SHROPSHIRE REVISITED

Theodora and Alfred Kroeber, 1959

Our century continues to be much occupied with death, and our creative energies to expend themselves on one aspect or another of death, whether in the waging of war, the invention of implements and devices of war, or in political and social thinking, or in the plastic arts and literature.

Poets are said to speak prophetically. This could mean that, some time before the first World War, their poems had begun to emphasize death over life. Poe, Emily Dickinson, Swinburne, Housman, Kipling, Yeats, and Eliot do indeed use the words death, dead, die, dying, significantly more often than the words life, alive, live, living, and Housman, at the seeming apex of this twentieth-century death-directed interest, is discovered to have employed seventy-one per cent of death words to twenty-nine per cent of life words.[1] Since Housman wrote A Shropshire Lad there has been a world war, and since he published his Last Poems there have been the vertiginous twenties, a depression, and a second World War, with their presently complex aftermaths. Reviewing the poetry of the past half-century or so, a style profile, however tentative and incomplete, begins to emerge. We--the English and the Americans--faced what followed on Sarajevo with the bravado and despair of the lads of Housman's balladlike and simple poetry. We volunteered for glory and friendship and death. Never since our immersion in that first world war have values been for us as clear-cut as they were before. It is Housman who gives those lost values their perfect and limited, if astringently negative, voice.

Eliot seems with an equal accuracy to have forecast the disillusionments and disjointments of one war and those leading into the next. No ballad, no memorable tune, no song, came out of the second war. The poets of private language, symbol and abstraction, successors to Eliot, projected for us in the only language left for singing in, perhaps, our confusing present world. One cannot see clearly when so close; one can only surmise that Dylan Thomas may have lived long enough to have given some pattern, difficult but no longer chaos, to the immediately confronting future.

To return to Housman, A Shropshire Lad was published in 1896, Last Poems in 1922. Housman has a very great deal to say about death, even in his light verse, but the present essay examines only A Shropshire Lad, being a content analysis of sorts of its vocabulary, through which is traced the pattern of the dominant death theme by which the whole of the book becomes so much more than a congeries of its separate poems.

A Shropshire Lad is now sixty-three years old, a difficult age for a book of poetry. It is long past its first impact and freshness, but too newly outmoded to much interest today's poets and critics.

George Orwell speaks recollectively of the first popularity of A Shropshire Lad in "Inside the Whale," an essay he wrote in 1940.[2] He was himself

seventeen years of age when he and his friends discovered Housman. He believes Housman to have had "the deepest hold upon the thinking young" of any writer (during the adolescence) of those born around 1900, making his period of influence, according to Orwell, from 1910 to 1925. He says of him, "He stood for a kind of bitter, defiant paganism, a conviction that life is short and the gods are against you, which exactly fitted the prevailing mood of the young,"[3] meaning, presumably, the English-speaking young. It is a touching picture--these serious wartime youngsters drawing wisdom or bitter comfort from the more cynical poems of Housman, to judge by Orwell's quotations--and it is rare to come upon such a direct lead into what seventeen-year-olds once felt and believed. Rupert Brooke belonged, no doubt, to their older brothers.

By the time Orwell got around to writing his essay, Housman said nothing at all to him; he was "querulous," he "tinkled,"[4] he seemed expressly the poet for the adolescent. Condemning his own belief and thought of twenty years ago, Orwell also condemns the poetry which those beliefs and thoughts seized and fed on.

One wonders what his judgment on Housman might have been in 1960. One wonders because the young of today do not, many of them, read Housman, but the old--seemingly a good many of them--do read him. His readers like what Orwell says the adolescents of the twenties liked: that his poems "deal with the simple, intelligible disasters that give you the feeling of being up against the 'bedrock facts' of life."[4] Orwell says of Housman's themes that they are adolescent, being murder, suicide, unhappy love, and early death. This is a bit of a slip for so informed a writer. There is wide interest among adolescents in murder and suicide and unhappy love, and early death, but as themes they are scarcely adolescent, and are of as great potential interest to the old as to the young, although it is to be expected that the two age groups will choose differently among the poems. Certainly Orwell[5] and Arnold Toynbee,[6] to name two, quote very different poems from him.

Stephen Spender, in "The Essential Housman," republished in 1955, points out Housman's technical skill in "his use of consonants so that they separate, sometimes by alliteration, sometimes by contrast, one image from the next."[7] He admits him to serious consideration, but finds in his poetry only repression, "prolonged adolescence," and pessimism, and is aware of no positive quality beyond that of formal excellence. It may indeed be too soon for our poets to be revisiting Shropshire, but it may not be presumptuous, meanwhile, for others, ourself among them, to do so.

The selection and order of the sixty-three poems of A Shropshire Lad are Housman's own. He meant when he published it that it should be his only book of verse and he held to this decision for many years. His brother Laurence Housman, in the memoir of 1937, quotes from an autobiographical note by A. E. Housman, "A Shropshire Lad was written at Byron Cottage, 17 North Road, Highgate, where I lived from 1886 to 1905."[8] This means that the poems were composed or put into their present form between 1886 and 1896, within a span of ten years at most, when Housman was approaching or in his thirties, and mostly while he was teaching at the University of London.

Influences are not easy to trace, so thoroughly has Housman made his own and characteristic form. He once named as the sources of which he was conscious,

Shakespeare's songs, the Scottish Border ballads, and Heine's lyrics.[9] He wrote no sonnets, and his stanza is never allowed to draw attention to itself, is never odd or intricate or distracting. He wanted and achieved clarity, so his poetry seems simple, and it is, except for deliberate ambiguities. His ear was good and his melodic line true--he interwove trochaic and iambic without the reader's having to hesitate in the beat of the reading. Apparent form is so subordinated to meaning and feeling that it disappears unless one consciously concentrates attention upon it.

Thirteen of the Shropshire poems are known to have been written sometime within the twelve months of 1895, and seven others for which there are dates were written or started in the years 1890 through 1894.[10] The poems do not appear in the book in chronological order, nor is there subject grouping. The arrangement would seem to be varietal, with some clustering of the poems of most intense feeling in the middle part, whereas we meet the lads of Shropshire in the early poems, and take leave of them in the final ones at a more restrained and austere and characteristic pitch of feeling. Austereness is seen to pervade the whole of Shropshire--austereness, and a way of seeing and feeling which is peculiar and consistent and patterned.

Take, for instance, the sense perceptions. There are few fondly elaborated details of sense awareness, no bypaths of sense indulgences. The sensory experience of smelling is absent, unless "The Merry Guide"'s thymy wold is thought of as evocation of the odor of thyme. Tasting is rather special, too. It is limited to the taste of blood: What is falling on my lips / My lad, that tastes of brine?; to bitter yew and the smack is sour--the earlier ale's the stuff to drink of the same poem being concerned with the effects of the ale, not with its taste.

There is extreme restraint of language in contact of body with body, which contact is for the most part quite imageless: an elbow is brushed, an arm is taken, or put around, two lie breast to breast, heart to heart, or heart upon bosom; there is a kiss reported by an aspen tree; and the act of conception is an unadorned get or got, imageless and without affect.[11] Only in the handclasp, that supreme gesture of friendship, is there the actual, living sense of flesh touching flesh, and of an emotional overtone.[12] To taste and to feel, there must be close contact; surfaces must touch. But this is not the way of A Shropshire Lad. Not only are the body contacts limited to those mentioned, thirteen of them in all, of which four are handclasps, but also other tactility--of softness or roughness and all such sensation--is absent, except for the grave. The grave becomes a couch of gravel, or a bed of mold / Where there's neither heat nor cold. Only the grave is a textured and variously regarded and intimate place where friends lie near and close to one another. The hinted living intimacy is a midnight pallet and a kinder bed--passing, temporary stopping places on the way to the grave.

Hearing and seeing, senses which can be made to function in distance, pervade the whole of Shropshire, and very subtle is Housman's use of these senses. We will come back to them again when we examine landscape which is quite inseparable from them, but the tactile reticence is a clue to further reticences. For example, there is no intimacy within the meaning of familiarity, Gemütlichkeit, or homeliness. There are no fathers or mothers or brothers in

the context of home and beloved ones. There are not even the words wife and sister; brother comes only into a Cain and Abel episode; father and mother, only in the ancient wrong of "The Welsh Marches," which in any case is a poem of imaginary ancestral memory at one level, and of a complex and ambiguous symbolism at another level. There are few childhood recollections, and these few bitter-sweet to bitter in mood. There are no children. The word child occurs once, in "The Immortal Part," but means the skeleton freed from its encumbering flesh.

In all but six[13] of the sixty-three poems, there is a person or persons other than the poet or speaker, but all of these "others" are without real portraiture and with very little individuality or personality. They are faceless, almost gestureless, and for the most part nameless and voiceless, nor can one always be sure of their sex.

The facelessness of those who people Shropshire is absolute, and they are nameless except for the Queen--Victoria is meant but is not called by name--Terence and Maurice, Fred and Rose Harland, Dick and Ned, Mithridates and Terence, once more. These names are poetical, not "real" or personifying or intimate or revelatory. We know the nameless ones as well as or better than we know Rose and Terence.

There are none of the occasional poems or poems dedicated to a person, in the usual sense. "1887" is an occasional verse of sorts, the occasion being Victoria's golden jubilee. She appears in the poem as the Queen, but it is those who have died for the queen or who will die for her whom it celebrates. There are three poems which are "to" someone: "The Recruit," however, is less a tribute to the nameless recruit of the verse than to a generalized, stereotypical recruit; and "To An Athlete Dying Young" is to an athlete who is nameless in the poem, his fortunate and early death being the more particular object of celebration, while a third poem commemorates the suicide of an unnamed young man.

The Shropshire people are almost gestureless, there being seven gestures only. A fist is shaken, a hand beckons, shoulders are squared, but it is the handclasp which alone conveys emotion in variety and intensity: here's a bloody hand to shake; reach your friends your hand; take my hand quick; my hand lay empty on my knee . . . So many an honest fellow's fist / Had well-nigh wrung it from the wrist.[14]

They are not quite voiceless, there being a voice, besides the poet's or speaker's, in twelve of the poems; but these voices are rather special, for, in only half of them is the second voice that of a man or a woman. For the rest, there is a disembodied voice; a Greek statue speaks; an aspen tree talks, as do a blackbird and church bells; and there is a dialogue between the flesh and its skeleton. The wordless human voice is heard singing and cheering and calling; jangling and sighing and weeping; piping a tune and whistling. Then there are the sounds which come borne by the wind: the multiple voices of inanimate things. Bells sound and ring and peal and toll; gallows clank, and whistles blow forlorn, and Ludlow tower hums; trains groan and clocks ring, while the storm cock sings and harness jingles; there is drumming, and there are calling bugles and screaming fifes; and a gun sings.[15]

Hearing and seeing become a single sensibility of landscape when beechnuts rustle down, or when The vaulted shadow shatters. And sound crowds sight, By falling stream and standing hill / By chiming tower and whispering tree. Nine poems dispense with landscape and nature, which are, for the rest, only less pervasive than death.[16]

It is never strictly landscape, with Wordsworthian particularization and localization and loving detail. Rather, its trees and its streams, its fields and its hills come on the wind and are seen in sound and in motion and are all of a piece with natural forces. There are the blowing realms of woodland, and the starlit fences; the glimmering weirs; the sky-pavilioned land; the windy weald; and there is the aspen which heaves / Its rainy-sounding silver leaves; and the twelve-winded sky; and the sighing air. And all the while this blowing, shimmering, sighing, sunlit, and starlit landscape-in-motion is placeless. Placeless, the Shropshire hills become the hills you know, the hills you climb to see your Ludlow tower; its streams, the streams you sit beside; and its woods, the woods you walk in or that blow to you in nostalgic retrospect. Turn to "Bredon Hill." It begins, In summertime on Bredon, and in the second stanza says, Here of a Sunday morning / My love and I would lie / And see the coloured counties. Reading, you make only the brief indicated comma stop after coloured counties, and go on to the end of the tender and poignant poem which has to do with love and death. The coloured counties, and all the images in Shropshire, seem to form endlessly out of the stuff of nature, and pass like summer clouds, making up and dissolving without ever blurring the blue of the sky, and with such quietness of voice and mode that the placeless landscape obtrudes as little as do the faceless people.

When we attempt the nearer view, we find again the familiar austerity. There are some of the homely tools of the farm: a spade, a plough, a rick, a rake, a scythe, a fold, and the horse and harness and team. Of household furnishings there are two pallets, the only reference to the interior of a home being the quite oblique one of the Cain and Abel poem, And long will stand the empty plate / And dinner will be cold. We learn one interior well, the grave's. We are told of its various aspect, feel, and affect. Until they come to the grave, the lads and lassies of Shropshire are rarely to be found indoors. The intimacy of enclosing walls is reserved for the dead.

We are not told much about the outsides of buildings; there is no architecture as such. There is the market place, the belfry with its bells, the tower with the town clock, the cottage, the barn, the jail, the church, the steeple, and the gallows-tree. We come to know the look of these cottages and churches and steeples and gallows and jails, not close-up, but silhouetted against the sky, or seen from a hilltop, or more distantly still, in the homesick memory.

Then there is the town whose name is Corve or Clee, Wenlock or Ludlow or Knighton or Teme, or the ancient four, Clunton, Clunbury, Clungunford and Clun; always the far-discovered town which, being named, takes on the dimension of sound and accent, but not of place. Perhaps it is well to remind ourselves of what Laurence Housman says about his brother's place-names, "When I reproached Alfred for his romantic falsification of local history, his explanation was that the place he really meant [poem 61] had an ugly name, so he substituted

Hughley."[17] And, he says, "A. E. H. admitted his choice of locality was often haphazard and sometimes fictitious."[18] And we should remember, too, that Bredon Hill is in Worcestershire, not in Shropshire at all. We learn from Housman's notes that Wenlock town was to have been Stourbridge town.[19] The names of Shropshire towns are poetry, not geography.

Blue is the favored color in Shropshire, as it is Keats' favorite. Perhaps blue is most poets' favorite color? One wonders, for the resemblance is otherwise not striking between the two poets in their color imagery, which is extremely rich in Keats and austere in Housman. There are eight blues in A Shropshire Lad, three greens, two reds, two roses, and one each of scarlet, brown, purple, and yellow. The blue is the azure of the distant sky, and the green, the green of the graveyard turf. The only color compounds are the two reds which are redcoats, and the two roses, which are rose-lipt, those rose-lipt maidens who are sleeping In fields where roses fade. Truly the nineteen unelaborated color mentions do not do much to heighten the imagery, whereas the two times the word coloured is used the image is made by it: in the coloured counties quoted above, and in "The Welsh Marches," When Severn down to Buildwas ran / Coloured with the death of man.

The glitter imagery for the out-of-doors--there is no indoor glitter in Shropshire--is as rich and ranging as Keats' own, and Keats loves glitter. There are nine golds and five silvers, the other glitter words of Shropshire being bright, shine, beam, gleam, glimmering, glittering, and sparkling. Its glitter and glow are viewed from afar, the gold and silver of sunrise and sunset, brilliance without warmth: sparkling to a cruel clime; glittering pastures; silver dusk; all the brooks ran gold.

There is another color dimension in Shropshire, its gray palette, whose words are shade, shadowed, dark, fade, white, black, bleach, and hueless. Here we find no such imperative for distance and impersonality, for there is: Wearing white for Eastertide; and there is Mute and dull of cheer and pale; and But wear it and it will not fade; and Bleach the bones of comrades slain. When it paints the hueless, the pale, the bleached, and the shadowed, the poet's brush moves close enough to lighten or darken a room--the grave; to paint a face--in death; close enough to touch, for death is the only intimacy.

Turning once again to the people, the lads and the lassies, the men and women of Shropshire, we recall that few of them are named, and we see that the mother and son and father and brother relation terms, fifteen of them in all, have not to do with family. For this is what happens with them: every mother's son means everyone; and brothers is used in the sense of fellow men; most of the sons are generalized, son of grief, The earth . . . / Sorrowed for the son she bore, the son of sorrow (this is the unknown suicide). There is the father, Joseph of Nazareth of course, of "The Carpenter's Son"; there is the mother of the Cain and Abel poem, My mother thinks us long away; and there are the fathers and sons of the first poem, "1887," Get you the sons your fathers got, hortatory to soldiers of the Queen. These account for ten of the family-relation names. The poem which has the most family names and which contains the remaining five relationship terms is "The Welsh Marches." Here is the speaker's father and here is his mother, here is my mother's marriage-bed, my mother's curse, and his mother's brother's grave. But this is the poem of many levels whose mother and father and brother are, at most, the imaginary, ancestral relatives of the speaker.

There are some nonfamilial relationship terms: sweetheart and bride and bridegroom. There are two sweethearts, ironical both: I cheer a dead man's sweetheart; I never knew a sweetheart spend her money on a chap. There are two brides and bridegrooms, but their and the graves' provenience makes them quite special: In the nation that is not / . . . the bridegroom . . . / Never turns him to the bride; and the lover who says I shall not find a bride, speaks truly, for this is the lover who takes his own life; and the Groom there was none to see, is he whose beloved precedes him to church, but to her own burial, not to their marriage.

The words of light endearment for women are my own, my pretty, and my dear. In "Bredon Hill," a poem of much tenderness, we find a more felt and a thrice repeated endearment, my love, and again, in the poem with the aspen which, over stile and stone / Was talking to itself alone, we encounter a tender my love, and a not untender another love. This poem, by the way, is a sort of modern evocation of the carpe diem mood and theme.

Fewer women than men there are, many fewer, only forty in all.[20] They come into twenty of the poems, in five of them merely in a passing phrase: the garland briefer than a girl's; The lads for the girls; girls go maying; woman bore me; every mother's son.[21] But in the other fifteen, a woman is central to feeling and meaning, and we find that she is always young, a girl.[22] In "The New Mistress," she is a sweetheart who has tired of her lover and rejects him, Sick I am to see you, will you never let me be? she says. And there is the friendly but wary one who, when her lover says, My love is true and all for you, answers him, Perhaps, young man, perhaps, and when he begs her, Be kind, have pity, dismisses him, Goodbye, young man, goodbye. One learns that Lovers' ills are all to buy, as well as all to sell; and that lovers should be loved again. So far, all is springtime and love on the far young edge of life. But death presses in, and the lover is no longer man alive, but is lying under the land he used to plough. He asks, Is my girl happy, / . . . has she tired of weeping / As she lies down at eve. And he is told, Ay, she lies down lightly, / She lies not down to weep. And so it is with Rose Harland, Rose walked with the better man, and knew that A lad that lives and has his will / Is worth a dozen dead. Death moves nearer. There are Two lovers looking to be wed; but before this can come about, she shall lie with earth above. Even the thoughtless young learn tenderness and a certain tender grief, With rue my heart is laden; and violence, too, for there is "The True Lover," Her heart to his she laid, while she questions him fearfully, Here upon my bosom prest / There beats no heart at all. And again, What is it falling on my lips, / My lad, that tastes of brine. Her lover answers her, 'tis blood, my dear / . . . the knife has slit / The throat across from ear to ear.

What are these women, and wherein do they fit the Shropshire vision of life and death? They are one with the landscape, with wind and sun and night, they are creatures of the fields and blowing flowers, innocently complaisant, and, like the flowers, beyond good and evil. They suit a young man's fancy while the blood runs gold, weaving their golden strands of youth and young love around the borders of friendship, for they are everything friendship and death are not: fickle and yielding and changing, and their meaning is mutability, the impermanence of everything in life, excepting only death.

What of The lads in their hundreds, the lads that will never be old? A good many of them are here, two hundred and three of them, and in fifty-one of the sixty-three poems.[23] In an autobiographical note Housman wrote, "The Shropshire Lad is an imaginary figure with something of my temper and view of life. Very little in the book is biographical."[24] Such, then, is the "I," the speaker, and we go to the poems where the speaker is, as it were, turned in on himself, to learn a little more of him. We find that, like the lassies and the other lads, he is young, a young man, a young yeoman, a silly lad. He shares the life weariness of the very young, See the son of grief at cricket / Trying to be glad. A blackbird sings to him as he is at work in the field, and its words are, Lie down, lie down, young yeoman, / What use to rise and rise? He gazes at the reflections in a clear pool--they are more perfect than life--and he wishes To strip and dive and drown. A Greek statue converses with him, saying, Courage, lad, 'tis not for long: / Stand, quit you like stone, be strong! And he cries in young anguish, Oh, why did I wake? When shall I sleep again?

This lad is a puritan, and there are poems of the aching struggle for control over himself. He speaks to his hand, Hand . . . / You and I must keep from shame / . . . the Shropshire name. He learns, too late, that the old man's advice was good, Give pearls away and rubies / But keep your fancy free; that His folly has not fellow / . . . That gives to man or woman / His heart and soul away. He finds the heats of hate and lust / In the house of flesh are strong, and he looks forward to death, where the hater hates no more; and where Lovers lying two and two / Ask not whom they sleep beside. It used to be with the dead as with him now, Fear contended with desire. And until he, too, attains his bed of mould, . . . fire and ice within me fight / Beneath the suffocating night.

The lad's tragic view is corroborated in nature where Spring will not wait the loiterer's time, where beauty is linked with transience and death. Already on the occasion of his twentieth birthday he thinks upon life's fleetingness as he gazes at the Loveliest of trees, the cherry. And in "The Lent Lily" he sings a song in a minor key, the old legend of the daffodil That dies on Easter day. His tragic view intensifies when seasons and flowers and trees are recalled in hopeless, terrible homesickness. There is The golden broom . . . / . . . Gold that I never see. There are those blue remembered hills / in the . . . land of lost content. The Lad is in London, pressed upon by a multitude too unhappy to be kind, and he recalls that at home he was companioned, The seasons range the country roads, and there Trod beside me, close and dear, / The beautiful and death-struck year, and his song becomes a lovely hymn to autumn.[25]

The tragic view reaches full and poignant expression in the poems of friendship. Friendship is, to the Shropshire Lad, life's one positive value; it alone makes death tragic. We find death invading the whole of the broad fabric of friendship, these two great verities interweaving their strands, twining one about the other.

There is really only one sort of friendship in Shropshire: friendship between young men. The lads, the carriers in heart and hand of this friendship, are one lad, an archetypal figure, strong in build, of controlled emotion, whose sexual expectations and expression belong still to an adolescent dreaming, but

who shows a plastic and various emotionality in the bitterness, the tender regard, and the love which are aspects of friendship.

There are twenty-nine poems of friendship. Among them there is the lad who goes to be a soldier, the familiar lad in scarlet clad, who is leaving for duty overseas where he will probably meet a hero's death; or the tense is the past one, and the events have already taken place. He is a savior, a hero, he is Severn's dead. He is handsome of face and handsome of heart, belonging to those fortunate fellows, / The lads that will die in their glory and never be old. He is Dear to friends and food for powder / Soldiers marching all to die, one of the lovely lads and dead and rotten.[26]

Then there are the friends and companions remembered from town or field or graveyard, honest lads and hale, the smart, the true, the poor, the young, the luckless, the kind, the singlehearted; twenty-three poems[27] about these golden friends, the lads I used to know. Some of these lads are in drinking songs of sorts, balladic in feeling, Look into the pewter pot / To see the world as the world's not. Some are full of the bravado and pseudo-toughness of sentiment appropriate only to the very young, as, I shall have lived a little while / Before I die forever, or, 'tis only thinking / Lays lads underground, or Dick lies long in the churchyard / And Ned lies long in jail. The tone is often hortatory, Square your shoulders, lift your pack, or the See my neck and save your own of the "Carpenter's Son" speaking from the gallows; and the nagging, ever-present sense of time's fleetingness obtrudes. Say, lad, have you things to do? Quick, while your day's at prime.

There is a taste for crude violence: here's a bloody hand to shake. Suicide is a part of this taste. To the young suicide he says, Shot? so quick, so clean an ending? This lyrical poem in praise of self-destruction was Housman's response to a newspaper account of the suicide of a Woolwich Cadet aged eighteen.[28] And there is, Play the man, stand up and end you. Hanging is also part of this taste. There are several hangings in Shropshire: the lover / That hanged himself for love; and there are the words gallows-trees, dangled, hang, and neck, words of hanging, not of crucifixion.

There are the poems in which the violence and the disillusionments of youth are left aside and in their place are pure compassion and pure love. "To an Athlete Dying Young," is one of these: Around whose . . . early laurelled head / Will flock . . . the strengthless dead. There is a graveside hymn of restrained evocative imagery, Bring, in this timeless grave to throw / Whatever will not flower again, / To give him comfort. And there is the tender Lie you easy, dream you light; and the fantasy, no longer earthbound, Warm with the blood of lads I know / Comes east the sighing air / . . . The names . . . blow soundless by.

Just to one side of the word friend stands the word lover, and to one side of the word like is love. Love and lover are in five of the poems of friendship,[29] carrying less emotional freight than like and friend, but only slightly less. The words love and lover are used thirty-seven times, one or both words coming into nineteen of the poems,[30] their heaviest concentration being in poem 16, whose eight short lines include five loves and lovers.[31] The correlation with death is high, death being in fourteen of the nineteen.[32]

Twelve of the nineteen speak unambiguously of love between a man and a woman;[33] seven do not make such designation explicit.[34]

In these seven poems, the speaker voices love for another whose sex is left ambiguous. This is not remarkable in lyric poetry, and we stop to comment on it in Housman because ambiguity is not ordinarily part of his language, which is not to say that many of his poems do not have layers of meanings; they do. It should perhaps be said here that customary critical usage is to "explain" the ambiguity as a latent homosexuality in Housman. This paper neither reads such meaning into the poems nor denies the possibility that it may be there. Its concern is with the poems as poetry, not as sources for guesses as to possible nonmanifest biographical content. This ambiguity of sex could have been part of Housman's strong sense of privacy. It could also have been aesthetic, never allowing the personal and particular to intrude on the feeling-tone of the poem--an ultimate stretch of the namelessness and facelessness we have noted already--for there fall within this group three passionate love poems: 15, the delicate, Look not in my eyes; 36, with its love and longing, White in the moon the long road lies; and 33, the tenderest poem of Shropshire, the fullest of love, the perfectest statement of the love of a friend for a friend, This long and sure-set liking / This boundless will to please; this poem bringing us to the ultimate boundary of friendship as a Shropshire Lad understood it, with only death ahead.

Indeed, death is all around us in Shropshire. It is in each of the twenty-nine poems of friendship, it is in all the poems excepting only nine.[35] Let us look first at its vocabulary. The direct words are die, the grave, hang, kill, slay, perish, shoot, and drown.[36]

There are fifty-five other words which mean death or the grave within the context of the poem. Lie is the most frequent of these words, being used thirty-one times in the meaning of death, twenty-three times in literal meaning. Sleep comes next. Of the nineteen sleeps, fifteen mean death. Still, night, and rest follow close. The grave is most often called a bed, a couch. The words are simple and unforced, all of them, but it is these words which are the backbone of A Shropshire Lad's rich metaphorical language.[37]

Live, and the words denoting inception or continuance of life, born, breath, breed, bear, birth, are the direct life words,[38] besides which there are thirteen different metaphorical life words. Save heads this list and is used in the sense of life, which is not surprising, given Shropshire's peculiar and pessimistic orientation. Stand is another favorite, as is rise.[39]

The many fewer words for life than for death indicate the formal side of a disproportion whose imbalance is really intrinsic; and the key to much of the imagery of death in Shropshire is the peculiarity of its life vocabulary. Life words are used to denigrate life, to belittle or deny it, or to emphasize, not life, but the death to which it leads.[40] There is a curve or progression of life negation, beginning perhaps with the word save, one of the two most frequent metaphors for life: themselves they could not save; If single thought could save; See my neck and save your own. A weary business is life. Even the Greek statue knows this, for it says, ere you stood up from rest, meaning, ere you were born. The other favorite metaphor for life is rise, and we find this

word used once in the meaning of life-hope, and six times in the meaning of life-weariness: What use to rise and rise, for, Rise man a thousand mornings / Yet down at last he lies. There is life's brevity: life is little room; it is but a flower; it is a ware that will not keep; it is Fields where glory does not stay. In a mounting rejection, there is disgust with life: it is worse than dust. There is despair: Let us endure an hour and see injustice done, and in the same poem, Oh, why did I awake?

At the top of the curve of negation, life words are used to mean death: stand on air and stood on air meaning hanged, and the rose up so early of "Bredon Hill" meaning died. In "The Immortal Part" the ordinary values attaching to life are inverted and given to death. For the whole of Shropshire, the life metaphors and figures of speech negate life three times as often as they affirm it, there being ten of affirmation, and thirty-one of negation.[41]

Even by conservative count, there are one hundred and thirty-two multiple-word metaphors for death.[42] There are nine poems which are without death words or metaphors,[43] but they too are close to death, being of falling tone and gentle for the most part. They tell of lovers' deceits, of the transitoriness of love, of homesickness and lonesomeness, of the pain of separation, and of nostalgia for a lost youth: Now, of my threescore years and ten, / Twenty will not come again; or, to tell the hours / That never are told again; or, Where the lad lies down to rest / Stands the troubled dream beside.

There are nine other poems whose subject is not death, but which contain, none-the-less, direct death words or metaphors.[44] These poems tell that unhappiness is the outcome of love and desire, and they are full of disillusionment and weariness with life. They go from light to blackest melancholy. Among them is the land of lost content, The mortal sickness of a mind / Too unhappy to be kind, and, Sea-deep, till doomsday morning, / Lie lost my heart and soul.

What do we find in the hard core of the remaining forty-five poems in which some aspect of death is central to their meaning? We find first of all that A Shropshire Lad does not shrink from violent death, taking hangings, shootings, knifings, stranglings, and poisonings in stride; but also that there is no sadism, no cruelty or torture, no morbid dwelling on pain, no prolongation of the death act. There is only pity for a lingering death or indeed for a life which lingers on past youth.

Ten poems give us the act of death, these accounting also for such violence as there is in Shropshire: there are fratricide; the soldier's ultimate sacrifice spelled out for us; war; rapine; and hemlock; hangings, and suicides or recommendations to suicide. The suicide group gives us the harsh and crass words, Take the bullet, slit the throat, Put the pistol to your head, stand up and end you. Strangely, it is one of the "hanging" poems which contains the gentle old folk metaphors for being hanged, Shepherded the moonlit sheep, and, keep / The flocks by moonlight there.

While suicide and hanging and the soldier's death are the favored deaths in Shropshire, their description remains for the most part undramatized and laconic. It is not the act which engages emotion and imaginative interest, it is rather death as state and condition. This aspect of death comes into more

than half of the poems--into thirty-two of them[45]--and is implicit in most of the others, determining the over-all feeling tone of the book.

In the poems of state and condition there is no murdering or hanging or suicide, but in their place there is the pervasive, inevitable, static everywhereness of death. Resignation is a dominant note, and doom--not black doom so much as inexorable doom. The words are freighted with unmovingness: lie, sleep, slumber, end, night, numb, stiff, cold, are some of them. The grave becomes a bed, a couch, a mound, a home, and the metaphorical language of death as state and condition becomes richer than for the act of death. Here cluster the poems of tribute to a beloved, the recollective poems. They are full of the sense of life's fleetingness, and of life's weariness, and the love they tell is a poignant love. Little lightness is in them anywhere except for brief, sardonic jocularity such as 'tis only thinking / Lays lads underground. Immanence of death, impermanence of life, pity, resignation, the wish to die, grief, an awareness of the dead in one's living world, in all of consciousness, and especially of the young dead and the untimely dead, are the stuff of these poems.

The harshness of imagery clinging to all but one, poem 9, of the act-of-death poems, gives way in the poems of resignation to a gentled description of death. Death is when the lips lack breath, when the journey's over. To die is to slip . . . away, to stand up no more, to go the way they will not return, to lay down your ill. Death is the land where all's forgot. No longer is the grave a place of dust, and marl, and clay, and rot. It may be in fields forgotten, but it may also be with clover clad, and by brooks; it may be a house, for Fred keeps the house. And it need not be lonely, for the athlete is Townsman of a stiller town, and the dead are part of a nation that is not.

These images strip the grave of some of its lonely solitude and the ever-changing imagery takes from death also its immobility, for in "Bredon Hill" the metaphors suggest movement: the dead lover rose up so early, and stole out unbeknown, and went to church alone. This begins to suggest living participation in death, and freedom, and motion. There is the poem which begins, The winds out of the west land blow, / . . . Winds warm with the blood of lads I know, and another, which has no death words, which tells of the wanderer who hears My soul that lingers sighing / About the glimmering weirs. Here are overtones of a persistent, loving, nostalgic memory which clings and lingers and goes on the wind. We are leaving aside immobility and resignation, and entering briefly into a state of exultation.

There are three poems of exultation in A Shropshire Lad, constituting in a sense its center and its climax, for they contain Housman's unique imaging of the triumph of death, making of death something affirmative and desirable. See poem 43, then 32, and finally, 42.

"The Immortal Part," poem 43, exalts and elevates death over life in a meter strong and firm enough to carry the almost frightening load of bold and radical metaphor, the meter itself being remarkable with iambic slipping over to trochaic, back and forth, with never a wobble of rhyme, rhythm, or emphasis. The poem contains forty-four lines and two hundred and seventy-eight words. To list meaningfully all of its twenty-one life and mortality metaphors, and its twenty-eight death and immortality metaphors, requires more than half of all its words, and parts or wholes of all but six of its lines.

Its elaborate conceit is to pair life with mortality, and death with immortality. Death is the vital force leading to immortality, an apotheosis accomplished with drastic directness, the thesis of the poem being that the mortal and the immortal parts of man are in necessary, ultimate conflict. Here we find no homesick, backward-looking tenderness for life; the point of view is wholly that of the skeleton, which is the immortal part. In the living state, so says this poem, the mortal part is master, the bones, hidden within, being perforce its sullen slaves, having to obey their restless master, wearily biding their time, checking off the days of life one by one, another night, another day, they say. For what is life? A little hour, a slough of sense, trouble sore. And what is mortal? Flesh and soul, the brain, the fire of sense, the smoke of thought, all these are mortal. But the goal is immortality, and the bones know a state better than life--death, endless night, ancient night, when eve and morn are gone, where there is no heat o' sun, no snowing winter wild. Death is rest for dying body and dying soul, and is the means by which the bones are freed. So the body is told it must Lie down, that is, must die. It must Bear the fruit, that is, it must decay. It must Bring to light, that is, it must fall away from the bones. Only then it may rest. The bones chide the living man: let flesh and soul be on with it, be slain, be cast, be laid, decay. For, and the tone turns commanding, every mother's son / Travails with a skeleton. The skeleton, the man of bone, is the eternal seed, brought at last to light; it is the child, born of death, decay, and dissolution. It is the birth / That shall last as long as earth, passionless and incorrupt, the stedfast and enduring bone. Astringent, cathartic, daemonic, triumphant, the crowding metaphors telescope into a single aesthetic of death.

Many artists have shared Housman's feeling for bone. Two contemporaries of his seem very close indeed to him. There is Lehmbruck the sculptor whose sensitive and still figures, emaciated and elongated, reveal beneath their barely-covering skins the almost too sentient and dominating skeleton. There is Georgia O'Keeffe whose canvases of surrealist whiteness and clarity and stillness, with their ribs and skulls scoured clean by sun and sand and time become "The Immortal Part" translated into the language of paint.

"The Immortal Part" is a tour de force by which the inescapable sequence of life, death, flesh-to-dust and bone-laid-bare, becomes a triumphal, instead of a tragic, progression. It is a slow triumph, one of waiting and patience, travail, and struggle, and it is confined inexorably and forever to the grave.

The other two poems of exaltation are outside the grave, which they escape and seemingly forget. Number 32 begins, From far, from eve and morning, / And yon twelve-winded sky, / The stuff of life to knit me / Blew hither: here am I. Brief, compassionate and tender, its sounds and its words, fragile as moth wings, leave their message on the air as they blow by, a breath of somewhere, something, which is beyond struggle and violence and doom, beyond eternity with its endless night, beyond birth and life and death, but tied to life by a succoring love, Take my hand quick and tell me, / What have you in your heart; and not wholly freed from the gentle melancholy we have come to know so well in Shropshire, Ere to the wind's twelve quarters / I take my endless way.

To be blowing free, to be part of the twelve-winded sky, is to be a long, long way from the grave. But life in its imperfection continues to cloud the

perfect enjoyment of death, and it is only in "The Merry Guide," that we learn of such perfect enjoyment, for here life and loved ones are forgotten, as well as the grave. This is how it comes about: Once in the wind of morning / I ranged the thymy wold, says our speaker. Hermes appears to him and beckons him to follow. He follows and is led Across the glittering pastures and By blowing realms of woodland, on and ever on With the great gale we journey / That breathes from gardens thinned, / Borne in the drift of blossoms / Whose petals throng the wind, becoming one midst the fluttering legion / Of all that ever died, finding the glory and beauty of the world in sun and wind and the glint and gleam of an ever-changing landscape. Lovely and singing and unalloyed, this poem evokes a state free from the pain of love and friendship and memory, from aloneness and the grave, from life, and from living and dying.

Is this, then, not a perfect felicity? No. The speaker asks Hermes, Oh, whence . . . and whither? and, Hermes smiled and would not say, and we learn a little farther on that Hermes has lips that brim with laughter / But never once respond, and the poem begins to ring with silence. Hermes may smile and point his wand toward the shining sun and the blowing wind and the leaves whose coloring in death reveal a beauty unknown to their living greens, but the silence remains, and the glittering world is again far-discovered, no longer intimate. This following forever in silence and mindlessly after the blowing beauty Of all that ever died would pall as do all fantasies of endlessly repeating glory. It is not and is not meant as a way of life or death, it is rather a joyous dream which looks at the dead through a gayly colored prism, shutting out for the duration of its song whatever fetters perfect and selfish enjoyment, shutting out memory and love.

These poems of exaltation-in-death add imaginative dimensions to the poetry and the imagery of death. It is interesting, after the heavy metaphorical freight of "The Immortal Part," that the twelve-winded sky and "The Merry Guide" should do without any life and death metaphors. A "twelve-winded sky" is too airy to pin down to life or death, and "The Merry Guide" is, as it were, itself a single metaphor of death. Together, these three poems would seem to suggest that if the tragic view is wide and bold enough, even death may be played with now and then, tossed and turned and reversed, seen in brightness and in darkness, seen straight but variously; a sophisticated way of looking at death which in our own mid-century may be an appropriate and even a necessary way for us to learn.

Some moments of exaltation there must be from time to time to refresh the everyday fatalistic and ironic view. Refreshed, we turn back again to our awareness of others, to our concern for the living; to our intimacies and our shared griefs and pain and to our sense of the reality of the grave.

This we take to be what A Shropshire Lad says. It is to a grave the Lad first leads us, and it is beside a grave that he takes his leave of us. It is not on the wind or in pursuit of Hermes' feathered wand that we remember him, but standing quietly in the shadow of Hughley Steeple, contemplating with compassion and irony and love the graves of his sleeping friends. I shall ne'er be lonely / Asleep with these or those.

ENDNOTES

1. This finding is from a count made by the authors of the present paper.

2. A Collection of Essays (Doubleday Anchor Books, 1954), p. 226.

3. Ibid., p. 230.

4. Ibid., p. 228.

5. Orwell cites from poems 8, 9, and 52, of A Shropshire Lad; and from poem 27, of Last Poems.

6. Arnold Toynbee, A Study of History, Vol. VI, cites from poems 7, 12, 31, 32, 42, and 48, of A Shropshire Lad, and from poems 3, 4, and 7, of Last Poems; in Vol. VII, from poem 37, of Last Poems; and in Vol. IX, from poem 48 of A Shropshire Lad.

7. Originally in Horizon, republished in The Making of a Poem (London, 1955), pp. 157-165.

8. Laurence Housman, A. E. H. Some Poems, Some Letters, and a Personal Memoir by his Brother (London, 1937), p. 71.

9. Ibid., pp. 71 and 72.

10. The Collected Poems of A. E. Housman (New York, 1940), p. 253.

11. Poems 1, 5, 11, 23, 26, 28, 53.

12. Poems 3, 8, 32, 37.

13. Poems 2, 7, 17, 20, 39, 40.

14. Poems 42, 47, 60. Handclasps in 3, 8, 32, 37.

15. A woman's voice in poems 5, 34, 53; a man's in 13, 27, 62; sighs in 5, 6, 8, 15, 38, 52. There are twelve sighs, the commonest wordless sound; other wordless human sounds in 11, 19, 24, 25, 28, 38, 53, 56, 62. Nonhuman sounds in 7, 21, 26, 38, 43, 51.

16. No landscape in poems 6, 13, 18, 24, 34, 47, 51, 56, 57.

17. Op. cit., p. 82.

18. Ibid., p. 225.

19. Ibid., p. 255.

20. Vocabulary distribution is: girl 8; my love 5; mother 4; maiden 3; woman, lady, lass, bride, sweetheart, Queen, my dear 2 each; mistress, slave, my own, my pretty, she, Rose Harland, 1 each. Total 40.

21. Poems 19, 23, 29, 35, 43.

22. Poems 1, 5, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 21, 25, 26, 27, 28, 34, 53, 54.

23. Vocabulary distribution is: lad 66; man 56; friend 28; fellow 8; comrade 6; lover (male) 6; soldier 6; boy, chap, 3 each; youth, yeoman, stranger, 2 each; coward, drummer, enemy, keeper, redcoat, sergeant, sexton, shepherd, slayer, 1 each; and there are Terence, Maurice, Fred, Dick and Ned, and Mithridates. The poems with no lad except the speaker are 2, 17, 18, 20, 21, 29, 30, 32, 33, 36, 39, 40.

24. Laurence Housman, op. cit., p. 71.

25. With these may belong also 52, "The wanderer halts and hears / My soul that lingers sighing / About the glimmering weirs."

26. Poems 1, 3, 22, 23, 35, 56.

27. Poems 4, 8, 9, 19, 24, 32, 33, 37, 38, 44, 45, 46, 47, 49, 50, 54, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63.

28. Laurence Housman, op. cit., pp. 103 and 104.

29. Poems 8, 33, 47, 57, 61.

30. Poems 5, 6, 8, 10, 11, 12, 15, 16, 18, 21, 26, 28, 33, 36, 47, 48, 53, 57, 61. Love 21 times; lover 16 times.

31. Poem 26 also contains five, but it is twenty lines long.

32. Poems 8, 11, 12, 15, 16, 21, 26, 28, 33, 47, 48, 53, 57, 61.

33. Poems 5, 6, 8, 10, 12, 21, 26, 28, 47, 48, 53, 61.

34. Poems 11, 15, 16, 18, 33, 36, 57.

35. Poems 2, 5, 10, 13, 18, 36, 39, 52, 55.

36. Die 18, dead 16, death 4, dying 3; the grave 12; hang 7, kill 5, slay 5, perish 3, shot 3, drown 2; total 78.

37. We cite first the total occurrences of each word, then the occurrences meaning death. Lie 54-31, sleep 19-15, still 28-8, night 20-6, rest 10-5, bed 7-5, dust 5-4, earth 12-3, doomsday 3-3, clay 3-3, end, ending 6-3, home 20-3, stand 9-2, couch 2-2, decay 2-2, strangle 2-2. Single occurrences, all meaning death or the grave, twenty nouns: ashes, birth, bourn, child, churchyard, darnel, dwelling, fruit, gravel, headstone, hearse, lintel, mound, seed, sill, spade, threshold, tombstone, town, underground; ten verbs: bear, bereave, blow, bring, cast, dangle, labour, rot, smother, travail; nine adjectives: ancient, clean, cold, endless, eternal, long, numb, rotten, stiff.

38. Live 9, life 4, born 4, breath, breathe 4 (meaning life, 3 others in direct meaning), living 3, alive 2, breed 2, bear 2, birth 1. Total 31.

39. We cite first the total occurrences of each word, then the occurrences meaning life: save 7-7, stand 9-7, rise, arise 7-7, blood, bloody 14-3, day 11-3, wanderer 2-2, warm 2-2, quick 6-1, journey 3-1, brain 2-1, heal 2-1, knock 1-1, wake 1-1.

40. Words from the life vocabulary used in inverse or negative sense are: rise 6 times, save 3, stood 2, and brain, journey, live, and wanderer, once each.

41. Life metaphors of affirmation in poems 4, 12, 24, 25, 27, 31, 34, 59. Life metaphors of negation in poems 2, 4, 5, 7, 12, 19, 43, 44, 51.

42. In abstracting and counting life and death metaphors of phrase, clause, and sentence length, we have tried to abide by Housman's punctuation, which is particular and accurate. Where he has set off his metaphors from the another by punctuation, we have followed him and counted two or more; where he has kept several possible figures within a single unit of punctuation, we have counted one only. We have omitted figurative phrases which are so much a part of a sentence containing direct death words as to make their indirect sense, however real in itself, superfluous or induced rather than intrinsic.

43. Poems 2, 5, 10, 13, 18, 36, 39, 52, 55.

44. Poems 6, 14, 15, 17, 20, 22, 34, 40, 41.

45. Poems 1, 3, 4, 7, 11, 12, 19, 21, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 29, 30, 31, 33, 35, 37, 38, 46, 48, 49, 50, 51, 54, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 63.

NOTE: The edition of A Shropshire Lad used for the analysis and word count was in all cases: The Collected Poems of A. E. Housman, New York: Henry Holt and Co., Inc., 1940.