Sub Regno Cynarae

Sketch of Ernest Dowson by William Rothenstein in early 1890s

Ernest Dowson was born in 1867 into a prosperous family in London. His father owned a dock, but had more interest in literature than in business. Ernest spent two and a half years at Oxford, but he did not take a degree, leaving in 1888. The dock fell into debt, and the family became poor. His father took his own life in 1894, his mother following suit a few months later. Ernest Dowson became a homeless, alcoholic poet. He consorted with prostitutes. His most famous poem recalls the shadow of an earlier love:

Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae

Last night, ah, yesternight, betwixt her lips and mine
There fell thy shadow, Cynara! thy breath was shed
Upon my soul between the kisses and the wine;
And I was desolate and sick of an old passion,
Yea, I was desolate and bowed my head:
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

All night upon mine heart I felt her warm heart beat,
Night-long within mine arms in love and sleep she lay;
Surely the kisses of her bought red mouth were sweet;
But I was desolate and sick of an old passion,
When I awoke and found the dawn was gray:
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

I have forgot much, Cynara! gone with the wind,
Flung roses, roses riotously with the throng,
Dancing, to put thy pale lost lilies out of mind;
But I was desolate and sick of an old passion,
Yea, all the time, because the dance was long:
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

I cried for madder music and for stronger wine,
But when the feast is finished and the lamps expire,
Then falls thy shadow, Cynara! the night is thine;
And I am desolate and sick of an old passion,
Yea, hungry for the lips of my desire:
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

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The Latin quotation is from Horace’s Ode IV:1: “I am not the same as when I was ruled by the good Cynara.” Dowson was very familiar with the Roman poets. Although he did not finish his degree, he had distinguished himself in Latin in his years at Oxford.

The subject of Horace's ode is not the same as that of Dowson's poem. Horace is asking Venus to have mercy on him and not to tempt him with new passions, now that he is in his fifties and not the man he was. He tells Venus to attend to the prayers of younger and more able lovers. Yet he is unable to stop the tears and tongue-tied state brought on by thoughts of their present loves and remembrance of his past. His erotic stumbling has run alongside a creative slowing, ten years having passed since the Horace's last book of poems. The ode thus concerns his creative as well as his amorous activities – Cynara was his muse as well as lover (Putnam, 1986).

Furthermore, a sense of impending death edges his new poems. Horace was to die in the year 8 B.C. at the age of 57. Horace's most famous poem *Diffugere neves* is the seventh ode in this fourth book: "Who knows whether the high Gods will add more tomorrows to the sum of our todays?" (translation Shepherd). Nevertheless, different though they are, both Horace's ode IV:1 and Dowson's poem tell of the passage of youth and ability, and the shadow of the past that falls between the present moment and its enjoyment.

Cynara was a quondam mistress of Horace. She is referred to only occasionally in his poems and the letters. She is described as mischievous (*proterva*) and greedy (*rapax*). Horace remembers that in his youth he must have been both very handsome and very eloquent to have charmed Cynara "without a present" (Radice, in introduction to Horace, 1983, p.34). She died young. In Ode IV:13, Horace remarks cruelly on the aging of her successor Lyce: "To Cynara, the fates allowed few years, but Lyce shall be long preserved, an aged crow." It is not clear whether Cynara left Horace before she died. My intuition is that she did and that his "sad laments" at her leaving combined both real mourning and the bitterness of a rejected lover.

The actual situation in Dowson's poem shows more similarity to the relations between Propertius, another Augustan poet, and

his mistress Cynthia (Benediktson, 1989). As Plarr (1914, p.57) succinctly states in his reminiscences about Dowson's poem: "Horace suggested, but Propertius inspired." Cynthia and Propertius experienced both high passion and extreme jealousy, being most in love when they were unfaithful to each other. In Propertius' last book of odes, he describes how he retaliated after Cynthia had deceived him: with Phyllis and with Teia "we scattered simple roses for their scent … they sang: I was deaf; showed their breasts: I was blind" (IV:8, translation Shepherd). Suddenly Cynthia returned, furiously putting Phyllis and Teia to flight, fumigating the bed, and making passionate love to Propertius.

In perhaps the most striking of his poems (IV:7), Propertius describes receiving a visit from Cynthia's ghost after he had witnessed her cremation. The ghost remembers their "secret promises", swears "I kept my faith to you" and prophecies that "though others may possess you, later I shall hold you alone and clutching closely, bone to bone." (translation Highet, 1965). Indeed, one wonders whether the jealous Cynthia described in Ode IV:8 returned in mortal or immortal form.

Dowson's Cynara poem conveys the same feelings as Propertius' Cynthia poems, though the details of the visits differ. In Propertius, Cynthia is specifically described as the shadow, whereas in Dowson Cynara casts a shadow; in the Latin, it is Cynthia and not the poet who keeps the faith, and keeps it even beyond her death.

Dowson's poem describes a terrifying nostalgia. His 1896 book of poems was dedicated to Adelaide Foltinowicz, the daughter of the owner of a small restaurant in London. Her youth and innocence had completely fascinated him. He called her "Missie," and asked for her hand in marriage. Yet Dowson's passion came to naught: "she listened to his verses, smiled charmingly, under her mother's eyes, on his two years' courtship, and at the end of two years married the waiter instead" (Symons in introduction to Dowson's poems, 1905, p

xiii).

In 1897, Adelaide married Auguste Noelte, a tailor who helped out in her father's restaurant. Dowson was devastated. He fell into a life of dissipation. His problems with alcohol had started before Adelaide's refusal, and may indeed have led to Adelaide's favoring some one less wild. Dowson was not without insight. He realized that his passion was irrational and that he and his beloved were not suited to each other. In a later poem *To a Lost Love* he says, "But at the best, my dear, I see we should not have been very near." However, this poem is not memorable: reason does not have the same rhythmic drive as passion, and often fails to persuade.

The poem to Cynara, however, is technically brilliant. The repetition gives a strong slow rhythm to the poem like the tolling of a bell. Since the two repeating lines of each verse are separated by a new line, this rhythm is gained without loss of interest. Even within the repetition, there is novelty: "and" varies to "but" and back, and the final verse uses the present tense – "I am desolate and sick." The images are balanced: "her warm heart" goes with "her bought red mouth" and "riotous roses" with "pale lost lilies." The sounds provide musical accompaniment to the images: the lilting l, m and n sounds of the line "Night-long within my arms in love and sleep she lay," and the softly dying s and f sounds of "But when the feast is finished and the lamps expire."

The Cynara poem is probably not directly related to Adelaide since it was written in 1891 when Dowson had only just met her (a girl of twelve) and long before she decided to marry another. The poem is perhaps more related to the inevitable loss of innocence and beauty voiced by Horace and Propertius. Given Dowson's life, it is also tempting to see in it the loss of his own art and potential.

In 1890, William Butler Yeats and Ernest Rhys had started The Rhymers' Club, a small group of poets that met irregularly in

a tavern just off Fleet Street called The Cheshire Cheese (Alford, 1994). The poets would have supper and then adjourn to the upper room of the pub to read and discuss their poetry. They published two volumes of the *Book of the Rhymers' Club* in 1892 and 1894. The Cynara poem, initially published in *The Hobby Horse* in April, 1891, was reprinted in the second book (p. 61).

Among the members of The Rhymers' Club were Lionel Johnson, Arthur Symons, Victor Plarr, Francis Thompson, Richard La Gallienne and Ernest Dowson. Oscar Wilde joined them occasionally. These were the English "decadents." They followed the precepts of Walter Pater and pushed the ideal of art for art's sake to its emotional limits. The poets played with dissipation, much like Baudelaire in France three decades before. "I cried for madder music and for stronger wine" is in the vein of Baudelaire's prose poem *Enivrez-Vous* (Be Drunken):

> Be always drunken. Nothing else matters: that is the only question. If you would not feel the horrible burden of Time weighing on your shoulders and crushing you to the earth, be drunken continually.
>
> Drunken with what? With wine, with poetry, or with virtue, as you will. But be drunken.
>
> And if sometimes, on the stairs of a palace, or on the green side of a ditch, or in the drear solitude of your own room, you should awaken and the drunkenness be half or wholly slipped away from you, ask of the wind, or of the wave, or of the star, or of the bird, or of the clock, or whatever flies, or sighs, or rocks, or sings, or speaks, ask what hour it is ; and the wind, wave, star, bird, clock, will answer you: "It is the hour to be drunken ! Be drunken, if you would not be martyred slaves of Time; be drunken continually! With wine, with poetry, or with virtue, as you will." (Baudelaire 1869,

translated by Symons, 1905)

In his memoirs, Yeats (1972, p. 93) described Dowson as "burning to the socket, in exquisite songs celebrating in words full of subtle refinement all those he named with himself 'us the bitter and gay'." The quotation is from the *Villanelle of the Poet's Road*

> Wine and woman and song.
> Three things garnish our way
> Yet is day over long
>
> Lest we do our youth wrong
> Gather them while we may
> Wine and woman and song.
>
> Three things render us strong
> Vine leaves, kisses and bay
> Yet is day over long.
>
> Unto us they belong
> Us the bitter and gay
> Wine and woman and song.
>
> We, as we pass along
> Are sad that they will not stay
> Yet is day over long.
>
> Fruits and flowers among
> What is better than they:
> Wine and woman and song?
> Yet is day over long.

Dowson tried to live the life proposed by Walter Pater: "to burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life" (Pater, 189, p. 188). Yet for the cultivated hedonism of Pater, Dowson substituted wine and women. He was drunk more than sober, slept with prostitutes, and got himself into drunken brawls with laborers and cabmen.

He burned himself out.

Dowson's poem to Cynara has exerted an immense impact on the culture of the twentieth century. Quotations from the poem show up in the titles of books and movies, and in popular songs. T. S. Eliot's *The Hollow Men* (1925) echoes the anxiety of the shadow:

> Between the idea
> And the reality
> Between the motion
> And the act
> Falls the Shadow
>
> For Thine is the Kingdom
>
> Between the conception
> And the creation
> Between the emotion
> And the response
> Falls the Shadow
>
> Life is very long
>
> Between the desire
> And the spasm
> Between the potency
> And the existence
> Between the essence
> And the descent
> Falls the Shadow
>
> For Thine is the Kingdom

Dowson used another quotation from Horace as the title of the first poem in his 1896 book. Horace was well loved of the English, particularly in the 19th century. His was a gentleman's poetry, full of wisdom and restraint, clear-headed and elegant. His sense of beauty was tempered with irony.

Horace lived when Roman Empire was at its zenith, much like the British Empire in the time of Queen Victoria. Just as the Romans looked back to Greece, so did the English look back to Rome to see how to live properly. *Dulce et decorum est pro patriae mori* (Ode III:2 – It is sweet and fitting to die for your country) and *Carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero* (Ode I:11 – Seize the day, and put little trust in the morrow) were Horace's gifts to England. In both England and Rome, the enduring nature of the empire brought thoughts of the ephemerality of the individual. Keats translated Horace's fourteenth epode to begin his own *Ode to a Nightingale*. Dowson's poem also deals with the brevity of our life:

Vita summa brevis spem nos vetat incohare longam

> They are not long, the weeping and the laughter,
> Love and desire and hate:
> I think they have no portion in us after
> We pass the gate.
>
> They are not long, the days of wine and roses:
> Out of a misty dream.
> Our path emerges for a while, then closes
> Within a dream.

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The quotation is from Horace's Ode I:4: "Life's short span forbids us to entertain long-term hopes." Dowson's poem is quoted by Edmund, the younger son, in *Long Day's Journey into Night* (O'Neill, 1955, p. 130). The stage directions state "sardonically." His father rails against such morbidity. Edmund goes on to bait his father further with Baudelaire's "Be always drunken" (p. 132). Eugene O'Neill was well aware how seductive these ideas were, how easy it was to fall into the life of intoxication and oblivion, where talent is wasted and hopes washed away in the beauty of what might have been.

Sketch of Dowson by Charles Condor, late 1890s

Dowson did indeed waste away. After being rejected by Adelaide, he moved to France, where he eked out a living writing translations. He suffered from severe poverty, alcoholism, and tuberculosis. He returned to London in late summer of 1899, and finally succumbed on February 22, 1900. Yeats wrote to Lady Gregory, “Poor Dowson is dead. Since that girl in the restaurant married the waiter he has drunk hard and so gradually sank into consumption. It is a most pitiful and strange story” (quoted by Adams, 2000). Adelaide’s marriage was not happy. She had an affair with another man, and died after a botched abortion in 1903 (Adams, 2000).

Dowson had converted to Catholicism in 1891. His conversion may have resulted in part from his courtship of Adelaide, in part from his relations with Lionel Johnson, in part from the fact that it was the thing to do. Whatever the cause, he was formally admitted to the Roman Catholic Church (Adams, 2000, pp 58-59). Yeats doubted his conviction: “Dowson adopted a Catholic point of view without, I think, joining that church, an act requiring energy and decision” (1936, p. x). Yet Dowson was sincere in his beliefs, and he found some release of his guilt and despair in the rituals of the church:

Extreme Unction

Upon the eyes, the lips, the feet,
On all the passages of sense,
The atoning oil is spread with sweet
Renewal of lost innocence.

The feet, that lately ran so fast
To meet desire, are soothly sealed;
The eyes that were so often cast
On vanity, are touched and healed.

From troublous sights and sound set free;
In such a twilight hour of breath,
Shall one retrace his life, or see,
Through shadows the true face of death?

Vials of mercy! Sacring oils!
I know not where nor when I come,
Nor through what wanderings and toils.
To crave of you Viaticum.

Yet when the walls of flesh grow weak,
In such an hour, it well may be,
Through mist and darkness, light will break,
And each anointed sense will see.

Viaticum is the set of provisions for a journey. The word is used for the final Eucharist – the communion given to the dying – but it hearkens back to Roman customs. In *Marius the Epicurean*, Pater (1985) considers the voyage of the soul released from the body in the chapter on the poem *Animula vagula* (little wandering soul) of Marcus Aurelius. Dowson's poem also recalls the death of Marius "Gentle fingers had applied to hands and feet, to all those old passage-ways of the senses, through which the world had come and gone for him, now so dim and obstructed, a medicinable oil" (p. 296). Marius had drifted among the many philosophies of Rome, but ultimately died a Christian martyr even though he had not

formally converted to the new faith. Dowson had converted; yet yet no priest was present at his death to anoint his body.

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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 almum*
> *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:

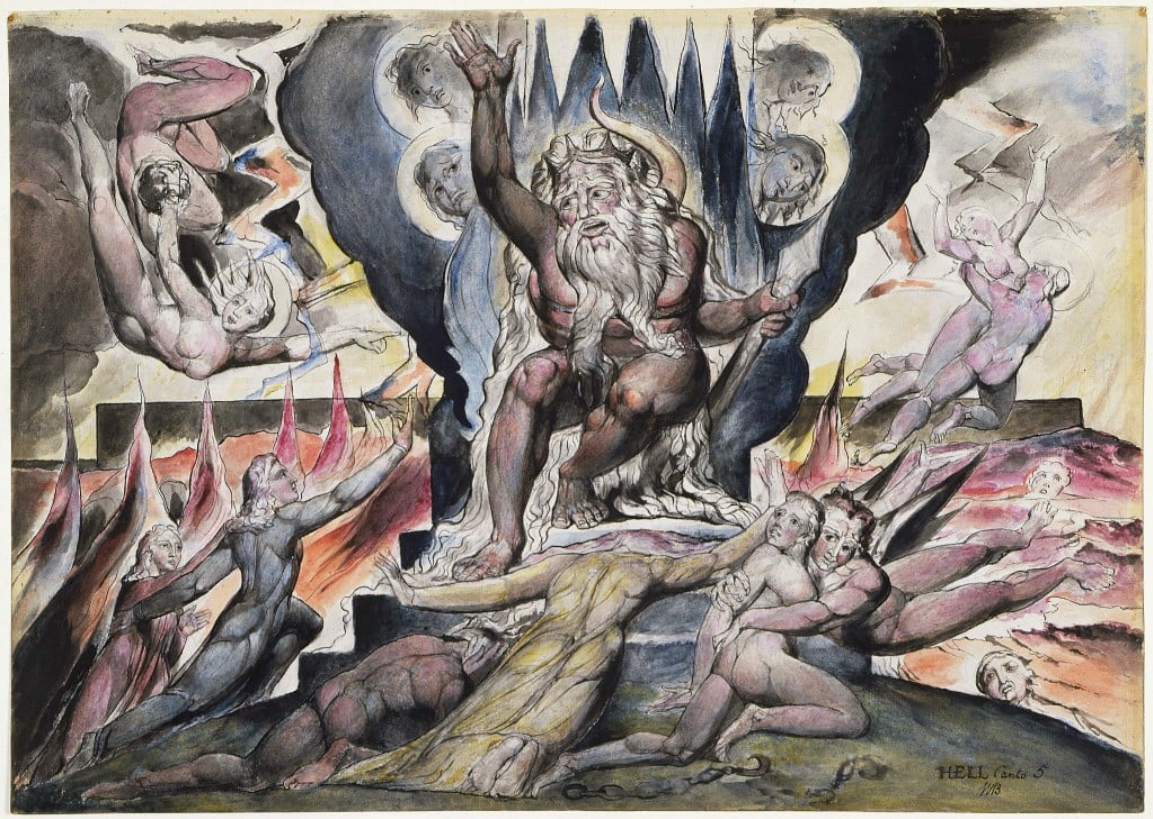
If all that ever Man had sung
In the audacious Latin Tongue
Had been lost – and This remained
All, through this might be regained.

Horace's suggestion that his fried 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.

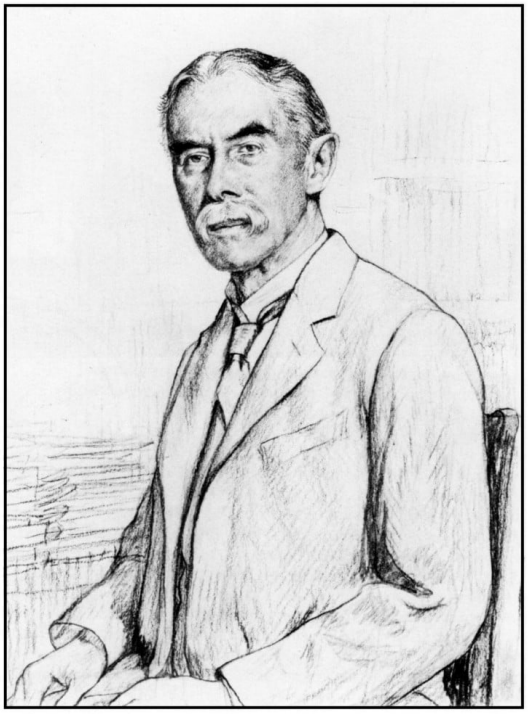
Working independently of any institution, Housman quickly became the most accomplished Latin scholar of his generation, publishing brilliant papers on the poems of Propertius and other Roman authors. On the basis of these contributions he was appointed as Professor of Latin at University College in London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