse (*Letters* 1: 340). The location, like most venues in *A Shropshire Lad*, is part of a mythic landscape onto which the drama of his poetry is projected. The final verse suggests that the song, the poet and 'Fancy' itself share a common fate in their absorption into the elemental forms of earth and air:

The lofty shade advances,
I fetch my flute and play:
Come, lads, and learn the dances
And praise the tune to-day.
To-morrow, more's the pity,
Away we both must hie,
To air the ditty,
And to earth I.

However, the circularity in Housman's verse has a deeper resonance than merely some echo of Astronomical circular motion, and the clue lies again with

Lucretius. Lucretius argued for the ceaseless recycling of matter: atoms cohere temporarily and then disperse into space to cohere again somewhere else. This theme of endless cycling is found in numerous poems (see: *ASL XXXIV*). But it is not just matter that is cycled: in *ASL XXXI* ("On Wenlock Edge"), for example, we have the recycling of both matter and troubled thoughts. Here the narrator of the poem, contemplating the ancient Romans who inhabited Uricon (Wroxeter in Shropshire), reflects that "The tree of man was never quiet / Then twas the Roman, now 'tis I". So although "To-day the Roman and his trouble / Are ashes under Uricon" both matter and grief are recycled.¹¹ The processes go on endlessly: hence, we have the "endless way" of *ASL XXXII* and the "endless road" of *ASL LX*. People die and are replaced by other people fulfilling the same role, having the same experiences. In *ASL LV* ("Westward on the high-hilled plains") we read the narrator noting ruefully that "in newer veins / Frets the changeless blood of man", and later that new lads "Tread the mill I trod before" and have "thoughts that were once mine". In *ASL XXVII* ("Is my team ploughing?"), the main speaker of the poem is the ghost of a dead ploughman. The answers to his questions show that things are just as they were before: "No change though you lie under / The land you used to plough"; even the dead ploughman's sweetheart is now comforted and bedded by another man. This circularity and recycling is enforced in Housman's poetry by numerous references to night and day, dawn and dusk. In effect, Housman is providing his own poetic response to the problem set by the Greek pre-Socratic philosophers: how can we explain change by reference to that which is stable and unchanging? For philosophers such as Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes and Heraclitus there was one underlying substance that remained constant but appeared in different guises. For Leucippus, Democritus, Epicurus and then the Roman Lucretius, these unchanging entities were the atoms. Housman takes Lucretian atomism one step further and identifies the underlying stability of enduring psychological entities such as love, friendship, joys and disappointments, beneath the chaos and mutability – the Heraclitian flux – of human experience.

In Housman's poetry the dead disintegrate into their component elements and merge again with the circular flux of things. Circular motion is observed too in the fact that the spinning of the earth on its axis gives the appearance of the stars and the planets revolving around the celestial pole (the Pole Star in the northern hemisphere). Housman uses these ideas with powerful effect. In the poem "Astronomy" (*LP XVII*), for example, we are made acutely aware of how life and death are played out under a dome of revolving stars. The poem was written in memory of Housman's brother, George Herbert Housman, who was killed in action on 30th October 1901 fighting the Boers in South Africa, and is worth quoting in full:

The Wain upon the northern steep
 Descends and lifts away.
 Oh I will sit me down and weep
 For bones in Africa.

For pay and medals, name and rank,
 Things that he has not found,
 He hove the cross to heaven and sank
 The pole-star underground.

And now he does not even see
 Signs of the nadir roll
 At night over the ground where he
 Is buried with the pole.

The "Wain" refers to the constellation of the Plough or Ursa Major. The Plough would descend in the sky as an observer moves south and this is just what George did in travelling to Africa. But since this is Housman responding to the news that his brother has been killed, the intended image is more likely one of the Plough, as a circumpolar constellation, sinking towards the horizon and rising again as the Earth turns. The sudden change in the first stanza from "Wain" to "Africa" suggests the revolving constellations calling Housman's brother to mind. The fact that "he hove the cross to heaven" has clear overtones of Christ's sacrifice but in this context also refers to the fact that travelling south of the equator brings the Southern Cross into view as the pole star sinks below the horizon. The metaphor works well: George Housman has laboured like Christ to raise his own cross and prepare for his own destruction, whilst his own native polar constellation (the Plough) sinks into the ground as he does into his grave. The pointlessness of it all is emphasised by the fact that those things he sought "he has not found". The "signs of the nadir" are the constellations of the southern hemisphere, alien stars to George Housman and ones to which he is now insensible. Burnett, in his edition of Housman's *Letters* dates the poem to after the death of George in 1901; it was published in an anthology in 1904 and in *Last Poems* in 1922 (Gasser).

There are obvious parallels with Hardy's poem "Drummer Hodge", first published in November 1899. Like George Housman, Drummer Hodge lies below a set of strange stars: "And foreign constellations west / Each night above his mound" (lines 5-6). To emphasise this point, in each stanza of Hardy's poem the stars are either "strange", "foreign" or "strange eyed". The last verse ends:

Yet portion of that unknown plain
 Will Hodge forever be;
 His homely Northern breast and brain
 Grow to some Southern tree,
 And strange-eyed constellation reign
 His stars eternally. (13-18)

Both poems stress the pathos of loss and the dislocation of death made more acute by the fact that the body rests separated from home and friends in unfamiliar ground. The separation of the dead from the grieving is thereby emphasised by a reference to the geographical and astronomical space that separates them. Housman's poem was almost certainly written after Hardy's, but it is not clear if there was any direct influence. Housman met Hardy for the first time in June 1899 (Naiditch, *Additional Problems*). Housman also accepted an invitation to visit Hardy at Max Gate in August 1900 (*Letters* 1: 122). There are letters between Hardy and Housman suggesting admiration for each other's verse, although neither "Astronomy" nor "Drummer Hodge" are mentioned. It is possible that they did not talk much about poetry. In a letter to Richard Purdy, for example, Housman recalls: "I do not remember talking with him on poetry, except that we were both very fond of William

Barnes's Dorset poems" (*Letters* 1: 84). He repeated this point in a later letter to Houston Martin: "Hardy and I never talked about my poems" (*Letters* 1: 495).

Housman's poem could also be a veiled comment on Britain's imperial ambitions: the stars are "strange" to George Housman raising the question about what he was doing in the southern hemisphere. The late nineteenth-century was a period of imperial expansion and consolidation for Britain: the first Boer war took place in 1880 and 1881 and the second (in which George was killed) over the years 1899-1902; Egypt was occupied in 1882; and Burma annexed to the Empire in 1885. The opening poem of *A Shropshire Lad* which purports to celebrate the golden jubilee of Victoria in 1887 is ambiguous at best and there are similar critical allusions to foreign wars and the soldiers who die to "save the Queen". The poem also relies for effect on a similar geographical incongruity, in this case Shropshire names read in Asia, and lads reared by the Severn lying dead by the Nile:

It dawns in Asia, tombstone show
And Shropshire names are read;
And the Nile spills his overthrow
Beside the Severn's dead.

Housman's dead are reunited with the earth and turn with it like the rest of matter. In *LP XX* the loss of a friend is placed in a cosmic framework of the diurnal motion of the earth:

The night is freezing fast,
To-morrow comes December;
And winterfalls of old
Are with me from the past;
And chiefly I remember
How Dick would hate the cold.

Fall, winter, fall; for he,
Prompt hand and headpiece clever,
Has woven a winter robe,
And made of earth and sea
His overcoat for ever,
And wears the turning globe.

"Dick" of the poem resembles his pastoral namesake in *Love's Labour's Lost*: "When icicles hang by the wall/ And Dick the shepherd blows his nail" (5.2.). Numerous scholars have noticed the similarity to Wordsworth's 'Lucy' poem: "A slumber did my spirit seal" (Wain; Marlow). Wain claims that *LP XX* compares unfavourably with the Lucy poem but his comments miss intended and crucial differences. In *LP XX*, Dick, seemingly, has escaped the privations of winter by cleverly turning death into a release. But whereas Wordsworth shows how his complacency in his love for Lucy makes the finality of death even more tragic and painful, Housman is reflecting on the process of memory bringing grief to mind and tries vainly to seek some consolation. The first verse suggests a linear progression of time – the night is freezing and tomorrow it is December – only to be thwarted by the reminder that there have been previous winters. But one thing that cannot return is Dick – a friend whose

value was such that he becomes the chief memory of this moment. "How Dick would hate the cold" adds a colloquial touch befitting the name "Dick", but the past tense of "would" immediately signals to the reader that Dick is no more. In the second verse Housman, in the spirit of Lucretius, asks us to consider death as a release where the grief of the death of a friend is mitigated by the idea that death is not to be feared since a state of nothingness no longer has any bearing on life. But, as often found in Housman, there is an added twist. What Dick hated was "the cold", now he is dead he has turned the earth and sea into an overcoat: the "winter robe". Note that it is not just a small patch of ground (his grave) that Dick wears but the whole expanse of earth and sea – an idea that emphasises the gulf between the narrator and his friend and elevates the scale to the global or cosmic. But this is also doubly ironic: firstly that death has been turned to Dick's advantage, secondly because in reality he can do no such thing since as a non-being he cannot feel the cold or the warmth of his new robe. Housman here is playing sardonically with what Korg has called the "problem of metaphor" in Victorian verse. For the metaphysical poets, despite the dislocation wrought by the Copernican Revolution, the natural world could still be seen as a repository of instructive analogues: few doubted that man and nature were strongly connected through the doctrine of correspondences. As Korg also observes, even as late as the Romantic period the power of metaphor was sustained by the "premise that man and nature share common moral and spiritual values" – a suspected affinity sustained by natural theology (141). But the images presented by mid nineteenth-century science: the vastness of space, the eternity of time, and the mutability of species, made it difficult to relate the physical world to a human scale and see in it any reflection of or correspondence to any sort of human striving. Applying this insight, we can see that in *LP XX* Housman effectively subverts the Wordsworthian view of nature (as he did in *LP XL* with the phrase "heartless witness nature"). The idea of the earth and sea as an overcoat is a deliberately preposterous metaphor: following the decline of natural theology it is empty and in a material universe meaningless. Despite what the naïve narrator tries to express, death has no such consolation and this realisation makes the grief seem more acute.

The identity of 'Dick' in the poem is not clear. It may just have been an exercise by Housman, or given that he seems to have written a draft of the poem in 1922, at a time when he knew his dear friend Moses Jackson was dying of stomach cancer, he may have had in mind a real friend. As noted earlier, in *A Shropshire Lad* there are several voices or narrators and these serve as masks functioning to distance the poetry from the poet. There were good reasons for Housman to disguise or transmute some of his feelings. Much of *A Shropshire Lad* was written in 1895 and it was on April 3rd of that year that Oscar Wilde's failed libel action against the Marquess of Queensbury opened in London, to be followed by Wilde's arrest and his own trial on April 26th culminating in his conviction on 25th May. Masks, however, are difficult to sustain indefinitely and Housman's love for Moses Jackson is one area where his use of astronomical and cosmological imagery bears the signs of the turmoil in his personal life. This is especially evident in *Last Poems* – a copy of which Housman sent to Moses Jackson as he lay dying in Canada in 1922. Housman's later poems – ones that were assembled by his brother Laurence into *More Poems* and *Additional Poems* – were deemed by Housman, either because of their literary merit or their personal tone, unfit to be published in his lifetime. So in these two later collections a more personal voice might also be expected.

Housman met Moses Jackson as an undergraduate at Oxford and his deep affection for him lasted for the rest of his life. It survived an apparent argument in the autumn of 1885 (when Housman disappeared for a week), Jackson's move to India, his marriage, and his subsequent emigration to Canada. As noted earlier, Housman's interest in astrology was purely academic and sustained to help him prepare his edition of Manilius and make other commentaries on classical literature. Indeed, the Stoic idea that the stars deal us our fate, metaphorically or otherwise is hardly present in *ASL*. But a fairly conventional use of the notion of astral influence appears in the "Epithalimium" that Housman wrote for the wedding of Moses Jackson in December 1889. As Sparrow (247) and Burnett (394) point out, the opening bears a strong similarity to a famous Epithalimium written by the Roman poet Catallus, whose work Housman greatly admired. Like Catallus, Housman introduces the god Hymen, son of Urania the muse of astronomy. But unlike Catallus, Housman calls for a beneficial celestial influence, most notably in lines 33-36:

And the high heavens, that all control,
Turn in silence round the pole.
Catch the strong beams they shed
Prospering the marriage bed. (*LP XXIV*)

Like any good poet, Housman was perfectly capable of extracting multiple metaphors from a single concept. His uses of 'wind' for example are manifold: signifying human passion (*ASL XXXI*); death and dissolution (*ASL XLII, XXXII*); healing (*ASL XXX*); geographical isolation (*ASL XXXVIII*); memory (*ASL XL*); and the hostility or indifference of nature (*LP IX, XXVII*) (see also: Page 195). Similarly, stars, constellations and planets can signify a variety of ideas: the seasons turning (*ASL X*); sacrifice, alienation and loss (*LP XVII*); astrological influence or blessing (*LP XXIV, XVII*); and foreboding (*LP XXXVI*). But, as is often the case in Housman, the sense of unfulfilled desire is never very far away and astronomical ideas are accordingly yoked into service. In the "Epithalimium" noted above (*LP XXIV*), although "starry beams" are invited to "prosper the marriage bed", the first stanza suggest that as the "groomsman quits your side" the bride's gain is his (i.e. Housman's) loss:

Friend and comrade yield you o'er
To her that hardly loves you more

The use of astral imagery to convey both intimacy and separation is also found in the Latin dedicatory epistle to Moses Jackson that Housman prefixed to the *Astronomica* of Manilius. In the poem, Housman refers to the constellations that shone above them when they enjoyed evening walks together (presumably in Oxford and London). The intimacy is suggested by the fact that they both saw the constellations rise together and they shone on both equally. However, since Jackson was in India when Housman composed the work, he refers to Jackson as someone who has followed "Eastern stars".¹² The stars can also suggest separation since, as we saw in an earlier analysis of "Astronomy" (*LP XVII*), different constellations will be visible in different parts of the world. The use of stars as objective correlates for unfulfilment and separation is also found in *MP X* and *XI*, two poems that are imitations and

developments of a fragment of verse attributed to Sapho. The original fragment of Sapho's verse (as translated by J. A. Symonds in 1883) reads:

The moon has left the sky
 Lost is the Pleiads light
 It is midnight
 And time slips by
 But on my couch alone I lie

In *MP XI* Housman links the Pleiads with Orion: "The rainy Pleiads wester/Orion plunges prone".¹³ Housman's two poems convey the same sense of desolation to be found in Sapho but he develops the theme in *MP XI* by invoking the never-to-be fulfilled desire of Orion pursuing the Pleiads as the heavens turn as well as the idea, found also in *LP XVII* "Astronomy", of the constellations visiting others on another part of the globe:

The rainy Pleiads wester
 And seek beyond the sea,
 The head that I shall dream of,
 And 'twill not dream of me.¹⁴

According to Burnett's dating of the manuscripts, the first draft of this verse can be dated to about 1901, a year when Moses Jackson was in India (*Letters*). When he finished the final draft in 1922 Jackson was in Canada.

Another use of the movement of the constellations is to be found in *ASL X* ("March"). The first two stanzas are:

The Sun at noon to higher air,
 Unharnessing the silver Pair
 That late before his chariot swam,
 Rides on the gold wool of the Ram.

So braver notes the storm-cock sings
 To start the rusted wheel of things,
 And brutes in field and brutes in pen
 Leap that the world goes round again.

Archie Burnett identifies a possible influence of Manilius here, noting that the "silver pair" refers to the pair of fishes in the last winter zodiacal constellation of Pisces, a reference also found in Manilius *Astronomica* (2: 192-3) and that the "gold wool of the Ram" is similar to a line in the same work (1: 263). He also suggests a possible influence of Dryden (*Poems of A E Housman* 327). Both are, of course, possible: Housman seems to have first read Manilius around 1894 (Page 168), the poem was written sometime in 1893 or 1894, and Housman is known to have admired certain passages of Dryden – including one about spring that he cites in his lecture subsequently published as *The Name and Nature of Poetry*. The sense of a new year beginning and nature stirring as the sun moves around the ecliptic, is, of course, something of a commonplace and is also found in the opening lines of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* and Housman may also have had these lines in mind:

WHAN that Aprille with his shoures soote
 The droghte of Marche hath perced to the roote,
 ... and the yonge sonne
 Hath in the Ram his halfe cours y-ronne . . . (lines 1-2; 7-8)¹⁵

Housman's poem like Chaucer's conveys the awakening of desire, but in Housman's poem the narrator ends on a note of thwarted desire: "Ah, let not only mine be vain, / For lovers should be loved again"

Housman's feelings of being an outsider are forcefully captured in *LP XII*. Manuscript drafts show this poem was conceived between Aug and Dec 1894 during the period of heightened emotion that produced *A Shropshire Lad* (Burnett 382). In the poem he rails against the laws of God and man: "And if my ways are not as theirs / let them mind their own affairs", but notes, strangely, that flying to another planet is not an escape option:

. . . since, my soul, we cannot fly
 To Saturn nor to Mercury,
 Keep we must, if keep we can,
 These foreign laws of God and man.

The allusion to Saturn and Mercury is not entirely clear. Carol Efrati suggests that these are mythological types that hark back to a classical world where homosexuality was tolerated (61). She takes Saturn to represent Greece and Rome and Mercury the option of suicide (since Mercury was thought to be the guide of the dead to their resting place – see Housman's *ASL XLII* where mercury, as Hermes psychopompos, guides the souls of the dead to the underworld). But there are other readings: Mercury was also the trickster or turncoat, possibly Housman is indicating that he cannot change his nature. Housman may also have had in mind Cicero's *Dream of Scipio* which describes a fictional dream journey of the Roman general Scipio Aemilianus in which the planetary spheres are described.

In the science of astronomy and the cosmology of Lucretius, A. E. Housman found a fruitful set of ideas. Like many intellectuals of the late 19th century, Housman was forced to confront and re-imagine a universe increasingly revealed as indifferent to human affairs and stripped of any prospect of Christian redemption. Bertrand Russell expressed similar concerns, not in poetry but memorable prose, when he wrote in his essay *A Free Man's Worship* (1903):

That Man is the product of causes that had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve individual life beyond the grave; . . . that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins – all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built. (48)

The painful reality of a world deserted by the gods, as advanced by Lucretius and confirmed to many by Darwin, must have seemed all too obvious to Housman – a man forced to suppress those very feelings whose expression may have brought some measure of personal happiness. In the bucolic but mythic landscape of Shropshire, Housman found a flawed Arcadia for the thoughts and passions of his characters. Within the wider framework of the sidereal motion of the heavens and the restless cycling of matter he found fitting concepts to craft his unique blend of poetry from his own unyielding despair.

Notes

I am grateful for the comments of Alan Wall on this article, and for the perceptive commentary of two anonymous reviewers.

1. Subsequent references to poems in this volume are abbreviated *ASL* followed by the number of the poem
2. Subsequent references to poems in this volume are abbreviated as *LP* followed by the number of the poem
3. In addition to other works cited here, see, for example, Beer; Cosslett; Chapple; and Dove.
4. The actual letter was recently sold at Sotheby's as Lot 41 of their Books and Manuscripts Sale, New York, 18th June 2010.
5. It may be significant that the Roman playwright Terence was brought to Rome as a slave and hence an exile from his own land. Possibly, Housman saw parallels with his own sojourn in London as an exile from his native Worcestershire. Thankfully, Housman's accepted the advice of his friend Arthur Pollard and *A Shropshire Lad* was born.
6. The philosopher Aristippus that Housman claimed to admire so much, was born around 435 BC and hence was a contemporary of Socrates. His Cyrenaic school of philosophy was named after his native town of Cyrene. For Aristippus the goal of life was immediate sensuous pleasure, a position that outraged such contemporaries as Plato and Xenophon. In Aristippus' own life the pursuit of this goal seems to have taken the form of sleeping with courtesans, enjoying fine food and wine, and the avoidance of troublesome political responsibilities. Significantly, Aristippus followed these desires even at the expense of transgressing the conventional morality of his time. In epistemology (which may also account for Housman's admiration), the Cyrenaics bore some similarity to Protagoras and his followers; namely, they were sceptical empiricists who avoided making claims about the nature of what they regarded as an unknowable ultimate reality.
7. Subsequent references to poems in this volume are abbreviated *MP* followed by the number of the poem.
8. See Huxley, "Science and Culture (1880)".
9. The idea of twelve winds has puzzled many readers (see Westhead). However, twelve winds are sometimes found on medieval maps (see "Where the Winds Blow") and Pliny refers to 12 winds in Book 2 Chapter 46 of his Natural History.
10. Marlow attributes the "cone of night" image to one of the better emendations made by Bentley to Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Bentley had changed Milton's "car of Night" to "cone of night". Although Housman generally disparaged Bentley for meddling with Milton, this is a possible source. Another previous usage is with Shelley where he used the phrase cone of night in his poem *The Triumph of Life* (line 23). There is also a suggestive passage in Manilius' *Astronomica* (1: 221-6) where there is a discussion of how the earth's shadow falls on the moon.
11. See also Womack.
12. For a translation and commentary see Harrison.
13. The mythological and *Astronomical* contexts are fairly straightforward. The Pleiads (also known as the seven sisters or the Pleiades) were the attendants of Artemis pursued by Orion but then rescued by the goddess who turned them into a

flight of doves and then stars. Artemis later killed Orion and placed him in the sky as a constellation forever pursuing the Pleiads.

14. In a letter to his colleague A S F Gow concerning the meaning of a passage in one of Theocritus' Idylls (VII verse 54) Housman refers to the "matitudunal" (i.e morning) setting of Orion and the Pleiads as a sign to the Greeks of forthcoming storms when the sea would be unfit for navigation (*Letters* 1: 599).

15. The Roman year began in March, and in the middle ages the Catholic Church recognised a year as beginning around March 25th with the Feast of the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary)

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