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HOUSMAN'S SPECTRAL SHROPSHIRE

By Mihail Evans

THE FICTIONAL SETTING of the "Shropshire" of A. E. Housman's *A Shropshire Lad* (1894) is well known.[1] He himself admitted to hardly having visited the county before the publication of his cycle of poems and the topography of the county in verse and actuality are often two different things. For instance, Hughley, whose steeple in the poems is a "far-known sign," as Housman's brother Laurence discovered on a post-publication visit, is located in a valley and the remarkable spire turns out to be squat rather than soaring (Burnett, *Letters* 1: 90). The particular form of unreality that will be the subject of this paper is not, however, the physical backdrop of Housman's poems, imaginary or otherwise. Rather I would like to focus on the way in which the imaginative universe of Housman is populated by figures who challenge our assumptions about the boundary between the realms of the living and the dead. We might say that I will be concerned not with the epistemology of Housman's Shropshire but with its ontology, or perhaps, to use a term of Derrida's, with its "hauntology" (*Specters* 10, 51, 161). Indeed, my suggestion will be that far from being an untrue or fictional world, the phantasmal figures of Housman's Shropshire articulate that reality that is named, in the late work of Jacques Derrida, as the spectral. My essay will elaborate the question of the spectral as an interplay between the poems of Housman and the philosophical meditations of Derrida.

William Empson spoke with approbation of Housman's "haunting poetry" (419), high praise when we find that he also uses this term in regard to Yeats and Donne, even if it somewhat undermines the term's descriptive precision. In this essay I want to specify this claim about Housman's poetry and argue that the unique place he allows the dead to assume in his work challenges our habitual modes of thought. I will argue that the haunted world he conjures up is not something that can simply be reduced to his own biography or mentioned as accounting for his appeal to a particular generation. My claim is that Housman, similar to Jacques Derrida, presents us with an ontological truth about existence, that the living is always already partly dead and that the dead continue to haunt the living. The "scholar-poet" (to use Graves's not quite correct appellation) and the philosopher, two such apparently heterogeneous figures, both find that neither life nor death are pure and that there is no clear and unequivocal boundary we can draw between the two. Of course, they are far from being the only two figures who have traced such themes in the history of either literature or philosophy and it would be silly to claim for the pair an exceptional status. Indeed, the significance of spectrality depends on there being other, albeit different, attestations such as the one Derrida finds in Shakespeare. But both are important thinkers of spectrality and my essay will enlarge the thinking of this concept through reading them together.

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My motivation for making this conjunction of Derrida and Housman, apart from the intrinsic interest of the subject, is a desire to challenge established interpretative frameworks. Over forty years ago Christopher Ricks complained that Housman's reputation seemed fated to be overwhelmed by the wrong sort of admirer (3). The situation has undoubtedly changed since then but while there has been talk of various revivals, barriers for new readers remain and these often come in the form of inherited preconception and prejudice. Derrida equally has problems with a perceived readership, ones far too complex to be treated of here. What this essay will show is that although he may personally and philosophically have particular interests in Mallarmé, Joyce, and Celan, there is no necessity that his work should only ever be brought into conjunction with poets of a firmly modernist or avant-garde stamp. My starting point for this paper is his claim that "deconstruction is the case" (Derrida, "Some Statements" 85) that the quasi-transcendental structures, such as spectrality, that his work elaborates should be expected to also be attested to widely, even in the work of a poet such as Housman.

Spectrality might be a concept first explicitly named in Derrida's work but this paper in no way seeks to simply apply his term to Housman's verse. What I wish to do here is to put the writings of this apparently odd pair into communication. Derrida's own interpretation of spectrality is tied strongly to questions of justice and of phenomenality but it is the relation to mourning that I see as carrying particular parallels in Housman.[2] Dante excepted, no other writer so intensely focuses on the realm of the dead as Housman – "the nation that is not" to use a favorite term of his. With Housman we do not have to descend to the underworld, these phantasms walk in broad daylight in English markettowns of the 1890s and address us poems from their graves. The various commemorations Derrida gave on the deaths of friends give us an insight into how the world is structured by those who have passed away and by even the very possibility of the dying of those yet alive. Housman's spectral Shropshire, the imaginative universe of his poetry, repeatedly and insistently illustrates how the line between life and death is not a pure one.[3] There is life in death, and death in life. Housman and Derrida reveal the spectral nature of our world. In the midst of life we are in death, as the words of the Order for the Burial of the Dead of the *Book of Common Prayer*, has it.

Death and Housman

STEPHEN SPENDER ARGUED THAT ONE of the main features of Housman's poetry was "the view that life is misery and that man is only happy when he is safely under the ground" (378).[4] He is far from the only reader to do so and an aura has grown around the poetry that it portrays life as a vale of sorrows before the release of death. These sentiments are perhaps most pithily summed up in the first verse of Ezra Pound's poem "Mr Housman's Message" (42):

> O woe, woe
> People are born and die,
> We also shall be dead pretty soon
> Therefore let us act as if we were
> dead already.

The accusation that Housman's poetry is lacking in any affirmation of life is, despite its persistence, a quite false one. It perhaps owes something to the legend of Housman the man:

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a famously reticent and waspish figure, a man who deliberately choose as his life's work the edition of Manilius, a third rate poet of astrology, rather than his particular interest, the much more congenial Propertius, a poet of love. Well known as the donnish master of the academic putdown, Housman in the 1960s was revealed to have been homosexual and we thus have the established personal myth overlaid with an association with the closeted and apparently self-denying homosexuality of the post-Wilde years. The popular image takes little cognisance of the gourmand and lover of fine wines, the regular continental traveler whose "holiday companions" and young Italian male friends he felt unable to introduce to visiting members of his English circle. I say this not in order to establish a new myth but rather in order to suggest that we need to read freshly and without preconceptions. Reading only the work we will find that the message of Housman's poetry, to use Pound's term, is in fact far from life-denying.

There is no question that life's travails were an important subject for him but these were never treated in a wholly negative way. Mostly we find a constant tension, an intermingling of the bitter and the sweet, in which the affirmation of existence, however hard, is always there in the end. I will argue that the mistaken accusation of morbidity arises through confusing a legitimate preoccupation with the place of death in life with a desire for non-existence. The later position is found in no place in Housman's work except in a few posthumously published fragments (for example: MP, XXI or MP, XXXVIII). There is every reason to expect that these are only elements of a larger unwritten work in which they would have been only a part of a larger more complex sentiment resembling the work published in Housman's lifetime.

Ezra Pound, Hugh Kingsmill, Humbert Wolfe: it seems there is no parody of Housman that does not work by playing on a recognition of his apparent obsession with death. Housman was undoubtedly aware of how he could be misread and got in first with his own self-parody, as well as a response to it, in ''Terence, This is Stupid Stuff," the penultimate poem in *A Shropshire Lad*. It contains a similar recognition:

> But oh, good Lord, the verse you make,
> It gives a chap the belly-ache.
> The cow, the old cow, she is dead;
> It sleeps well, the horned head:
> We poor lads, 'tis our turn now
> To hear such tunes as killed the cow.
> Pretty friendship 'tis to rhyme
> Your friends to death before their time
> Moping melancholy mad:
> Come, pipe a tune to dance to, lad.

Housman (or Terence, his somewhat intermittent narrator in *Lad*) goes on to respond to this charge by the retelling of the story of Mithridates, who ate small amounts of poison regularly so that when the time came that an attempt was made to poison him it failed. *Pharmakon,* the good classicist knows, is both medicine and poison in Greek and in this poem Housman effectively equates his poems with small toxic doses that will help us the better to survive. His verse then is about how to live, which as we shall see might well be connected to death but is not at all a desire for death.[5] Picking up a term from this poem which Derrida also

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identifies with (I will come back to it), we might say his verse is "melancholic" rather than morbid. The failure of critics to properly distinguish between these two terms may well have motivated what, in the final poem of *Last Poems* (1922), appears to be a deliberate rejection of his earlier suggestion, when the speaker demands, as the "lofty shade advances": "Come, lads, and learn the dances/ And praise the tune to-day." Here there is no talk of either poison or medicine, there is simply life to be enjoyed today in the face of the inexorability of death.[6] Housman's poetry is about life – often one touched by hardship and struggle, yet at times also joyful or tinged with sadness – and how through death we live life.

I would argue that Housman's pessimistic and allegedly morbid outlook is much overstated because of a failure to comprehend the specifically spectral nature of his poetry. The sheer negativity of unrelieved morbidity needs to be distinguished from the interplay of life and death in his poetry. Frequently within Housman's poems we find the most wistful and emotional affirmations of life and its transience. Perhaps best known is the second poem in *A Shropshire Lad* on the cherry tree but there are many others. Even among some of the darkest of poems, a final affirmation of life is made. In SL, XX the poet contemplates the lure of a suicide by drowning. The first three verses elaborate the urge "to strip and dive and drown." Suicide is positively presented as the embrace of something of aesthetic value: "Those are as beautiful again/ That in the water are." It is also seen as a moral purification. There are also echoes of the suicide of, what we now can read as, the homosexual cadet in "Shot? So quick, so clean an ending?" (SL, XLIV): "The pools and rivers wash so clean." In this poem a self-inflicted death is presented not as a desperate act of the individual in extremis but almost, in a play on the old cliché, as a move to "a better place." Even in a poem on such a morbid theme as suicide Housman escapes any pure negativity. But in any case, as we might suspect from the narcissistic imagery, in the final verse these seductions are rejected as false: "But in the golden-sanded brooks/ And azure meres I spy/ A silly lad that longs and looks/ And wishes he were I." Rather than commending suicide, in this poem the speaker who is allured by the watery grave is recognised as "a silly lad" who will come to regret his act (the ghost who must do this regretting we might claim as the first spectre of my paper). From the midst of the suicidal longings emerges a deep affirmation of life.

Those who accuse Housman of a morbid tone overlook the diversity as well as the extremely ambiguous nature of many of the poems. In places, such as the final verse of "Reveille" (SL, IV), there is a mood of sheer affirmation of life: "Clay lies still, but blood's a rover; Breath's aware that will not keep/ Up, lad: when the journey's over/ There'll be time enough to sleep." This is a capacious embrace of life in all its hardship, tinged by the urgency that nothing will wait or last (and perhaps it is pertinent that this almost too ebullient voice is not that of Terence Hearsay). We find such a mood again in the last line of the first verse of "The Carpenter's Son" (SL, XLVII) when the condemned man cries out: "Live, lads, and I will die," a line whose message is emphasised by being repeated at the end of the final verse. In this poem Housman's secular retelling of the crucifixion is essentially a commendation of this one life. Indeed, it explicitly rejects any Christian otherworldly focus with Housman's Christ figure telling his fellows: "See my neck and save your own." Housman similarly reworks Christian themes in SL, XXXIII, the Christian desire for a life everlasting been transformed into an affirmation of this earthly life: "I think the love I bear you/ Should make you not to die." Elsewhere, of course, his emphasis on the finitude of human existence results in a mood tinged with wistfulness or sadness as in the final two lines of SL, LVII: "I shall have lived a little while/ Before I die for ever." This delicate balance between the affirmation

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of life and a sense of loss (in particular the loss of others) - which I will later suggest we might follow Derrida in calling mourning - is well attested by the final two verses of LP, XVIII:

> The skies, they are not always raining
> Nor grey the twelvemonth through;
> And I shall meet good days and mirth,
> And range the lovely lands of earth
> With friends no worse than you.
> But oh, my man, the house is fallen
> That none can build again;
> My man, how full of joy and woe
> Your mother bore you years ago
> To-night to lie in the rain.

In a posthumously published poem Housman speaks of "stolen waters" (usually interpreted to refer to illicit homosexual activity) and says: "But he that drinks in season/ Shall live before he dies" (MP, XXII). Mr Housman's message here — that we must embrace the finitude of our existence and live in the light of our inevitable and unpredictable demise — gives the lie to R. P. Blackmur's claim that he wrote "almost entirely of death, and almost entirely of one sort of death, the blotting death which has no relation to life" (qtd. in Burke 196). I would not deny that there are places, many of them indeed, where a melancholic or even depressive tone takes over. Two poems on from Reveille, where the soldier is urged to rise we have the untitled VII whose final verse is much more defeatist: "Lie down, lie down, young yeoman;/ The sun moves always west;/ The road one treads to labour/ Will lead one home to rest,/ And that will be the best." But such unrelieved negativity is unusual and, I think, in this case it is hard not to read it but as a corrective to the excessive ebullience of the preceding poem already mentioned. In Burnett's authoritative edition of Housman's poems this whole verse is in double inverted commas in the original, univocity being avoided by the negative sentiments of the verse being presented as those of a blackbird that the speaker kills, leading to his ultimate adoption of its view.[7] More typical is a restless movement back and forth between the pains and the sweetness of existence, such as can be seen in a verse from LP, XVI where a "scorned unlucky lad" tosses and turns: "Half the night he longed to die,/ Now are sown on hill and plain/ Pleasures worth his while to try/ Ere he longs to die again." Housman sentiment is often that expressed in SL, XVII: "Wonder 'tis how little mirth/ Keeps the bones of man from lying/ On the bed of earth." Affirmation even in hardship.

If we reject the simplistic negative suggestion that Housman's dwelling on the dead is morbidity or a rejection of life, another critical option is to see it as biographically determined. Although he said very little about it, the death of Housman's mother on his twelfth birthday was surely an event that must have been one of the most significant of his early life. There is nothing in the poetry, however, which seems to explicitly touch on it. Housman's Shropshire includes some mothers and plenty of sweethearts but the world is a very masculine one and there is little in the way of elaborate mother-son relations.[8] Better attested in the poetry is the death of his youngest brother, George, in the Boer War in 1901. There is no doubt it was a loss that was deeply felt – "Oh I will sit me down and weep/ For bones in Africa" (LP, XVII) - and can be seen to partly motivate the sympathy with the plight of the private soldier which

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is so marked in his work (this should not be mistaken for any sort of imperial jingoism or uncritical patriotism as LP, VIII makes clear: "Rest you, charger, rust you, bridle;/ Kings and kesars [i.e., kaisers], keep your pay;").[9] Yet even these two blows, no matter how personally significant they may be, cannot surely accord for the uniquely important place that the dead occupy in Housman.

This leads more subtle critics to attempt see a sort of figuration at work. Jebb suggests, in particular, that: "the notion of dying for one's fellow men ... is, in fact, the covert route by which A. E. Housman's homosexuality finds expression" (85). Such a strategy has the incomparable advantage on the contemporary scene of trading in what might seem the more embarrassing side of Housman – all those mentions of soldiers and war with the worrying imperial aura that might seem to go with them – for the much more congenial figure, for us, of a repressed homosexual struggling to find expression. I would not contest the idea that under the surface of Housman's poetry, and even above it at times, homosexuality is not an important theme and Jebb has provided strong readings of Housman's three main poems concerning homosexuality. However, apart even from the coherence of the idea of dying for one's fellow men as an expression of homosexuality, there is the problem that while the dead might be a regular theme in Housman, there is not actually that much of explicitly sacrificial "dying for one's fellow men," as opposed to say dying because the army pays 13d a day, of which there is an awful lot. In introducing the question of spectrality what I want to suggest is that when Housman obsesses on the dead maybe that is just simply because he has an important point to make: about the dead, and our relations with them.

An alternative temptation, rather than trying to account for Housman's preoccupation with death biographically, is to historicise it and, in particular, to find it to be explanatory of the remarkable public acclaim his poetry received from a couple of generations. There is certainly a popular view that associates Housman with the poets of war, "all young men dying" as a *vox pop* had it on a 2008 BBC Radio adaptation of *A Shropshire Lad*. As with the biographical interpretation it is not that this view is completely wrong but that it is partial and reductive and ultimately fails to account for the singular place accorded the dead in his poems. Certainly, I would not question the suggestion that the sense that we are still in the presence of absent loved ones was a feeling that was perhaps much more common in the Edwardian era than now. Infant mortality was still shockingly high and few families would not remember a child who had died young. Similarly, in the period of imperial expansion, military service and death overseas, as Housman's poetry constantly reminds us, were common experiences. The Boer War was particularly traumatic and in its aftermath many families and communities would have recognised, with hindsight, having before the war been in the midst of the scene painted by Housman in 1896 in SL, XXIII: "The lads in their hundreds to Ludlow come in for the fair,/ There's men from the barn and the forge and the mill and the fold,/ The lads for the girls and the lads for the liquor are there,/ And there with the rest are the lads that will never be old." We are right in the midst of the life of the fair day and yet already the living have taken on a spectral form in the eyes of the poet. After the carnage of the Great War this sense of having walked among the spectres of the dead in pre-war days must have rung all too true for most readers of *A Shropshire Lad*. Yet, as I will go on to make clear, Housman's poetry is not simply a prescient mirror of the slaughter of the early twentieth century wars. Soldiers are, I would suggest, rather incidental to his interest in the dead and their place in life (although they may well have had other particular attractions for him). As the condemned, the second major figure in his poems after the soldier, attest, he is not interested in war and soldiery so much as in the boundary

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between life and death more generally and these happen to be the figures which will allow him to best instigate a questioning of it within a generally realist and naturalistic poetics. As in Derrida, his spectrality is a quasi-transcendental one (to use the technically appropriate term for Derrida's philosophy): it outlines a structure that arises from the particularity of one life but testifies to something that exceeds that one particular time and place.

Derrida, Spectres, and Mourning

DERRIDA FIRST SPOKE OF SPECTRES in the film *Ghost Dance* (1983) in which he played himself, a philosophy professor asked by an anthropology student if he believes in ghosts. His improvised response was that he does not believe ghosts to belong to a bygone historical period but that, on the contrary, they are ever more manifest in an age of new technologies. The point is easy to understand when we look at the screen and see a dead man talking to us about ghosts: the technology of film allows the dead to engage us in ways that previously were not possible. "*Ici, le fantôme, c'est moi*," he says at one point.

It was not until a decade later in *Specters of Marx* that he began to elaborate the conception of spectrality implicit but unnamed in *Ghost Dance*. He commenced that book by printing the famous scene from Shakespeare in which Hamlet swears with the ghost to set right that which is "out of joint." He begins his book by seeing ghosts (as does Marx when commencing *The Communist Manifesto* "A spectre is haunting Europe . . . ") and moves on to suggest that we do not learn to live from life but only from the other and from death, and "from the other at the edge of life." Indeed, he claims that learning to live "can happen only between life and death" (Derrida, *Specters* xviii). Although it does not declare itself as such, *Specters* takes the form of a series of interlinked essays (on Valéry, Blanchot, and Heidegger), that keep circling back to the question of spectrality and, in particular, how this might relate to politics and to Marx. Certainly important elements of Derrida's spectral such as its relationship to justice, its overt "messianism" or, indeed, what he calls "the visor effect" (whereby our complete recognition of the spectral phenomenon is is forever impeded) are not obviously related to Housman's work.[10] However, I would contend that the structure of spectrality outlined by Derrida is one that finds many parallels and echoes, as well as original formulations, in Housman's *oeuvre*. At the start of *Spectres* Derrida says we must "learn to live *with* ghosts" and that is exactly what Housman's poetry attempts to teach us to do. Cixous, in a recent essay on Derrida and Shakespeare, points out the way in which the play *Hamlet* may have been a way for Shakespeare mourn his son, Hamnet, who died young and it is the relationship between spectrality and mourning that I would argue is most important in the consideration of Housman's poetry.[11]

This intersection is elaborated by Derrida in a number of works including *Demeure*, *Memoires*, and especially *The Work of Mourning*, a collection of funeral addresses and obituaries for friends. These repeatedly return to the point that the self is preceded by and composed of others, that our world and our selves are unthinkable except in the form of relations among finite others. In any friendship one friend will outlive the other and thus friendship even in its highest moments is inhabited by the potential absence of one of the friends. There is no life without mourning. Derrida presses this conception, defining "ghosts: the concept of the other in the same . . . the completely other, dead, living in me" (41–42). He thus speaks, making a play in French on the two words, of "a piece [*morceau*] of myself like a piece of the dead [*mort*]" (50). We are alive yet with the death of the friend a part of us dies, a part of our life passes away, but the friend also remains, alive, in me. Yet this is a

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living-on, a life that is without response. As he said on the occasion of the death of one of his friends: "if we have, as one says in French, 'la mort dans l'âme, death in the soul', it is because from now on we are destined to speak *of* Paul de Man, instead of speaking *to* and *with* him" (72).

The subject of mourning is, of course, a long standing topic in psychoanalysis. In "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917) Freud suggested that the former is a normal process whereby when a love object dies we gradually accommodate ourselves to acceptance of this (245–67). Mourning is stated to be a conscious process while melancholia, where the loss is less clear and not necessarily of another human, is said to be an unconscious and more pathological process. In *Memoires: For Paul de Man*, a work written after his friend's death in 1983 Derrida suggests "there can be no *true mourning*" (29). What he means by this is that, contra Freud, we can never finally master the loss of the friend or loved one. He proclaims "the sublimity of a mourning without sublimation and without the obsessive triumph of which Freud speaks" (38). Similarly, in an essay on the work of the psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, Derrida both takes up and undermines their ideas of incorporation (a love for the other in me) and introjection (retaining the other as a pocket in me). His suggestion is that, contrary to what they initially suggest, incorporation can be seen to be pathological in failing to respect the alterity of the other. But equally, he rejects the possibility that the other can remain as a pocket in me, for that would be another way of failing to respect the other, by ignoring it and failing to engage with it (in any interaction we do not leave the other untouched). Given the concept emerges in psychoanalysis, we might initially think that mourning is confined to the interpersonal sphere but Derrida's thought of spectrality, as haunting leads us to rethink the boundaries of the self and time as traditionally thought, to a radical questioning "of the very presence of the present, this sort of non-contemporaneity of the present time with itself (this radical untimeliness or this anachrony on the basis of which we are trying to *think the ghost*)" (Derrida, *Specters*, 22).[12] While such explicitly articulated questioning is certainly not made in Housman's work, it is not absent and, indeed, could not be in a work so thoroughly "haunting" (to take up again Empson's term).

Housman's Haunting Poetry

"THERE NEVER HAS BEEN A SCHOLAR who really, and as scholar, deals with ghosts," Derrida says in *Specters* (11). Undoubtedly true yet if we were to put forward a candidate A. E. Housman is perhaps the nearest thing that could be imagined although his approach is, of course, primarily poetic rather than scholarly. I want now to elaborate in greater detail how Housman conjures up his spectral Shropshire, to enumerate his dealings with ghosts in this "most gigantic phantomachia" that is his collected poems (to borrow a phrase Derrida used about another work).[13] Again, I would like to stress that my approach is not to apply the philosophy of Derrida to the literary work of Housman but rather to observe how the work of both and the different voices they contain can be seen to speak to each other, revealing them to be structured by a questioning of the boundary of life and death and an insistence on the interplay between the two that Derrida has named as the spectral.

Firstly, we might note how Housman suggests that life itself is full of little deaths. Housman's well-known poem "To an Athlete Dying Young" (SL, XIX) is constructed around the sentiment of the third verse:

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Smart lad, to slip betimes away
From fields where glory does not stay
And early though the laurel grows
It withers quicker than the rose

The athlete escapes the fate of a death in life where before his physical demise his glories have been forgotten (this poem can be read not so much as a simple commendation of an early death as the surviving friend attempting to console himself for his loss). Christopher Ricks in his introduction to his collection of Housman criticism makes much of the idea of Housman as a poet of adolescence but in the way in which he repeatedly enumerates life in terms of the passing of days and years, there is perhaps something much more of the concerns and outlook more typical of maturity and middle age (Housman was well into his thirties when he wrote *A Shropshire Lad*). In his poems the precocious figures are in the prime of youth yet already counting out their lives. At twenty, the well-known speaker in "Loveliest of trees, the cherry now" looks upon his life as a series of Maytimes: "fifty springs." He speaks with a sense of loss although there is associated an intense and fleeting joy that is absent from that other great poetic enumerator Prufrock. The cherry tree is an image of the cyclical, yet impermanent present, which contrasts with the finitude of the poet's life (the reference to Eastertide emphasises this in a way characteristic of Housman's post-Christianity). There is an echo of this poem in LP IX where a rainy "spoilt spring" is rued, another year passed in the life of the young man. It is not just the years, the portions of life passed and those remaining, that are enumerated but the days, weeks, and months: "The beautiful and death-struck year" (SL, XLI).[14] Even the very minutes: "With dandelions to tell the hours/ That never are told again" (SL, V). Each sunset is a death, each passing day a little annihilation. There is a constant association in Housman of the west, the sun going down and dying. "Bells in tower at evening toll, /And the light forsakes the soul" (MP, XVII).

However, it is not just that Housman suggests that life is constantly passing, that we are already partly dead but rather that there is a relation with the dead that comprises what it is to be alive. It is this that Housman shares with Derrida: the idea that life is structured by our relations with the dead, by what the latter calls mourning. In Housman these connections take many forms. Most straightforwardly, relations with the dead come in the form of remembrances or memorialisations, such as that of A. E.'s dead brother George already quoted (LP, XVII). Similar is MP, XLII:

Strange, strange to think his blood is cold
And mine flows easy on,
And that straight look, that heart of gold,
That grace, that manhood, gone.

Then there are those poems where the living speak to the dead: LP, XVIII is addressed to a corpse, LP, XXVI to a dead love, LP, XXIX to a fallen soldier and MP, XXXIX to his dead comrades by one who fled when they did not. There is an important ambivalence in these poems. At times the dead are spoken to (or of) as dead but in places also *as if* alive. There is a spectral ambiguity, the dead may be dead but in some respects to the speaker they appear as still fully alive. It is in such poems that Housman commences his challenge to the either/or ontology of living *or* dead.

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Other poems are addressed with an amazing straightforwardness to the living by someone dead, such as AP, XIX, SL, XXX ("... from my grave ..."), SL, XXVII ("Is my team ploughing"), that which commences "Here dead lie we" (MP, XXXVI), or that containing the lines "So leave alone the grass/ That I am under" (MP, XXIV). Similarly, "The Lancer" (LP, VI) speaks of a time when he will be in his grave and his comrades alive: "And I with the brave shall be sleeping/ At ease on my mattress of loam,/ When back from their taking and keeping/ The squadron is riding at home." The tone is wistful for the loss of life, for the next verse speaks enviously: "The wind with the plumes will be playing,/ The girls will stand watching them wave,/ And eyeing my comrades and saying/ *Oh who would not sleep with the brave?*." Housman's spectral Shropshire is a world where the dead still speak to us. This is not a fictional device, for similar to Derrida, Housman believes the dead really do still speak to us, we engage and interact with them every day, even if nobody has ever actually been addressed from his grave by a dead lancer.

Quite different are the poems featuring obviously ghostly characters. Many of these owe much to the popular tradition of Scottish border ballads that Housman explicitly cited as one of the three main poetic influences on his work.[15] LP, XIX sets such a scene: "And the dead call the dying/ And finger at the doors" before going on to a conclusion that seems initially a denial of spectrality: "The living are the living/ And dead the dead will stay,/ And I will sort with comrades/ That face the beam of day." The best known of these phantomatic presences is SL, LIII, "The True Lover" with its schlock horror, cut necks, and dripping blood. True spectrality is always at risk of being overshadowed by such melodramatic visitations. There is no doubt that Housman is attracted to the figure of the ghost for various reasons (one being his much overlooked affinity for the popular culture of his day),[16] but perhaps the most important is that, similar to Derrida, he senses that in important respects we live with the dead. They are not nailed down in their coffins but move among us with a reality that in some respects is no less for being dead. Yet, Housman's ghosts make their point in ways so sensational and exaggerated that they are hard to count as wholly successful.

The sense that the living and the dead remain in interaction is far better conjured when the scene is more ambiguous. Far more common than veritable ghosts are figures that are unplaceable, strangely distanced from the living but are not actually stated to be dead either. The speaker in SL, XII might well be identified as a ghost. The first line, "When I watch the living meet," contains an implied distance suggesting an address from the world of the dead.[17] The impression of a voice from beyond the grave is strengthened in the second verse which ends, "Let me mind the house of dust/ Where my sojourn shall be long" while the third verse goes on to apparently describe this world of the dead. Similarly, the speaker in SL, IX might be a spectre. The first verse establishes the scene in the rural nighttime – "the sheep beside me graze" - while the third goes on to hint that he himself was one of the hanged: "They hang us now in Shrewsbury Jail." In poems such as these I would argue that it is deliberately unclear who is living and who is dead. The ambiguity conjures up a haunted world where we are never quite sure who were are sorting with. Where we can easily dismiss a too real ghost, more unsettling figures remain to undermine our perception of who addresses us in the manner of the "visor effect" spoken of by Derrida in relation to *Hamlet*.

Another way in which Housman challenges the boundary between life and death is with the second (after soldiers) of the main figures of his world: the criminal, or to be precise, the condemned man. The surprising number of poems by Housman that take as their theme the condemned has not been satisfactorily accounted for although it has been remarked.[18]

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These verses always focus on the individual and his fate to the almost complete exclusion of the law and the actual crime committed.[19] SL, VIII concerns a man who has murdered his brother, and it is unusual among Housman's poems in actually setting a scene and mentioning a particular crime. But even then the cause and actual event itself are passed over and we are rather just presented with the aftermath and a tragic scene that is irreparable: "She had two sons at rising day,/ To-night she'll be alone." In the next poem SL, IX no crime at all is specified, all we are given is the night before the execution: "There sleeps in Shrewsbury jail to-night,/ Or wakes, as may betide,/ A better lad, if things went right,/ Than most the sleep outside." The focus is entirely upon the criminal as a man and as the man explicitly still living yet condemned to death at a specific time and place. In LP, XIV the condemned is presented through his parents and the initial scene is "The day my mother bore me." Again, there is no mention of how he broke the law, we are merely presented with a son who himself has no sons, the execution being presented as an almost cosmic extinction. In LP, XV we have no more than the last minute of the condemned man's life. For all their empathy, it is difficult to read in these poems an obvious protest against capital punishment. I would suggest that they are rather an invitation to the reader to consider himself as "condemned," as yet alive but living in the certainty of a coming death. We are in a sense already spectres, alive but living in the expectation of death, both our own and that of others, leading to what Derrida calls "a mourning that does not wait for the so-called 'actual death'" (*Work of Mourning* 26).

In a similar yet more allusive vein, we have poems in which the living are seen to merge with their approaching death. In LP, VII a group of soldiers take on a spectral existence, on the boundary between life and death as a courting couple hears them marching: "Behind the drum and fife,/ Past hawthornwood and hollow,/ Through earth and out of life/ The soldiers follow." Nobody fingers a door here and no blood drips and the haunting effect is all the more for it. As with the scene at Ludlow fair in SL, XXIII already mentioned the as-yet living become ghosts before our eyes, passing from life into death. SL, XXXV with its line "Soldiers marching, all to die" and its strong rhythm suggest the inevitability and inexorability of their movement towards death. In these poems the living are not fully alive but already taken by death. The sense of having been among the dead when with the living is evoked in the reader at the same time as the idea that I myself am also a spectral presence that will pass too. Housman's poetry is ostensibly about soldiers and criminals but the central interest is in untimely deaths which can evoke the precariousness of existence. His point is that it is only in the company of the dead that we can understand what it is to be alive. Life is never pure of death which is something quite different from the facileness of Pound's "We shall be dead pretty soon/ Therefore let us act as if we were/ dead already." There is a certain obsession with the dead that, far from being morbid, is a part of living life (as we have heard Derrida say). This emphasis on mortality is an important element of what I have called Housman's post-Christian outlook. I have already touched on it and there is not space to elaborate on wider questions here, suffice to say that Housman's poems show a consistent engagement with Christianity, one which rejects it and passes through it to an affirmation instead of this one life and of man's place in the inexorable flow of time.

Throughout Housman's poetry the dead are almost as much a force and presence as the living and occupy a seemingly natural place in the scheme of things (and I think here we find Housman undermining the dominant naturalism and realism of his poetics). On occasion this is underlined when they are presented as a mass. This spectral assembly we might term "the nation that is not," a phrase Housman liked so much he used it twice, in SL, XII and MP,

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II. There is a similar allusion to the community of the dead – "Townsman of a stiller town" – in "To an Athlete Dying Young" (SL, XIX). In MP, XXXVIII, a posthumously published poem, this host, who are suggested not to know eve from morn, is the main subject of the poem. They are said to be "more in number" than the living. Elsewhere, we have "... the fluttering legion/ Of all that ever died" (SL, XLII).[20] Housman, in rejecting any Christian idea of an afterlife, replaces it with the spectral sense that the dead remain a presence among the living. In the poems of memorialisation or addresses to the dead this takes a personal form but the idea of the "nation that is not," the dead as a community, is far larger than this. The generations now passed and gone accumulate and against them the individual life lived now stands out. Repeatedly this life is placed in the continuum of time in order that we might see it for what it is. Thus the spectres that haunt the denziens of Housman's spectral Shropshire do not only take human form. In SL, LI the poet is addressed by a statue in the "Grecian gallery":

> I too survey that endless line
> Of men whose thoughts are not as mine.
> Years, ere you stood up from rest,
> On my neck the collar prest;
> Years, when you lay down your ill,
> I shall stand and bear it still

This idea of a life or force that transcends the individual human life and thereby gives to it a particular finite definition can also be taken by nature, or more occasionally by landscape. In "On Wenlock Edge" (SL, XXXI), the span of human life is mediated by the countryside:

> Then, 'twas before my time, the Roman
> At yonder heaving hill would stare:
> The blood that warms an English yeoman,
> The thoughts that hurt him, they were there.

Here Wenlock Edge is a background or stage which puts into connection individuals centuries apart, a passive haunting we might say. Elsewhere, that very landscape takes on human properties of remembering. The speaker in "The Recruit" (SL, III) is unplaceable but the friends of the lads addressed are conjured up as potential ghosts: "Come you home a hero,/ Or come not home at all,/ The lads you leave will mind you/Till Ludlow tower shall fall." And again, in the final lines there is the promise that the recruit will live on, this time not just through his friends but through the very landscape: "Oh, town and field will mind you/ Till Ludlow tower is down." Or similarly "The earth, because my heart was sore,/ Sorrowed for the son she bore" (SL, XLI). Housman has been attacked for "the pathetic fallacy" but what such criticism overlooks is the way in which his personification of landscape or nature is an attempt to figure the way in which the dead, as well as the time past and future which exceeds my span, outline the life of the living man.

Yet much as the landscape and the falling down of the years looms over the lives of Housman's spectral Shropshire, it is human lives that are at its heart in a way that manifests a

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strong affinity with Derrida. Some of the anecdotes we have of Housman suggest that, similar to the latter, the deaths of friends were keenly felt. As Archie Burnett notes: "in personal life, his composure usually intact and well-guarded, could be shaken. Percy Withers recalls Housman telling him of a lady recently dead: 'and in the telling his voice faltered and a look of unutterable sadness suffused his face'" (9). As in Derrida there is a stress on the uniqueness of the friend and his death becomes almost and even the death of a world:

> Now to her lap the incestuous earth
> The son she bore has ta'en,
> And other sons she brings to birth
> But not my friend again (AP, VIII).

On the death of his friend and former tutor Louis Althusser, Derrida said:

> what is coming to an end, what Louis is taking away with him, is not only something or other that we would have shared at some point or another, in one place or another, but the world itself, a certain origin of the world – his origin, no doubt, but also that of the world in which I lived, in which we lived a unique story. It is a story that is, in any case, irreplaceable . . . It is a world that is for us the whole world, the only world, and it sinks into an abyss from which no memory – even if we keep the memory, and we will keep it – can save it. (Derrida, *Work of Mourning* 115)

Between these two quotes there is a considerable distance in many respects and they jar in style and tone. On the one hand we have an English poet who worked with poetic forms that were with unremarkable in the late Victorian period (Housman is often not credited with the quiet and unassuming mastery of his chosen métier by those who think he made the wrong literary choices) and on the other hand we have a French philosopher of cosmopolitan background and avant garde inclinations writing a funeral address the better part of a century later.[21] Yet across this distance what we find in both is a meditation on the death of the friend which poses it as the loss of a unique origin of the world. I have already pointed out how for Housman the death of the childless condemned man in LP, XIV is portrayed as an almost cosmic extinction. Another element of the same poem, the focus on "the day my mother bore me," also parallels a similar point Derrida draws out about the way this end of the world returns us also to the beginning: "each time another end of the world, the same end, another, and each time it is nothing less than an origin of the world, each time the sole world, the unique world, which, in its end, appears to us as it was at the origin – sole and unique" (*Work of Mourning* 95). Something akin yet phrased althogether differently is implied in a grotesquely comic and somewhat uncharacteristic posthumously published poem in which the speaker imagines taking up a knife:

> I need but stick it in my heart
> And down will come the sky,
> And earth's foundations will depart
> And all you folk will die (MP, XXVI).

The narcissism on display here is alien to Derrida, for whom the other is unavoidably first but I would take the idea of the individual human as the unique origin of the world as the crucial point. We might call this shared sensitivity between the French philosopher and the English poet and classicist to the way in which each time someone dies a, even the, world dies their "melancholy." Derrida remarked on the death of Jean-François Lyotard that he felt that he

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himself was the most melancholic of his generation of friends (Derrida, *Work of Mourning* 215). Housman in his self-parody at the end of *A Shropshire Lad* accuses himself of being "melancholy." This common feature of these two so otherwise divergent writers would be no longer a Freudian melancholy but one that is interminable and where the spectres remain inassimilable. Such a melancholy is very different from morbidity. It is a recognition that "the affirmation of life is nothing other than a certain thought of death; it is neither opposition nor indifference to death" (Derrida, *Work of Mourning* 175).

We live, both Derrida and Housman agree, albeit in their very different ways, as survivors. In *Learning How to Live Finally* Derrida says, "we are all survivors who have been granted a temporary reprieve [*en sursis*]" (24). Housman dramatises such a scene in a series of well-known poems in the middle of *A Shropshire Lad*. In SL, XXV two friends quarrel over a girl, with the speaker of the poem outliving the other to recount the event. The following poem takes up a similar theme, speaking at the end of the first verse of:

> Two lovers looking to be wed;
> And time shall put them both to bed,
> But she shall lie with earth above,
> And he beside another love (SL, XXVI).

At the poem's end we learn: "They talk about a time at hand/ When I shall sleep with clover clad,/ And she beside another lad." Here we have a full scale drama of survival with the apparent triumphalism of a Freudian mourning giving way to something more resigned as the speaker realises that while he has survived for the moment others will come to survive him. This verse is followed by a yet further one where a dead man asks his still living friend how things go in farm, field, and with his sweetheart. It turns out she is now the friend's sweetheart (SL, XXVII). There is a huge distance between this disturbing, almost surreal poetic drama and Derrida's pithy aphorism, "*la vie* est *survie*" ("life *is* living on, life *is* survival"), yet the same thought reverberates through both (*Work of Mourning* 26). We are haunted by spectres of our dead and melancholy comes from the fact that while they yet remain within us, we have forever lost the response of a living person.[22] As Derrida said, "death [is] not, first of all, annihilation, non-being, or nothingness, but a certain experience for the survivor of the 'without-response'" (*Work of Mourning* 203). Again, we have this sentiment put in a more personal way by Housman when, in *More Poems* (1936), this death of the friend as the loss of a response is evoked in a poem entitled "A. J. J.":

> The word unsaid will stay unsaid
> Though there was much to say;
> Last month was time enough: he's dead,
> The news must keep for aye (MP, XLII).

With death we lose any return from the friend. There is a further echo of this in Housman's:

> My friends made words of it with tongues
> That talk no more to me. (SL, XXXVIII)

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These tongues, these friends or spectres that speak no more to Housman and to us we have enumerated throughout his poetry. They remain, as do the spectres of Derrida, a part of the himself and a part of us, that is a part of dead. "There I was friends with perished people,/ And there lie they" (MP, XIV).

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NOTES

1. Housman's poetic works are referenced in the text following the now standard notation: *A Shropshire Lad* = SL; *Late Poems* = LP; *More Poems* = MP; *Additional Poems* = AP. The texts of the poems as cited here conform to those established in Archie Burnett's *The Poems of A. E. Housman*.
2. Derrida argues that there is a constant interplay between law, which is paradoxically both to come and immanent, and a singularity that exceeds it and, indeed, on which he argues it is founded. Justice is the name he gives to this event whereby law is constantly challenged in the face of an excessive singularity. Law demands justice and justice demands law. I will return to occasions when Housman appears to take up a similar thought of justice elsewhere in my essay. Here I would simply wish to suggest that "The Laws of God, the Laws of Man" (LP, XII) can be seen to dramatise just such a structure (although from the existential standpoint of the individual rather than Derrida's focus of judgement). This poem is, following Jebb, commonly seen to be the last of three poems Housman wrote on the subject of homosexuality. There are readers who bemoan his failure to explicitly take up the subject of his sexuality but it can also be argued that not mentioning homosexuality explicitly strengthens "The Laws of God, the Laws of Man" as a piece of literature by making law more generally the theme.
3. In speaking of Housman's "Shropshire," I will take the term loosely to refer to the world of his poetry and will not restrict myself strictly to his *A Shropshire Lad* cycle. I think the arguments for taking his poetry as a whole rather than attempting to select out what in his most famous collection, as well as in later ones, is written in the voice of "Terence Hearsay," the eponymous Shropshire Lad, are pretty self evident. Housman's is a highly distinctive voice whereas the figure of Terence, even in *A Shropshire Lad,* is a quite weak and fitful one. I will therefore use the term "Shropshire" metaphorically for Housman's poetic world whether the device of Hearsay is used or not.
4. I will come back to how late in Spender's life Housman was the occasion for him to make his own testament to spectrality.
5. There is no space here to analyse fully what Derrida has to say about death and the *pharmakon* in "Plato's Pharmacy" but we might minimally note that the later is for him that which disturbs apparently simple boundaries, such as the one between life and death that is under scrutiny in this paper and in Housman's poetry, "The *pharmakon* and writing are … always involved in questions of life and death" (*Dissemination*, Chicago, U of Chicago P, 105).
6. There is a similar sentiment in the first poem in the series of "Notebook Fragments" edited by Archie Burnett: "Tomorrow you shall have the grave to wife:/ Now, in the accepted time, make friends with life/ . . . / And here you loiter spelling gravestones: go" (Burnett, *Poems* 171).
7. Another of these rare examples would be AP, X:

> Oh on my breast in days hereafter
> Light the earth should lie,
> Such weight to bear is now the air
> So heavy hangs the sky.

8. Those that are are mostly in the poems on the condemned. I will come back to these.

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9. The lines: "A soldier cheap to the King/ And dear to me" (MP, XL) may very well refer also to his brother.
10. But see endnote 2 above regarding justice and what I will later have to say about the "visor effect."
11. Hamnet's name is inadvertently spelled Hammet in the text.
12. This is a point Derrida returns to repeatedly in *Specters*: "if there is something like spectrality, there are reasons to doubt . . . the border between the present, the actual or present reality of the present, and everything that can be opposed to it; absence, non-presence, non-effectivity, inactuality, virtuality, or even the simulacrum in general, and so forth" *Specters* 39.
13. Derrida calls *The German Ideology* "the most gigantic phantomachia in the whole history of philosophy" (*Specters* 120).
14. In SL, XXIX Housman uses the image of the way in which the passing of different species of flowers can be used to mark the passing of the year. Interestingly, his own personal diaries record two main types of events: those concerning his love life and those concerning the different times at which seasonal events like the first of a particular type of flower occur. The poem already referred to ends with the post-Christian suggestion that "the daffodil . . . dies on Easter day." In the "Light Verse and Juvenalia" as edited by Burnett we have the poem "Summer" that has the final line: " . . . coming Autumn, coming death" (*Poems of A.E. Housman* 203).
15. The other two were Shakespeare's songs and Heine.
16. When professor of Latin at University College, London Housman eschewed gentlemens' clubs and his typical idea of an evening out was dinner followed by a musichall (Graves 92).
17. This is both reinforced and undone by the end of the verse which speaks of "the street/ where I lodge a little while."
18. Jebb's suggestion that the figure of the condemned man is linked to Housman's homosexuality is not necessarily mutually exclusive with my argument suggesting it is part of a much broader structure of spectrality in Housman's work.
19. Housman at times seems to be implicitly making a similar distinction to Derrida between justice and law. See further endnote 2 above for Derrida on law and justice.
20. Poem "XVI" in Burnett's "Notebook Fragments" series runs: "Under the earth we trample,/ The thoughtless dead lie thick/ This outspread surface ample / Bears, sprinkled thin, the quick" (Burnett, *Poems of Housman* 175).
21. Derrida's style is too often spoken as if something *sui generis* and its proximity to the mainstream of French philosophical writing is ignored. Only in a handful of works in the 1970s does Derrida attempts something obviously radical and even then it is the form more than the style that is novel.
22. Strikingly Stephen Spender, who had mocked Housman's supposed morbidity, had occasion to give testimony in this vein on the publication of Robert Graves's biography of Housman. He noted down what interested him most in the book: "Housman was circumcised on his father's instructions, when he was 12 [sic], and that he had a gondolier in Venice, and male prostitutes (descriptions and prices paid in a notebook) in Paris – how I longed to tell Wystan [W. H. Auden]. One cannot telephone to the dead" (Goldsmith, ed. 382–83).

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