Conservatism and Creativity in A.E. Housman

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As Tom Stoppard’s The Invention of Love begins, A.E. Housman “aged seventy-seven...stands on the bank of the Styx watching the approach of the ferryman, Charon,” who tells him they have to wait for another passenger.¹

Charon A poet and a scholar is what I was told.
AEH I think that must be me.
Charon Both of them?
AEH I’m afraid so.
Charon It sounded like two different people.
AEH I know.

Stoppard begins with the public division between the poet, the “true” poet of A Shropshire Lad, and the scholar, severe and often caustic, who held chairs of Latin at University College, London, and at Cambridge University. Stoppard also explores an even bigger hiatus in Housman’s life, one that appears in his poetry:

He would not stay for me, and who can wonder?
He would not stay for me to stand and gaze.
I shook his hand and tore my life in sunder
And went with half my life about my ways.²

To put the world between us
We parted stiff and dry;
“Farewell,” said you, “forget me.”
“Fare well, I will,” said I.³

We do not know the details of that parting, recreated in Tom Stoppard’s imagination,⁴ but the scene echoes through the poetry Housman wrote in his notebooks which was published after his death by his brother, Laurence. Many see the difference between the Shropshire Lad’s mournful strains and the cold cruelty of the Latin professor’s reviews emerging from the chasm that separated Housman from the man he loved.

II

Alfred Edward Housman⁵ was born on March 26, 1859, “in Worcestershire, not Shropshire.”⁶ He enjoyed academic success, winning scholarships to King Edward VI Grammar School, Bromsgrove, in his hometown, and to St. John’s College, Oxford, where he received a First Class in “ Mods,” examinations on classical Greek and Latin language and literature. Two years later he was “ploughed in Greats,” that is, his examiners denied him even a passing grade in his final examinations on ancient history and philosophy. As Housman wrote, “In 1879 I was placed in

the first class in the Honour School of Classical Moderations; in 1881 I failed to obtain honours in the Final School of Litterae Humaniores." 7

Housman left Oxford without a degree. Biographers have attributed the failure to many reasons, 8 including arrogance 9 or a possible religious crisis. 10 (He lost his Christian faith at thirteen, when his mother died, and became an atheist at twenty-one, the year before he failed Greats.) 11 Others suspect a romantic cause. 12 He later wrote, "Oxford did not have much influence on me, except that there I met my greatest friend," 13 Moses John Jackson (1858-1923), 14 "the man who had more influence on my life than anybody else," 15 and one source of "the great and real problems of my early manhood." 16 Housman, once the playful leader of his family’s seven children, moved to London where he avoided them. He earned a Pass degree and went to work in Her Majesty’s Patent Office, where Jackson was also employed.

Housman roomed with Moses from 1883-1885. Moses’ brother Adalbert lived with them until December 1884. In Fall 1885 something happened. Housman disappeared for a week. Moses wrote anxiously to Housman’s father, but Housman showed up again and each moved to separate accommodations. In 1887 Jackson moved to Karachi, India, to become principal of a technical school, Sind College. When he returned to marry in 1889, he kept the news from Housman until he and his bride had sailed. (Housman wrote in his diary on 7 January 1890, “I heard he was married.”) When Jackson retired, he moved to Canada, where he died of cancer in 1923.

Adalbert remained Housman’s friend until his death in 1892, the year Housman was elected Professor of Latin at Cambridge and Fellow of Trinity College, where he lived and lectured until his death in 1936. For those twenty-five years pictures of Moses and Adalbert hung above the fireplace in his rooms at Trinity.

It was as a Professor, after “the really emotional part of my life was over,” 17 that Housman composed the poetry published by himself as A Shropshire Lad (1896) and Last Poems (1922) and by his brother, Laurence, as More Poems (1936) and Additional Poems (1937). Despite favorable reviews, A Shropshire Lad did not sell well at first, but by the time of the Great War it had become a popular favorite. Last Poems was an instant bestseller. During these years Housman produced enough scholarly articles and reviews to fill three large volumes and critical editions of Ovid’s Ibis, Juvenal, Lucan, and Manilius. 18

Neither poet nor scholar believed that human desires can change the world:

Ay look: high heaven and earth all from the prime foundation;
All thoughts to rive the heart are here and all are vain. 19

—To think that two and two are four
And neither five nor three
The heart of man has long been sore
And long ’tis like to be. 20

Stars, I have seen them fall,
But when they drop and die
No star is lost at all
From all the star-sown sky.
The toil of all that be
Helps not the primal fault;
It rains into the sea
And still the sea is salt. 21

In the verse this gloomy insight is accepted with stoic resignation or avoided by drinking. In his scholarly prose it appears as the ironic dance of satire:

Chance and the common course of nature will not bring it to pass that the readings of
ally welcomed a Conservative victory at a bye-election, ‘because,’ he said, ‘it will vex the kind of people I don’t like.’

Several of his letters reveal a detailed knowledge of the leaders and politics of the Conservative Party and a healthy disdain for “the fetish” of Free Trade. He went out of his way to tell the leftist Gilbert Murray that he would not vote for him and made fun of Murray’s pacifism.

“I rather doubt if man really has much to gain by substituting peace for strife, as you and Jesus Christ suggest.”

Housman professed “his youthful admiration of Napoleon III, and that the Franco-Prussian War was a great shock and grief to him (then aged 11),” to A.C. Benson at Trinity College almost two generations later. He proclaimed it publicly, along with his contempt for the hypocritical attitude towards the Emperor of English Liberals, in his review of F.A. Simpson’s *Louis Napoleon and the Recovery of France*:

Queen Victoria had ascended the throne without saying by your leave or with your leave; one house of Parliament was hereditary, and five-sixths of the adult male population had no voice in electing either. These were the people who talked about despotism when a neighboring nation, by universal suffrage and enormous majorities, had settled its own form of government. Though in truth it was not the English people but the enlightened English Liberals, then at the beginning of their long ascendancy, to whom the Emperor was odious; and the reason why they called him a despot was that he had put a despotism down, and delivered France from the tyranny of Paris. The divine right of 2,000,000 Radicals to govern 30,000,000 Conservatives had been trampled underfoot; and Napoleon’s chief offence in this country was this great service he had rendered his own.

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*a MS are right whenever they are possible and impossible whenever they are wrong: that needs divine intervention; and when one considers the history of man and the spectacle of the universe I hope that I may say without impiety that divine intervention might have been better employed elsewhere.*

This enduring theme of Housman’s poetry and scholarly prose, that there is an objective world, which must be lived in despite the fact that it does not answer to human desires, may give a clue to the unity of his life’s work.

III

“I am a conservative, and do not like changing anything without due reason.” In 1914 he refused a request to sign a petition to reform English spelling by writing, “I confess I am attached to the current forms of words, and also I am what you have often heard of but perhaps not often seen, a real conservative, who thinks change an evil in itself.” The unity or disunity of Housman’s poetry and prose has often been sought in his unhappy love life, his homosexuality, or his loss of faith. The most consistent trait in his life, however, was his political and social conservatism. Here, therefore, it may be worthwhile to consider his conservatism in politics, art, and scholarship.

The Housmans were Conservatives and their favorite family toast was “Up with the Tories and out with the Radicals!” His letters home make politics the best-documented aspect of his college years. At Oxford he participated in student debates and demonstrations. A strong Conservative in a Conservative stronghold, he objected to the way his fellow Conservatives shouted down and threw out Liberal opponents. He had no objection, however, to burning Gladstone in effigy and was quite put out by the Liberal victory of 1880. Later in life he professed indifference to party politics, but “generally welcomed a Conservative victory at a bye-election, ‘because,’ he said, ‘it will vex the kind of people I don’t like.’” Several of his letters reveal a detailed knowledge of the leaders and politics of the Conservative Party and a healthy disdain for “the fetish” of Free Trade. He went out of his way to tell the leftist Gilbert Murray that he would not vote for him and made fun of Murray’s pacifism.

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War in 1901, which confirmed but did not alter his attitudes. One day “a ‘Pro-Boer’ Professor made some disrespectful remarks about the English private soldier. The result was a display of Housman’s invective which surprised even” his colleagues. Frank Harris, in a vain effort to win him over, lauded the poet’s “bitter sarcasm,” which, according to Harris, “poked fun” at patriotism and “made splendid mockery of it.” Housman angrily repudiated the compliment: “I can only reject and resent your—your truculent praise.”

Housman later said that “Frank Harris’s recollections are not accurate,” but there is no reason to deny that Harris interpreted *A Shropshire Lad* as mockery of patriotism and that he was mistaken.

The finest of these poems, “Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries” (*Last Poems*), is a bitterly ironic defense of British soldiers, who were attacked on the continent because they were not a drafted citizen army, precisely because they were professionals and did not need loud slogans to do their job:

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What God abandoned, these defended
And saved the sum of things for pay.
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Percy Withers asserted that Housman “had been careful to avoid imitation” in his poetry. As Norman Marlow showed, however, “Housman was not in fact careful to avoid imitation—indeed on several occasions the imitation is so direct that he seems to be making explicit allusion to the earlier passage.” His extensive use of earlier authors, such as the Bible (especially Ecclesiastes and Psalms), Shakespeare, and Matthew Arnold, shapes his language and adds depth to his simplicity of meter and theme. Although Housman’s sensibility is Romantic, his poetics is Classical, based on clear and direct *imitatio*, which is meant to be observed and admired.

Housman’s “Introductory Lecture” delivered at University College, London, in 1892, was in part ideologically Conservative, since he used the occasion to attack the views of two famous Liberals, Herbert Spencer and Matthew Arnold. Bright undergraduates admired Spencer, who maintained the Utilitarian creed of the early Liberals. Housman mocked Spencer’s vision of education, noting how little science is needed to satisfy physical needs. He also repudiated Matthew Arnold’s idea that reading great literature makes you a better person. Knowledge, like virtue, “is good in itself simply” and “has happiness indissolubly bound up with it.”

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I spoke just now of servility shown towards the living; and I think it significant that this is so often found in company with lack of due veneration towards the dead. My counsel is to invert this attitude, and to think more of the dead than of the living. The dead have at any rate endured a test to which the living have not yet been subjected. If a man, fifty or a hundred years after his death, is still remembered and accounted a great man, there is a presumption in his favour which no living man can claim; and experience has taught me that it is no mere presumption. It is the dead and not the living who have most advanced our learning and science; and though their knowledge may
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have been superseded, there is no super-
session of reason and intelligence. Clear
wits and right thinking are essentially nei-
ther of today nor yesterday, but historically
they are rather of yesterday than of today:
and to study the greatest of scholars of the
past is to enjoy intercourse with superior
minds. If our conception of scholarship and
our methods of procedure are at variance
with theirs, it is not indeed a certainty or a
necessity that we are wrong, but it is a good
working hypothesis; and we had better not
abandon it until it proves untenable. Let us
not disregard our contemporaries, but let
us regard our predecessors more; let us be
most encouraged by their agreement, and
most disquieted by their dissent.\footnote{43}

Housman’s vision of scholarly progress
intimately linked to past achievement is
reflected in his editions, in which he evalu-
ates the work of earlier scholars. His col-
lege hero, Hugh Munro, wrote of the great
German scholar, Karl Lachmann, “His love
for merit of all kinds incites in him a zeal
to do justice to all the old scholars who
have done anything for his author; while
his honest scorn and hatred of boastful
ignorance and ignoble sloth compel him
to denounce those whom he convicts of
these offences.”\footnote{44} These words fit
Housman. The vindictive wit that stinks
and stings on page after page of his schol-
arly writings is inspired by the witness of
great predecessors like Lachmann and
Munro.

The proud conclusion of the preface to
the final volume of his Manilius attaches
Housman to the moralistic traditions of
Roman historiography. “And the deaf
adder, though I can hardly say that she
has unstopped her own ears, has begun to
stifle her hisses for fear that they should
reach the ears of posterity.”⁴⁵ These words echo Tacitus’s claim: praecipuum munus
annalium reor ne virtutes sileantur utque
pravis dictis factisque ex posteritate et
infamia metus sit. “History’s chief job is to
record virtuous acts and ensure that
shameful words and deeds fear posterity’s
bad opinion.” (Tacitus, Annals 3.65) The
similarity of sentiment is reinforced by
Housman’s use of the nouns fear and
posterity, matching Tacitus’s posteritate
and metus.

Housman did mock “conservative
scholars.” “It would not be true to say that
all conservative scholars are stupid, but
it is very near the truth to say that all
stupid scholars are conservative.”⁴⁶ “Con-
servative” here, however, is a term of art
for literary scholars who accept the text
found in manuscripts and printed edi-
tions rather than undergoing the disci-
pline of traditional philology: gathering
the evidence (recensio), interpreting the
resulting text where possible (interpre-
tatio), and suggesting corrections when
interpretation fails (emendatio). These
literary scholars are “conservative,” but
not traditionalists, who understand that
their first job is to learn the lessons of the
past and to think critically about what we
have learned—but then finally, if pos-
sible, to respond to the current situation
with novelty and invention.

There is no better description of the
virtues of a good textual critic than “the
courage to recognize the inevitable loss
that accompanies change and the inquir-
ing intelligence to repair that loss.”⁴⁷ The
author of these words, the fine literary
critic, Guy Davenport, was describing the
virtues of political conservatives. As a
conservative, Housman approached texts
with a disposition to preserve and an
ability to reform. A.C. Clark, an editor of
Cicero and Latin Professor at Oxford in
Housman’s time, recognized the coher-
ence of this view when he said, “I am a
conservative, a conservative in all things
but textual criticism.”⁴⁸

IV

Most commentators do not agree. For
Andrew Gow, Housman was “a rebel
forced ‘by man’s bedevilment and God’s’
into unwilling conformity with standards
which he condemned...with his view of life as a 'long fool's-errand to the grave'.”49 Discussing Housman’s poetry and prose, Christopher Ricks emphasizes “the steely knot that most bitingly binds the two: blasphemy. The blasphemy of the poems is their central energy.... Last Poems IX joins in cursing 'Whatever brute or blackguard made the world,' quivering with the preposterous comedy of (in Samuel Beckett’s words) an atheist chipping at the deity. Last Poems XII scorns equally, levelly, 'The laws of God, the laws of man.'"50 Richard Perceval Graves assumes that Last Poems 12 is a confession of Housman’s beliefs.51 Tom Burns Haber calls Last Poems 12 “a passionate indictment of the ‘ways of God and man’ that had betrayed Housman in his innocence to an existence he hated for its barrenness and loneliness.” Housman’s poetry reveals “the passionate resentment of a proud and unyielding rebel against an ill-ordered universe that had injured him.”52 Terence Allan Hoagwood thinks that Housman agreed a fellow classical scholar, Friedrich Nietzsche, “that moral systems are hollow fictions, often used by the powerful to repress and oppress deluded people.”53 These critics rely on two of Last Poems. In Last Poems 9 two young men “are not the first” to have “cursed/Whatever brute and blackguard made the world.” Last Poems 12, in turn, begins with a gallantly defiant speaker, reminiscent of Milton’s Satan:

The laws of God, the laws of man,  
He may keep that will and can;  
Not I: let God and man decree  
Laws for themselves and not for me;  
And if my ways are not as theirs  
Let them mind their own affairs.  
Their deeds I judge and much condemn,  
Yet when did I make laws for them?

Biographers and critics hear in these words the voice of a young man who became a deist when his mother died and a resolute atheist at twenty-one and who wrote angry verses saying that Oscar Wilde was jailed “for the colour of his hair.”54 Housman could be inspired by actual events. A Shropshire Lad 44-45 sprang from newspaper accounts of the suicide of a young cadet.55 Additional Poems 18 is an angry parody of the charges against Oscar Wilde. Housman also wrote poems in persona. He originally intended to publish A Shropshire Lad as the anonymous Poems of Terence Hearsay.56 “The Shropshire Lad is an imaginary figure,” he wrote, “with something of my temper and view of life. Very little in the book is biographical.”57 There are several reasons to think that Last Poems 9 and 12 are also spoken by imaginary characters and do not represent Housman’s philosophy and views.

Last Poems 9, for example, has two twenty-three year old men drinking in a tavern because the rainy weather has spoiled their May plans. They are angry and frustrated:

We for a certainty are not the first  
Have sat in taverns while the tempest hurled  
Their hopeful plans to emptiness, and cursed  
Whatever brute and blackguard made the world.  
It is in truth iniquity on high  
To cheat our sentenced souls of ought they crave,  
And mar the merriment as you and I  
Fare on our long fool's-errand to the grave.  
Iniquity it is; but pass the can.  
My lad, no pair of kings our mothers bore;  
Our only portion is the estate of man:  
We want the moon, but we shall get no more.

In stanza after stanza the reader is distanced from the foolish young speaker, who is angry at God for the bad weather and thinks it is unfair (he says “iniquity” twice) if he and his friend are “cheated” of whatever they want when they want it. (“May will be fine next year as like as not/ Oh ay, but then we shall be twenty-four.”)56 The hyperbole of “whatever brute and
blackguard made the world,” therefore fits with his other extreme and silly statements.

The reader is also reminded in every other stanza that the young men are drinking, which is Housman’s most consistent poetic symbol of unthinking refusal to accept the world as it is. It is the dominant image of his *Ars Poetica, A Shropshire Lad* ("Terence, this is stupid stuff”):

And malt does more than Milton can
To justify God’s ways to man.
Ale, man, ale’s the stuff to drink
For fellows whom it hurts to think.

*Last Poems*’s last stanza possesses an emotional vigor more powerful than the open irony that pervades the earlier stanzas. Housman told Sir Sydney Cockerell that it was written many years after the rest of the poem, just before *Last Poems* was published in 1922.59

The troubles of our proud and angry dust
Are from eternity, and shall not fail.
Bear them we can, and if we can, we must.
Shoulder the sky, my lad, and drink your ale.

The last line is unambiguous and hammers home the theme of drinking to avoid thinking and so to avoid facing the reality that the world is not made to satisfy our desires. It does not seem to be an accident that the next poem, *Last Poems* 10, clearly contrasts drinking and thinking:

Could man be drunk forever
With liquor, love, or fights,
Lief should I rouse at morning
And lief lie down of nights.

But men at whiles are sober
And think by fits and starts,
And if they think, they fasten
Their hands upon their hearts.

*Last Poems* 12 begins with ten lines of defiance for “the laws of God, the laws of man,” but it is followed by ten lines of open recognition of the futility of this defiance. In the seventh and eighth lines of the second section, the speaker recognizes his own weakness:

I, a stranger and afraid
In a world I never made.

In the last four lines, the defeated speaker surrenders his defiant pose:

Keep we must, if keep we can,
These foreign laws of God and man.

Dramatic development is not usual in Housman’s verse, but in *Last Poems* 12 we see open defiance changing to hesitation before the facts and culminating in final submission, as the rebel ends up accepting the overwhelming power of social convention and traditional morality. It is a successful and artistically satisfying poem, but there are good reasons not to identify the speaker with A.E. Housman.60 Professor Housman devoted a public lecture, “The Application of Thought to Textual Criticism,”61 to mocking classical scholars who edit texts without thinking, just as *Last Poems* 9 mocks thoughtless young men and *Last Poems* 12 mocks silly rebellion against conventional morality. Housman’s prose pours sarcastic abuse on scholars who are too lazy and thoughtless to find out how manuscripts are really copied and miscopied. “How the world is managed, and why it was created, I cannot tell; but it is no feather-bed for the repose of sluggards.”62

The average man, if he meddles with criticism at all, is a conservative critic. His opinions are determined not by his reason—“the bulk of mankind,” says Swift, “is as well qualified for flying as for thinking”—but by his passions; and the faintest of all human passions is the love of truth.63

[T]he rule is irrational; for it involves the assumption that wherever a’s scribes made a mistake they produced an impossible
reading. Three minutes’ thought would suffice to find this out; but thought is irksome and three minutes is a long time.64

Naturally there is a sense in which the author of Housman’s scholarly articles, reviews, and prefaces is also a persona, who differed from the A.E. Housman one met at High Table at Trinity College, Cambridge, or having lunch with his publisher, Grant Richards. That persona, at least, could be addressed as A.E. Housman; the imaginary speakers of Last Poems 9 and 12 cannot.

V
Near the end of his life Housman answered a series of questions sent to him by young Houston Martin. “In philosophy I am a Cyrenaic or egoistic hedonist, and regard the pleasure of the moment as the only possible motive of action.”656 He had been using these terms to describe his philosophy for over twenty years.66 Andrew Gow said frankly, “If Housman’s philosophy was sound, then the great ambition of his life was unattainable and its pursuit futile,”67 quoting More Poems 45 (set up in type for Last Poems but rejected at the last minute), where the speaker sees human accomplishment as transitory. “What shall I build or write/ Against the fall of night? ... Nothing.”

Despite failing his final exams on ancient philosophy, Housman knew enough to understand that his loss of faith led to the Cyrenaic position. Many Victorians felt the tension created by the loss of Christian faith, while still believing in morality and excellence,68 including figures Housman read and admired, such as Matthew Arnold, Thomas Hardy, and the conservative polemicist, W.H. Mallock. Alfred Pollard, the great English bibliographer who roomed with Housman and Moses Jackson at Oxford, says that Housman enjoyed Mallock’s Is Life Worth Living? (London, 1880).69 Mallock’s first book, the brilliant roman à clef, The New Republic (London, 1877), provides us with a vivid picture of Oxford in the years just before Housman’s matriculation. Its protagonists are two teachers whose classes we know Housman attended, Jowett and Ruskin.70 It is Mallock who seems to have taught Housman one of his most characteristic stylistic traits.

The difference between an icicle and a red-hot poker is really much slighter than the difference between truth and falsehood or sense and nonsense; yet it is much more immediately noticeable and much more universally noticed, because the body is more sensitive than the mind. I find therefore that a good way of exposing the falsehood of a statement or the absurdity of an argument in textual criticism is to transpose it into sensual terms and see what it looks like then.71

This trope is used over and over again in Mallock’s Is Life Worth Living?:

We do not call a wild bear tame because it is so well caged that there is no fear of its attacking us; nor do we call a man good because, although his desires are evil, we have made him afraid to gratify them.

Social happiness is a mere set of ciphers till the unit of personal happiness is placed before it...If our greatest delight were to see each other dance the can-can, then it might be morality for us all to dance. None the less, would this be a happy world, not because we were all dancing, but because we each enjoyed the sight of such a spectacle.

Mallock taught Housman a characteristic rhetorical device, but his book made an important philosophical point: a life without God ends in a philosophical and moral dead-end. Those who lack Housman’s mental clarity can avoid that conclusion. Housman lost his faith, but not his mind. If there is no God, as he came to believe when he was twenty-one, then logically the pleasure of the moment is the sole motive for human action. He never sought refuge behind social activ-
ism to hide from himself the significance of his loss of faith.

Housman’s sister Clemence and brother Laurence were notorious champions of women’s suffrage,72 but he treated women’s rights with dripping sarcasm.73 Laurence was a member of the Society of Chaeronea, which worked secretly for “gay rights.”74 A.E. Housman never discussed the subject with his brother, although Additional Poems18 revealed that the Oscar Wilde scandal upset him. Laurence published it because “although not of a high standard, it says something that A.E.H. very much wanted to say.”75 It was Laurence who wanted his brother to say it, and he never did. Although he proclaimed his atheism, he praised High Church Anglicanism as “much the best religion I have ever come across”76 and wrote a hymn to be sung at his funeral service at Trinity College Chapel (More Poems 47). In our search for the basis of his lifework, his atheism and sympathy for Oscar Wilde are red herrings. His poetry and scholarship were written not by a militant atheist or a gay rights activist like his brother, but by a man who was outraged by failure in the search for truth, and even lapses in accuracy. (“Accuracy is a duty and not a virtue.”)77 He treated the moral virtues, including patriotism, the love of beauty, the search for truth, and friendship as realities that imposed lifelong obligations. He lived and wrote as though morality and duty were real, not “hollow fictions.”

Before everything else, Housman was a conservative and a traditionalist. He remained loyal to the traditions of his people, his class, and his profession even after he lost his religious faith and the one person he loved above all others. Housman called himself a Cyrenaic, but it was his conservatism, not egoistic hedonism, that makes sense out of his life’s work. Behind the lovely verse, the brilliant conjectures, the searing prose, stood a man who was committed to love, truth, and loyalty to friend and country.

Housman rarely tried to explain the intellectual foundations of his greatness in poetry and scholarship. That greatness itself, however, he recognized. His personal life was frustrated. The poetry published in his lifetime hints at that frustration, which is revealed more completely in his posthumously published verse. The best description of his situation does not come from there, however, or from parallels like Oscar Wilde and Friedrich Nietzsche, but from his great contemporary, William Butler Yeats, who was more of a conservative revolutionary than a traditionalist.

The intellect of man is forced to choose
Perfection of the life, or of the work,
And if it take the second must refuse
A heavenly mansion, raging in the dark.78

Perhaps we concentrate too much on Housman’s raging in the dark. Whatever his personal life was like, Housman’s lifework, poetry and scholarship, was a triumphant unity of beauty and truth. Many can feel this of his poetry. It is true also of his great editions, which juxtapose his own searing prose with great Classical poetry, uniting reverence for (the manuscript) tradition, interpretive understanding of the transmitted text, and an insight which restores our contact with the past in epiphanies of creativity (his best conjectural restorations of the text). Those who work through his Lucan, Juvenal, or Manilius experience that unity of ancient poetry and modern scholarship, of beauty and truth. His poetry lacks a vision of that triumphant interaction of personal sacrifice, rigorous logic, and moving beauty linked to a sense of mystery that surpasses all. Again we need to turn to Yeats and his great ode on education, “Among School Children.”

Labour is blossoming or dancing where
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,
Nor beauty born out of its own despair,
Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight dawn
Oh chestnut tree, great-rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
Oh body swayed to music, oh brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?^3