

## God and A. E. Housman

‘God and Some Fellows of Trinity’—the title of this term’s addresses has the ring of ‘chips with everything.’ ‘God and’ is what’s on the menu. Today, it’s ‘God and Housman’. But as you might guess, it’s an uncomfortable pairing; not one Housman would have relished. Indeed, he would have found it laughable to be the subject of an address in chapel, if laughing were much in his nature. Notoriously acid, suspicious, disinclined to common niceties—as when he refused to let Wittgenstein, his neighbour in Whewell’s Court, use his newly installed lavatory in a moment of need—Housman, on the whole, is not an edifying character. But then, he’s an intellectual. ‘God and’ is not quite his scene.

In a rare personal overview of his life, he once wrote: ‘I was brought up in the Church of England, and in the High Church party, which is much the best religion I have ever come across. But Lemprière’s Classical Dictionary, read when I was eight, made me prefer paganism to Christianity; I became a deist at 13 and an atheist at 21.’ (*Letters*: II, 325). Housman’s atheism was profound and lifelong, and not to be glossed into varieties of honest doubt. Those dates, however, are telling. When he was thirteen his mother died, her final request to him that he should not lose his faith. When he was twenty one, a perhaps even more important event occurred. While at Oxford he fell in love with a fellow student, Moses Jackson—by all accounts a burly, athletic, cheerfully philistine science student. Housman, for some unexplained reason, then spectacularly failed his Classics degree—his exam papers were almost blank—and left Oxford, degreeless, to work for the next ten years in the Patent Office in London. For three of those years he lived with Moses and Moses’ brother, Adalbert.

Auden’s elegiac sonnet for Housman hints at some cause and lifelong effect:

No one, not even Cambridge, was to blame  
 (Blame if you like the human situation):  
 Heart-injured in North London, he became  
 The Latin Scholar of his generation.

The ‘dry-as-dust’ scholarship, the ‘savage footnotes’ and ‘dirty postcards’ of a ‘private lust’ were all, Auden suggests, the withdrawing symptoms of a man whose heart-injury was incurable. According to Housman’s brother, Laurence, it was Adalbert, not Moses,

who reciprocated his passion. Whatever the details, certain facts are known. In 1895, the year of the Criminal Law Amendment Act—the Act which led to the prosecution of Oscar Wilde—Housman suddenly disappeared for a week. When he resurfaced, living elsewhere, he resumed his friendship with the two men, but something had changed. Adalbert was to die young. When, some years later, Moses married, in spite of regular contact, Housman was neither told nor invited to the wedding. ‘I heard he was married’ is the cryptic record in his diary. In another entry, beside an exactly recorded time of day, he wrote just two words: ‘said goodbye’. The rest must be guesswork, or perhaps poetrywork:

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 heart in sunder  
 And went with half my life about my ways. (205)

Indeed, for the remaining ‘half [his] life’, Housman was solitary, secretive, defensively acerbic. He did, however, keep portraits of the two brothers over the fireplace in his rooms till the end of his life.

Oh who is that young sinner with the handcuffs on his wrists?  
 And what has he been after that they groan and shake their fists?  
 And wherefore is he wearing such a conscience-stricken air?  
 Oh, they’re taking him to prison for the colour of his hair.

‘Tis a shame to human nature, such a head of hair as his;  
 In the good old time ‘twas hanging for the colour that it is;  
 Though hanging isn’t bad enough and flaying would be fair  
 For the nameless and abominable colour of his hair.

Oh a deal of pains he’s taken and a pretty price he’s paid  
 To hide his poll or dye it of a mentionable shade;  
 But they’ve pulled the beggar’s hat off for the world to see and stare,  
 And they’re haling him to justice for the colour of his hair.

Now ‘tis oakum for his fingers and the treadmill for his feet  
 And the quarry-gang on Portland in the cold and in the heat,  
 And between his spells of labour in the time he has to spare  
 He can curse the God that made him for the colour of his hair. (217)

Though clearly inspired by Wilde’s imprisonment, the drum-beat rhythm of this poem captures the outrage of the arbitrarily unjust. In fact, it works better as a poem about general injustice than about Wilde, whose incrimination was slightly more

complicated. That ‘treadmill’ refrain, ‘for the colour of his hair’, draws on all sorts of ancient prejudices. It is a phrase, as Christopher Ricks points out, which turns up in Locke’s *Letters Concerning Toleration* as well as Macaulay’s ‘Civil Disabilities of the Jews’ (286-7). An even older, medieval association, making the connection between hair colour and sin, reiterates that red hair is ‘Judas-coloured’ (Ricks, 291). So the jaunty phrase, ‘for the colour of his hair’, runs the gamut between absurd social prejudice to a sense of injustice, not only in the nature of things, but deep in the Christian scheme of redemption. Judas too, perhaps, was the necessary victim of a story requiring his kiss, his betrayal, his suicide—themes that run through Housman’s poetry about soldier lads who love and die. ‘He can curse the God that made him for the colour of his hair.’ Cursing God is something Housman is good at.

It was after he left the Jacksons that he began the textual editing which would make his name as a classicist. On the strength of it, in 1892, he was offered the Chair of Latin at University College London. (Oxford quickly cobbled together a degree for him.) Here he remained for the next twenty years, till he came to Trinity in his fifties. ‘I shall, I hope, be a member of the Wine and the Garden Committees’ (Page, 91), he declared. Certainly, by this time he was an expert cook, and judging by his many entries in the Kitchen Suggestions Book, the food at Trinity was a trial to him. ‘We have a great number of unattractive sweets at dinner: why not cheesecake sometimes for a change?’ he suggested.<sup>1</sup> The story that Housman introduced crème brûlée to Trinity high table is perhaps not far-fetched. If not sweetness of manner, he had at least a sweetness of tooth.

His reviews and lectures, however, are waspish in the extreme. His inaugural lecture, which is an excoriation of the newish discipline of literary criticism, and a defense of textual criticism in its driest form, depends on such statements as the following: ‘Men hate to feel insecure; and a sense of security depends much less on the correctness of our opinions than on the firmness with which we hold them; so that by excluding intelligence we can often exclude discomfort. The first thing wanted is a canon of orthodoxy, and the next thing is a pope.’ Against both orthodoxies and aesthetics, he waged an untiring campaign. Here he is, reviling the temptations of lazy thinking and easy appreciation:

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Kevin Gray for directing me to the Kitchen Suggestions Book.

If therefore you like to go out on a clear night and lift up your eyes to the stars ... and repeat, as your choice may determine, the poetry which they have evoked from Homer or David, from Milton or Leopardi—do so by all means. But don't call it astronomy. (310)

Astronomy, he then quotes, is found in the third book of Newton's *Principia*: 'Let S represent the sun, T the earth, P the moon, CADB the moon's orbit. In SP take SK equal to ST, and let SL be to SK in the duplicate proportion of SK to SP'. After a paragraph of this, he concludes: 'That is how scholars should write about literature' (304). It is hard at this point to know how much tongue is in how much cheek. If this is a defence of the scientific method, it also betrays the opposite. Star-gazing with Homer, David, Milton and Leopardi somehow beats, at least rhetorically, 'In SP take SK'. Like Newton, who kept his scientific method quite separate from his weirder, pseudo-scientific notions of faith, as we heard last week, Housman kept his classical studies quite separate from poetry. Asked once to explain the nature of poetry, he snapped back: 'I could no more define poetry than a terrier can define a rat' (369). Rats are not for definitions; they are for killing. In a sense, both Newton and Housman are reminders that the same mind can think, quite inconsistently and surprisingly, in two different languages.

In Trinity, this shy, ferocious man found a congenially protective space in which to compose his 'savage footnotes' and wistful, reticent poems. That reticence became legendary. At one college dinner he and J. M. Barrie exchanged not a word. Barrie then wrote to apologise for being so shy; Housman replied in exactly the same words, but with his own name correctly spelt (Douglas-Fairhurst, 100). He turned down honours and invitations, and when he died, his large stock of pornographic literature, acquired on various trips to Paris, was donated to the U.L. —an archive no doubt benefiting any number of Ph.D.s. One reviewer rather cruelly summed up the matter of Housman's poetry: 'Life's a curse, love's a blight, God's a blaggard, cherry blossom is quite nice' (in Douglas-Fairhurst, 89-90). Yet this rather sour, donnish character, and meticulous Latin scholar, was also, on the strength of two slim volumes and a sheaf of unpublished work, one of the great minor poets in the English tradition.

So what is to be said about Housman's atheism, or indeed about our own? I suggest that part of what locks our thinking on this subject is the very abstract noun itself. The trouble with abstract nouns, though beloved of philosophers and theologians, is that

they fix things in the singular. Atheism, like belief, thus quickly becomes a badge of communal identity, the flag of a set of assumptions, leaving nothing more to say. But Housman did have more to say, and he said it in poetry:

If in that Syrian garden, ages slain,  
You sleep, and know not you are dead in vain,  
Nor even in dreams behold how dark and bright  
Ascends in smoke and fire by day and night  
The hate you died to quench and could but fan,  
Sleep well and see no morning, son of man.

But if, the grave rent and the stone rolled by,  
At the right hand of majesty on high  
You sit, and sitting so remember yet  
Your tears, your agony and bloody sweat,  
Your cross and passion and the life you gave,  
Bow hither out of heaven and see and save. (147)

Notice how all the theological terms have been demoted to lower case, including ‘son of man’. Either sleep for ever, the poem declares, or else get up and do something. The silence at the end is the poem’s answer to what it asks. This so-called ‘Easter Hymn’ is not a covertly believing poem; but it is a poem that entertains what it denies. Above all, it is a poem that hangs, not on abstract nouns, but on that little preposition ‘If’: ‘If in that Syrian garden’, ‘But if, the grave rent’. ‘If’ is the poet’s word. It’s a word that lets the imagination, both poet’s and reader’s, out to play. It is a word which considers, listens, ponders the object it also denies. This too, I suggest, is a kind of intellectual thinking.

Perhaps then, on the vast spectrum which lies between belief and atheism, a spectrum I suspect many travel without necessarily homing anywhere, there is room for another word: imagination. The imagination can entertain a possibility, allow for a story. Belief must make disputable claims on truth and reality (alas, more abstract nouns), and atheism must dismiss those claims. But what Larkin calls the ‘vast moth-eaten musical brocade’ of Christianity makes calls on another faculty, and another kind of language. To imagine is to put the mind to work among the ‘ifs’ of language. It is to think, even to reason, but differently, without necessary correspondence between SP and SK. Housman was an atheist, but he was also a poet, and ‘if’ for him is a way to think beyond belief and disbelief. That seems to me a place worth keeping open, if only to make us wary of those simply declarative forms of instant self-identification.

A few days before he died, Housman wrote to a correspondent: 'In philosophy I am a Cyrenaic or egoistic hedonist, and regard the pleasure of the moment as the only possible motive of action' (473). I'll leave you with what is effectively the same statement, but free of flag-waving abstractions. The rat of poetry, when caught, can catch us all in a kind of assent, not assent to any particular creed, but just, perhaps, assent, to and for the moment:

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

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

Speak now, and I will answer;  
 How shall I help you, say:  
 Ere to the wind's twelve quarters  
 I take my endless way. (56)

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## Notes

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