

## A. E. Housman, the Aftermath of Poetry

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This is the world. Have faith.

— Dylan Thomas —

### I

We seem to have digested the submarine Dylan Thomas; we forgave him his obscureness because we are secretly nostalgic and romantic. We still ruminate Housman, the anodyne; we cannot very well reject him nor yet wholly take him in, because it is us his poison hurts. Read Stallman's complete account of Housman criticism.<sup>1)</sup> The general consensus of Housman in all possible aspects has been well measured and classified only to demonstrate the fact that it is our modern poetics that "lacks the standard" rather than his meager output of some several hundred lines. Modern equivocation of poetics seems to be divided into many folds. The final over-all standard of value seems to be assessed by the number of anthologies that include a poet's verses—in a word, by Time's screen.

In the previous discussion,<sup>2)</sup> we confirmed that the final substance of poetry is emotion, and the order of that emotion definable in terms of the poems which are each a multi-dimensioned individual system in the realm of language. Emotion as such is a partially controllable state of each individual's attitude towards what he perceives or conceives. It is contagious only through media and often the media itself is the definer of the emotion. Emotion is regressive; the more basic it is, the more general and even the physiological. Emotion can be defined, articulated, to the degree of the precision of the terms used to define it. It is specific and individualized. In a word, emotion and its expression are mutually definable. Not that one weeps because he is sad, but that he is sad because he is weeping...was a classical psychologist's explanation.

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1) Stallman, R., "Annotated Bibliography: A Critical Study", PMLA, 55 (June 1945)

2) c.f. pp. 37-54 of the previous volume (vol. 11) of this journal

When language is employed as the means of defining and communicating emotions, the amphibious nature of language itself gets into the process. Language as expression is an abstract symbolism, but it cannot help being at the same time a concrete stimuli; it can behave like notes in music, but also it can serve as terms of mathematical formula. And there is a host of complex mass in between. Language is perhaps the most versatile and precise media for emotion, being itself emotionally charged yet intellectually articulate and self-conscious. On the other hand, emotion itself is not thoroughly non-intellectual. There is an emotion highly intellectual while there is an intellectual process thoroughly emotional. Yet it is obvious that language is more intellectually-orientated than emotion is.

Poems are, either by art or by accident, the most complex and conflicting form of human behavior and they refuse to be regarded as a substitute for some non-poetry activities with or without emotional involvement. A poem claims its status of being a poem by its emotional reality. "So let us begin with its most obvious test of excellence. First of all, it must give pleasure" decrees T. S. Eliot.<sup>3)</sup> If a poem fails to cause some emotional result, it simply fails to be a poem. (Although the cases of emotional results—getting ourselves closer on the side of the so-called affective theory, perhaps—may be sundry, not limited to poems. In fact if one is conscious, nothing reaches him without inducing some emotional reaction.)

The emotion of poetry is not only affected by the patent "usual" meaning of the words and sentences (plus all the usual allusions and cultural context communally acknowledged) and the musical or dramatic structure in which these elements are presented—the referential context, but also by the emotion of poetry derived from its physical involvement, the sound effect connected with the act of producing and receiving speech. The mutual association and interference between these two orders of affairs interplaying may be another source of the emotional concrete of the poem. Hence a poem can be thoroughly prosaic in its structure—its poetic total consisting of its affected non-poetic constitution with non-poetic materials. Likewise a poem can be thoroughly poetic, its poetry mainly drawn from its musical parallel. Thus the tradition of lyric, a genre of poetry. Lyric affects a state in which the language-aspect of a poem and its music-aspect

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3) Eliot, T. S.; in *Le Rôle Social des Poètes*, an address in Paris, May, 1945.

are made so much dependent upon each other that both sides concede some portion of the property so that the integration is achieved. It is a negotiated amphibious entity, a compromise of Hulme, hence it has the significance of being a marginal case.

As music is a sculpture in time, stringing the emotional concrete—the sound-emotion complex—into an intellectual eternity; lyric strains itself between the incompatible two forces. A poem, in its effort to be lyrical, gets emotional in order to be musical. The concreteness of musical emotion is anchored in the physiological universality of its sound-emotion complex, which is its objective—hence the communal property. Since emotion is regressive, the more basic and general the referential content of a poem, the easier the accomplishment—less defined but more communal. In lyric the poet looks to the universal emotion, a rut which few can resist following...the nostalgic region “Dr. Tillyard calls ‘the great common-places’; the seasons, the sea, friendship, love and death...”<sup>4)</sup> In order to hit deep, the poet hits the softest and most concrete area of the communal human ego. The poem leads the tender portion of the reader along the easiest and most usual steps to an unusual amplitude of borrowed experience. It is a means at least towards efficiency for its own sake, though it may not be towards aesthetic or moral heightening. Eliot’s test of excellence, may be applied as prescribed, but it is not so obvious as he asserts. The criteria given for evaluating are not in terms of the stimula or in the environment, but in the individual responses whose uniformity is also endorsed by Eliot himself, who apparently believes in the “unity of sensibility” in man. Unless we have a definite hierarchy of values or purposes, with a lowest common denominator, instituted in the entire individual or social system of values, the evaluation of a poem or of anything becomes a purposeless relativistic anarchy.

Critical objectivity, therefore, cannot be expected as absolute in the matter of evaluating. It has to be, as it has been, and will have to be, tentative and even statistical. However, if there is a consistent coordinate upon which we can plot the spectrum of diverse poetic evaluations, we may be able to have a valid, though relative, scale of values by a given term. It will not give any absolute reading but will provide us with a coefficient for comparative assessment not only for what is being plotted but also for similar observations to be made abroad.

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4) Bethell, S. L. as quoted, pp. 75-6, *Literary Criticism and the English Tradition*, Dennis Dobson Ltd. 1948, London.

“The essence of lyrical expression is concentration ;...the lyric achieves its effect by the generalization of experience...”<sup>5)</sup> is almost true with the case of Housman. Is the incorrigible pessimism of Housman’s poem (and perhaps the Lad’s whose utterance the poems are affected to be) and perhaps of the poet...permissible, tenable, enlightening, educational, or morbid, negative, damnable, immoral, etc? The judgement and evaluation along this criterion, either huristic or hedonistic, is no doubt important and valid, but there is no feasible measure to register and verify the argument. Should we praise the poet for having given us this much of his material (either for good or for bad), or should we lament that he did not write poems like Browning’s or Whitman’s...which is understandable yet only out of the question as a criterion. Should we find some way to rate his poems strictly in line with the form of poetry—stanza form, diction, rhythm, rhyme, images, meter, wit, conceit...in a word, technically? He did not write in blank verse nor in verse libre, which is a want no doubt. But how could we determine the value of such assessment against the imaginary scale? Does individual judgement anticipate a fortunate majority rule and law of probability among the cognate audience, the generic Man? Or should we depend upon a thoroughly objective kind of questionnaire-statistics? It is better to have it in a complete enumeration type, say over a period of two generations perhaps? We know this is leading us nowhere. What we do traditionally and instinctively is the very prejudiced sampling of informants—great, established critics mostly,— or should we assume our experience and expectations to be more efficient and infallible than random chance sampling? Perhaps we are only concerned with the pro and con of those whom we think do count according to the usual, accepted standard of common sense and reputation. How could we do otherwise? Let us do this much at least! Such is the world we inherited.

*A Shropshire Lad* may be considered as songs from a play by that title, or so it was intended. Categorically how could we deny it? We have to come to terms with Dr. R. P. Warren’s Mercutio before we can accept Romeo’s serenading dialogue. So we must come to terms with our Shropshire lad. Will the reader accept the form of dramatic exposition? The willing acceptance on the part of the reader establishes the poet-poem-reader continuum, either assumed or real. It may be only an illusion, an assumption,

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5) Winters, Y; referring to Jeffer’s *The Women at Point Sur*, in *In Defence of Reason*, p. 33.

yet it is genuine and real. Such is the premise of a poetic participation tacitly accepted. In the case of novels, the matter of narrator and the exposition has been made familiar; we are trying to introduce the same idea more or less tentatively into the realm of poetry, as poetry and fiction stand on different conditions within the literary convention.

## II

Another aspect of poetry is to be considered though it may not directly contribute to a veritable assessment of the aesthetic value of a given poem or poems. This aspect of poetry is most amphibious. It is something outside of each poem yet not quite outside it. It is the status of a poem in its relation to the reader, the posture of the poem as an act or fact between the poet and the reader. Metaphorically it is a frame so to speak to the poem just as a wooden frame is to a painting. The relation itself is a creation on the part of the poet, the creation almost unconsciously assumed and accepted and as readily forgotten and transcended. In the act of conscious criticism, one must do what he can, of course, but he should know what he should be doing in a perspect, and be aware that the part he should be doing is what he is actually doing, i.e., the range of the validity of the conclusion he might draw and consequently its range of applicability. Thanks to our adaptability—a kind of negative capability—most of us have done so. Then why not continue in the way generations have trod and trod? Yet, how can we verify that the poems are in an implicit ‘if-clause’? Some of the poems of Housman’s *Last Poems* and *More Poems* seem to be in these brackets while many of his others are thrown onto the pages naked?

Poems, as well as novels, may have an actual window frame, not a picture frame, so one must look at it with no “unusual apprehension” or “suspension of disbelief” and look out through it into the painted vista and presume that he has seen real scenery there—the whole process supposedly happening in an actual room with actual windows and the real outside scene. Most of the exposition of novels are in this kind of pre-literary context. But here we have an opening in the wall fit up with a picture frame instead. We are to believe here a picture on the wall, decorating the room, where actually we are looking at real scenery. The sensation of reality comes to us in stealth. Of course the artist has selected the section of the nature to be viewed...the very pessimistic, hopeless aspect of life. The difficulty remains that we do not know if

the scenery is actual or artificial. Did one Mr. Housman really believe in that kind of life, or did he want to create that kind of illusion about life for an ulterior purpose unknown to us? There is no way of knowing. The fable is rather absurd, we admit; but if we were to discuss the situation, rightly or wrongly, it is a sensible thing to settle the matter about the context into which we the observers and the framed thing (either an actual scene or a painted piece) are cast, and to agree upon the realm of artistry we are going to evaluate. Or else there will be a procedural confusion.

This may have been simply taken for granted in criticism—it seems to be too obvious a case to be mentioned. Casual mentions have been made only when there was some unusual merit or demerit involved because of the issue. We may say, for instance, a poem is very much autobiographical, personal or dramatic, etc., as if they are additive features of a poem, but we are in fact, talking not of the product but about the history of the creation. When we select a good sculpture for a contest, we do not consider such incidentals of the product. We study the contour self-expressed and self-contained within the product, refusing the artist the opportunity to present his own case about the difficulty he encountered in conceiving and producing the thing. Likewise, if a photograph were presented as a piece of painting for a contest entry, usually it would be rejected, not as a bad piece of art, but as irrelevant. When we say some poems are dramatic, it is an epithet ascribing an attribute to the poem, not a classification by definition under a superior order.

A poem could be to a certain degree good, regardless of its definer. Another poem may be intellectually blank or silly, yet for some unknown reason it can be “ravishingly” a good poem. The dependency of the poetic candidness upon such assumed or accepted factors beyond the poem itself ought to be at least made an impartial, neutral factor to be relegated once and for all, though it may not be a value index in itself. Thus some poems, for instance Housman’s, may be wholly sentimental, pessimistic and a hopeless cliché, yet they could be appreciated if we accept the implicit ‘if...if’ it is a song sung by a dramatic character in an imaginary drama. The frame of fiction, one must “willingly” accept or, Alice-like, walk through “just like that”, but one thing constant in this is the fact that the reader must respect the artistic picture frame, (if he wants to communicate with others on that experience level,) by dint of which the reality of the room is maintained in the Wonder Land. Hence the lad at Shropshire may stay

dejected and keep killing himself...but no actual tragedy taking place. The song uttered by that fictitious person may be tolerated.

Now how could we verify the artistic merit of the artist and assert that the credit goes to the poet if the trick were successful on us at least? How did we come to take upon ourselves, in accepting the favorable situation for the poem, the task of improving it at the expense of our imagination? Is the demand tacitly made or are we psychologically conditioned? Was it calculated by the poet or are we simply credulous or sentimentally soft?

Most of the conflicting opinions about the poems of Housman seem to be based on this supposition. Is it there, the frame? And if there is one, is it a picture frame or a pragmatic frame? And is the scenery we see an actual Shropshire landscape or a well painted picture? It could be a painted landscape pasted to the back of a blank window frame. Are we discursive?

Ever since its genesis, poetry has been there and has grown into what it is today through a natural growth so to speak. It is a matter we have *de facto*, with all its cult including our picture cadre, the frame. Any definition given to it, therefore, is always a *post facto* acknowledgement, an interpretation. When a framed painting is introduced, and we are asked what we see, we think it safe not to say that we see the frame or the wall.

“We can call the short poem a *lyric*” says Herbert Read, “which meant originally a poem short enough to be set to music and sung for a moment’s pleasure. From the poet’s point of view, we might define the lyric as a poem which embodies a single or simple emotional attitude, a poem which expresses directly an un-interrupted mood of inspiration.”<sup>1)</sup>

### III

What is the *raison d’être* for a song? It certainly is a genre of various modes of musical events, a portion of music, an instance of what music can do. Then what is expected of songs as a distinct genre of music? We do not expect what we do from a symphony, nor from an opera. We do not compare Beethoven’s *Nineth* with an etude of Chopin. What do we expect from a piece of lyric, and whatever is meant by the term

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1) Read, H., *The Structure of the Poem*, p. 53

'lyric', anyway? If the term defines some kind of poems, it is a valid term to that extent—the lyric as we accept and use it. Let us, therefore, begin with the usual designation with its usual attributes. The musical affiliation of the lyric is historical but now only metaphorical. It is only within the last few hundred years that music has become more or less independent of symbolic media, i. e., the language, any way. Especially "the didactic and reflective lyric has a long history; its masterpieces are still admired, their influence is still felt, and the genre remains thoroughly extant"<sup>1)</sup> beside the paramount function of poetry in narrative, the epic. In these aboriginal cults of poetry, the impersonal status was an inevitability. They were best when they were communal, anonymous and traditional as most of the natural growth of human cultures are to this day. Even the division between epic and lyric was an afterthought. They were verbal folk-lore articles which encompassed ballads, nursery rhymes and so many other riches humanity inherited. Some of them could have been purely and genuinely spontaneous, as if a natural growth, while others may have been art-consciously manufactured as were the Romantic ballads—Burns' especially, to quote an example. The poetry as a genre of human behavior could be considered as a distinct convention rather than a natural distinction. Walking and dancing, are they different as kinetic conventions or as two distinct kinds of animal activities? At any rate, lyric is immune to historical individual authorship in its presumption; it has to be stylised in its property—language, characterization, topic, theme, temperament, etc. It has to be based on an actual or imagined communal experience at a certain locale. After all it is a conventional product. Thus when an art-conscious poet composes poems after lyrical convention, he is not only making use of, but also taking advantage of the conventionality of the lyrical tradition. His work is delivered under the guise of an impersonal public commodity. He artificially makes use of the *données* of the convention, but it is not the poet alone; his audience as well depends upon the convention. It is like the theater where the players and the audience are brought together into an artistic encounter.

The convention provides the poet and the audience with the aesthetic screen. It provides the reader with a mental freedom from the speaker, from his ego, and it lets him indulge privately, if he wishes, in the practice of the poem, ignoring the creator's

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1) Wells, H. W., *New Poets from Old*, p. 204, Columbia Univ. Press, 1940.

ultimate authority, a kind of copy-right. The reader rides on the borrowed channel for his emotional release with far less expense and with more assurance that he is not alone.

The convention also assists the poet; first he can count on the above mentioned, reader's selfish, personal engagement with the poem, and perhaps the poet can improve the case even further to his advantages. Hence lyric tends to be a melodramatic excess—a mutual degradation in sentimental vagueness and false emotion. “The sentimental lyric itself is based on a simple action, mood, feeling, or conjunction of images. Dispensing with logical subtlety, it is also without an immanent idea.”<sup>2)</sup> However, it is also true that a surface conformity to a convention is next door to a parody, a mockery upon sentimentality. It is an intellectual sophistry several steps removed from the “overflow of powerful emotion.” Lyric as a convention, before as a genre of poetry, can be used by a shy poet who is afraid, for some reasons, of exposure of his ego in his poems, there being a strong tendency to relieve oneself from high emotional tensions by giving it a vent in the form of the easiest, the channel of least resistance in the form of stylized public conveyance. Emotion does not create, it wants to spend itself. Likewise lyrics are enjoyed, or consumed in a way by an audience who would rather adopt this scheme so well designed for the purpose, available to every one, of letting one's emotion go. An easy reader finds his emotion not only approved but amplified by the lyrical exposition and by personally participating in the poem. He obtains a proper sense of release. The private emotion finds itself identified and absorbed into the prototype, the sorrow that is “man's”. There is always a very private and responsible ego shouldering the public, communal, objectified, stereotyped, allegorical expositions. There is a psychological regressive flow of emotion which usually induces resignation of mental identity, relegation of responsibility as an original, individual utterances of expression, dissipation of sentiment. And like anything else, where a thing is applicable to every case, it loses its significance, and the lyric as such becomes mere song.

Natural ballads simply lack an author, which constitutes the genetic-myth of lyric. But there is the audience. Where there is the “artist” beside the ballad, the audience pretend that they do not see him. He is there as an irrelevant presence beside the product which is now the public utility. The public identifies itself with the poem, not with the historical author, imagined or actual. (Why should we persist in labelling

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2) *ibid.*, p. 232

every poem with its poet's name about whom one expects to have little private knowledge? The rumour about its creator continues to be background information. A poem does not change its value, if it exists, whether it be known as one by A. E. Housman or by any John Brown whatever.) In such case, the poet exposes himself in the shy convention of anonymous character who expounds unabashed pessimism, narcissism and decadant sentimentalism. The audience, however, will not be as ready in accepting the ravings if it were presented without a situation in which the speaker is the lesser character than the reader himself, especially when the utterance, the messages, were delivered as a direct communication of the speaker. We take him in on an aesthetic discount. "How our poetry got this way—how romanticism was purified and exaggerated and "corrected" into modernism; how poets carried all possible tendencies to their limits, with more than scientific zeal; how the dramatic monologue, which once had depended for its effect upon being a departure from the norm of poetry,..."<sup>3)</sup> deplores R. Jarrell. The audience's attitude is as complex and dubious as that of the poet's. As a reader one wants to submit to negative-inertia, the regressive drive which, as animals, we cannot quench, yet at the same time do not approve; the state being that of any ordinary mentality. "Do I contradict myself? Well then I contradict myself..." Whitman is supposed to have said. Hence the subtle self-deceiving process of the convention-dependence of emotional discharge.

Read Hardy for instance. There the speaker is speaking in the poems as an individual, not in an assumed role. He may speak under the guise of a persona, yet one gets the feeling that the ego behind is the same character. His poems are saved from sentimentality in some ingenious way...there is internal evidence that the speaker is dependable as a person for the entire utterance, that there is an ego who is in earnest in making such a statement and is perhaps finding the way out of the ill though it is bad enough. Even so, Hardy's poems fail when they assert the helpless futility as if in earnest, because we wonder how such a negative view could be productive—productive enough to crystalize itself into the poems? In Housman's case, the poems are the utterance of the character, the limited, theatrical ego who will not take the consequence of what he says if the audience candidly responds to the message.

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3) Jarrell, R., *Poetry and the Age*, p. 12.

It is even irrelevant to refer to the poet, if he happens to be available, for the indorsement. The poet could have conceived a type thoroughly different or even opposite to the character considered. The poet lives in the actuality which is only a realization of what could have been, would or should have been, and what he would have liked to have it be, etc. The characters, however, live in the poems as they are instituted, for them there is no other possibility. There is a great deal of difference in whether we anchor our moral response upon the character or upon the author. One usually does not accuse or praise a hero of a novel, unless he supposes that he is an actual person, because the character can do no better nor worse than he does as he is presented. It is always in figurative sense that we do so. In Housman's case, poems are, though there are poems of more affirmative strains, mostly the testaments that life is "worse than ill" either stated outright or in some tell-tale oblique irony, or through sentimental direct wailings. But there is always an indication that they are utterances by a character who is not a full person. We are naturally and secretly attracted towards that kind of deathurge, which is usually suppressed by the positive "censor", conscious or unconscious. It is a thing we know but do not usually approve of. It is not the whole man affected by the attack of the air that kills, but nevertheless it is part of ourselves. It is not a false sentiment, it is only a truth in a limited scope. Perhaps "it is the divine element in human nature which allows us to indulge in retrospection and be capable of despair."<sup>4)</sup> At any rate, the modern poet is "writing in an age in which the most natural feeling of tenderness, happiness, or sorrow was likely to be called sentimental; consequently he needed a self-protective rhetoric..."<sup>5)</sup> Shy Housman, in his poems, made his engagement one aesthetic distance removed from the usual literary rapprochement by instituting utterances in dramatic half-reality, like Yeats' mask. It is made a lyric, a natural growth on the surface, anonymous, irresponsible and fictitious. Once a friend advised Yeats "Begin plays without knowing how to end them for the sake of the lyrics. I once wrote a play and after I had filled it with lyrics abolished the play"<sup>6)</sup>, according to Yeats himself.

Housman as the author of a play or plays of which these songs are members may

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4) Bethel, S. L., *op. cit.* p. 75.

5) Jarrell, R., *op. cit.* p. 89.

6) Yeats, W. B., in preface to *The King of the Great Clock Tower*, in *The Creative Process*, ed. by B. Ghiselin, p. 108.

be accused of not having created other kinds of songs with more healthy, varied views of life and so on. But our arrows will be stopped short by the interceding dramatic character, the Lad, the source of the songs, and Mr. A. E. Housman will stand clear of the attack. Each poem, and all the biographical information available are not going to provide good evidence or enough materials for our judgement of the “Whole Housman”.

This is where we stand in criticism of *A Shropshire Lad* and other poems conveniently and duly ascribed to a certain name. This much consideration, though it is usually implicit in all the statements, is to be given when we are participating in a performance of Mr. Housman’s poems. We concede to Mercutio, the understood convention of lyric. We do not blame Shakespeare for his not having written novels. Since Housman wrote in that premise, let him stay there. But now the question is how do Housman’s poems impose upon the readers such convention? How are we made to come to his terms? We recite “Full farthom five...” fully cognizant of the fact that it is a song in that play in such a context, by sheer force of our cultural knowledge and past experiences. Does Housman count on our docility for the encounter in his favour? For some obvious reasons, no one questions that his products are meant to be poems. As readily, the convention of his poems are acknowledged by the readers. There is some internal, self-sufficient cause in the poems themselves that brings about the poem-reader circuit. How is it imposed? Should it be ascribed to the credit of the poet? The poet may be subject to criticism for the mode of the convention he so tacitly establishes, and for his correctness in selecting the kind of encounter.

This aspect of poetry reveals the poet’s ability as well as the attitude of the poet. The ability and attitude are the elements that determine the way he anticipates the eventual audience and selects a poem for his means of communication. Usually poets select direct exposition, intimating their attitude and expressing them in the postures of the poems themselves. Let us, however, relegate our aesthetic assessment of our poet’s discretion in choosing what he chose for the status of his poems as we have them.

#### IV

The poet-poem-reader continuum is not neutral. The encounter is, from the reader’s point of view, optionally selective, before and during. He is “willing” to suspend his usual disbelief for the sake of what he anticipates and presumes. As a reader, one

readily assumes the role of the audience of a poem, or a novel, or a literary work in general as distinguished from that of an opera or a drama. Immediately he is a reader of the poem he is reading, telescoping several layers of genre distinctions. He may disregard the genre definitions for expediency as long as he is in contact with the final poem. He may as readily overlook the picture frame or frames that set the poem apart from the background reality. One may read a page of a book or even a whole volume of a kind without first finding out if it is a novel, or a business document or a political assertion, or an academic report. He may react to it as he pleases. But when he wants to evaluate the piece in communicable terms over-riding his personal intransitive impressions and attachment, it becomes imperative that he should find what kind of thing it was that he has read. Criticism therefore demands the genre designation for any valid statement about a thing, though it may fail to present a value index, or standard, or the final and actual value. We evaluate, say, an excavated sculpture of an Egyptian cat disregarding the original purpose in which it was created. We simply admire its merit by arbitrarily forcing our standard—as a piece of art, analogically, in our own concept. We do not consider its validity as a zoological description of an aboriginal cat. Fortunately Housman is not a prehistoric item.

Now, how does Housman make his poems lyrical in their apparent attire? Are the poems themselves self-evidently lyrical, patently and legitimately? Obviously, yes. But is it not a mere surface conformity to the traditional convention, which could as readily be a parody? How are we made to accept the situation as lyrical—the situation in which we participate in the poem? Is it by sheer force and by virtue of the poem's formal status, e. g., the stanza forms, characterization, tenor, the theme, etc.? Is it that he created a character who is vested with such a characterization that we may not approve him morally though accepting him aesthetically and relishing what he says in a literary extraterritoriality? Do we not find our emotional strains abated and discharged through comparable processes of active-reactive equipoise? His schemes may of course be verified for each individual poem; some may be found strictly within full lyrical-cadre, while others may fail to be so.

Consideration of an individual poem as the only object and sufficient evidence of itself, is a kind of criticism, whereas a comprehensive study of poems beyond one single whole to a combination of interdependent or contrastive members is another order of

criticism. Especially when such a collocation of poems are naturally grouped together as one poet's work, the criticism is on another level, although there is a natural, graded stepping up of the level of abstraction. Likewise a criticism may be made for a vast whole, covering an assembly of works of many poets grouped together under any term, e. g., of a period, or of the same tradition. Such is an a priori map for the realm of criticism. One need not begin always from the zero altitude, or in one direction and on one term only. But whatever kind of criticism one makes, his coverage must be located in the scale. Housman's poems, especially the ones grouped together as *A Shropshire Lad* need to be designated in terms of their status, i. e., how most of the poems are presenting themselves to the reader. How skillfully and appropriately (and morally and even aesthetically) it is accomplished (or failed) may constitute one indispensable kind of criticism and the consequent evaluation will duly be ascribed to the poetship of the poet. This does not exclude other kinds and levels of criticism. We are only asserting that such designation and consideration are not only implicit whenever a criticism is being made, but also indispensable... It may be too obvious to be stated, or it may be devoid of any practical value to criticism, depending upon individual cases. Yet as a matter of theoretical completeness, this is a necessity.

When men agree that Housman's poems are lyrical, they may be implicitly stating that the poems should be treated as such in view of the fact that they so obviously conform to the convention of the lyric. Now by designating certain poems of his, and saying they are presented as lyric, we are defining the poet's attitude towards the poems concerned, and through them, towards the audience. Of course it is a selective and aesthetic choice inevitably related to his whole person, not only as a poet, but also as an historical individual who lived. The usual criticism on the referential and emotive content of the poems, say they are sentimental, incorrigibly pessimistic and egotistic, etc., is in the first place lodged against the theatrical character, the limited representation, and is not immediately posed against the creator of that character. The genuine critic may discern the identity of the character and the creator, but he will certainly refrain from making him the public target of his criticism: because it is a private matter incidental to the poet. It is only a matter of convenience that we use the label "Housman's" for a group of poems. When we come to grasp a personality, the ego behind the poems grouped under the label, the name stands only for that ego

realized in the poems, not anything beyond.

To sum up, the lyrical-ness of a poem or poems is different in critical aspect when it is considered as an attribute of a poem or poems, and when it is considered as a pre-expository condition to which the author and the audience are to concede. We are asserting that when we say that a poem or the poems of Housman are lyrical; it is to be considered in the latter category. For instance, we could say when the lyrical-ness of some of Housman's poems become more of an attribute than a category, they get closer to some of Hardy's poems. *More Poems* tend to be such. If we diagram our plan of a hypothetical Housman criticism in the present layout, it will be somewhat like this :

1. He, or the poems as a whole, to be skillful in imposing the lyrical cadre.
2. Lyrical cadre is conducive to emotional disarmament both for the poet and the audience. Hence an advantage aesthetically, but dubious in moral outlook.
3. Lyrical status, whether artificial or natural, is musical, emotional or the like, if compared against the status of other poetry.
4. Pessimism, fatalism, etc. are most germane to lyrical constitution, if compared to other possible tenors of poems.
5. The topics and other dimensions of lyric have to be selected for the best effect and for ease in lyric. Love, death, nature, home, etc., are such, and of which most of Housman's poems are concerned.
6. Housman was clever in selecting 3, 4, 5 above.
7. Housman as the author and as an individual, must take the consequence of the whole show, regardless of the convention in which he presents his product to the audience. He is humanly responsible for the aftermath of his poetry.
8. The private interest of the author in his audience is reciprocated by the private interest of the audience in him.

If we diagram likewise, the way Housman accomplishes the lyrical situation of encounter between the audience in his poems, the following phases may be considered.

1. Surface conformity to lyrical convention :
  - a. Stanza form, meter, rhyme structure, diction, imagery,
  - b. Language : colloquial, dialectal, primitive, metaphorical, archaic
2. Content conformity to lyrical convention
  - a. Theme and topic : bucolic, heroic, mock-heroic, communal, traditional-folk-lore, romantic
  - b. Exposition : dramatic, epigramic, allegorical, occasional ; in monologue, dialogue
  - c. Tonal quality : symbolic, ironical, pathetic, moral, sentimental
3. Latent features reinforcing lyrical solidity
  - a. Characterization : simple, symbolic, tragic, ballad-like

- b. Organization: Concentration, economy, regularity
- c. Design: Clear, single and obvious.

As a craftsman, Housman's skill in those aspects itemized above may be considered moderately high, let us say. But that he failed to be otherwise—he was not a Whitman nor a Hopkins—may belong to another kind of consideration. We must first talk about what he did and was, not about what he did not do or was not. Thus, his skill in making his lines match its assumed cast is more than adequate; the onomatopoetic parallel between rhythm, sound effect, language and the topical content is well attained and maintained, that is to say, when it is dramatic, it was adequately dramatic—producing appropriately representative quotations—, when hedonistic, properly hedonistic, etc. The diction, both vocabulary and phrasing, are well coined and collocated in such and such lines and stanzas. One is, for instance, convinced of the theatrical realism with which such rustic speech is used to a fit language in which, if there were ballads and lyrics in Shropshire they may have well been spoken. He not only represented but purified the speech of the tribe, theatrically, that is to say. As *Romance of Roses* cannot be re-written in *Romance of Onions*, as a saying goes, the *Shropshire lad* poems cannot be re-written as *An Oxford Novice* nor as *David Copperfield*. Charles Lamb allegedly considered his sonnets to be so very personal that he refused to have them improved by others. This is an implicit acknowledgement of the imposition of the prescribed author-product-effect relationship. Sonnets impose the mode of encounter upon the reader by sheer force of their verse form, a genre of art defined by form. (Suppose Lamb wrote a free verse with the title *A Sonnet*, would he have also refused to have it edited?) Housman is similarly imposing the situation mostly by verse forms or other explicit features. However, his poems not only assert, by force of their patent features, the premise, but also by the force of the kind of emotion he arouses...he did not cause democratic or religious emotion, for instance. Shall we quote from R. Jarrell again?

When you begin to read a poem you are entering a foreign country whose laws and language and life are kind of translation of your own; but to accept it because its stews taste exactly like your old mother's hash, or to reject it because the owl-headed goddess of wisdom in its temple is fatter than the Statue of Liberty, is an equal mark of that want of imagination, that inaccessibility to experience, of which each of us who dies a natural death will die.<sup>1)</sup>

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1) Jarrell, R., *op. cit.* p. 81.

When we talk about music, we do not usually criticize the moral consequence of the listeners after he undergoes the listening. For the particular piece of music, we discuss the quality of experience we undergo while the music is being heard. If the music drives a man to suicide, Terence's poor cow, it is done on his own primarily, and the composer is blamed only as secondary agent.

There is a definite progression of experience concrete and self-evident in musical participation, and all the possible verbal descriptions of the music are fated to be a meagre analogy, mere index and substitute. We cannot represent emotion nor summerize. It is better to refrain from bidding for the value of a lyric, therefore, according to the philosophical or moral property it may chance to carry. Let us believe that a poem that is good as a poem is in itself of moral consequence, in the name of humanity which cannot be but moral. To quote Jarrel again,

“Principles” or “standards” of excellence are either specifically harmful or generally useless; the critic has nothing to go by except his experience as a human being and a reader, and is the personification of empiricism.<sup>2)</sup>

After all, we may be identified with those who, since the beginning, argued that Housman is a lyricist and, as such, of a certain merit...not “a great minor poet”...and so on. Housman spoke through characters especially in *A Shropshire Lad*. But we would rather be considered as one who begins the argument by acknowledging that the poems Housman wrote in the literary tradition and culture as we can understand them to be, either individually observed or collectively surveyed, hold characteristics solid enough to distinguish themselves from others. Tentatively we may say that these poems, on the evidences within themselves, show such and such a quality to such a degree and that they may induce us to an apparently tenable theory that a certain effect of literary order is the result (either intended or unintended by the poet) of such and such features which are also self-evident in the poems considered. “Poetry equally with philosophy is an attempt to arrive at the truth, but its method is not abstractive and rational; it throws itself back on the undivided mind, prior to any separation into faculties. It is perhaps that which constitutes its chief fascination for the modern fragmented mind in its search for an organic unity.<sup>3)</sup>” It is not only to Housman that such pre-imposed

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2) *ibid.* p. 81.

3) Bethell, S. L., *op. cit.* p. 34.

poet-poem-reader continuum should be explicitly or implicitly prescribed, to be affected or eventually effected in the scope of literary communication. Poetry as a whole, according to the tradition, selects its own situation and society, under which the participation is to be accomplished. To this the reader usually submits readily, thanks to his negative capability, or aesthetic predilection. The selection of suitable situations, partly within partly without the poems themselves, are seldom considered to be the part of art that is liable to criticisms abroad, and for which the poet is directly responsible.

There is an irony in this, however,—a tension cannot be rendered unless articulated eventually in some form of conventionalized form, the recourse to language being the primary concession, then the diction and so on... The selection of the kind of convention is the primary artistic feat on the part of the creator...it is his personal attitude to his poem to be and to his audience, the public. Whereas, for the one who is to participate and accept his art, a poem, it is the only and the all-legitimate evidence. Thus the poem as given is the cause and the result at the same time. The information other than this, either reductive or positive, speculated or attested, are only probable outer evidences no better than hypothetical material or a tentative conclusion. "Housman should have written a complete novel like Hardy did, and those pieces of lyrics should have been presented to the world as the arias of the heroes and heroines of that fiction..." is a plausible opinion. But it is an after-given advice in the capacity of personal adviser to the poet who has already done the creation. It may be beneficial to many Housmans to come...perhaps an unintended aside of a critic, though no less enlightening for all that. "So let us begin with its most obvious test of excellence..."<sup>4)</sup> and believe poems are in a way, the aftermath of poetry.

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4) cf. the last line, *Essay on Rime* of Karl Shapiro.