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The Military Image in the Poetry of A. E. Housman

Richard Alan Hudson

THE MILITARY IMAGE IN THE POETRY OF A. E. HOUSMAN

BY

RICHARD ALAN HUDSON

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This thesis is approved as a creditable and independent investigation by a candidate for the degree, Master of Arts, and is acceptable as meeting the thesis requirements for this degree. Acceptance of this thesis does not imply that the conclusions reached by the candidate are necessarily the conclusions of the major department.

// // Thesis Adviser Date

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Head, English Department Date

PREFACE

This thesis analyzes the military image in the poems of A. E. Housman. The first section is a brief biographical sketch which stresses those incidents of Housman's life that most influenced his personality and poetry. Section two is an introduction to Housman's association and contact with the military and points out influences on his military poems. Section three analyzes those military poems which have autobiographical significance for the author. The fourth section is an explanation of Housman's belief that the military life is the best possible life; it also analyzes the virtues and value system of the soldier. The final section discusses the military as an escape from the misery of life, an escape either through becoming an automatonic soldier, or by reaching the ultimate in life, a brave death.

All poems cited are from The Collected Poems of A. E. Housman, published by Henry Holt and Company, New York, in 1940. Poems referred to include:

A Shropshire Lad:

1, 3, 4, 22, 28, 34, 35, 56, 60.

Last Poems:

2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 13, 17, 18, 19, 29, 32, 37, 38.

More Poems:

4, 36, 37, 39, 40.

Additional Poems:

14, 19, 23

The most useful scholarship included My Brother, A. E. Housman, by Laurence Housman; A Divided Life, by George L. Watson; A. E. Housman: Man Behind a Mask, by Maude E. Hawkins; and Housman: 1897-1936, by Grant Richards.

I wish to express my sincere appreciation to my adviser, Dr. J. W. Yarbrough, for his patience and guidance during the writing of this paper. I also wish to thank Dr. Jack W. Marken and the entire English faculty for their friendship and help during my two years as a graduate assistant at South Dakota State University. And finally, I thank J.M.G. without whose encouragement and inspiration none of this work was possible.

R.A.H.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF A. E. HOUSMAN

A. E. Housman was born on March 26, 1859, the son of a Bromsgrove solicitor. His brother Laurence and his sister Katherine have described his love for the countryside during his early years when his two chief recreations were reading and walking, usually alone. He became interested at an early age in astronomy through a little book in the house, and once placed members of his family on the lawn to represent the motions of the sun, the earth, and the moon. This interest in astronomy, and the desire for exactness in representing it stayed with him all of his life.

In boyhood he attended church regularly with the rest of his family, and no doubt the cadences of the Book of Common Prayer and the Authorized Version of the Bible became part of his consciousness, with the result that his poems often have distinct echoes of both. It was a copy of Lempiere's Classical Dictionary that he read when he was eight years old that "attached my affections to paganism."[1] The sensitivity to the beauty of the world which finds expression in his poetry was heightened by the thought of

[1]Grant Richards, Housman: 1897-1936 (London, 1941), p. 270.

death, and with the knowledge that death would end this beauty he began to question religion. He wondered what good a life after death might be if the beauty that he knew in the world would no longer be present; and this questioning subsequently led him away from Christianity.

His mother's death on his twelfth birthday shut him off for ever from "a land of lost content,"[2] and brought death nearer to his thoughts. It was seldom far from them afterwards. When choosing subjects for poems by members of his family more than a year after his mother died, he began with death, and the two pictures with which he adorned his rooms at Oxford were Durer's "Melancholia" and "The Knight, Death and the Devil."[3] In later years he spoke much of death among some of his friends. This haunting thought was the primary one that began his poetic expression.

On September 12, 1870, he entered Bromsgrove School with a Foundation Scholarship. During his schooldays he filled several notebooks with copies of poems which presumably he admired. The quite conventional choices included Wordsworth, Scott, Shelley, Byron, Hood, Tennyson, Arnold, Swinburne, Beddoes, Keats, Southey, and Milton; but the

[2]Norman Marlow, A. E. Housman: Scholar and Poet (Minneapolis, 1958), p. 3.

[3]Ibid.

poems and extracts were all about sorrow, separation or death.[4] At school, Housman wrote three prize poems, "Sir Walter Raleigh," "The Death of Socrates," and "Paul on Mars Hill," and at home produced much better ones for family competitions or plays in which he took the leading part. The delightful nonsense verses which he wrote at intervals all his life had begun to appear, and there was at this time a juvenile parody of Hamlet. The intensity of his pride in knowledge and of his anxiety not to waste his own compositions led him to impart what he knew to his family in original and acceptable ways and to impose his poems on them as their own. Often, his brother Laurence writes, he took his brothers and sisters for walks with a didactic end in view, teaching them the names of flowers and more particularly of trees; these he always loved and could identify with characteristic expertness and precision. Yet he was becoming self-contained and preoccupied. There were two strains at war with him, love of praise and contempt of himself and others for loving it, but the second had not yet won complete mastery.

At St. John's College, Oxford, where he went in 1877 with a scholarship of one hundred pounds sterling a year for four years, he met Moses Jackson, a brilliant science student who became his closest friend and had more

[4]Marlow, p. 3.

influence over his life than anyone else. Jackson's immediate influence, in the judgment of contemporaries, was to induce idleness. Since Jackson was sure of a first-class degree and did not need to read in the evenings, Housman wasted his time in talking with his friend instead of reading for examinations. The letters which he sent home at this time show him to be an eager and partisan member of the Union, keenly interested in the politics which stirred Oxford and very much one of the crowd, an admirer or satirist of the popular heroes.[5]

For his failure in Greats in 1881, there have been many explanations. He avoided required work in those subjects which he disliked. It may be that he thought his excellence in the scholarly parts of the examination would pull him through. The shock of failure was great, though he must have seen the risk he was taking in not answering many of the questions. Toward learning he may have taken the Cyrenaic attitude which led him eleven years later to say: "If a certain department of knowledge specially attracts a man, let him study that, and study it because it attracts him; and let him not fabricate excuses for that which requires no excuse, but rest assured that the reason

[5]Laurence Housman, My Brother, A. E. Housman (New York, 1938), pp. 44-54. All subsequent references will be A. E. H.

why it most attracts him is that it is best for him."[6] Long afterwards he said that the examiners had no option, so he had seen where his exclusiveness might lead him and was not wholly unready when trouble came. Among the troubles of his early manhood must have been the realization that for the time at least this view of learning seemed to have failed him, and perhaps that is partly why he described his London Introductory Lecture as "rhetorical and not wholly sincere."[7]

He returned home after failing Greats and worked for a civil service examination, earning a living meanwhile by teaching the upper forms at his old school, Bromsgrove. In 1882 he took the civil service examination and was appointed to a higher division clerkship in the Patent Office, where his friend Moses Jackson was already working in a more highly paid capacity as examiner of electrical specifications. Jackson and his younger brother, Adalbert, invited Housman to share their rooms in Baywater. At this time he kept away from his family, feeling, and perhaps exaggerating, their disappointment, for their hopes had centered on him, and his academic failure came at a time when his father's ill-health had caused him to abandon his

[6]A. E. Housman, Selected Prose, ed. John Carter (Cambridge, 1961), pp. 20-1.

[7]Richards, p. 303.

practice. Poverty seemed inevitable for the family. To help them Alfred made over his share of a small legacy which accrued at this time, and until he could regain his lost prospects he kept aloof and spent his leisure at the British Museum, resolved to attain excellence and a name in his chosen field. A paper on Horace appeared in the Journal of Philology in 1882, and in 1888 he published a discussion of passages in the Agamemnon of Aeschylus. He wrote very little verse during these dark years, directing his attention almost entirely to the classics.

In 1887 Jackson went to India to become principal of the Sind College, Karachi. Housman refers to their parting in such terms that some have suspected that his feelings for Jackson verged on homosexuality and can point to many things which seem to bear them out: to the frankness of the expressions of loss in the poems, to the barriers which he seemed to erect around himself, to the evident intensity of his emotions which led people to guess at some inner torment which he wished to conceal. We cannot know for certain, but surely intense affection for a friend, especially by someone as lonely as Housman, is not necessarily unnatural, and one who knew Housman and Jackson in their years together wrote these words to Housman in 1892:

"There is, as far as I could ever discover, absolutely no flaw in your character as a man, and no one would ever hope for a better friend."[8]

Housman's forceful and penetrating articles in the Journal of Philology had evoked the praise of scholars in Europe and in America, and when in 1892 the authorities at University College, London, decided to appoint professors of Greek and Latin to divide the work of the retiring professor who had held both chairs, Housman applied for, and was appointed to, the chair of Latin--"rescued from the gutter," as he expressed it.[9] Since 1882 he had qualified for a pass degree at Oxford, but had wasted no money in taking up the degree until this time. It was the custom at University College to open the session with a lecture to the assembled Faculties, delivered as a rule by a junior professor. Housman composed and read the lecture for 1892, which was the only one ever honored by being reprinted. He remained at University College, London, for nineteen years.

In 1896 appeared A Shropshire Lad, most of which he had apparently written in the spring of 1895[10] when he was in a state of practically continuous excitement and somewhat

[8]A. E. H., p. 92.

[9]Marlow, p. 7.

[10]Tom Burns Haber, The Manuscript Poems of A. E. Housman (London, 1955).

out of health, in consequence partly of his father's death in the winter of 1894 which brought many duties to him as head of the family. Forty years later in the Leslie Stephens Lecture for 1933 he was to disclose that his poetry usually came to him on afternoon walks, when he was thinking of nothing in particular and noting the progress of the seasons. Incidentally, his method of noting this progress was characteristic and precise, for during the twenty years after 1887 he kept a diary of the first blossoming of trees and flowers.

A Shropshire Lad originally bore the title Terence or The Poems of Terence Hearsay, but the title was changed on the advice of A. W. Pollard, who professed curiously enough to have hit on the phrase in "the poem," though the exact phrase does not occur there. The book was finally published at the author's expense by Kegan Paul and sold very slowly at first. Two years later only 445 copies had been sold, 162 of these in America.[11] Not until World War I, probably because of the popularity of the militant masculine spirit, was there anything like a boom in sales of A Shropshire Lad. Housman always seemed to regard the book with special affection; he would accept until 1925 no royalties on its sales, he refused to allow poems from it to be included in anthologies (a refusal not extended to Last Poems), and

[11]Richards, p. 32.

when his second book of poems appeared he would not allow the two books to be bound in one cover.

In these years, though, his primary concern was to build himself a monument in scholarship. In 1920 J. E. B. Mayor, the Kennedy Professor of Latin at Cambridge, died. Housman, after some persuasion, agreed to stand for the chair, and through the efforts of Henry Jackson, an uncle of Housman's friend Jackson, was elected.

A. S. F. Gow's sketch gives an unforgettable description of Housman's life at Cambridge and of the impression he created. Mr. Gow depicts a man of spare figure and medium height, quietly and well dressed in a rather old-fashioned way, with rooted convictions and regular habits, a familiar figure in the afternoons in the countryside around Cambridge. He spared speech to the point of taciturnity, yet every recorded utterance has an individual and arresting precision and shapeliness. He at times would unbend and talk freely and happily to those who were unembarrassed by the legend of his remoteness and could refrain from harping on A Shropshire Lad. Housman lived during term time in "book-littered rooms"[12] in Wherwell's Court and spent part of each vacation at luxurious French hotels in search of architecture, local dishes, and local wines. He was conservative to a degree in outlook, but

[12]Richards, p. 336.

read the works of the modern English and American authors with interest.[13] These details are familiar enough, but in speaking of Housman's temperament opinions differ markedly.

Some, usually superficial acquaintances or merely readers of his printed satire, speak of him as a cantankerous and churlish recluse. Others who found in him admirable and even lovable qualities were strongly drawn to him because they could detect beneath his reserve a passionate sincerity and sensitivity and a great capacity for appreciating and bestowing affection. In many men the passing of years and the multiplicity of interests dull the ambitions and induce contentment. Housman had none of these, but retained one single aim, that of excellence in scholarship and whatever else he undertook. His outlook on life was steady and he saw in it "much good, but much less good than ill." He never succeeded completely in manufacturing from the raw material of life the fabric of happiness, because he denied himself in later life the friendships and attachments which he surely must have craved. Age mellowed him but slightly, and some of the remarks with which he prepared the fifth and last volume of his Manilius are as savage as any he ever wrote.

[13]A. S. F. Gow, "Cambridge," A. E. Housman (New York, 1937), pp. 67-73.

When he collected and published in 1922 a number of the poems which had been written at fitful intervals between 1895 and 1910, he seems to have been visited by something of the old excitement. The volumes of Manilius appeared at steady intervals until 1930 when he published the fifth and wrote to a friend that he "now intended to do nothing for ever and ever."[14] An edition of Lucan was published by him in 1925 and in 1933 he gave the Leslie Stephen Lecture, choosing as his subject "The Name and Nature of Poetry," maintaining that response to poetry is physical rather than intellectual. His health was now ebbing and he hastened his end by refusing to relinquish his lectures. He died on April 30, 1936, having completed his pilgrimage in deep loneliness.

[14]Marlow, p. 12.

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I

INTRODUCTION

Two sentiments strong in A. E. Housman from his boyhood were his fascination for the subject of death and his attraction towards soldiers. The two were often united in his poetry. On his intellectual side, he was often intolerant to the common man; but on his human side, he was ready to humble himself before the man who chose to go out and fight and risk his life in doing so. The soldier attraction was genuine admiration, not morbid infatuation. In 1874 he paid his first visit to London; afterwards, he wrote to his stepmother a long description of the things that had interested him and ended with the statement: "The Quadrant, Regent Street and Pall Mall are the finest streets; but I think of all I have seen, what has impressed me most is--the Guards. This may be barbarian, but it is true."[1]

In this candid moment, it seems that Housman cast off his superior pose and became an awe-struck schoolboy, transfixed with admiration in the presence of those life-size soldiers who stand, blank and immobile, outside their sentry posts, or march and strike their heels in mock

[1]Marlow, p. 3.

ferocity on the parade ground. Chosen for their statuesque height and trained to a machine-like precision, the guardsmen in their red coats and towering bearskin hats represented a colorful but inhuman military symbolism. They suggested not the glory of the battlefield, but the discipline of the drillmasters; they were not so much heroes as they were automata. Yet from these handsome effigies Housman conceived at first glance an irresistible attraction to which the only clue lies in his use of the word "barbarian," a term which usually connotes either some brutal assault upon the life of reason and restraint, or a yielding on the part of civilized people to their baser instincts. Apparently half-conscious that his enthusiasm for the Guards partook of both meanings, Housman revealed and even underlined in this passing remark to his stepmother not only his discovery that young men of flesh and blood existed inside the uniforms, but that to feel about them as he did was obscurely reprehensible.[2]

Housman's sister, Katherine Housman Symons, relates that his imagination in boyhood often led the children to play at war games: "Old drain pipes became cannons under force of Alfred's imagination, and pieces of wood were

[2]George L. Watson, A Divided Life (Boston, 1958), p. 60.

transformed into guns and torpedoes."[3] At Oxford he allied himself with Moses Jackson in whom he found the qualities he so admired. Despite the sedulous training to which Jackson had been subjected by his father and the burden of his own accomplishments, he had not lost the spontaneity of youth; in fact, an air of self-conscious rectitude merely enhanced his appeal. With his good looks and his upright bearing, this ideal freshman combined the high principles of Mr. Millington, Housman's boyhood teacher, with the physical attributes of a guardsman.

Though Alfred and his father rarely agreed, politics was one of the few subjects about wh ch they were in accord. In a letter to his father (which the elder Housman long treasured), Alfred described his alignment with the Oxford Union. He endorsed the very party whose militant foreign policy, under the suave leadership of Lord Beaconsfield, would arouse the most jingoistic sentiments and lead to some "field afar."[4]

Housman was always a Tory in his political opinions. He supported the belief that war was necessary for the survival of the English race and the crown, and that it would always be so. It was an essential part of British living.

[3]Maude E. Hawkins, A. E. Housman: Man Behind a Mask (Chicago, 1958), p. 23.

[4]Watson, p. 86.

The English soldier therefore became to him the greatest of all patriots. When World War I erupted in 1914 and his nephews were called to the service of England, he contributed one hundred pounds to provide them with the proper outfitting and greater comfort which he felt was the least he could bestow on these boys he loved. One of them, Victor Noel Symons, lost a hand in battle and his uncle provided the money to secure for him the best possible artificial substitute. The rest of his bank balance he contributed to the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Impulsive and unsolicited, these acts of generosity were the financial tokens of that instant feeling with which he had, ever since boyhood, responded to the appeal of military sacrifice.

Later in life he had no use for pacifism, and deplored the rise of liberalism and the labor party. His political beliefs were based upon the Tory background of his father and forefathers, and on the social distinctions in the air he breathed at Perry Hall and Fockbury. He was aristocratic by nature, and firmly maintained to the end of his life that social gradations were necessary in a well-organized government. Once he went so far as to assert that slavery was essential to a well-governed civilization. He was extremely patriotic, and believed in maintaining the rights

of the crown to the day of his death.[5] When Frank Harris questioned the sincerity of Housman's poem, "1887":

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

Housman replied sharply: "I never intended to poke fun, as you call it, at patriotism, and can find nothing in the sentiment to make mockery of: I mean it sincerely; if Englishmen breed as good men as their fathers, then God will save the Queen. I can only reject and resent your--your truculent praise."[6]

Such was his assurance in the English government that during the first World War, despite the presence at Cambridge of "20,000 soldiers, 500 of them billeted in the building in which I write,"[7] he expressed complete confidence in an eminent victory for England. At this time Housman exuded an airy confidence: "Now is my chance to see the Riviera, when the worst classes who infest it are away."[8] But, progressing into his late fifties, perhaps

[5]Hawkins, p. 85.

[6]Cleanth Brooks, "Alfred Edward Housman," A. E. Housman, ed. Christopher Ricks (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968), p. 76.

[7]Watson, p. 202.

[8]Richards, p. 127.

he was no longer able to grasp easily an experience whose magnitude only shattered and stupefied those who were enduring it at first hand. To some extent he lived, or persuaded Grant Richards that he did, "as if there were no war,"[9] and with a natural conservation of his waning energies, he applied himself to that immaculate scholarship which served, in the midst of such a holocaust, to preserve not only his sanity but the values that were being so furiously obliterated. But seldom did a visible revulsion against the carnage that daily mounted break through his composure; even after one of his nephews was killed in Flanders, it was a copy of "Illic Jacet" and not a new poem that Housman inscribed for Mrs. Symons in order "to harmonize the sadness of the world."[10]

In a letter to Mrs. Ralph Thicknesse on November 24, 1914, his assured, yet flippant, attitude is noteworthy: "The thirst for blood is raging among the youth of England. More than half the undergraduates are away, but mostly not at the front, because they all want to be officers. I am going when they make me a Field Marshall. Meanwhile I have three nephews being inoculated for typhoid and catching pneumonia on Salisbury Plain and performing other acts of

[9]Richards, pp. 128-37.

[10]Katherine Housman Symons, "Boyhood," A. E. Housman (New York, 1937), p. 37.

war calculated to make the German Emperor realize that he is a very misguided man."[11] It is evident that at this stage in life, Housman had settled into a groove as a scholar, but not of political science.

Nevertheless, the war remained in the back of his mind. When asked if one of his poems could be published in a braille anthology, something which he usually forbade, he answered: "I suppose I must follow the example of the anonymous great poet (very likely Alfred Noyes) and relax the rule, in order that the poem may be read by blind soldiers."[12] In a letter to Grant Richards, his editor, Housman wrote: "I do not make any particular complaint about your doubling the price of my book, but of course it diminishes the sale and therefore diminishes my chances of the advertisement to which I am always looking forward: a soldier is to receive a bullet in the breast, and it is to be turned away from his heart by a copy of A Shropshire Lad which he is carrying there. Hitherto it is only the Bible that has performed this trick."[13]

The love Housman had for soldiers as expressed in his poems was not sexual. Half-truths often result in whole

[11] A. E. H., p. 205.

[12] Richards, p. 160.

[13] Ibid., p. 155.

untruths, and the whisperings about the sex life of Housman have resulted in gross misinterpretations. Nothing could be more ridiculous than the rumors that his soldier poems were based on sexual experiences.

One notable example of such ignorance would be quite amusing if it were not so blamable. An English lecturer in a western college wrote triumphantly in a letter in 1951 to Laurence Housman that with the aid of an equally masculine associate professor she had solved the Housman mystery. And she did it in this fashion: There was a young soldier at the time of the Boer War with whom Alfred Housman was "in love;" he was killed, and Alfred's muse died with him. The same professor goes on to say that at the time of World War I, there was another young soldier, so much like the first that he might have been a reincarnation. So Housman "loved again," and again burst into poetry when his second "love" was killed.[14] But the poems under discussion in A Shropshire Lad were published three years before the Boer War. To anyone who knows the historical facts about the Housmans, it is apparent that the soldier referred to in the Boer War (Last Poems and More Poems) was Alfred's youngest brother, Herbert, who died in battle. And the soldier killed in World War I was

[14]Hawkins, pp. 151-55.

the third of Housman's four nephews, the son of his sister Katherine. While he did write poems about his brother and his nephew, he generalized his emotion to include all British soldiers:

> They sought and found six feet of ground
> And there they died for me. (LP 32)

Housman had written many verses in Last Poems and More Poems before either the Boer War or World War I occurred, as a sequence study of the original manuscript proves, but there was not a temporary death and resurrection of his Muse.

II

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ELEMENT IN HOUSMAN'S MILITARY POEMS

The soldiers found in Housman's poems are not all phantoms of his imagination. The death of his youngest brother, Herbert, in the Boer War and the death of his nephew in World War I became topics for his military poems, and a further instance of autobiographical concerns can be found in "On Wenlock Edge," which records the inner struggles of his own life.

On October 30, 1901, Housman's youngest brother, George Herbert Housman, was killed at Baakenlaagte, South Africa. Inheriting both his father's skill as a marksman and his improvident disposition, Herbert was the only one of the five brothers without studious inclination. He gained cups at school instead of prizes, and was more popular with the boys than with the teachers. He left school to become a medical student, but drawn toward a more active life, he took his career into his own hands at the age of twenty-one and enlisted as a soldier. Already a fine shot in the Bromsgrove Rifle Corps, he chose to join the King's Royal Rifles, and gained non-commissioned rank almost immediately after recruitment. After an obscure knockabout interval of twelve years, he lost his life in a gallant but reckless

charge of Mounted Infantry for the rescue of Col. Benson's guns from the Boers. At that time the Housman family received only the shocking news of his death, and it was not until the first World War that the pitiful details were found out by a nephew.[1]

That Sergeant Housman's career must have served to deepen his eldest brother's sense of involvement in the Boer War and at the same time his compassionate feelings is an assumption that the textual evidence would easily support. But that a young renegade whose misfortunes were largely the result of reckless gallantry not long before the termination of hostilities should have inspired "many of the soldiering verses in A Shropshire Lad and Last Poems," as Mrs. Symons chose to believe,[2] was to credit their author with an excess of fraternal attachment and to constrict unwarrantably his frame of reference. For the characteristic feature of Housman's poetry was its power of defining emotions peculiar to himself in terms that were just as valid for others. This, in turn, makes it equally unsafe to regard his overt subject as necessarily the real one, or to infer his whole meaning from the apparent drift of his words. But in any case the chronological sequence of his poems would have ruled out the theory that

[1]Hawkins, p. 164.

[2]Symons, p. 35.

Housman was concerned only with the military adventures of one who had been a virtual stranger to him for most of his life.

The sad news that reached Housman towards the end of 1901 no doubt struck a spark once again and quickly generated under London's wintry sky those sombre night-thoughts which wreathed a tribute to every anonymous veteran who had spent his courage

> For pay and medals, name and rank,
> Things that he has not found. (LP 17)

But while the sentiment that Mrs. Symons attributed to him was not as extensive as she believed, Housman did indeed refer to his brother's death in a few poems. The allusions are strongest in Last Poems, which appeared after Herbert was killed. "Astronomy" (LP 17) becomes fully intelligible only when it is understood that it was this brother who exchanged the Pole Star for the Southern Cross and returned no more.[3] No lines written by A. E. Housman have more personal application than these:

> The Wain upon the northern steep
> Descends and lifts away.
> Oh, I will sit me down and weep
> For bones in Africa. (LP 17)

Unlike many of Housman's other military poems, where death of a soldier is often thought of as a blessing, this poem

[3]Symons, p. 36.

expresses a sense of real loss. The frustration in the waste of death in the lines:

> 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,

show a deep personal concern for the futility of what has occurred.

But with this lament, Housman's poetic mood began to wane. Except for some ironic lines induced by the peace settlement, his notebook contained nothing else that might be taken as a timely reference or response to the Boer War. But he could not be indifferent to the fate of those who were having just then "no luck at all" (LP 28), and whose ordeal so keenly affected him that when some pro-Boer professor disparaged the home-sick hard-pressed army in his presence, "he let his tongue curl around his unfortunate colleague"[4] with a blast of scorching invective. Thus united in spirit with the young men who slept on desolate colonial battlefields, and perhaps also visited by those stabs of remorse which affect the non-combatant in such a context, Housman was admirably fitted, it would have seemed, to become the valedictorian of an age whose anxious last

[4]Watson, p. 176.

phase coincided with the highest reach of his own responsibilities. A poet already expert in the technical manipulation of his art, he could have scarcely failed to meet, if his creative impulse had been strong enough, the challenge of this opportunity. And even without a sharper goal, he did eke out five or six brief poems that comprised a modest epitaph for the occasion of the war.

Another one of the poems commemorating the Boer War and Housman's brother in particular is Last Poems 18, intentionally placed beside "Astronomy." Though it has not a soldier garb, the battlefield death and burial of his brother in 1901 was still in Alfred's mind as he wrote this poem in 1902. The news received of Herbert's death told of the soldiers who fell lying all night in pouring rain before a party could be sent to bury them. They had been stripped of their outer clothing by the Boers. The poem has a pathetic suggestion that it was cast in remembrance of this burial, and of this brother. The lines

> The rain, it streams on stone and hillock,
> The boot clings to the clay,

and

> Your mother bore you years ago
> To-night to lie in the rain,

refer to Herbert's body as it lay in the rain thrcughout the night.

More direct reference to Herbert Housman may be found in the poems which Housman himself did not publish. Though we have no way of dating what became More Poems 40, the death of his brother must still have been in his mind when he wrote it:

> Farewell to a name and a number,
> Recalled again
> To darkness and silence and slumber
> In blood and pain.
>
> So ceases and turns to the thing
> He was born to be
> A soldier cheap to the King
> And dear to me.

The "name and number" was Sergeant George Herbert Housman, 6365, K. R. Rifles, 25th Battn. Mounted Infantry, S.A. Field Force.[5]

Again, in Last Poems 8, a reference is made to a soldier who had died. This poem, which was written in 1905, probably refers to Housman's brother. In the poem the author welcomes the soldier back from the wars, telling him that no more will he have to suffer through

> . . . winters biting
> Filth in trench from fall to spring,
> Summers full of sweat and fighting
> For the Kesar or the King.

Through three stanzas the reader is led to believe that the soldier is indeed coming home to that which he left

[5]Symons, p. 37.

behind. But in the final two lines we find that the rest in his new home will be final:

> Soldier, sit you down and idle
> At the inn of night for aye.

"Illic Jacet" (LP 4), is often considered as a poem about the grave of Sergeant Herbert Housman on the Veldt. Mrs. Symons and Grant Richards both state that Housman had his brother on his mind when he wrote the poem. However, the poem first appeared in the Academy in February, 1900, a year and a half before the younger Housman was killed. It is significant that Housman's father died in the winter before the prolific period of writing in 1895, and this poem, rather than being about his brother, describes the grave of his father.[6] For most of his life, until his health began to fail, the elder Housman had been noted as one who was not an infrequent visitor of the ladies in Fockbury, and perhaps there is irony in the lines:

> But there he will be as they laid him:
> Where else could you trust him to sleep?

In his declining years, Edward Housman became distant with his family, communicating with them very little the last few years of his life. His expressed desire was to end his life of misery, and the last two lines of the poem express this thought:

> And far from his friends and his lovers
> He lies with the sweetheart he chose.

[6]Marlow, p. 151.

Some years later, upon the death of one of his nephews in Flanders during the First World War, Housman sent "Illic Jacet" to Mrs. Symons, adding that "it is the function of poetry to harmonize the sadness of the world."[7] Against this dark incoming tide of death Housman saw himself as pathetically striving to establish himself as a scholar, as exemplified in More Poems 45:

> Shall it be Troy or Rome
> I fence against the foam,
> Or my own name, to stay
> When I depart for aye?
>
> Nothing: too near at hand,
> Planing the figured sand,
> Effacing clean and fast
> Cities not built to last
> And charms devised in vain,
> Pours the confounding main.

Irony in Housman's poems is common. But in the poems commemorating the death of his brother little irony is present. To Housman, the death of a soldier was not necessarily sad, as it was a means of escape through an act of bravery, but in the poems on his brother's death a deep sense of loss is prevalent in lines such as:

> Oh I will sit me down and weep
> For bones in Africa, (LP 17)

and

> A soldier cheap to the King
> And dear to me. (MP 40)

[7]Symons, p. 37.

In A Shropshire Lad the tensions of Housman's own life are always on the surface. One poem which dramatically expresses those struggles is "On Wenlock Edge" (ASL 31), in which the terse starkness of the lines is a paradox itself with the world of passionate feeling that colors the mood of the verse.[8]

On Wenlock Edge the wood's in trouble;
His forest fleece the Wrekin heaves;
The gale, it plies the saplings double,
And thick on Severn snow the leaves.

'T would blow like this through holt and hanger
When Uricon the city stood:
'Tis the old wind in the old anger,
But then it threshed another wood.

Here, Housman creates an image of the eternal struggle of man and nature with the gale of destiny as symbolized by the Romans and the trees in battle and tempest. He becomes one of the Roman soldiers on Wenlock, their brother by heredity and struggle. The trees bent double in the gale are images of his own twisted personality.

The poem could hardly be better located in order to give the proper background for a conception which is deceptively simple. Wenlock Edge, a wooded chain of hills ten miles east of Shrewsbury, Shropshire, stands as an important historical landmark. Traces of old British military camps lie along the summit of the Wrekin and Wenlock. Uricon, the third geographical location referred

[8]Hawkins, p. 154.

to in the poem is actually Uriconium, an ancient Roman stronghold of early Britain, the site of which is four miles east of Shrewsbury. It existed from about 70 AD as a Roman Fortress and, later, as a city which was sacked and burned by the West Saxons in the sixth century.[9]

The Roman soldier on Wenlock Edge stands for strength and courage against onslaught. This Roman soldier fused himself with the history and the life of the island, and the nineteenth century yeoman--Housman himself--is a related outgrowth of Uricon:

> The blood that warms an English yeoman,
> The thoughts that hurt him, they were there.

Not the yeoman, but his entire past is joined in one long everlasting struggle with Fate and her final triumph over man, of which Uricon is a symbol.

Wind of hurricane force is suggested by the lull in the next to the last stanza:

> There, like the wind through woods is not,
> Through him the gale of life blow high.

Then comes the renewal of cyclonic ferocity at the beginning of the last stanza, which suddenly resolves itself into the dramatic calm of ashes and peace in the last line:

> The gale, it plies the saplings double,
> It blows so hard, 't will soon be gone:
> Today the Roman and his trouble
> Are ashes under Uricon.

[9]Hawkins, p. 155.

Time has done its worst; the battle is over, and the Roman has found his solution of life in the same way that all men, including Housman, have discovered--death.

III

THE MILITARY LIFE AS AN ULTIMATE POSSIBILITY

To Housman, the soldier's life was the best, and in many of his poems he dwells on the values and virtues of being a soldier. He felt that the ideal soldier was one who faced up manfully to a bad world, and who carried out his duties without complaint. This respect for the soldier was so keen that in many of his poems he challenges young men to enlist so that they, too, can be elevated to what he considered the ultimate possibility in life.

Among the scraps that Housman thriftily salvaged from his moments of inspiration and recorded in his notebook sometime in the autumn or winter of 1893-4 was a line which signalled the appearance of the figure destined to assume one of the commanding roles in his poetry. "Soldier," Housman had briefly jotted down, "I wish you well." This reference later took form in A Shropshire Lad 22. Perhaps unaware of its literary possibilities, or shy of betraying the strong emotions it aroused in him, Housman had wanted at the time merely to remind himself of some face that had caught his eye. It was probably one of those glancing encounters that must have occurred often in the course of his daily exercise. The statuesque guardsmen for which he

had not lost his schoolboy preference were still a decorative feature of the London streets and it was probably in a passing troop of these familiar giants, dramatically marching to or from their barracks in Knightsbridge,[1] that he saw the "single redcoat" (ASL 22) whose look made so indelible an impression. Since England was at peace in 1894, though faintly alarmed by the rumors of a disturbance in South Africa, Housman's sympathy for the soldier did not arise from the civilian's temporary enthusiasm for his defenders in the hours of crisis, and it had no basis in a factual knowledge of the military life. Also, the first volume of his poetry, A Shropshire Lad, had been published before his youngest brother was killed in the Boer War, so Housman's choice of subject owed nothing to this private sorrow.

On the contrary, it was an attraction Housman had always felt towards those who face up manfully to a bad world. In the common soldier Housman discovered one who, without having any fancy reasons for doing so, draws his mercenary "thirteen pence a day" (ASL 22) and fights and dies. It was an attraction he had always felt toward the gallant bearing and masculinity of men in uniform, now deepened by a sense of closer kinship with their unhappy

[1]Watson, p. 144.

lot. Even more than the farm lads for whom he nursed a romantic nostalgia, the common soldier embodied that mixture of youthful idealism and impending adversity in which Housman saw the reflection his own experience.[2] The soldier epitomized in his imagination the unfulfilled, cut-off-in-its-prime spirit of youth. This fallen hero was a subject through which he could release his emotions, and he now and then found an overpowering inducement "to sit me down and weep," not only for "bones in Africa" (LP 17), but for himself.

To Housman, the soldier is an automaton, aloof from the emotional and personal life. The soldier never complains, yet carries out his duties with a deep commitment to his profession. He does what must be done with stoic courage, rather than a high idealism, and he does it without lofty talk.[3]

In A Shropshire Lad 22 Housman expresses in simple language a thought that is one of his dominant themes, respect for the soldier. A group of soldiers is marching in the street, and the boyhood fascination of the military causes the poet to "troop" there because a bond exists

[2]Watson, p. 146.

[3]Richard Wilbur, "Round About a Poem of Housman's," A. E. Housman: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Christopher Ricks (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968), p. 90.

between the soldier and the civilian. While he is standing and watching the soldiers,

> A single redcoat turns his head,
> He turns and looks at me.

This innocent glance from an unknown soldier, one that he is "like to meet no more," touches in Housman that irresistible attraction he had for those in the service of their country. What thoughts the soldier might have, who he is, and where he is going, Housman does not know; the only thing of importance to the poet is that here is a soldier. Housman sums up his attitude toward all soldiers when he writes in the last lines:

> But dead or living, drunk or dry,
> Soldier, I wish you well.

The mercenaries of this poem are enlisted from all of Housman's other poems, and though their deaths exemplify the world's evil, he stresses not that but the shining of their courage in general darkness.

As we have seen, his attraction to the soldier was strong from his boyhood, when he first sensed the courage and stoic endurance these men possessed. Fighting for another, dying if need be, was something which the poet respected and envied in those who were "the straight, the brave" (LP 32). The speaker says in this poem:

> When I would muse in boyhood
> . . .
> It was not foes to conquer,

But it was friends to die for
That I would seek and find.

The soldier represents one who is willing to die not only for his friends but his country. Housman was very close to his mother who died in 1871; perhaps his enthusiasm for the noble, self-sacrificing soldier was the replacement for the beloved mother. The soldier, like the idealized mother, was one who seemingly was willing to die for others, who was brave, and who would do what he was told without complaint.

I sought them far and found them,
The sure, the straight, the brave,
The hearts I lost my own to,
The souls I could not save. (LP 32)

That Housman wished that he too could have become a soldier is expressed in More Poems 39, a poem in which he feels guilty that others have died for him, when he has done nothing for them. Housman had little opportunity to become a soldier because he was an unathletic man, and he was nearly forty years old when the Boer War erupted. His thoughts, though, dwelt with the soldier:

My dreams are of a field afar
And blood and smoke and shot.

The soldier was one who "steals the heart of maid and man together" (LP 7); and the speaker in More Poems 37 says that he did not lose his heart on a romantic summer evening, but rather lost it

When plumes were under heel and lead was flying
In blood and smoke and flame.

He says he lost it to a "foeman," an enemy who tried to kill him but lost his own life instead. The respect Housman shows for this enemy is due to his own stoic life. War is a game to Housman and he could respect only those who played by the rules, and accepted their fate without complaint. Here, the enemy exhibits this idea of dying a brave death, as he

> Took the sabre straight and took it striking,
> And laughed and kissed his hand to me
> and died,

something for which Housman could greatly respect the man.

Housman was not content just to praise the soldier for his gallantry; he felt a need to urge the youth of England to join the cause in which he so forcefully believed. In A Shropshire Lad 3, entitled "The Recruit," he says:

> Leave your home behind, lad,
> And reach your friends your hand,
> And go, and luck go with you
> While Ludlow tower shall stand.

He tells the young men that whether they return as heroes, or whether they return not at all, they will be remembered by all of England for a job well done. Housman characteristically does not worry about the death of those who go off to war. As long as the soldier makes

> . . . the foes of England
> Be sorry you were born,

and does so without complaint, and with an automatic sense of duty, he is commendable as a man. To believe, as George L. Watson did,[4] that Housman was particularly susceptible to the manhood of his imaginary hero is arbitrary. His respect for the soldier was based on the soldier's sense of responsibility and duty in the face of adversity, rather than an overt fascination in his manliness.

In Last Poems 38 Housman again bids the young man to enlist, though this time he uses irony to convey his meaning. He tells the farmer to "stay at home, my lad, and plough the land," rather than join the laborious tasks of the soldier. In the second stanza he repeats his statement for the young man to stay with the "company and mirth," and enjoy life, for the grave is already too full

> Of fellows that were good and brave
> And died because they were.

The point here lies in the words "good and brave." Housman believed that bravery, even if it led to death, was much better than a life of pleasure and cowardice. The poem is somewhat autobiographical, for Housman probably wished for an escape from his lonely life through death, and the brave and gallant death of a soldier seems a projection of that wish.

[4]Watson, p. 144.

In his "Epitaph on the Army of Mercenaries" (LP 37), Housman may be bestowing on his soldiers the ultimate commendation. The sacrifice that the soldiers make, in its courage and in the scope of its consequences, is Christ-like:

> Their shoulders held the sky suspended;
> They stood, and earth's foundations stay;
> What God abandoned, these defended,
> And saved the sum of things for pay.

Just as Christ felt abandoned on the cross when he uttered the words, "My God, my God, Why hast thou forsaken me?" yet still accomplished His intended purpose, these soldiers have fulfilled their duty. Once we recognize Housman's reference, we can see the extent of his esteem for the so-called mercenaries. And once we perceive that the first line in the stanza has to do with the transference of a burden, we know where to place the emphasis.[5] It should fall on the first word:

> Their shoulders held the sky suspended.

It was the mercenaries who saved the day when "heaven was falling," and "earth's foundations fled" (LP 37).

Housman's soldiers are always willing to fight for their country in a time of need. The responsibility that man has for defending what he loves is shown in Additional Poems 14, a poem in which a virtuous young soldier, though

[5]Brooks, p. 76.

id, asks from the grave, "Oh is it my country calling?"
Housman, the importance of the soldier as a defender
the empire is immeasurable. In "1887" (ASL 1), a poem
mmemorating the Jubilee of Queen Victoria, he talks
out the absentees on the occasion, the boys who had been
oad on the Queen's business, but who did not come home:

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

has saved the Queen, but he has required the services--
at least chosen to make use of the services--of human
pers, of whom some have proved to be expendable. A
tain irony persists here. If the defeat of the Queen's
mies is to be attributed ultimately to God, the humbler
ns, the British infantrymen who have stood off her
mies, have had a share, even if only a humble share, in
's work.[6] But many of the brave Shropshire lads who
t into the armies of the Queen have not returned:

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

e, Housman has compared his soldiers to Christ, who,
ging on the cross, was taunted with the words: "Others
saved: himself he cannot save." The speaker lets his

[6]Wilbur, p. 95.

imagination wander over the far places of the earth where the dead soldiers now lie:

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

We pledge in peace by farm and town
   The Queen they served in war,
And fire the beacons up and down
   The land they perished for.

The poem next shifts back to the Jubilee celebration, and to the lads of the Fifty-third Regiment--at least those who did return:

"God save the Queen" we living sing,
   From height to height 'tis heard;
And with the rest your voices ring,
   Lads of the Fifty-third.

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

Frank Harris, in his Latest Contemporary Portraits, questioned the sincerity of Housman's patriotism in the last lines. Housman replied that "if Englishmen breed as good men as their fathers, then God will save their Queen."[7] The speaker clearly admires the lads of the Fifty-third but his angle of vision is different from theirs. What they accept naively and uncritically, he sees in its full complexity and ambiguity. His attitude is not cynical; it is genuinely patriotic.

[7]Watson, p. 144.

Because he had failed his family when they had counted so heavily on him, Housman was very conscious of responsibility and duty. This failure, which was to change his life, resulted in his becoming conscious of a sense of duty as a virtue. In a non-military poem, More Poems 30, the extent of his sense of duty is apparent. He is parting from a friend, and says:

> But if you come to a road where danger
> Or guilt or anguish or shame's to share,
> . . .
> Whistle and I'll be there.

That Housman believed that it is one's duty to defend a cause is shown here in his willingness to stand by his friend, even if death is the outcome. It is noteworthy that Housman's soldiers often die in defending their cause, because he believed that death as an escape would be most glorious if it were the result of some action in defense of an ideal or a friend:

> But it was friends to die for
> That I would seek and find. (LP 32)

In More Poems 30 the soldiers are dead because they

> . . . did not choose
> To live and shame the land from which we sprung.

To defy one's sense of duty was something which Housman could not tolerate. It was much better, he believed, to die than to live with the shame of not having met one's responsibility. The meeting of this responsibility not only demanded that the soldier not concern himself with

possible death, but also that he must never complain. This stoic endurance is exemplified in Additional Poems 6:

> Others have held their tongues, and so can I;
> Hundreds have died, and told no tale before.

In "On the idle hill of summer" (ASL 35), an indolent young man hears the stirring and fatal music of a marching column, and decides to enlist. The final quatrain is:

> Far the calling bugles hollo,
> High the screaming fife replies,
> Gay the files of scarlet follow:
> Woman bore me, I will rise.

He will rise and enlist because "woman bore" him--that is, because he is a man and naturally responds to the summons of the bugle. The preceding two stanzas give a picture of gloom, as both express the thought that the soldiers will not return--"Soldiers marching, all to die." The last line is forceful and plain, and clinches the poem beautifully. Yet there is more, and perhaps after several readings, we may hear in that last line the reverberation of the prayer which is said at the graveside in the Anglican burial service, and which begins: "Man, that is born of woman, hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery . . . ."[8] If man's life is short and full of misery, then whether or not the soldier dies in battle is unimportant. The death of a soldier can be not only a

[8]Wilbur, p. 99.

fulfillment of his duty as a man, but an escape from the misery of life as well.

The soldier often becomes an automaton carrying out his duty without emotion and without making decisions. In Last Poems 7 the lines

> Behind the drum and fife,
> Past hawthornwood and hollow,
> Through earth and out of life
> The soldiers follow,

give the impression of toy-soldiers, similar to the guards that Housman had seen as a youth, following obediently without complaint wherever they are led. Their only reward for the job they do is the money that they receive, and even this often offers little satisfaction. The soldier is called by the Queen to defend the country for "thirteen pence a day" (LP 5), and accepts the offer. After marching to his death, he becomes aware of the futility of the contract he has made. Housman must have sensed this futility of fighting for a monetary reward, instead of for duty, because he concludes this poem with a stanza in which the dying soldier regrets selling his body:

> And I shall have to bate my price,
> For in the grave, they say,
> Is neither knowledge nor device
> Nor thirteen pence a day.

To die for a cause is not only acceptable, but virtuous; but death because of an agreement to fight for materialistic rewards is something to which Housman was opposed.

In "Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries" Housman at first seems to take a different view concerning fighting for an ideal versus fighting for money. This poem commemorates the small British professional army that heroically took its beating in the early days of the first World War, but which, in spite of terrible losses, managed to slow down and finally to stop the German advance, and so hold the Channel ports.[9] The poem, though, has a more universal application. At first it seems to celebrate merely the tough professional soldier who fights for his country, because fighting is his profession and living, and not because of some high-sounding ideal. Thus it seems to defend those hard-bitten realists who are often regarded as mere materialists and yet who frequently outdo the idealists and self-conscious defenders of the right. But can one really be hired to die? Do Housman's "mercenaries" save the sum of things, as the poet asserts that they do, "for pay?" There is a concealed idealism after all, despite Housman's refusal to allow anything more than the materialistic reason. The point he is making is that the courage to stand and die rather than to run away usually comes from something like professional pride or even from a kind of instinctive manliness rather than from adherence to the conventional rules of patriotism and duty. Housman's hero

[9]Brooks, p. 63.

ces "the troubles of our proud and angry dust" (LP 9)

subscribes to the sentiment that

Bear them we can, and if we can we must.
Shoulder the sky, my lad, and drink your ale.

the face of adversity his soldiers always do their best,

matter what the consequences might be. Housman's advice

the young soldier is, as always, to do his duty, for

the man that runs away
Lives to die another day.

Therefore, though the best is bad,
Stand and do the best, my lad. (ASL 56)

ing pointed out the soldier's virtues and duty, Housman

o praised those who had died in the service of their

ntry, saying that they had earned their rest. He reminds

se who have lived through their battles to remember those

s fortunate:

O Soldiers, saluted afar
By them that had seen your star,
In conquest and freedom and pride
Remember your friends that died. (AP 19)

he repeats this thought in "1887":

Lads, we'll remember friends of ours
Who shared the work with God.

Last Poems 8 the speaker welcomes the soldier home from

wars, inviting him to sit down. No more will the

dier be faced with ugliness of war, for the time has

e when he can have the well earned rest. For this

dier, though, the rest will be forever:

Soldier, sit you down and idle
At the inn of night for aye.

To Housman this final rest, death, was the natural thing to happen, and the soldier is fortunate that his has come through a gallant role. "Since all is done that's due and right," he says, "Let's home" (LP 18), for the young man has earned his rest and it is natural that he should die. Last Poems 29 again emphasizes this theme that upon fulfilling his duty, the soldier will find his peace:

> Times enough you bled your best;
> Sleep on now, and take your rest.

In his poem about the death of his brother in battle, Housman again salutes one who was willing to fight and die for his country. He could not help but think of his brother's death with sadness; and while he salutes the brother's virtues as a soldier, his words present a picture of despair:

> So smothers in blood the burning
> And flaming flight
> Of valour and truth, returning
> To dust and night. (MP 40)

Housman believed that those soldiers who had died had not done so without purpose. Some died to escape from the miseries of their own lives, and some, as in Additional Poems 23, died to bring peace to England:

> Aloft amid the trenches
> Its dressers dug and died;
> The olive in its orchard
> Should prosper and abide.

Whether they died to escape from life, or died for patriotic reasons, Housman always sympathized with the

soldier. He was never in the military and perhaps felt guilty that he could not repay these men; for in his mind they had

> Sought and found six feet of ground
> And there they died for me. (LP 32)

Housman's wish to escape from his lonely life caused him to project himself as a soldier, and the significance of these lines can only be fully understood when we interpret them as a lament that the soldier's deaths were not his own.

IV

THE MILITARY AS AN ALTERNATE TO LIFE

For A. E. Housman, life was, at best, "much less good than ill" (ASL 52), an opinion shared by the soldiers in his poems. From his miserable life, man can escape by becoming an automaton, i.e., a soldier, giving up his civilian life to become "a soldier cheap to the King" (MP 40). As a soldier he enters an obscure world in which he makes no decisions on his own, goes where he is told, and accepts death without complaint. In his own mind, and in Housman's, the soldier seems to have chosen the best. He knows that one day he will die, and he accepts his fate whenever it may come. An ambivalence occurs, however, since some of the soldiers in Housman's poems choose the soldier's life as the best alternative, while others really choose death.

That the best life is that of the soldier who has reverted to a death-in-life is exemplified in much of Housman's poetry. In Last Poems 11 we find a poem in which the speaker is bored with the monotony of his life. The time is morning, and the speaker rises

> To wash and dress and eat and drink
> And look at things and talk and think
> And work, and God knows why.

In this non-military poem we see a picture of the way in which Housman portrayed the everyday life. Fate is predominant in his poetry; in this poem the speaker's words, "And God knows why," seem to say that only God, or Fate, can answer the question of the purpose of life. The speaker continues, saying:

> Oh often have I washed and dressed
> And what's to show for all my pain?
> Let me lie abed and rest:
> And all's to do again.

Life is monotonous, and each day seems so very similar to the one before. With this view of daily life, it is natural Housman would have his young men join the military as an escape. It is interesting to note that the only poem in which the poet is seemingly optimistic and is inviting young men to experience life to its fullest, he uses a military image. In "Reveille" (ASL 4), he says:

> Up, lad, up, 'tis late for lying:
> Hear the drums of morning play.
>
> Clay lies still, but blood's a rover;
> Breath's a ware that will not keep.
> Up, lad: when the journey's over
> There'll be time enough to sleep.

The speaker in "The Recruit" (ASL 3) bids the young men to join the military because he thinks that such a life would be best. As a soldier, perhaps he would become a hero, and the Ludlow chimes would play as "The conquering hero comes." But whether he returns as a hero, or doesn't

return at all, he still will have chosen the better life. He says:

> And go, and luck go with you
>
> And make the foes of England
> Be sorry you were born.

The best life in this instance is one in which the man accepts his duty to defend his country. This theme of inviting the young men to join the military is expressed in A Shropshire Lad 60. In this poem the speaker says that the lad might as well enlist because death is at the end of all roads:

> Square your shoulders, lift your pack,
> And leave your friends and go.
>
> In all the endless road you tread
> There's nothing but the night.

The speaker in Last Poems 19 also expresses this view when he decides to venture to Africa or India to fight and die for his country:

> Oh, to the bed of ocean,
> To Africk and to Ind,
> I will arise and follow
> Along the rainy wind.

A life of simply going through the motions of living is often the best for Housman's soldiers. The soldier in "The New Mistress" (ASL 34) chooses the life of an automaton, serving his country without complaint. In this poem the soldier has been rejected by his former mistress, who has told him that he "may be good for something, but

you are not good for me," and he decides to enlist in the military. He decides to choose a life of nothingness, of servitude without complaint, and go where he is told. His new mistress becomes the military itself, for there he will find one who wants him:

> I will go where I am wanted, to a lady born and bred
> Who will dress me free for nothing in a uniform of red;
> She will not be sick to see me if I only keep it clean:
> I will go where I am wanted for a soldier of the Queen.

There is a childish quality in his attitude toward the uniform which reinforces the passive character of the soldier. Each of the last stanzas begin with the phrase, "I will go where I am wanted," and with this refrain the soldier is expressing the idea that he will go <u>wherever</u> the army wants him. He has given up his life of free choice to become a robot-like soldier to be manipulated like a puppet. In the poem "Grenadier" (LP 5), we again find a soldier who has decided to reject the free civilian life for a life of service for the Queen. In the first stanza, a sergeant asks him:

> Young man, a soldier will you be
> For thirteen pence a day?

The soldier agrees, thus relinquishing his life of free choice, and accepting his fate as a manipulable soldier.

In the lines:

> For thirteen pence a day did I
> Take off the things I wore,

he has literally taken off what identified him in his earlier life, and is now a nonentity. The soldier has been wounded and lies dying; he comes to the fatalistic conclusion that no matter what he had chosen to do, it would have had no worth for him in death:

> And I shall have to bate my price,
> For in the grave, they say,
> Is neither knowledge nor device
> Nor thirteen pence a day.

The meaning of the poem revolves around the third stanza:

> My mouth is dry, my shirt is wet,
> My blood runs all away,
> So now I shall not die in debt
> For thirteen pence a day.

That he "shall not die in debt" means that he has paid his debt to his Queen; he has made the ultimate sacrifice in life, which is to die for a cause. He no longer owes his country anything, because he has accepted the role of the soldier and died. For Housman, the best possible moment in life is the moment of death, but only if this moment is caused by an act of bravery. Because the poet did not believe in an afterlife, nothing would matter after death. He is expressing here the view that Hemingway shared, that the best possible thing in life is to die well, i.e., to know that one has courage. That he will have to lower his price when he is in the grave is indicative that he is

worth something only as long as he is performing his duty as a soldier. His worth reaches its height at the moment in which he dies for his Queen; after that he is no longer of any worth. The soldier as merely a pawn in the hand of the King takes on autobiographical application in More Poems 40. In this poem, commemorating the death of Housman's youngest brother, Herbert, the soldier has become a mere number:

> He was born to be
> A soldier cheap to the King
> And dear to me.

The reason for choosing the life of a soldier over the civilian life is perhaps best stated in "The Deserter" (LP 13). The only assured and secure thing in life is that it will one day end. Since the soldier's life very often brings death, the soldier can reach this security more quickly. To Housman, the civilian life is one in which changes occur rapidly, and one on which man cannot depend. It is better to choose the automatic life, or even death, because

> Love is rare and trouble plenty
> And carrion cheap.

Death is both philosophically and economically prime to life, and those who choose to trust in the civilian life to find their security will probably be disappointed. The forsaken lover in this poem regrets his mistake of trusting

in reckless pursuit of the glory of the emotional life when he says:

> Ay, false heart, forsake me lightly:
> 'Tis like the brave.
> They find no bed to joy in rightly
> Before they find the grave.

The soldier realized his mistake and now that he has been shot and killed, he is content to lie there with his

> Leaden lover
> For ever and a day.

Housman's soldiers often choose to escape from life through the military. Bored with the civilian life, they have joined the military with the expressed purpose of fighting and probably dying. Life is "nothing much to lose" (MP 36), and so they are not only willing to die, but often expecting to do so.

The main consideration that the soldier faces in death is whether or not he has done his best in life. In "The Day of Battle" (ASL 56), the soldier must make his decision whether to stay and perhaps meet his death, or to "turn and fly." His reasoning for wanting to flee is sound:

> Fly I would, for who would not?
> 'Tis no pleasure to be shot.

But his decision rests on the fact that he knows he will one day die; and since he believes it is better to die as a brave rather than a cowardly soldier, he decides to remain:

But since the man that runs away
Lives to die another day,
And coward's funerals, when they come,
Are not wept so well at home.

He will choose to remain and fight because this seems to be the best alternative. He still feels that he does not want to die, but he realizes that the best is often bad, and the test of his manhood is dependent upon his decision. He sums up his decision in the final stanza:

Though the best is bad,
Stand and do the best, my lad;
Stand and fight and see your slain,
And take the bullet in your brain.

There is a certain fatalism present in these lines. Although he knows that he will die if he remains, he has decided that death is the best alternative, or at least a better alternative than living with a sense of shame and guilt for not having carried out his duty as a soldier.

This theme of the brave soldier in the face of impending death is a recurring one. In Last Poems 2 the soldier is preparing to enter battle, and is contemplating the ensuing clash. His thoughts revolve around those who have died in previous battles:

As I gird for fighting
My sword upon my thigh,
I think of old ill fortunes
Of better men than I.

His decision to stay and meet his fate is based largely on the fact that much better men than him have fought and died:

'Tis sure much finer fellows
Have faced much worse before.

If he is to die he wants to elevate himself to their level of bravery. What he seems to be saying is that death is inevitable; but the only satisfying escape through death will be for him to face the battle as a man should and accept his fate with bravery. That his death in battle is expected is expressed in the last stanza, where he says:

> So here are things to think on
> That ought to make me brave,
> As I strap on for fighting
> My sword that will not save.

There is a fatalistic forewarning in much of Housman's poems about soldiers. In "Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries," a poem commemorating those who died defending the English ports from the Germans, the soldiers have died simply <u>because</u> they were soldiers:

> Followed their mercenary calling
> And took their wages and are dead.

Death is the natural end of the soldier's career. The soldier knew what his fate would be, but nevertheless chose the military and death.

Irony often appears in Housman's poetry, and his poems concerning the death of brave soldiers are no exception. In <u>Last Poems</u> 38, the speaker tells a young lad to

> Stay at home . . . and plough
> The land and not the sea.

He is saying stay alive on the farm rather than go to the sea, or death. In the second stanza, the speaker continues his advice to remain alive:

Oh stay with company and mirth
And daylight and the air.

But in the last three lines, his advice takes on an ironic note, as he advises:

Too full already is the grave
Of fellows that were good and brave
And died because they were.

The deaths of these soldiers are attributed to the fact that they were "good and brave." The speaker believes that even though these men have died, their choice of a courageous death was the right choice. In "The Lancer" (LP 6), Housman again expresses the idea that the choice of death in bravery is the wise choice. The author, with his repetition of the line, "Oh who would not sleep with the brave?" may at first appear to be employing irony, but the poem is not intended to be ironic. The phrase is a sincere one. The speaker does believe that it is better to "sleep with the brave," than to return to a life of misery. He has fought with a squadron of brave men, but has lost his life:

And far with the brave I have ridden,
And now with the brave I shall sleep.

The men have taught him that a brave death is something for which to strive:

For round me the men will be lying
That learned me the way to behave,
And showed me my business of dying;
Oh who would not sleep with the brave?

That the brave have a better death than those who die without glory is expressed in the fifth stanza:

> And I with the brave shall be sleeping
> At ease on my mattress of loam.

His final sleep will be one of "ease," and one for which he has longed. In the final two stanzas of this poem we see the living soldiers returning amid a celebration in their honor. The girls on hand for the occasion ask the refrain which seems ironic, "Oh who would not sleep with the brave?" The female mind cannot comprehend that the soldier's purpose was to escape through a brave death; in the girls' question there is a sarcastic note, as if they were saying, "Surely, you must admit that this homecoming is much better than death on the battlefield." But the only reply, and the one which expresses the whole idea of the poem, is:

> I will 'list for a lancer,
> Oh who will not sleep with the brave?

There is a sexual irony here in the usage of the word "sleep," as the author is saying that death is superior to love and sex in life. The soldier has rejected life, and has given evidence that he is indeed much happier "sleeping with the brave."

One reason that the soldiers look to death the way they do is that they believe that their deaths are inevitable, and thus it is their duty to fight well and die. In

"The Sage to the Young Man" (MP 4), the sage tells the young man that he should not expect to live:

> Well is thy war begun;
> Endure, be strong and strive;
> But think not, O my son,
> To save thy soul alive.

If the young man believes that he will live by being a courageous soldier, he is badly mistaken. The sage represents wisdom; and in one of the clearest insights we have of a Housman opinion, this sage says:

> Wilt thou be true and just
> And clean and kind and brave?
> Well; but for all thou dost,
> Be sure it shall not save.

He is saying here that the soldier is meant to die. To "charge to fall and swim to drown" (LP 29) is the soldier's purpose.

In A Shropshire Lad 35, this idea of the soldier's inevitable death again is expressed:

> Dear to friends and food for powder,
> Soldiers marching, all to die.
>
> Lovely lads and dead and rotten;
> None that go return again.

There is an equation of the word "lovely" with "dead and rotten" in these lines, as he is expressing the idea that death is the best alternative. The soldier lads reach "lovely" through "dead and rotten," i.e., the necessary inevitable consequence of "lovely" heroism is to be "dead and rotten."

For A. E. Housman, the military life was the best possible because it offered an escape from the misery of life, an escape either through becoming a soldier automata, or by reaching the ultimate in life, a brave death.

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