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# Testi

## STOPPARD, HOUSMAN AND THE MISSION OF TEXTUAL CRITICISM

JEREMY LAWRENCE

«Facile coram Deo in die obitus retribuere unicuique secundum vias suas, et in fine hominis denudatio operum illius.»

*Biblia Sacra Vulgata*, Sirach II: 28-29

It is an easy thing unto the Lord in the day of death to reward a man according to his ways, and in his end his deeds shall be discovered». What then – fellow Aristarchus, *mon semblable, mon frère* – shall be discovered of the works of textual critics?

Tom Stoppard dramatizes this very scenario in *The Invention of Love* (1997), based on the life of the poet and classical scholar A.E. Housman (1859-1936). The play is a love-story, not an essay about critical method, but it contains the most scintillating apologia for textual criticism in English literature. There are, as far as I know, only three earlier writers on the task and character of textual critics whose works deserve to be read as art: Bentley's *Dissertation upon the «Epistles of Phalaris»* (1699), Pope's *Variorum Dunciad* (1729), and Housman's essays, «The Application of Thought to Textual Criticism» and the introductions to his Manilius, Juvenal, and Lucan (1921, 1903-30, 1905a, 1926). Even if we extend the category of philology to include Humpty Dumpty's *explication* of a medieval ballad in *Through the Looking-Glass* (Carroll 1871, Ch. VI), George Eliot's portrait of the «ante-rooms and winding passages» of Casaubon's labyrinthine «condensations» in *Middlemarch* (1871-72), or Nabokov's excoriation of the narcissism of commentators in *Pale Fire* (1962), the tally remains meagre. There is therefore no need to apologize for writing about Stoppard's latest addition to the canon from the peculiar viewpoint of an audience of textual critics.

The play's *mise-en-scène*, long ago imagined by the *artes moriendi*, is a

death-bed examination of conscience in which the devils of Housman's life rise up to dispute over his soul. Housman was an atheist and classicist, so his *transitus* takes place in a dream – from the gates of horn or the gates of ivory, we cannot tell – based upon Virgil's account of Charon's ferry across the waters of Styx (*Aeneid* VI, 295-314), in allusion to one of Housman's own posthumously published private love poems (*More Poems* XXIII, 1-4; 1956, p. 183):

Crossing alone the nighted ferry  
With the one coin for fee,  
Whom, on the wharf of Lethe waiting,  
Count you to find? Not me.

In a dream phantasmogoria shot through with reminiscences of the Victorian culture of Housman's youth, the river of Hades mingles in memory with the streams of Isis and Cherwell that lapped the Elysian Fields of his Oxford days, «when wits were fresh and clear, / And life ran gaily as the sparkling Thames» (Matthew Arnold, *The Scholar-Gypsy*, vv. 201-202). This vision in turn evokes the summery bank at Godstow where, on 4 July 1862, Charles Dodgson first told the story of *Alice in Wonderland* to the three Misses Liddell, daughters of the Dean of Christ Church<sup>1</sup>. The riverine evocations are spliced with snapshots of the intellectual ambience of the city of dreaming spires that Housman encountered in its heyday in the late 1870s: the pederastic Hellenism of the Aesthetes Pater and Wilde side by side with the Pre-Raphaelite socialism of Ruskin and the classicism of Jowett, Pattison, and Ellis (see below *Dramatis personae*, pp. 198-201). The real-life characters from this charmed circle weave in and out as the weft of the story, quoting themselves in a weird, erudite game of literary croquet that again echoes *Alice in Wonderland* (1865, Ch. VIII). The warp of the tapestry is provided by an encounter with another boat, this one manned by three men, to say nothing of a dog – an allusion to that best-loved of English pastoral idylls, Jerome K. Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat* (1889). The three are young Housman, his beloved

<sup>1</sup> A «Miss Liddell» is mentioned as Housman's rival in love – tellingly, in a bit of horseplay about whether her name would scan in Catullan verse (*Invention of Love*, p. 12). Carroll's valedictory verses on the Godstow expedition in *Through the Looking-Glass* (1998, 241), with their allusion to Calderón and touch of Housman's poetic voice (l. 6), encapsulate the scenario and atmosphere of Stoppard's play: «A boat beneath a sunny sky, / Lingering onward dreamily / In an evening of July – [...] / Long has paled that sunny sky: / Echoes fade and memories die. / Autumn frosts have slain July. [...] / Ever drifting down the stream – / Lingering in the golden gleam – / Life, what is it but a dream?».

Moses Jackson, and their fellow student A.E. Pollard. Act I traces the unravelling threads of Housman's love for the unsuspecting Jackson and his equally ardent love for ancient poetry. Both are discoveries or "inventions" of Eros that lead to a transfixing encounter between the old Housman (AEH) and his young self (Housman).

Act II takes up the story ten years later. The backdrop is now provided by the aftermath of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 and Oscar Wilde's trial for gross indecency; the chorus is composed of hacks from the Victorian gutter press (including Jerome K. Jerome); and the biographical foreground traces the uncovering and tragic curtailment of Housman's love for Jackson, followed by flight into the contradictory sublimations of lyric poetry and a professorship of Latin. The play's end brings us back to the banks of the Styx with another encounter between AEH and Housman. Before this last scene, however, comes a meeting (though their paths crossed frequently, the two never met in life) with the departing soul of Wilde as he quips his way to Avernus on Charon's raft. Wilde's flamboyant self-sacrifice is contrasted with Housman's repression:

AEH. My life is marked by long silences. [...] I defended the classical authors from the conjectures of idiots, [...] and that will have to do, my sandcastle against the confounding sea. [...]. I'm very sorry. Your life is a terrible thing. A chronological error. [...]

WILDE. [...] Better a fallen rocket than never a burst of light. [...] The artist is the secret criminal in our midst. He is the agent of progress against authority. You are right to be a scholar. A scholar is all scruple, an artist is none. [...] I made my life into my art and it was an unqualified success. The blaze of my immolation threw its light into every corner of the land [...] I lived at the turning point of the world where everything was waking up new [...]. Where were you when all this was happening?

AEH. At home (*Invention*, pp. 98-100).

Some critics assume this scene embodies the play's message, and that it dramatizes a proposition detrimental to Housman as a man and to scholarship as a pursuit; that it condemns the professor, as W.H. Auden put it in a notorious sonnet (1977), for choosing «the dry-as-dust» while keeping his «tears like dirty postcards in a drawer». To suppose that this was Stoppard's intention is to disregard his constant protests against reducing the «high comedy of ideas» to such banal lessons:

What there is [in my plays] is a series of conflicting statements made by conflicting characters, and they tend to play a sort of infinite leap-frog [...], an ar-

gument, a refutation, then a rebuttal of the refutation, then a counter-rebuttal, so that there is never any point [...] that is the last word<sup>2</sup>.

The vulgar interpretation also ignores the ensuing climactic scene with young Housman, which returns to the Latin elegists' invention of love with a poignancy that fascinates all the more because, as the play's most insightful critic points out, «Wilde seems to represent, among other things, Stoppard's own fluency and facility pitted against something, or someone, more reticent and cautious»; it is Housman's vulnerability «that is made to seem the more inspired, the more resilient» (Phillips 1998). This is true, and connects with a recurrent theme of Stoppard's plays: namely, that the life of the mind is our bastion against futility and despotism. «It's wanting to know that makes us matter», cries Bernard in *Arcadia* (1993); «otherwise we are going out the way we came in»<sup>3</sup>. Indeed, Housman is a natural born Stoppardian hero, and the value of his dedication to truth – which brings us to the point of this essay, the defence of textual criticism – is foregrounded at two key moments in the play<sup>4</sup>.

One comes mid-way through Act II, where Pollard chides Housman for the savage tone of his critique of rival critics:

HOUS. If I'm disrespectful it's because it's important and not a game anyone can play. [...] Scholarship [is] where we're nearest to our humanness. Useless knowledge for its own sake. Useful knowledge is good, too, but it's for the fainthearted, an elaboration of the real thing, which is only to shine some light, it doesn't mat-

<sup>2</sup> Stoppard 1974, p. 114. Earlier Stoppard said: «It is a delusion that a play is the end product of an idea; [...] the idea is the end product of the play» (1968, p. 109); and later, «grown-up art is art that withholds [...] the possible meanings of the narrative [...]; the story [is] a metaphor for an idea that has to be tricked out of hiding» (1999a, p. 10). Auden (1957) later retracted his sonnet and – forestalling Stoppard's portrait – wrote of Housman's tragic predicament making him «one of these rare people whose skeleton, so to speak, was always showing».

<sup>3</sup> The ethical imperative of knowledge for its own sake figures in all the plays, notably George Moore's struggles with idealism, logical positivism, and fascism in *Jumpers* (1972); the art vs. politics debate enacted by Joyce, Lenin, and Tzara in *Travesties* (1974); totalitarian assaults on thought in *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour* (1977), *Professional Foul* (1978), and *The Coast of Utopia* (2002); and Thomasina Coverly's heroic curiosity about entropy and chaos in *Arcadia*.

<sup>4</sup> Stoppard 1999b: «I find him heroic. I'm afraid I even like his arrogance [...], the poison always grows out of something very deep in him», asserting that he was inspired by the image of Housman, after failing his Oxford degree in 1881, working nights at the British Museum on textual studies for the ten years he was employed as a clerk in the Patents Office (where Jackson worked) in order to get his chair.



ter where on what, it's the light itself, against the darkness, it's what's left of God's purpose when you take away God. (*Invention*, pp. 73-4)

But for this grand claim to be valid the technical detail of the scholarship must stand scrutiny – must, that is, be capable of proving that the knowledge really is “the real thing”. Stoppard's achievement in *The Invention of Love* is to convey not merely the general feel but the concrete texture of that detail. The dialogue preceding this quotation, for example, has Pollard quote verbatim from a handwritten draft of a paragraph about Postgate's emendation of Propertius I, 1, 33 in what would be the twenty-nine-year-old Housman's eighth article, «Emendationes Propertianae» («*Voces in verse 33 is an emendation to frighten children in their beds*», *Invention*, p. 73)<sup>5</sup>. Not that anything is said to enlighten the audience about the arcane significance of the variant, here or in the other passages where Propertius's poem and its textual problems crop up<sup>6</sup>. But the fundamental motive of textual criticism is explained at several junctures, most memorably through the surprising mouthpiece of Jowett, Master of Balliol and dilettante of Plato, whose mispronunciation of ἀκριβῶς earned Housman's contempt (*Invention*, p. 3). The dialogue turns upon Munro's emendation of Catullus 64, 14 and Robinson Ellis's fatal inability to perceive the significance of the Codex Oxoniensis that he discovered in the Bodleian<sup>7</sup>:

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Housman 1888, p. 34 (1972, I, p. 53): «Of Mr Postgate's conjecture *in me nostra Venus uoces* [for *noctes*] *exercet amaras* “against me my darling plies her bitter speech” I am at a loss to know what to say [...]: the alteration makes nonsense of the whole elegy from beginning to end. [...] Propertius had been banished from Cynthia's presence for a year; and yet he makes her “ply her bitter speech against” Propertius, from whom she was as many miles asunder as Hypanis is from Eridanus! [...] no wonder that many regard [conjectural emendation] as a game played merely for amusement [...]. But I imagine that these considerations will have occurred ere now to Mr Postgate himself, or will have been pointed out to him by his friends». Pollard quotes «makes nonsense ~ end» and the last sentence.

<sup>6</sup> For further references to «Emendationes Propertianae» see *Invention*, p. 33 («HOUS. One has hardly settled down with Baehrens before one is jolted out of one's chair by something like *cunctas* in one-one-five... AEH. Yes, *cunctas* for *castas* is intolerable»; cfr. Housman 1888, pp. 18-9 [1972, I, pp. 41-2]); *Invention*, p. 34 («AEH. And here is Paley with *et* for *aut* in one-one-twenty-five»; cfr. Housman 1888, pp. 32-3 [1972, I, p. 52] – the latter misattributed by the slipshod Jowett: «you, sir, have not been put on earth with an Oxford scholarship so that you may bother your head with whether Catullus in such-and-such place wrote *ut* or *et* or *aut*», *Invention*, p. 24).

<sup>7</sup> *Invention*, p. 23: «JOWETT. Catullus 64! Lord Leighton should paint that opening scene! [...] “And the wild faces of the sea-nymphs emerged from the white foaming waters” – *emersere feri candenti e gurgite vultus aequoreae* [...]. HOUS. Yes, sir. *Freti*, actually,

JOWETT. What Catullus really wrote was already corrupt by the time it was copied twice, which was about the time of the first Roman invasion of Britain: and the earliest copy that has come down to us was written about 1500 years after that. Think of all those secretaries! – corruption breeding corruption from papyrus to papyrus, and from the last disintegrating scrolls to the first new-fangled parchment books, [...] – until! – finally and at long last – mangled and tattered like a dog that has fought its way home, there falls across the threshold of the Italian Renaissance the sole surviving witness to thirty generations of carelessness and stupidity: the *Verona Codex* of Catullus [...]. And there you have the foundation of the poems of Catullus (*Invention*, p. 24-25).

Nevertheless, the eloquent conviction of these details brings us no nearer to certainty that the «knowledge» is the real thing. In fact, the passages are perfect examples of the infinite «leap-frog» of refutation and rebuttal that Stoppard avows as the structural and intellectual spring-work of his plays. Ideas collide, they do not meld. Jowett, of all people, makes a defence of *feri* that gives special pause for thought:

JOWETT. The textual critics have spoken. Death to wild faces emerging in the nominative. Long live the transitive *emersere* raising up the accusative unqualified faces from the white foaming waters, of the *freti*, something watery like channel. Never mind that we already have so many watery words that the last thing we need is another – here we are: «*freti* for *feri* is an easy correction, as *r*, *t*, *tr*, *rt* are among the letters most frequently confounded in the manuscripts». Well, Munro is entitled to concur with everybody who amends the manuscripts of Catullus according to his taste and calls his taste his conjectures – it's a futile business (*Invention*, pp. 23-4)<sup>8</sup>.

Knowingly, Jowett is made to talk to young Housman about the dangers of taste in conjectural criticism in much the same terms as the mature AEH will later do, and as the real Housman did<sup>9</sup>. Here and in several oth-

sir». Cfr. Housman 1905b: «Towards conjectures which take sense and context into consideration [Ellis] shows some hostility, and his voluminous notes have no room for [...] 64, 14 *freti*».

<sup>8</sup> Quinn prints *feri*, and comments: «More likely nominative (and *aequoreae*... *Nereides* an appositional expansion) than descriptive genitive; those who read *freti* mostly take *uultus* as accusative after *emersere*. Schrader's *freti*, proposed in 1776, is adopted by Mynors and Fordyce [...]. But the case against *feri*, the reading of V, (i.e. “timid”, “shy” [...]) is *not conclusive*» (Catullus 1973, p. 303, my emphasis).

<sup>9</sup> «Taste is not knowledge» (*Invention*, p. 37), «To be a scholar, the first thing you have to learn is that scholarship has nothing to do with taste» (ivi, p. 72); cfr. «[Bentley] alters what offends his taste without staying to ask about the taste of Manilius», «Not only had Jacob no sense for grammar, no sense for coherency, no sense for sense, but being him-

er places we are presented with a vision – the ideal scenario, in Stoppard's view – of a man surrounded by the ruined carcasses of his own ideas<sup>10</sup>. And this particular ruin goes to the heart of the matter as far as textual critics are concerned, because in our discipline the absence of certainty, of absolute proof, constitutes the locus of methodological dispute, the entire nub of theoretical and practical contention. Against Housman's passionate affirmation that «the recovery of ancient texts is the highest task of all» and that «scholarship is a small redress against the vast unreason of what is taken from us» (*Invention*, p. 74), it is hard not to grant the force of Jowett's objection: «Certainty could only come from recovering the autograph» (*Invention*, p. 24)<sup>11</sup>.

The play addresses this crucial point in the other key passage where the epistemological question – the *nature* of textual critical knowledge – is debated. It comes in the conversation towards the end of Act I in which the dying AEH coaxes the critical instinct in young Housman with an emendation to Catullus 64, 324 – the one place where a textual problem is actually worked out in front of us<sup>12</sup>. The brilliant solution is typical of the real Housman's most enduring work, which often concerned such despised minutiae as the art of punctuation. In this regard the first 19

self possessed by a passion for the clumsy and the hispid he imputed this disgusting taste to all the authors whom he edited» (Housman 1903-30, I, in 1961, pp. 29, 33); and see below, n. 13.

<sup>10</sup> Stoppard 1968, p. 112: «Beckett [...] picks up a proposition and then dismantles and qualifies each part of its structure as he goes along, until he nullifies what he started out with. Beckett gives me more pleasure than I can express because he always ends up with a man surrounded by the wreckage of a proposition he had made in confidence only ten minutes before».

<sup>11</sup> Precisely the same “leap-frog” occurs in a later discussion of the parallel corruptions – textual, semantic, and moral – of the phrase *hashing/hushing up* on newspaper reports about white slavery (trafficking of women): while Housman and Pollard enthuse about «which copies come first and which scribes had bad habits – oh, the fun is endless», the *ingénu* Chamberlain sees only that «there's no way to tell, if they both make sense». Housman's retort, «One of them always makes the better sense *if you can get into the writer's mind*» (my italics), has the unintended result of revealing the subjective nature of the business: «CHAM. Toss a coin – I would. POLL. That's another good method» (*Invention*, pp. 69-70). As for «vast unreason», see the image of the cornfield after the reaping on p. 74: «Laid flat to stubble, and here and there, unaccountably, miraculously spared, a few stalks still upright. Why those? There is no reason».

<sup>12</sup> *Invention*, pp. 37-8, dramatizing the argument of Housman (1915): «The verse [*Emathiae tutamen opis, carissime nato*] is universally esteemed corrupt. The description of Peleus as dear exceedingly to his yet unborn and unbegotten son is so absurd a form of address [...]. [But] the reading of the Mss offers no difficulty, and stands in need of no help from anyone except the printer: *Emathiae tutamen, Opis carissime nato*».

lines of his *Lucan* (1926) are a performance whose pellucid mathematical simplicity – sheer *beauty* – offers the textual critic a pleasure no less electric than the effulgent, fairy-tale opening of Lachmann's *Lucretius*: «Ante hos mille annos in quadam regni Francici parte unum supererat Lucretiani carminis exemplar antiquum...» (Lachmannus 1850, I, pp. 3-15). Surprisingly, however, Stoppard's play nowhere expatiates upon this intrinsic aesthetic justification of textual criticism – the one that matters most to practitioners. Instead, in the passage which I am here discussing, he tackles first the more tricky question of its extrinsic aesthetic value. Tellingly, it is the enthusiastic Housman who has to remind the moribund AEH of the argument, using an image from Catullus 11, *cecidit velut prati / ultimi flos, praetereunte postquam tactus aratro*, elsewhere (see above, n. 11) turned to account as a metaphor for the «vast unreason» of the wreck of literature:

AEH. The Romans were foreigners writing for foreigners two millennia ago; and for people whose gods we find quaint, whose savagery we abominate, whose private habits we don't like to talk about, but whose idea of what is exquisite is, we flatter ourselves, mysteriously identical with ours<sup>13</sup>.

HOUS. But it *is*, isn't it? We catch our breath at the places where the breath was always caught. The poet writes to his mistress how she's killed his love – «fallen like a flower at the field's edge where the plough touched it and passed on by». [...] Two thousand years in the tick of a clock. [...] I could weep when I think how nearly lost it was, [...] that flower, lying among the rubbish under a wine-

<sup>13</sup> The speech quotes Housman's Cambridge Inaugural of 1911 (Housman 1969, pp. 34-5): «When Horace is reported to have said *seu mobilibus ueris inhorruit adventus foliis*, and when pedants like Bentley and Munro object that the phrase is unsuitable to its context, of what avail is it to be assured by persons of taste [...] that these are exquisite lines? Exquisite to whom? [...] What is the likelihood that your notions or your contemporaries' notions of the exquisite are those of a foreigner who wrote for foreigners two millennia ago? And for what foreigners? For the Romans, for men whose religion you disbelieve, whose chief institution you abominate, whose manners you do not like to talk about, but whose literary tastes, you flatter yourself, were identical with yours». The passage goes on with a rare and profound – though surely unintended – glimpse into the desert places of Housman's psychology: «Our first task is to get rid of [our tastes], and to acquire, if we can, by humility and self-repression, the tastes of the classics; not to [...] cover the floor with the print of feet which have waded through *the miry clay of the nineteenth century into the horrible pit of the twentieth*. [...] Communion with the ancients is purchasable at no cheaper rate than the kingdom of heaven; we must be born again. But to be born again is a process exceedingly repugnant to all right-minded Englishmen» (my italics). It was this passage of the play which provoked the heated debate in Stoppard 2000.

vat, the last, corrupt, copy of Catullus left alive in the wreck of ancient literature. It's a cry that cannot be ignored (*Invention*, pp. 36-7).

The «cry that cannot be ignored» moves us, as far as the meditation on textual criticism is concerned, to the heart of the matter and the play. It centres on the question, adumbrated from the very beginning («CHARON. A poet and a scholar is what I was told. [...] It sounded like two different people», *Invention*, p. 2), of whether the critic can be – or must be – a poet at the same time. For AEH «poetical feelings are a peril to scholarship» (p. 36); chastened, or perhaps subconsciously convinced, by his younger self's reply («we're never too old to learn»), he counters with a modified defence which leads us back to the epistemological question of whether textual scholarship is true science, knowledge of the real thing:

You had better be a poet. Literary enthusiasm never made a scholar, and unmade many. [...] A scholar's business is to add to what is known. That is all. But it is capable of giving the very greatest satisfaction, because knowledge is good. It does not have to look good or sound good or even do good. It is good just by being knowledge. And the only thing that makes it knowledge is that it is true. You can't have too much of it and there is no little too little to be worth having. There is truth and falsehood in a comma (*Invention*, p. 37).

There follows the demonstration of the last proposition from Catullus 64, 324 (see above, p. 193, n. 12), and then this final formulation:

AEH. By taking out a comma and putting it back in a different place, sense is made out of nonsense in a poem that has been read continuously since it was first misprinted four hundred years ago. A small victory over ignorance and error. A scrap of knowledge to add to our stock. What does this remind you of? Science, of course. Textual criticism is a science whose subject is literature, as botany is the science of flowers and zoology of animals and geology of rocks. Flowers, animals and rocks being the work of nature, their sciences are exact sciences, and must answer to the authority of what can be seen and measured. Literature, however, being the work of the human mind with all its frailty [...], the science of textual criticism must aim for degrees of likelihood, and the only authority it might answer to is an author who has been dead for hundreds or thousands of years. But it is a science none the less, not a sacred mystery (*Invention*, p. 38).

Textual science as the art of the probable, «degrees of likelihood» – once again, the speech starts out with a quote from Housman's Inaugural, but then it follows a movement outwards to a more mature formulation

that, while abandoning the extravagant claim to scientific certainty, makes a disciplined case for the use of «reason and common sense, a congenial intimacy with the author, a comprehensive familiarity with the language, [...] integrity, mother wit and repression of self-will» (*Invention*, pp. 38-9)<sup>14</sup>. This is a formula that at last satisfies, because it first grants the premise that the object and purpose of criticism is aesthetic, and then deduces a condign method – call it scientific if you will –, rather than coming at the problem the other way around. And of course, it is very far from being a coincidence, in dramatic terms, that such a resolution should emerge from a confrontation between the two assymetric contrasts between Housman young and old, poet and philologist.

One contradiction in Stoppard's presentation of Housman's position in regard to textual criticism will not have escaped expert textual critics: namely, that despite the theoretical claims for the scientific status of criticism defended in the play by AEH – and scrupulously documented, as we have seen, in the writings of the real Housman –, in practice the latter is best known for affecting to despise *via ac ratio*, or rather its Germanic deformation as *Methode*. He boasted of holding in equal contempt both the heresy of clinging to a «best manuscript» (Bédierism, as it was later called) and the unprincipled promiscuity of unlicensed conjecture, and propounded what E.J. Kenney accounts «the only completely and universally valid principle of textual criticism ever formulat-

<sup>14</sup> The Inaugural puts forward the proposition that philology is «a science conversant with literature» and therefore «ought not to be pursued as if it were a science conversant with the operations of nature or with the properties of number and space, nor yet as if it were itself a branch of literature» (Housman 1969, p. 16). However, out of anxiety to demonstrate to his new employers that he was a serious scholar rather than the author of *A Shropshire Lad*, the lecture presses the scientific claims of textual criticism beyond what is rational: since the study of the ancient literatures is «a department not of literature but of science» (ivi, p. 26), it argues, the scholar «has no right» to present aesthetic judgments (ivi, p. 27) and should write in the same style as Newton's *Principia* does about the heavens (ivi, p. 30), concluding: «Literature is so alien from science that the literary temper in himself is a peril against which the scholar must stand on his guard; [...] departments of literature are also departments of lying» (ivi, p. 31). Housman never again permitted himself such fatuities; the «more mature formulation» is based on the preface to *Manilius V* of 1930: «To read attentively, think correctly, omit no relevant consideration, and repress self-will, are not ordinary accomplishments; yet an emendator needs much besides: just literary perception, congenial intimacy with the author, experience which must have been won by study, and mother wit» (Housman 1961, p. 51), and had earlier been adumbrated in «The Application of Thought to Textual Criticism» (1921), which opens with what I regard as an almost flawless formulation: «Textual criticism is a science, and, since it comprises recension and emendation, it is also an art. It is the science of discovering error in texts and the art of removing it» (Housman 1961, p. 131).

ed»: that «there is something in criticism which cannot be subjected to rule, because there is a sense in which every case is a special case». But this contradiction is, I think, perfectly resolved by Stoppard's play. It shows how the former scientific and public attitude could have sprung from the defence mechanisms of Housman's touchy, wounded sensibility as a lower-middle-class closet homosexual<sup>15</sup>. By contrast, the empirical but reasoned insight of the latter attitude might be seen as reflecting a poetic sensibility at work in his private personality. The point is epitomized in an arresting speech:

HOUS. It doesn't mean I don't care about the poetry. I do. *Diffugere nives* goes through me like a spear. [...] I think it's the most beautiful poem in Latin or Greek there ever was; but in verse 15 Horace never wrote 'dives' which is in all the texts, and I'm pretty sure I know what he did write. Anyone who says «So what?» got left behind five hundred years ago when we became modern, that's why it's called Humanism (*Invention*, p. 71)<sup>16</sup>.

All this is only to say that any history of the philosophy of textual criticism which is not a history of the personalities and sensibilities of great textual critics is liable to failure.

A conclusion from this examination might be to say that Stoppard has succeeded in extracting from the imagined *denudatio operum* of Housman's works not only a work of art, but also a meditation on the practice of textual criticism of some intellectual worth. But art, of course, can go further than biography, or theory; it «cannot be subordinate to its subject», says Wilde in the play, «otherwise it is not art but biography, and biography is the mesh through which our real life escapes» (*Invention*, p. 96). Or in Coleridge's words: «How mean a thing a mere fact is, except as seen in the light of some comprehensive truth» («A Prefatory Observation on Modern Biography», *The Friend*, 1810). The more com-

<sup>15</sup> Stoppard (1999b) acutely comments on the most perplexing aspect of Housman's genius, his olympian air of certainty, «I won't say he was heads-and-shoulders genius above his contemporaries; he wasn't. He had a tone of utter authority that, really, he'd done nothing to earn. He was a failure who was a clerk».

<sup>16</sup> The quotation of Keats's erotic phraseology («Everything that reminds me of her goes through me like a spear», letter to Fanny Brawne) comes, appositely, from one of Housman's last works, the lecture on «The name and nature of poetry» of 1933 (1961, pp. 168-95, at 193). Housman's hero-worship of Horace, *Carm.* 4, 7 – a *Leitmotiv* in the play, and the subject of his only published translation from Latin (*More Poems* V, 1956, pp. 164-5, first printed in 1897) – is well documented; his emendation of *diues* to *saeuos* in l. 15 is in a youthful article (1891, pp. 178-9).

prehensive truth on offer in *The Invention of Love* is the daring notion of textual criticism as a metaphor for life and the quest of love:

HOUS. The point of interest is – what is virtue?, what is the good and the beautiful really and truly?

AEH. You think there is an answer: the lost autograph copy of life's meaning, which we might recover from the corruptions that have made it nonsense. But if there is no such copy, really and truly there is no answer (*Invention*, p. 41).

#### DRAMATIS PERSONAE

*Baehrens, Emil* (1848-1888), a leading figure of the last great generation of Prussian classical scholarship and frequent target of Housman's critiques of the mechanical misapplication of post-Lachmannian *Methode* (*Invention*, pp. 26, 33, 84, etc.), edited the Teubner texts of Catullus (1876) and Propertius (1880).

*Chamberlain*, a fictional character representing the sub-culture of "Uranian love" after its criminalization in 1895, is partly based on Jack Maycock, a colleague of Housman's at the Patent Office («you became a sort of footnote», *Invention*, p. 94; cfr. Norman Page, *A.E. Housman: A Critical Biography*, London 1983, p. 63).

*Ellis, Robinson* (1834-1913), fellow of Trinity and Professor of Latin at Oxford, worked on the text of Catullus and fifteenth-century humanist Mss. He supported Housman's candidature for the London chair; Housman repaid him with contempt, writing in the preface to *Manilius V* that Ellis had «the intellect of an idiot child» (*Invention*, p. 25-26), and mocked his reliance on Lachmann's Datanus to the neglect of the Codex Oxoniensis, which Ellis himself discovered: «Parisians ate rats in the siege, when they had nothing better to eat: must admirers of Parisian cookery eat rats for ever?» (Housman 1905b; *Invention*, pp. 25, 31).

*Housman, Alfred Edward* (1859-1936) went up to St. John's College, Oxford, in 1877, where he fell hopelessly in love with Moses Jackson and failed his degree. In 1882 he became a clerk in the Patent Office with Jackson; Housman worked nights in the British Museum. When Jackson left England Housman withdrew into his studies, publishing his first article in 1888; in 1892 he was appointed to the new chair of Latin at University College London. In 1896, the year of Wilde's trial, he published the slim volume of poems that made him famous, *A Shropshire Lad*, which reflected the pain of unrequited love, though the homosexual aspect remained clandestine. Housman devoted his life to textual criticism of the Latin poets; in 1911 he moved to a professorship at Cambridge. On the news that Jackson was dying in 1922 he assembled a second collection of verse, *Last Poems*; his most intimate poems were posthumously published by his brother (*More Poems*, 1936).



- Jackson, Moses* (1856-1923) was Housman's scientist room-mate at Oxford, and the love of his life. Being heterosexual he rejected Housman's advances, but they shared a flat in London in 1882-86 while working at the Patent Office. In 1887 Jackson married and moved to Ceylon, subsequently taking up a post as headmaster in Karachi and retiring to Canada. He shared none of Housman's literary interests; the *Manilius* is dedicated to him as «sodali meo [...] harum litterarum contemptori», with 28 elegiac verses – Housman's only published Latin poem – in a language that Jackson could not read (Housman 1903-30, I, p. v).
- Jerome, Jerome K.* (1859-1927) rose from orphanhood and poverty via life as a travelling actor and hack journalist to being one of English literature's best loved humourists with *Three Men in a Boat* (1889). In 1894 he wrote a leader in his newspaper, *To-Day*, calling for stern measures against a homosexual Oxford student magazine *The Chameleon*, edited by Lord Alfred Douglas and with a page by Oscar Wilde; the magazine played a damaging part in Wilde's trial under the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, which for the first time made sex between consenting male adults a criminal offence (*Invention*, pp. 87-9, 104).
- Jowett, Benjamin* (1817-1893), Master of Balliol, Regius Professor of Greek, and Vice-Chancellor of Oxford, was famed as a Hellenist for his translation of Plato (1871), which Housman derisively called «the best translation of a Greek philosopher ever executed by a person who understood neither philosophy nor Greek». But Jowett had broader horizons; his best scholarly work was in Biblical criticism, and in public life he was the author of the University Reform Act of 1854, which removed all religious restrictions on entry and professionalized teaching with the successful aim of supplying the civil service of the British Empire with a new elite of educated meritocrats (*Invention*, pp. 3, 10, 16-7).
- Lord Leighton, Frederick* (1830-1896), the first English painter to be given a peerage, squandered his great gifts for the sake of commercial popularity, specializing in lavish classical, Oriental, and medieval fantasies and sentimental genre scenes liberally spiced with eroticism.
- Munro, Hugh A.J.* (d. 1885), Regius Professor of Latin at Cambridge, published his *Criticisms and Emendations of Catullus* in 1878 (*Invention*, pp. 23-4) and his *Lucretius* in 1886, which Housman judged «a work more compact of excellence than any edition of any classic which has ever been produced in England» (Housman 1969, pp. 20-2).
- Pater, Walter* (1839-1894), fellow of Brasenose College, Oxford, was the seer of the Aesthete movement, notably with the *Conclusion* to his *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) and novel *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), which in a superbly decadent prose preached the pagan creed that the «awful brevity» of man's «short day of frost and sun» can be fulfilled only by «gathering all we are into one desperate effort to see and touch» beauty: «to burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life» (*In-*

vention, pp. 19-20). Among those who fell under Pater's spell was Oscar Wilde, who called the *Studies* his «golden book of spirit and sense, the holy writ of beauty». Alarmed by the association of Aestheticism with homosexuality, Pater timidly withdrew the *Conclusion* from the 2nd edition of the *Studies* (1877), conceiving «it might possibly mislead some of those young men into whose hands it might fall».

*Pattison, Mark* (1813-1884), Rector of Lincoln College, Oxford, held the view that the university should dedicate itself to research, against Jowett's view that it exists to educate rulers (*Invention*, pp. 8-9, 15). Pattison devoted his academic life to inconclusive studies of Isaac Casaubon (1875) and J.J. Scaliger (unfinished), and in his *Memoirs* (1885) expressed morbid dissatisfaction with his achievement; he was rumoured to be a married celibate, and the model for George Eliot's Casaubon in *Middlemarch*. Housman called him «a spectator of all time and all existence» (*Letters*, London 1971, p. 236; *Invention*, pp. 48-9).

*Pollard, Alfred William* (1859-1944), Keeper of Printed Books at the British Museum, became a more influential scholar than Housman, founder with W.W. Greg and R.B. McKerrow of the New Bibliography, author with G.R. Redgrave of the classic *Short-Title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland & Ireland, and of English Books Printed Abroad, 1475-1640* (1926), and textual critic of Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Renaissance poetry.

*Postgate, John Percival* (1853-1926), Professor of Comparative Philology at London, was on the board which appointed Housman to his chair in 1892, despite the latter's critique of his *Select Elegies of Propertius* (1881). He went on to publish Housman's edition of Juvenal in his «Corpus Poetarum Latino-rum»; after losing the Cambridge chair to Housman he became Professor of Latin at Liverpool.

*Ruskin, John* (1819-1900), Professor of Fine Arts at Oxford, was a leading Victorian intellectual and cultural critic: in *Modern Painters* (1843) he championed the revolutionary Turner, and later the Pre-Raphaelites, against academic classicism; *Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) and *Stones of Venice* (1851-53) defended the moral imperative of art against Pater's Aestheticism, leading to a revaluation and revival of the Gothic style; as journalist, poet, and novelist he railed against the evil consequences of capitalism and the Industrial Revolution; and as Christian socialist he gave away his fortune for philanthropic projects in working men's housing and education. The spectacular failure of his marriage on grounds of «incurable impotency» (his wife subsequently married his protégé, the painter Millais) was followed by a disastrous infatuation for a nine-year-old girl, Rose La Touche; her later rejection of his suit and subsequent death in 1872 led to a series of psychotic breakdowns but did not diminish the flow of his writings, which total over 250. Late in life he became ever more disenchanted with modernization, attacking Impressionism as soulless.

*Wilde, Oscar* (1854-1900), the Anglo-Irish author, provided the definitive voice of *fin de siècle* modernism in English literature. His career was the uncannily

inverse of Housman's: after securing a brilliant first-class degree in classics at Oxford 1874-78 he cultivated publicity as the flamboyant celebrity of the Aesthetic movement, was lionized, travelled widely on the Continent and in America, married a rich wife in 1884, wrote a series of lucrative hits for the West End theatre culminating in *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), and created his other masterpiece, the decadent novella *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). But he did not conceal his homosexual life, and this brought about a tragic downfall in 1896, with disgrace, ruin, and imprisonment. He died alone and destitute as an exile in France living under the assumed name of Maturin's hero, Sebastian Melmoth.

Also mentioned in passing are the following classic writers in English: the poets Alexander Pope (1688-1744), John Keats (1795-1821), Matthew Arnold (1822-1888), and W.H. Auden (1907-1973); the textual critic Richard Bentley (1662-1742); the novelists George Eliot (i.e. Mary Anne Evans, 1819-1880) and Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977); and the children's author Lewis Carroll, author of *Alice in Wonderland* (i.e. the Oxford mathematician Charles Dodgson, 1832-1898).

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## APPENDICE

Dalla bella traduzione di L. Terzi, *L'invenzione dell'amore*, a cura di R. Cirio, Palermo, Sellerio, 1999, riprendiamo la piccola antologia di riflessioni sulla critica e l'ecdotica, commentate nell'articolo del professor Lawrance.

AEH. My life is marked by long silences... [qui a p. 189]

AEH. La mia vita è segnata da lunghi silenzi. [...] ho difeso gli autori classici dalle congetture degli idioti, [...] tutto qui, bisognerà accontentarsi, è questo il mio castello di sabbia contro il flagello del mare. [...] Mi dispiace tanto. La tua vita è una cosa terribile. Un errore cronologico. [...]

WILDE. [...] Meglio un effimero fuoco d'artificio che mai uno sprazzo di luce. [...] l'artista è il criminale che si nasconde in mezzo a noi. È l'emissario del progresso contro l'autorità. Hai fatto bene a fare lo studioso. Uno studioso è tutto scrupoli, un artista no, per niente. [...] Io ho mescolato la mia vita alla mia arte ed è stato un successo incondizionato. Il riverbero del mio rogo sacrificale ha illuminato tutti gli angoli della terra [...]. Ho vissuto il momento della svolta, il risveglio di un mondo nuovo [...]. E tu dov'eri mentre tutto questo accadeva?

AEH. A casa. [pp. 166-8]

HOUS. If I'm disrespectful... [qui alle pp. 90-1]

HOUS. Se manco di rispetto è perché si tratta di una cosa importante e non di un gioco che chiunque può giocare. [...] La filologia non ha bisogno di cavarsela con una battuta. È quella che più ci avvicina alla nostra essenza umana. Conoscenza inutile e fine a se stessa. La conoscenza utile è anch'essa un bene, ma è per i pavidì, un sottoprodotto di quella vera, intesa solo a fare un po' di luce, non importa dove e su che, la luce è luce, contro le tenebre, è quello che è rimasto dell'intenzione di Dio, una volta che Dio sia stato tolto. [p. 134]

JOWETT. What Catullus really wrote... [qui a p. 192]

JOWETT. I versi autentici scritti da Catullo erano già travisati dopo essere stati copiati due volte, cioè più o meno all'epoca della prima invasione romana della Britannia: e la più antica copia che ci è pervenuta è stata scritta circa millecinquecento anni dopo quell'invasione. Pensi a tutte quelle segretarie! – ogni

svarione provoca un altro svarione, da un papiro all'altro, e dagli ultimi rotoli in disfacimento ai primi libri di fiammante pergamena, [...] – finché! – da ultimo e dopo tanto tempo – storpiato e lacero come un cane che arrivi a casa dopo una zuffa, rotolò oltre la soglia del Rinascimento italiano l'unica testimonianza sopravvissuta a trenta generazioni di incuria e di stupidità: il *Verona Codex* di Catullo [...]. Questa copia è il testo su cui si fondano le poesie di Catullo. [pp. 72-3]

JOWETT. The textual critics have spoken... [qui a p. 192]

JOWETT. I critici testuali hanno parlato. Morte ai fieri volti emergenti al nominativo. E lunga vita al transitivo *emersere* che all'accusativo fa sorgere volti non meglio identificati dalle acque bianche di spuma, di che? Del *fretum*, una cosa piena d'acqua come potrebbe essere un canale... Non importa se per le cose d'acqua abbiamo già tanti termini che l'ultima cosa di cui c'è bisogno è averne un altro – questo importa: «*freti* per *feri* è una correzione facile, perché r, t, tr, rt sono fra le lettere confuse più di frequente nei manoscritti». Bene, Munro ha il diritto di convenire con tutti quelli che correggono i manoscritti di Catullo secondo il loro gusto e al loro gusto danno il nome di congetture – un futile esercizio. [pp. 70-1]

AEH. The Romans were foreigners... [qui alle pp. 194-5]

AEH. I Romani erano stranieri che scrivevano per gente straniera due millenni fa; per gente le cui divinità noi troviamo bizzarre, la cui crudeltà abominevole, delle cui usanze private preferiamo non parlare; ma la loro idea di ciò che è squisito, noi ci illudiamo che, misteriosamente, sia identica alla nostra.

HOUS. Ma lo è, non è vero? Noi tratteniamo il respiro nei punti in cui il respiro fu sempre trattenuto. Il poeta scrive all'amante come lei abbia ucciso il suo amore – «caduto come un fiore al margine del campo dove, passando oltre, lo ha toccato l'aratro». [...] Duemila anni, un minuto d'orologio. [...] Potrei mettermi a piangere se penso che per un filo non li abbiamo persi, [...] quel fiore buttato lì tra i rifiuti sotto una tinazza di vino, l'ultima, corrotta copia di Catullo ancora viva fra le macerie dell'antica letteratura. È un appello che non può essere ignorato. [...]

È meglio che tu faccia il poeta. L'entusiasmo letterario non ha mai fatto uno studioso, e ne ha disfatti molti. [...] Il compito di uno studioso è di accrescere ciò che si conosce. Tutto qui. Ma può dare la massima soddisfazione, perché la conoscenza è un bene. Non ha bisogno di sembrare un bene, o di presentarsi come un bene, e nemmeno di fare del bene. È un bene per il solo fatto di essere conoscenza. E la sola cosa che la qualifica come conoscenza è di essere vera. Non se ne può avere troppa e non ce n'è mai così poca che non valga la pena di averla. C'è verità e falsità in una virgola. [...]

AEH. [...] Togliendo una virgola e spostandola indietro di una parola si fa emergere il senso dal non-senso, in una poesia che è stata letta continuamente da

quando l'errore fu stampato quattrocento anni fa. Una piccola vittoria sull'ignoranza e la sbadataggine. Una briciola di conoscenza da aggiungere alla nostra riserva. E questo, a che cosa ti riporta? Alla scienza, naturalmente. La critica testuale è una scienza che ha per oggetto la letteratura, come la botanica è la scienza dei fiori, la zoologia quella degli animali, la geologia quella delle rocce. Poiché fiori, animali e rocce sono opera della natura, quelle scienze sono scienze esatte, e devono rispondere all'autorità di ciò che può esser visto e misurato. La letteratura, invece, è opera della mente umana con tutte le sue fragilità [...] la critica testuale deve procedere per gradi di plausibilità, e la sola autorità a cui può rifarsi è un autore morto da centinaia o migliaia di anni. Ma è pur sempre una scienza, e non un mistero sacro. [qui alle pp. 87-90]

HOUS. It doesn't mean I don't care about the poetry... [qui a p. 197]

HOUS. Ciò non significa che non m'importi nulla della poesia. Me ne importa. *Diffugere nives* mi trafigge come una lancia. [...] Penso che sia la poesia più bella di tutte, in latino o in greco; ma nel verso 15 Orazio non scrisse *dives* come si trova scritto in tutti i testi, e sono abbastanza certo di sapere che cosa ha scritto. Chiunque dica «Che importa?» regredisce al livello di cinquecento anni fa quando ebbe inizio l'età moderna, ed è per ciò che si chiama Umanesimo. [pp. 134-5]

HOUS. The point of interest is... [qui a p. 198]

HOUS. Il punto che interessa è... che cos'è la virtù? che cosa sono in realtà e verità il buono e il bello?

AEH. Tu credi che ci sia una risposta: l'autografo perduto del significato della vita, che possiamo ritrovare emendato dalle corruzioni che l'hanno reso privo di senso. Ma se in realtà e verità questo autografo non esiste, la risposta non c'è. [pp. 94-5]

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