

A.E. Housman's Daughters

Brian Abel Ragen

Wendy Cope's second collection of poems includes one on her favorite theme of romantic disappointment. It is entitled "Another Unfortunate Choice."

I think I have fallen in love with A.E. Housman,
Which puts in a worse than usual fix
No woman ever had a chance with Housman
And he's been dead since 1936.

Cope is by no means the only one of his readers to fall in love with Housman, nor the only poet whose admiration for him sometimes turns to imitation. I think that we can trace his influence on a number of poets who went against the grain of modernism during the 20th century. I will concentrate on only two: Wendy Cope herself and Dorothy Parker. Though these three writers lived in different eras and countries, they are united by a love of traditional forms, an often pessimistic view of life, and a shared attitude toward sex.

Considering how few events it contained, it is fascinating how much attention Housman's life has attracted. He has been the subject of several biographies, of a sonnet by W.H. Auden, and recently of a play by Tom Stoppard, The Invention of Love. The highlights are not the stuff of grand romance. Housman fails his examinations at Oxford either because he wastes time studying papyrus manuscripts of Propertius instead of the set texts or because he is distraught over his hopeless love for a heterosexual undergraduate; he makes himself the foremost classical scholar of his time but labors for years on trivial authors, and his editions are read mostly for the prefaces in which he extravagantly abuses textual critics who do not have his gifts. And in the course of a long life, he publishes two slim collections of mostly very short poems that become the staples of almost every textbook introducing poetry to students, but which seem to savor too much of the schoolroom to those who find the carefully polished stanzas old-fashioned.

What would heterosexual women writing in the 1930's and 1990's find attractive about such a figure? I would suggest that what drew each to the author of A Shropshire Lad was an attitude about both poetic form and love that is at odds with the dominant currents of 20th-century poetry in English.

I am not saying that either adopts Housman's characteristic forms in their entirety. Rather, both Parker and Cope develop a poetic art that depends on the sort of formal techniques of which Housman was a master. Housman himself was probably most deeply influenced by the poets of the Greek Anthology, which are more often than not epigrams and epitaphs. Surely among the poems we all remember are "To An Athlete Dying Young" and "Epitaph on a an Army of Mercenaries." Housman's formal perfection is often lapidary: it is the sort of "last word" that could be cut into marble, at least metaphorically, and placed over a dead soldier or a dead affection.

Parker and Cope also write many epigrams and epitaphs, but their purpose is not usually memorialization or the wistful meditation on the transitory nature of existence. Instead, their devotion to the form and to the metrical and rhyming disciplines that go with it springs from their devotion to another kind of writing that was neglected during the heyday of modernism: light verse or comic verse more generally. As John Hollander has pointed out, the lapidary diction of Housman is what stands behind many of Parker's works. She mixes the wistful talk of lads and leas with current slang and topical references, and the closing line is more often a joke than a cosmic irony.

But both younger poets take something from Housman besides a form. And that is an attitude toward life, one that might best be called stoic. I know the idea of stoicism in poetry may make the one think of something like Addison's Cato, an intensely moral tragedy, and not of poems about vanished love and vanished youth. But Stoicism is not, in fact, a system that is built on the denial of emotion. It is built on the idea that each person remains responsible for himself in the face of whatever blows fate will deal him. The agent always has, if nothing else, the option of suicide—and one of the things that

Housman and Parker share a love of poems devoted to contemplating self-destruction in an un-romantic way. After all, Parker's conclusion, after considering the drawbacks of all the popular methods "Razors pain you;/ Rivers are damp; / Acids stain you; / And drugs cause cramp" is, "you might as well live." In verse, the attitude leads one to lament, but not to whine, perhaps to protest, but never to pout.

That is the attitude toward life that informs Housman's, Parker's, and Cope's love poems. The idea of stoic love poetry may seem contradictory, but I would suggest that such a view is found not just in these three poets, but also in the lyrics of American "Standards" by writers such as Lorenz Hart. The view is not that of the "Confessional" poets of both sexes who discussed their romantic and sexual experiences during much of the twentieth century. I will try not to generalize too much about that tradition, but one thing that can be fairly said of it is that its practitioners write intensely personal narratives of or meditations on their own romantic and sexual experience. And they create their own forms in which to do it—though those forms often tend to be exactly the sort of free verse favored by each decade. Every thrill and every disappointment is presented as a surprise. (And the thoughts of suicide suggest less, "there is always one option that remains to us in this fated world," but instead either "I'll do it if I don't get my way" or "No one has suffered as I do.") Adopting the rhetoric of the confessional or the couch, they seek to give us a glimpse of their own psyches, which, being unique, are terribly important.

Our stoic love poets do not assume that their experiences are unique. Rather, they assume that they are the common lot of all humanity. Think of one of the Housman's poems most favored by the schoolteachers:

When I was one-and twenty
I heard a wise man say,
'Give crowns and pounds and guineas
But not your heart away;
Give pearls away and rubies
But keep your fancy free.'

But I was one-and-twenty,
 No use to talk to me.
 When I was one-and-twenty
 I heard him say again
 'The heart out of the bosom
 Was never given in vain;
 'Tis paid with sighs a plenty
 And sold for endless rue.'
 And I am two-and-twenty,
 And oh, 'tis true, 'tis true.

Here is Parker's version of the discovery that even when it comes to love, as Dr. Johnson put it, "The Doom of Nature is not stayed for you." Her poem is called, "The False Friends."

They laid their hands upon my head,
 They stroked my cheek and brow;
 And time could heal a hurt, they said,
 And time could dim a vow.

And they were pitiful and mild
 Who whispered to me then,
 "The heart that breaks in April, child,
 Will mend in May again."

Oh, many a mended heart they knew;
 So old they were, and wise.
 And little did they have to do
 To come to me with lies!

Who flings me silly talk of May
 Shall meet a bitter soul;
 For June was nearly spent away
 Before my heart was whole.

It is, of course, characteristic of Parker that she writes not about the inevitability of heartbreak but about the perhaps still more troubling inevitability of getting over it. But both poets recognize that even in love, even in the feeling that seems so intensely personal, the same forces play in all of us, and the same sad stories will be reenacted over and over again. Housman, of course, also describes the waning of love, and not just in those poems where a speaker from beyond the grave contemplates his old lover's new happiness, but also in poems such as,

Oh, when I was in love with you
Then I was clean and brave,
And miles around the wonder grew
How well I did behave.

And now the fancy passes by,
And nothing will remain,
And miles around they'll say that I
Am quite myself again.

Wendy Cope is just as insistent on the transitory nature of love. For example, here is her poem "The Aerial," which in its matter-of-factness will not remind you of other Ariel poems.

The aerial on this radio broke
A long, long time ago,
When you were just a name to me
Someone I didn't know.

The man before the man before
Had not yet set his cap,
The day a clumsy gesture caused
The narrow rod to snap.

Love came along. Love came along.
Then you. And now it's ended.
Tomorrow I shall tidy up
And get the radio mended.

Here love is transitory, but life goes on. That, of course, is a message Housman's speakers also often share. The often-anthologized "The Chestnut Casts Its Flambeaux" ends with these lines:

The troubles of our proud and angry dust
Are from eternity, and shall not fail.
Bear them we can, and if we can we must.
Shoulder the sky, my lad, and drink your ale.

Cope gives not too different advice in "Some More Light Verse," which has two recurring phrases: "And nothing works. The outlook's grim," and "You have to try," which is the phrase that begins and ends the poem.

You have to try. You see a shrink.
You learn a lot. You read. You think.
You struggle to improve your looks.

You meet some men. You write some books.
You eat good food. You give up junk.
You do not smoke. You don't get drunk.
You take up yoga, walk, and swim.
You don't know what to do. You cry.
You're running out of things to try.

You blow your nose. You see the shrink.
You walk. You give up food and drink.
You fall in love. You make a plan.
You struggle to improve your man.
And nothing works. The outlook's grim.
You go to yoga, cry, and swim.
You eat and drink. You give up looks.
You struggle to improve your books.
You cannot see the point. You sigh.
You do not smoke. You have to try.

I wish I had time to discuss more correspondences between these poets, but since time is short, I'll mention only one. Consider how Housman and Parker deal with the idea of the distant soldier. He is an openly romantic object to Parker, who writes her last published poem as a dedication to her husband in 1941. Many assume the soldier is, covertly, a romantic object to Housman, as well. (That there was a great deal of homoerotic sentiment in many poems about the troops will not seem a new idea to anyone who remembers the discussions of "Soldier Boys" in Paul Fussell's The Great War and Modern Memory.) Housman's speaker meets his soldier anonymously:

The street sounds to the soldiers' tread
And out we troop to see:
And a single redcoat turns his head,
He turns and looks at me.
My man, from sky to sky's so far,
We never crossed before;
Such leagues apart the world's ends are,
We're like to meet no more;
What thought at heart have you and I
We cannot stop to tell,
But dead or living, drunk or dry,
Soldier, I wish you well.

Parker's speaker does not name her soldier, but the entire poem is about intimacies and

identities.

Soldier, in a curious land
All across the swaying sea
Take her smile and lift her hand—
Have no guilt of me.

.....

Only, for the nights that were,
Soldier, and the dawns that came,
When in sleep you turn to her,
Call her by my name.

Neither poet expects fate to bring either union or fidelity. One can take comfort in vague solidarity, the other in the pleasure of spite, but both know that things will be as they will be.

Beyond their shared view of fate—their assumption that disappointment is the common lot of mankind, but that “you have to try”—why would female poets of both the 1930’s and the 1990’s feel attracted to Housman? I cannot help wondering if women moving in the circles Parker and Cope did may have felt a greater kinship with the male homosexuals of the 1890’s than with poets of either sex who played out the traditional sex roles in other periods.

If anything was almost certain about a man becoming romantically or sexually involved with another man in the 1890’s, it was that the relationship would not have a traditional happy ending and that it would be transitory. It was thus very different from that posited by traditional love poetry, written by men or women, where the one great passion leading to a socially-sanctioned union is the paradigm to be either fulfilled or, equally significantly, played against. In our day--and in the world in which Parker moved in the 30’s, where a variety of sexual partners was at least as common as it is now--that paradigm is no longer one to be assumed even for heterosexuals. Therefore, the sort of love poetry that treats happy permanent union as the expected end or isolation and heartbreak as the tragic exception no longer makes sense. (To use examples from

novels, you cannot create an Emma Bovary or an Anna Karenina in our culture, and if you create an Elizabeth Bennett, as Helen Fielding does, she has shagged her boss before finding her Mr. D'Arcy.)

In this cultural context, even the confessional seems dated, for, after all, we have nothing much to confess. How then, to deal with the unhappy fact that sex doesn't make us happy and love breaks our hearts? These poets choose the stoic answer, to face the fact even as we face the equally unpleasant fact that we will all die.

I promise nothing: friends will part;
All things may end, for all began;
And truth and singleness of heart
Are mortal even as is man.

Housman provides a model of the poet who may cry, but does not rant, who protests, but does not complain, and who, by the very forms he chooses, rejects the idea that his sufferings are unique. Perhaps that is just the sort of model appropriate for the woman poet who does not expect to find her Mr. D'Arcy and knows she will not jump in front of a train when her Vronsky dumps her.

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