

Late Spring

This year winter has stayed longer than usual. The seas are warmer, the Arctic vortex has shifted, and the currents of cold air have veered southward. Yet spring has finally arrived. The snow recedes. Gray and granular patches still remain, but they are not for long. Uncovered, the grass slowly turns from brown to green. Some of the trees, willows in particular, have gained a light green mistiness. Promise of leaves. The creeks are awash with runoff water. Wild waves now ride where once was stillness, ice and rocks. Red-winged blackbirds have returned to join the stay-at-home robins. Occasional cardinals flaunt their crimson. Mallards and geese find stretches of open water in the ice. A peregrine falcon circles slowly. Scattered snowdrops break the ground. Intermittent crocuses begin to show in pale purple and white, and an isolated daffodil braves the cold. The stores are full of cut flowers from countries where spring comes early or from greenhouses where summer is eternal.

The Roman poet Horace (65-8 BCE) described what will happen now in the seventh poem of his fourth book of Odes (Putnam, 1986; Quinn, 1969).

*Diffugere nives, redeunt iam gramina campis
arboribusque comae,
mutat terra vices et decrescentia ripas
flumina praetereunt,
Gratia cum Nymphis geminisque sororibus audet
ducere nuda choros
Inmortalia ne speres, monet annus et alium
quae rapit hora diem*

The full Latin text and vocabulary are available at the Cambridge Latin Anthology website.

A. E. Housman (1859-1936), author of *A Shropshire Lad* (1896) and renowned professor of Latin (1892-1936) considered this poem “the most beautiful poem in ancient literature” (Housman/Burnett, 2002, p. 427). He translated the opening lines

The snows are fled away, leaves on the shaws
And grasses in the mead renew their birth,
The river to the river-bed withdraws,
And altered is the fashion of the earth.
The Nymphs and Graces three put off their fear
And unapparelled in the woodland play.
The swift hour and the brief prime of the year
Say to the soul, Thou wast not born for aye.

Housman’s complete translation is available at Poetry X

The prominent rhymes and the archaic words fall uneasily on the modern ear, but fit the style of late Victorian poetry. Free verse might better suit the season that liberates the world from winter.

Scattering the snow, grass returns to the fields
and foliage to the trees.
Earth changes seasons, and the rivers subside
to flow within their banks.
Grace, with her twin-sister nymphs, dares
to lead the naked dancing.
Hope not for immortality, warns the year
whose passing takes away our days.

Rosanna Warren provides a translation (McClatchy, 2002) that quietly plays on the Latin connotations

All gone, the snow: grass throngs back to the fields,
the trees grow out new hair;
earth follows her changes, and subsiding streams
jostle within their banks.
The three graces and the greenwood nymphs,

naked, dare to dance.

You won't live always, warn the year and the hour
seizing the honeyed day.

Images of the dancing Graces were popular in Roman Italy. The picture on the right shows a fresco from Pompeii, now in the Naples Museum of Archeology. As fluidly as the dance changes meter, the mood of the poem changes. The end of winter highlights the passage of time. And time leads us toward our death. *Inmortalia ne speres;* hope not for immortality. We



shall die just as all have come before, be they kings or poets, good or bad, rich or poor.

Horace then poses to his friend Torquatus the essential question and its obvious answer:

*Quis scit an adiciant hodiernae crastina summae
tempora di superi?
Cuncta manus avidas fugient heredis, amico
quae dederis animo*

Who knows whether the gods will add tomorrow
to the sum of our todays?

Everything that you can give now to your beloved soul
will escape your heir's greedy clutches.

These ideas run through all of Horace, and indeed through much of Latin poetry: the transience of life, and the need to live it to its fullest.

From Ode I:4

Vitae summa brevis spem nos vetat incohare longam

Life's short span forbids us to entertain long-term hopes.

From Ode I:11

Carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero

Seize the day, and trust as little as possible in the future.

From Ode II:4, addressed to Postumus

Eheu fugaces, Postume, Postume

labuntur anni.

Alas, Postumus, the fleeting years slip by!

The most striking translation of these last lines is by R. H. Barham, an English cleric of the early 19th century writing under the name of Thomas Ingoldsby.

Years glide away and are lost to me, lost to me!

A marginal note for Ode IV:7 in Rudyard Kipling's personal edition of Horace (Carrington, 1978) reads:

If all that ever Man had sung
In the audacious Latin Tongue
Had been lost – and This remained
All, through this might be regained.

Horace's suggestion that his friend Torquatus should forget about the future and focus on today is hammered home by reference to the judgment that follows after death.

When thou descendest once the shades among,
The stern assize and equal judgment o'er,
Not thy long lineage nor thy golden tongue,
No, nor thy righteousness, shall friend thee more.

Though not specifically translated by Housman, the Latin poem refers to Minos, the mythical king of Knossos in Crete, who

arranged the sacrifice to the Minotaur. In some Roman versions of the afterlife, Minos became on his death the judge for all who die, deciding where in Hades each soul shall reside. Dante's *Inferno* placed Minos at the entrance to the second circle of the Inferno. In 1827 William Blake conceived him thus:



Dante and Vergil are on the left. Beyond Minos is the second circle of hell where the sinners who succumbed to lust are whirled around forever in the winds of passion. Among them are Paolo and Francesca of Rimini, who will recount to Dante the sad tale of their forbidden love.

Diffugere nives concludes with the statement that no mortal ever escapes from the underworld. Even the Goddess Diana could not release Hippolytus from Hades. Nor could Hercules free Pirithous. This latter story had special meaning for Alfred Edward Housman.

At university, Housman had fallen utterly in love with Moses Jackson, a fellow student at St John's College, Oxford. In

many ways Jackson was the opposite of Housman: scientist rather than classicist, athlete rather than aesthete, heterosexual rather than homosexual. On their final exams at Oxford in 1881, Jackson obtained a first in science whereas Housman failed. Housman was perhaps troubled by his youthful passions. Yet he also considered much of the curriculum irrelevant to his interests. He simply did not care about the philosophy he was supposed to have studied. After subsequent cramming, Housman finally obtained a Pass degree, and took a lowly clerical position in the Patent Office in London.

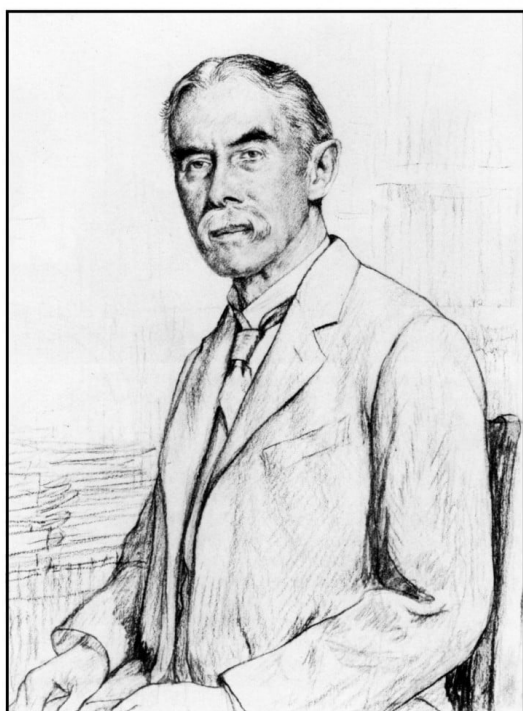
Working independently of any institution, Housman quickly became the most accomplished Latin scholar of his generation, publishing brilliant papers on the poems of Propertius and other Roman authors. On the basis of these contributions he was appointed as Professor of Latin at University College in London in 1892. He became Professor of Latin at Trinity College in Cambridge in 1911.

Housman published a book of poems *A Shropshire Lad* in 1896. The book was brought out at his own expense and did not sell very well at first. However, during the Boer Wars and the Great War, the songs of lost innocence, simple patriotism, unrequited love and early death came to represent the age.

Despite an early quarrel soon after graduation, Jackson continued his friendship with Housman, Yet it was a completely unequal relationship, Housman remaining passionately in love with his heterosexual friend. Jackson moved to India 1887 married in 1889, and then moved to Canada in 1911. Housman and Jackson maintained an active correspondence until Jackson's death from cancer in 1923. Housman published his second book of verse *Late Poems* (1922) in order that his friend might see his writings before his death.

For Housman, Moses Jackson was like the great Theseus, the brave and beautiful son of the god Poseidon, and the hero who slew the minotaur. Housman was like Pirithous, the king of the

Lapiths, who became fast friends with Theseus. Late in their life, the pair embarked on a foolhardy venture to steal Persephone from Hades. They were both arrested and fastened by chains to the Seat of Forgetfulness. When Heracles later came to Hades to capture the three-headed dog Cerberus, he was able to release Theseus from his bondage, but he could not dislodge Pirithous. Persephone returns annually from Hades in the spring, but Pirithous remains forever frozen.



In a way, Housman's life remained forever fixed in his unclaimed and unrequited love for Jackson (Graves, 1979: Stoppard, 2006). Tom Stoppard's play *The Invention of Love* (1997) considers the anguish of this life. After Jackson left for India, Housman devoted himself to dry textual scholarship. He wrote about Juvenal and Lucan, and wittily criticized the writings of others. The 1926 portrait of Housman by Francis Dodd shows a restrained professor with an acerbic eyebrow.

One of Housman's major works was a five-volume critical edition of the *Astronomicon* of Manilius, a relatively unknown Roman author. This is a work of poetic astrology, with no relevance to science, and little meaning as poetry. The first

volume came out in 1903 and the fifth in 1933. The first contains a Latin dedication to “my comrade Jackson, who pays no heed to these writings.” The final lines of the poem (in a recent translation by A. E. Stallings, 2012) read

I send these lines to you who went
Where stars rise in the Orient,
From here where constellations sink
Below the ocean’s western brink.
Take them: for that day will come
To add us to the canceled sum
And give our bones to earth to rot
(For we have no immortal lot,
And souls that will not last forever)
And the chain of comrades sever.

The “canceled sum” recall’s Horace’s “sum of our todays.” The “chain of comrades” recalls the chains that bound Pirithous to the Seat of Forgetfulness.

In the poems that were collected by his brother and published after his death in *More Poems*, Housman wrote:

Shake hands, we shall never be friends; give over:
I only vex you the more I try.
All’s wrong that ever I’ve done or said,
And nought to help it in this dull head:
Shake hands, goodnight, goodbye.

But if you come to a road where danger
Or guilt or anguish or shame’s to share,
Be good to the lad that loves you true
And the soul that was born to die for you,
And whistle and I’ll be there.

The poem, which dates back to 1893 (Housman/Burnett, 1997, p 445), concerns a quarrel which led to Housman and Jackson becoming temporarily estranged. The exact nature of the quarrel is unknown but probably concerned their out-of-balance

relationship.

Our human lot is to die. Before we die we can fall in love. Often this provides happiness. The year moves from winter into spring. Sometimes love triggers anguish. Even the happiest of loves comes to an end. Winter inevitably returns.

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Sense of Sin

Regret is an essentially human emotion. We make mistakes. If the mistake is without serious consequence we may just feel foolish; if it shows us as less than ideal we might feel shame; if it causes others to suffer we feel guilty; if it contradicts the law of god we feel a sense of sin. This is an overly simplistic taxonomy of what might be called the negative social sensations, in contrast to such positive sensations as friendship, compassion and love.

Social sensations provide the basis for religion. In the Eastern religions, our fate (*karma*) in this life and in later reincarnations is determined by how well we have followed the way of justice (*dharma*). In the monotheistic religions that come from Abraham, however, justice has a personal edge. Wrongdoing becomes a sin against God's law and incurs his wrath.

Sin and punishment come together. The Hebrew language uses several words for sin. In the story of Cain's murder of Abel, *hata* describes the sin waiting to be enacted, and *avon* the sin once committed. Each word denotes the punishment as well as the offence. Thus Cain's response to his banishment can be translated as either "My punishment is too great to bear" or

“My sin is too great to be forgiven” in the sense that the sin might be “borne away” (Anderson, 2009). William Blake’s tempera painting of 1826 shows Cain interrupted by his parents as he was trying to bury his murdered brother (an episode not in the biblical retelling of the legend). The setting sun and dark clouds highlight the agony of sin, as Cain burns with his guilt.



Punishment occurs both now and in the afterlife. However, sinners often prosper in this life and the innocent often suffer. The human sense of justice requires that this be corrected in the afterlife. All religions therefore have some concept of judgment. The righteous will be received into heaven whereas the evil will be consigned to eternal damnation where “their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched” (Isaiah 66:24).

The Bible uses several metaphors for sin (Anderson, 2009). Sin can be conceived of as a “stain” to be washed away by sincere repentance. This process is often represented by cleansing rituals such as baths and baptism. A sin against another person might be considered as a “debt,” and restitution or

compensation might be offered to erase the debt. Most often, sin is a “burden” that “weighs” us down. Exactly how this metaphor works is not clear. Perhaps the burden represents the load we must carry when we are indentured to work off our debt. We can be relieved of this burden if it is transferred to someone or something else.

Perhaps the weight represents the sin that will be placed in the scales of judgment. The writing on the wall at Belshazzar’s feast stated “Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting.” (Daniel 5:27). In Ancient Egyptian representations of the judgment, such as the following illustration from a Book of the Dead of 1275 BCE (British Museum), our heart (in the urn on the left) is weighed against a feather (on the right). The illustration shows the newly deceased (in white) being brought by the jackal-headed Anubis to the scales of justice (Maat) which are read by the ibis-headed Thoth. Osiris will then determines whether the soul is are accepted into paradise or consigned to oblivion (being devoured by the crocodile-headed Ammit who waits beside the scales).



Humanity has evolved many different means to deal with sin and punishment. God might be appeased by offerings and sacrifices. Rituals of sacrifice seem universal to all human religions (Burkert, 1996; Hubert & Mauss, 1899). Why is unclear. Perhaps

sacrifice was initially a way for human beings to share the benefits of the hunt or the harvest with the forces that had allowed their success. Perhaps it was a way to get the attention of the gods. Yet how these purposes evolved into a means to atone for wrongdoing is unknown.

Early Judaism used both sacrifice and scapegoat to attenuate the effects of sin. The high-priest would cast lots over two goats. One would be sacrificed. The goat that escaped this fate would become the "scapegoat:"

And Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions in all their sins, putting them upon the head of the goat, and shall send him away by the hand of a fit man into the wilderness:

And the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a land not inhabited: and he shall let go the goat in the wilderness. (Leviticus 16: 21-22)

The word translated as wilderness is Azazel, Custom considers this a mountain in the Judean desert (*Jabel Muntar* in Arabic), where the goat was pushed off a cliff. The ritual of the scapegoat bespeaks a finite God. Our sins are consigned to a place hidden from the sight of God. Modern Judaism uses neither sacrifice nor scapegoat. Yom Kippur – the day of atonement – involves prayer, repentance, and charity.

Repentance involves acknowledging the sin (confession), professing regret for its occurrence (contrition), and resolving not to do so again (renunciation). Acts of penance might be performed to demonstrate the sincerity of the repentance, and to reduce the required punishment (expiation). Such acts may reduce worldly pleasure and increase spiritual insight (fasting, flagellation, pilgrimage), improve the life of others (almsgiving, voluntary work, forgiving others), or

appease the anger of God (offerings, sacrifice).

The Christian religion has evolved a complex philosophy of sin and punishment. This derives mainly from the writings of the Apostle Paul some twenty or thirty years after the death of Jesus and Saint Augustine in the early 5th century (Fredriksen, 2012). Augustine argued against Pelagius, who proposed that we were born innocent and sinned only when we freely choose evil over good; and against Origen, who suggested that an all-merciful God could forgive everyone. Augustine considered humanity as inherently sinful. We inherit this from Adams's initial act of disobedience – the original sin – in eating from the Tree of Knowledge. Even though we might try to be good we cannot help ourselves and are subject to death and damnation. A merciful God, however, sent his son as a sacrifice to atone for our sins. Believing in Christ thus allows us to escape our just punishment.

Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life.

For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous (Romans 5:18-19)

The idea of original sin was not part of Jesus' teachings. God's sacrifice of his son to redeem the sinful provided Paul with a way to reconcile himself to the ignominious death of Christ on the Cross.

The concept of Christ's death as an atonement for humanity's sin was the subject of Saint Anselm's book *Cur deus homo* (*Why God became man*), completed in 1098 CE (Anderson, 2009). The doctrine of atonement is believed by many of the Protestant Churches. The Roman Catholic Church proposes that Christ redeems man through his example rather than by his sacrifice.

To believe in Christ is to follow his teachings.

Despite the fact that Christ died to save sinners from damnation, the fires of hell have remained alight for those who neither repent of their sins nor follow Christ. Even true believers still need to be cleansed of their sins before being admitted to paradise. In the 12th century, the Roman Catholic Church proposed Purgatory as a place for this purification. Eastern Orthodox churches also believe in an intermediate state between death and salvation, but call this Hades. Roman Catholics find some justification for their belief in 2 Maccabees 12:45, which urges prayers that the dead might be delivered of their sins. Protestant churches consider this book apocryphal and reject purgatory as without scriptural justification.



Belief in purgatory is no exception to the general rule that untested doctrines become more ornate with time. The duration and severity of the purification process can be attenuated by the prayers of the living, and the intercession of the saints. The illustrated painting by Luca Giordano in the Venetian church of San Pietro di Castello (around 1650) shows the Virgin Mary selecting souls to be released from the refining fires of Purgatory. Time in purgatory could also be shortened by purchasing an "indulgence." This would allot to the sinner some portion of the accumulated merit of the saints and martyrs in return for a donation to the church. Charging for indulgences was one of the main triggers for the Reformation.

The ancient idea of the scapegoat persists in various forms. Recently, the poet Thomas Lynch (2011) has based the character of Argyle, the "sin-eater," on funeral customs present until not long ago in Christian parishes. Through a distorted Eucharistic ritual involving the drinking of beer and the eating of bread, Argyle would take upon himself the sins of the deceased. Though a social outcast, Argyle provided necessary insurance against the fires of purgatory.

But still they sent for him and sat him down
amid their whispering contempts to make
his table near the dead man's middle,
and brought him soda bread and bowls of beer
and candles which he lit against the reek
that rose off that impertinent cadaver
though bound in skins and soaked in rosewater.
Argyle eased the warm loaf right and left
and downed swift gulps of beer and venial sin
then lit into the bread now leavened with
the corpse's cardinal mischiefs, then he said
"Six pence, I'm sorry." And the widow paid him.

The doctrine of original sin can give Christianity a very bleak outlook. Karl Barth considered religious persons as those who accept that they are composed of both spirit and flesh, that the spirit may seek to be good but that the desires of the flesh will inevitably lead to sin.

Conflict and distress, sin and death, the devil and hell, make up the reality of religion. So far from releasing men from guilt and destiny, it brings man under their sway... Religion is neither a thing to be enjoyed nor a thing to be celebrated: it must be borne as a yoke which cannot be removed. Religion is not a thing to be desired or extolled: it is a misfortune which takes fatal hold upon some men, and is by them passed on to others; it is the misfortune which assailed John the Baptist in the desert, and drove him out to preach repentance and judgement. (Barth, 1918, p. 258).

This is the religion of original sin. It is not easy to accept. Where in this misfortune is found the joy of God? Where in the misery is "the peace of God which passeth all understanding" (Philippians 4:7). This should come from the salvation available through the sacrifice of Christ. The darkness makes the light more obvious, but the darkness remains.

Philosophy has considered sin in different terms from religion. Descartes' *Fourth Meditation: Of the True and the False* (1642) considered man as "intermediate between God and nought." Our understanding exceeds our ability. This leads to error: we choose "the evil for the good, or the false for the true." This evaluation of humankind was extended by Pascal in the 72nd of his *Pensées*:

For in fact what is man in nature? A Nothing in comparison with the Infinite, an All in comparison with the Nothing, a mean between nothing and everything. Since he is infinitely removed from comprehending the extremes, the end of things and their beginning are hopelessly hidden from him in an impenetrable secret, he is equally incapable of seeing the Nothing from which he was made, and the Infinite in which he is swallowed up.

More recent discussions consider human "finitude." We are limited in our thought and action. The good escapes us even as we try to attain it. Paul Ricoeur considers us as *Fallible Man* (1965). We have only a single point of view, even though we can acknowledge the possibility of a more encompassing perspective. Intriguingly, Ricoeur uses the word "transgress" in a double sense: on the one hand, to break of a moral law; on the other hand, to transcend our limitations. Sin is thus a narrative whereby we can consider our limitations. Salvation and damnation are metaphors whereby we can urge ourselves to exceed these limitations.

Sin might be better considered in a social rather than a

religious context. We should think more about a just society than about divine obedience, more about the present state of affairs than about an imagined afterlife. We should evaluate wrongdoing in courts of justice rather than in churches. We should no longer tolerate the fulminations of the celibate about sexual matters in which they have no experience. Mutual respect and tolerance should be the goals of a pluralistic society. Greed and exploitation are far greater enemies to social welfare than blasphemy and apostasy.

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