

“Oh to Be Twenty-one, Reading Greats at Oxford!”:
What Happens in Tom Stoppard’s
The Invention of Love

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Abstract

Tom Stoppard’s play *The Invention of Love* stages the classical scholar and poet A.E. Housman at the point of death, as, in the role “AEH,” he recalls his younger self, “Housman.” “Housman” is seen as an Oxford undergraduate; he is a brilliant classicist, driven by ambition to purge ancient texts from corrupt readings; he is also fired by love for a male fellow-student, Jackson, and by a vision of Classical studies as fostering an awareness of ancient virtue shown in athletic prowess and comradely self-sacrifice. His Oxford milieu offers ambiguous support for this combination of ideals; as a clerical worker in London, he fulfils his academic ambitions but forces upon himself and Jackson the recognition that his love is not reciprocated, and, in any case, could not safely be given public expression or acknowledgement. “AEH,” driven by a sense of nostalgia which is also a quest to recover and resurrect his former self, is increasingly led to confront love, in his own life and in the poetic texts upon which he has worked, as an invention – a precarious and perhaps unsustainable balance between coherence and breakdown, between a stoical embrace of modernity and a passionately modern turn to a receding past.

Keywords: nostalgia, Classics, love, modernity, resurrection, past, academe, time, space.

Introduction

My title foregrounds an expression of something rather like academic nostalgia, together with reference to Tom Stoppard's 1997 play about A. E. Housman, the English poet and classical scholar (Lee 616). Yet Stoppard has never been an academic – which is the point of his exclamation, quoted in my title – neither as a teacher nor as a student; he left school aged seventeen and went into journalism, moving into theatre reviewing and thence, in the early 1960s, into playwriting, rapidly achieving immense and worldwide success. Housman, certainly an academic – Professor of Latin at University College London, and subsequently at Trinity College Cambridge, between 1891 and his death in 1936 – had, in 1881, ended four undergraduate years at Oxford without a degree of any kind. His poetry, first published in 1895 (as “A Shropshire Lad,” soon immensely popular) often voices nostalgia:

Into my heart an air that kills
 From yon far country blows:
 What are those blue remembered hills,
 What spires, what farms are those?
 That is the land of lost content,
 I see it shining plain,
 The happy highways where I went
 And cannot come again. (Housman, “Shropshire Lad” 64)

This powerful desire, to recapture an irretrievable past, is directed towards a place, Shropshire, where the poet himself, as distinct from his adopted persona, had never lived; Housman was born and grew up in Bromsgrove, a town in Worcestershire far nearer to the urbanism of Birmingham than to the Shropshire hills, remotely visible though they are from various high points in Worcestershire (and Birmingham). Stoppard's play, moreover, notably avoids any frequent citations of Housman's poems.

Nonetheless, the play is indeed centred both on nostalgia, as its dramatic mode, and on academe, as its protagonist's profession – or rather the predilection and the profession of its protagonists;

for once such a solecism is appropriate, since the two leading roles of the play both embody Housman, as the aged Professor and as the youthful student of Classics and young adult Latin scholar. Stoppard's speech-prefixes refer to them respectively as "AEH" and "Housman" and I shall do so too, using inverted commas, in referring to the characters, where Stoppard uses their speech-prefixes; I reserve the name without scare-quotes for references to the man as he is known outside the field of Stoppard's play.

"AEH," through much of the play, both remembers and resurrects his youth in the form of a distinct embodied "Housman." The play's engagement with nostalgia, and its questioning of the power and desirability of nostalgia, are thus embedded in its theatrical form. "AEH" remembers, in the play, what "Housman," up to a certain point, lives; can the youthful life be faithfully represented by the aged consciousness? can the young "Housman"'s choices be guided, and can they be accepted and acknowledged, by the dying "AEH"? An extended dialogue, between the two characters, late in the play's first act, poses these issues; in the second Act a more independent "Housman," in the absence (from the stage) of "AEH," reaches a crisis, after which he is largely displaced (on stage) by "AEH." Has the older man's nostalgia, and its will towards recall and resurrection, reached a limit? what is this limit? and what continuity, if any, remains between the young and the old man, "Housman" and "AEH"? "The past predicts the future, while the present resurrects the past" – does this formulation, owed in part to the first director of Stoppard's play, Richard Eyre, fully capture what is going on? (Eyre and Wright 310).

In the first part of my article, I shall pursue in more detail issues of the play's form, by asking this question: "what is going on?" or more succinctly "what happens?" It will be worthwhile, in fact, to discuss the most basic temporal and spatial features of the play's representational staging – an elementary line of enquiry that has not been much adopted by the play's published critics and interpreters. Richard Eyre remarked during the early stages of engagement with the text that "I can't see the structure although I

know that in Tom's mind all the connective tissues are there" (396) and again "I still can't see how the play connects together" (397). Four months later, he was delighted to feel that "Everything connects" (Eyre 415). Daniel Mendelsohn, in the course of a response that provoked Stoppard to public anger, felt that "'Housman' . . . isn't different in kind from 'AEH', who says pretty much the same things; he's just more wide-eyed and enthusiastic" (237). This is a serious misreading, but more positive responses have also avoided adequate reconstruction of the play's action. Hermione Lee's superb biography of Stoppard offers, in its course, plot summaries of almost all his plays, but not of *The Invention of Love*; she misdates the play's staging of the Oxford academic conversations of "Housman's" seniors (to the 1880s rather than the 1860s-70s) and hesitates over identification of the condition of "AEH," between "end of life" (in a nursing home) (604) and "death" ("he arrives on the shore of the underworld") (Lee 616). John Bull's brief remarks on the play in *The Cambridge Companion to Tom Stoppard* wrongly allocate the whole of its action to "an Oxford college" (149). A similar impression is given by William Demastes in *The Cambridge Introduction to Tom Stoppard*, who, while passing in review several of the play's episodes, offers no indication of any causal connections between them (107-113). Again, a perception by Eyre points up the possibility of, and the need for, a fuller account: "I'm starting to understand the play and realise that the play's structure is symphonic: much of what I'd thought was decorative is thematic and indispensable" (414).

In my second section I consider the action of the play in terms of the projects and ideals of "Housman." Existing responses to the play in this area have over-emphasized the retrospective framing remarks of "AEH," while doing inadequate justice to both the energetic mind (and body) of "Housman" and the variety of gifts with which, like the Housman of actual history, he is equipped. Such variety would pose problems for anyone at any time and place, as they clearly did for Housman. In Stoppard's play, "Housman" encounters, on the whole, encouragement from both his

seniors and his co-evals. His problems and his self-divisions emerge to some extent, it is suggested, from contingent though deep-seated aspects of late Victorian society, but to a greater extent from himself, in ways both within and beyond his control.

His problems, in fact, involve the impingement, upon his various gifts and general ideals, of a personal love which is, by its object, unreturned and only uncertainly recognised. The play's title and its verbal texture invite its audiences to consider the possible "history of love" as an emotion, including the possible "invention of love" by certain classical Latin poets; thus, the drama might be associated with recent academic studies framing and discussing "the history of emotions" in general. Certainly, the textual knowledge of both "Housman" and "AEH" is shown as capable of engagement with such a field of enquiry. But a different reading of the title may imply that a love unreturned and unrecognised may be, to and for its subject, something subjective rather than objective, something not so much found as invented, a matter not of discovery but of self-delusion. The fact that "Housman" loves a man, certainly, makes the expression and, by its object, the recognition of his love problematic in terms of the societies in which they live – problematic but not, the play indicates, impossible; at issue, rather, is the balance, in the "failure" of this love, between external constraints and, on the part of "Housman," internal complexity, or caprice, or catastrophic collapse.

In the third and final section of my article I shall focus on the role of "AEH" and upon his position and projects as staged by Stoppard's drama. In this connection, many of the play's allusions and underlying motifs will become salient; but I shall have room to explore only a few of the rich lines of reflection which Stoppard, through the language of "AEH" and through the character's acknowledged cultural resources, has mobilised. Poems by Catullus, Horace and Virgil belong within the scope of Stoppard's re-interpretative dramatic technique; Biblical texts, too, are flaunted (while their apparent meanings are flouted). Nor is William Shakespeare missing from the party – or the funeral wake. In

considering “AEH” one is thus considering much that is central to Stoppard’s own interpretation of Housman, and “Housman.”

Stoppard’s “AEH” is given further definition through his juxtaposition with the figure of Oscar Wilde, frequently mentioned by “Housman” and his fellow-undergraduates, and charted in his subsequent success and notoriety, in Act 2, by both “Housman” and a group of London journalists who claim responsibility for Wilde’s emergent fame and comment later on his disgrace. Wilde resembles “Housman”/ “AEH” as a former Oxford Classics student, a published poet, and a lover of a man (indeed, in Wilde’s case, of men). He differs from him, sharply, in the public nature of his life, and in the seemingly integrated self-confidence of his commitment to “Aestheticism” and to the pleasures and pains of the momentary intensities of love. The stage appearance of Wilde, near the end of Stoppard’s play, has sometimes been seen as climactic – especially by critics more familiar with Wilde than with Housman, who have debated their relative attractiveness as dramatic characters.

This juxtaposition resembles antitheses in Stoppard’s earlier plays, between apparently clear-headed, decisive and active characters, and others who seem inept and confused. These issues, again, demand more space than is available here. My own treatment, consciously rather neglecting the figure of Wilde, will briefly explore some different connections between *The Invention of Love* and earlier Stoppard plays, not least his most famous work *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead*. These connections raise a topic salient to Stoppard’s use, in the later play, of Wilde – the topic of “missed opportunities,” of life-choices seemingly contingent or, with the benefit of hindsight, seemingly inevitable, and, either way, at once fortunate and regrettable. Wilde, in *The Invention of Love*, may be taken to embody a life in which awareness of such opportunities and alternatives has been, out of bravado or bad conscience, suppressed.

In a brief epilogue, I shall mention a few “missed references” – missed by Stoppard’s characters (whether or not by his critics) – which may be seen as, on Stoppard’s part, conscious suppressions of reference; insofar as the play purports, along with so much else,

to chart an “invention of love,” it points to sources, textual and historical, which it forbears to name.

What Happens in *The Invention of Love*? – Issues of Time and Space

Stoppard’s play is divided into two acts, the latter being slightly longer. In each act, an audience is led to understand that, from the perspective of “Housman,” time passes. In Act 1, “Housman” progresses through four years between 1877 and 1881 as an undergraduate at St John’s College, Oxford. In early scenes he meets his fellow-scholars and friends, Alfred Pollard and Moses Jackson. Around the middle of the act, in a long dialogue scene, he encounters Benjamin Jowett, Professor of Greek at Balliol. Near the end of the act, he meets “AEH” and speaks enthusiastically to him of his hopes and plans for the future.

Act 2 covers, overall, a larger expanse of time, but, in its staging of “Housman,” again four years are shown to pass, up until 1885. Around the middle of Act 2 “Housman” falls silent; “Darkness on Housman” is the stage direction, while “AEH” now appears (“Light on AEH”) for the first time in the act. This effect is central to the act and to the play, as are the words spoken at this point (words from a poem by Housman – the first such quotation in Stoppard’s play) by “Housman” –

I shook his hand and tore my heart in sunder
And went with half my life about my ways. (Housman qtd. in
Stoppard 81)

From this point onwards in Act 2, and now from the perspective of “AEH,” we see a more rapid but disjointed passage of time. “AEH” is elected (in 1891) to the Chair of Latin at University College London, Oscar Wilde is tried and condemned (in 1895) to two years of hard labour, *A Shropshire Lad* is published (also in 1895), and Queen Victoria celebrates her Diamond Jubilee (in 1897). A reader of the play-text knows that

“AEH” lived to be 77, and hence that he speaks, for much of the play, as if from 1936 – the year from which he engages in a final conversation with the once-again young “Housman” at the play’s conclusion.

The general pattern, with regard to the play’s representation of time, is then this: a period of gradual passage of time (charted by the rhythms of “Housman’s” passage through a university institution) in Act 1 is followed in Act 2 by, first, a similarly gradual period (albeit outside any academic institution), then a period depicting a far more rapid and varied sequence of events – the break, between these periods in Act 2, being marked by the ending, or the abandonment (by “Housman”) of a relationship.

In terms of spatial representation, a similar pattern emerges. But an initial and fundamental problem here requires consideration. In Act 1, “AEH” is situated “on the bank of the Styx” – so the stage direction indicates – and engaging in conversation there with Charon, the mythical and Virgilian ferryman of the dead. Later in Act 1, once again to Charon, “AEH” remarks that “[t]hey are very kind to me here in the Evelyn Nursing Home” (Stoppard 29). Later references, by “AEH,” to the staff of a nursing home where he is staying build up the picture of a man near death but not yet quite dead (fearing, in fact, that he may urinate in his sleep). I take this ambiguity to be systematic, certainly in Act 1 – it recurs near the end of the play – and one may thus speak of a double siting of the role of “AEH,” on either side of the threshold of death. This doubleness may, in fact, serve the needs or desires of “AEH” himself, and I shall return to the issue in my third section. For now, it can be said that “AEH” imagines his encounter with “Housman” as taking place, whether in a late-life dream or post-mortem fantasy, on the banks of a river which is at once the Styx (in Hades) and (in Oxford) the Isis or Cherwell. Consider the following exchange:

JACKSON Hous hasn’t done any work since Iffley. . . .

HOUSMAN The nerve of it – who brought you up from Hades?
(14)

This exchange – concerning the “work” done by young men rowing with oars on a river – becomes a regular motif, and seems to attribute to “Housman” either a knowledge of an Oxford riverside location named, or nicknamed, “Hades,” or a subliminal awareness that he is being resuscitated and “voiced” by the “AEH” who is, or supposes himself to be, in or *en route* to Hades.

More straightforwardly, the other characters of Act 1 are represented, whether by Stoppard or “AEH,” as speaking and moving “in Oxford.” The stage embodies several Oxford sites; student colleges, rivers where students punt for picnics and where some may row for athletic glory, riverside villages such as Iffley, college lawns on which the dons play croquet, and rooms and sets used by dons for interviewing and for teaching. If rivers link and divide the living from the living as they divide the living from the dead, croquet, whose procedures allow continuous random jostling between its players, similarly links and divides dons from each other and (since students may not trespass on college lawns) divides dons from students. Generally, the implied spaces of Act 1 offer opportunities for conversations between small groups of men, each individualised, but linked by involvement in the University of Oxford.

In spatial terms, Act 2 proceeds rather differently. Its opening stage direction reads “The summit of ‘Mount Pisgah’ at sunset” (52). Stoppard’s quotation-marks recall a reference in Act 1 by “Housman” to “a hill near our house where I live in Worcestershire which I and my brothers and sisters call Mount Pisgah. I used to climb it often, and look out towards Wales . . .” (30). The implications of this privately-chosen name will be considered later; but clearly we have left Oxford. Subsequent scenes of the first half of Act 2 take place in London, and stage directions indicate specific settings – the Savoy Theatre, an underground train platform, an exclusive club, a suburban sports field, and lodgings shared by “Housman” and Jackson. As in Act 1, these imagined settings (apart from the theatre) allow conversations between small groups of people. And, as with temporal indications, there is a change in the play’s spatiality at the midpoint of the Act. Hereafter we see

something different: “‘AEH’ is at a desk among books, inkpot and pen. Elsewhere, simultaneously, a Selection Committee meets, comprising ‘several’ men . . . They wear academic gowns” (81). “AEH” is being interviewed for the post of Professor of Latin at University College London. But he does not share the same lit stage space as his interviewers, nor are his and their utterances mutually responsive. In subsequent scenes, “AEH” remains lit, on stage, but separated from other groups of characters – journalists and MPs in their club, rowers (some of them fictive) on a river (the Thames – the same river, in fact, as the Oxford Isis, a point which the play-text leaves only implicit), and, climactically, Oscar Wilde.

This pattern, of spatial separation between stage areas and implied localities, is twice broken. One case is a remarkable scene, ambiguous in space as in time, where the lit area of the stage is shared by “AEH” with his sister, now aged 35, and his London friend and contemporary Chamberlain (seemingly, and uniquely in the play, an invention by Stoppard), and the date is at once 1897 – the characters are watching, from a hilltop, fires lit for Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee – and some time after the date of Jackson’s death (to which “AEH” refers) in 1923. The other staging of “AEH” in a shared space concludes the play, once again setting him in company with “Housman” “by the river (100). At the very end we see “Charon . . . poling Wilde across the Styx” while we hear and presumably still see the final reflections of “AEH” “. . . standing on this empty shore, with the indifferent waters at my feet” (106).

What Happens in *The Invention of Love*? Ideals and Projects, Harmonious and Divided

In temporal and spatial terms, then, the two acts of Stoppard’s play differ. Act 1 presents, albeit from the perspective of the dying or dead “AEH,” an environment locally differentiated but generally belonging to the university city of Oxford, and an ongoing time-sequence in which “Housman” grows towards adulthood, amongst friends whom he likes or loves, studying Classical texts and

learning from Classics dons. He is driven by his immense abilities and by ideals, partly derived also from his university environment, which commit him in several directions – partly to poetry, emphatically to what is presented as the “science” of textual criticism, and equally emphatically to love for his male friend, Moses Jackson. All these commitments he declares and embraces, in conversation with “AEH,” near the end of Act 1. Act 2, in its first half, presents these ideals as they are neglected, developed, and relinquished or destroyed by the young adult “Housman.” By mid-Act, we are to understand that “Housman” is and will remain self-divided – this is voiced in the poem I have previously quoted. “AEH,” from now on, appears to us in successive incarnations, or montages, as successful scholar, published poet, and reticent or celibate “homosexual” – the late dialogue with Chamberlain introduces the term as a novelty of the ’90s (94). “AEH,” moreover, despite some involvement in conversations with others, remains, in terms of space, largely though not entirely isolated.

Stoppard’s Act 1 thus stages, at one level, doubleness – between the temporal and perhaps spatial positions of “AEH” and “Housman” – but, in another sense, within the young “Housman,” a rich and consciously diversified coherence, sustained in some measure by the environment of his friends and even of his university seniors, sustained also by his own will. In the first half of Act 2, the environment of “Housman” functions more ambiguously, for the London job which he takes up, while leaving him time for intense classical study, and while allowing him the highly-prized chance to share accommodation with Jackson, also isolates him from social encounters with any potential intellectual fellows; force of will must take the place of a relatively congenial academy.

The character is not shown, at this point, as expressing nostalgia for his Oxonian past. But there has been a break, and a failure; “Housman,” in the play, as occurred with Housman in life, has failed his Finals exams and has left Oxford without a degree – we hear of this in the opening scene of Act 2, in the dialogue between “Housman” and his sister Kate. The failure is not explained in Stoppard’s play; in real life it seems to have followed

from Housman's refusal to do any justice to the study of ancient history and ancient philosophy which were required by the Finals syllabus (Graves 55). Here, clearly, there is a sense of division, between the conjoined ideals which, in Act 1, "Housman" has accepted as his goal, and the intense focus on two ideals, in Act 2, which do not self-evidently belong together – classical textual scholarship, and love for Moses Jackson. At the midpoint of this Act, "Housman" abandons all hope for any fulfilled expression of his love. He moves out from their shared lodgings. Briefly he utters the words of a Housman poem – about tragic, or pathetic, self-division. And he is replaced, as stage protagonist, by "AEH," now not so much a commentator on "Housman" but a sardonic observer of his own and others' intellectual and social life.

This summary recapitulation, in terms of ideals, projects and identities, of the play's formal properties, invites one to see "doubleness," in several ways, as one of its chief concerns. And the play opens with dialogue, between "AEH" and Charon the ferryman of the dead, implying one particular mode of doubleness. Charon has been given instructions to wait for two people:

CHARON A poet and a scholar is what I was told.

AEH I think that must be me.

CHARON Both of them?

AEH I'm afraid so.

CHARON It sounded like two different people.

AEH I know.

CHARON Give him a minute.

AEH To collect myself. (2)

Stoppard's humour here is also that of "AEH," who is only too accustomed to perceptions of him as "double" in virtue of his public achievement as scholar and as poet. Critics of the play have regularly dwelt on this opening antithesis; but "AEH" does not dwell on it, nor does Stoppard's play, which cites very few lines from Housman's poems, for reasons it is not hard to guess. It is likely that Stoppard agrees with the judgment of W. H. Auden that "[t]o Housman himself, his scholarship came first, his poetry

second” (Auden 326). Rather the play gets this particular “doubleness” out of the way, acknowledged and disposed of, as early as possible. Its business lies elsewhere.

Stoppard is centrally concerned, as my essay’s titular quotation implies, with Housman the classical scholar. “Housman” and his friend Pollard, as students in Act 1 (and still, in the first part of Act 2, as adult friends) discuss classical topics as potential equals. One of their topics is the Latin word – also, Housman emphasizes the Greek word – for “hoop,” namely “trochus/trochos” (7). Hoops are playthings of ancient sport; the Latin poet, as “Housman” explains, names them derogatorily, as trivial objects, associated with Greek ways of life (and hence potentially with “effeminacy”), from which young men need to be lured back into more fitting gymnastic and pre-military forms of exercise (Horace, *Odes* 3.24.53-58). Jackson, friends with “Housman” and Pollard, is their fellow-scholar; he is a scientist, not a classicist; he is also a keen and multiply gifted athlete. The friendship of the three students thus revolves, from the start, around comparisons and contrasts, joking and serious, between all these ideals and modes of self-development: the study of poetry, the pursuit of science, the pleasure of athletics, and the ways in which all these converge or diverge as modes of excellence. And it is through the prism of classical study that the values of science and of physical strength come, in the young men’s conversation, to be articulated, at once casually and obsessively. Can Classics, in some way, be scientific? Can Classics honour the pride and the virtues of human physical excellence? Can Classics, in nineteenth-century Oxford and England, become a field in which past ideals are pursued in mutual and harmonious combination?

Stoppard treats these issues, in Act 1, through the debates not only of undergraduates but also of tutors and dons, four of whom engage with each other, sometimes in pairs, sometimes by implication as a larger group, and in one case in conversation with another, unnamed, student. They are Mark Pattison, Walter Pater, John Ruskin and Benjamin Jowett. Pattison is a Head of House and historian of classical scholarship. Pater is known as an “aesthete”

(another word dwelt on in the play). Ruskin remains famous and important as a critic of art, society and morality. Jowett was a Hellenist, famous as translator of Plato, preoccupied with reform of teaching and examination, and concerned with the utility of an Oxford education in the field of administrative government. Three of them are nostalgic for an Oxford which they remember but no longer perceive; Jowett speaks confidently of such changes: "The great reform of the fifties [that is, the 1850s] laid the foundations of the educated class that has spread moral and social order to parts of the world where, to take one example, my Plato was formerly quite unknown" (17).

Where Jowett idealises classical Greek culture, Ruskin extols the Gothic Middle Ages, while Pater finds his utopia in quattrocento Florence and what he proclaims as its gift for "living each moment for the moment's sake" (19). For Pater this programmatic ideal extends to allowing him a flirtation with a male student; hence he falls foul of Jowett. The interchanges between the four men, far from being merely "comically exaggerated scenes" where "[h]ypocrisy and double standards prevail," embody at an adult level a conflict, and a possible complementarity, of ideals comparable to that staged around the three undergraduates (Lee 604). They also indicate awareness, in relation to male friendship, of what one may call, simply, trouble.

"Housman" from the start is a budding textual critic, youthfully ambitious and scornful of his elders, not least of Jowett and his poor knowledge of Greek metre and pronunciation. He wants to do better; to show up his supposed elders and betters; to lead a reform. It is ironically appropriate that Jowett, in a dialogue with "Housman" central to the first Act and somewhat despise himself, leads the younger man to see the possibilities, in the field of textual criticism, for pulling together the variety of ideals and disciplines which the younger and the older men have inconclusively debated. Jowett's remarks about the "corruptions" – that is, the incremental verbal errors – to which, through the random and hazardous processes of historical transmission across two millennia, ancient Greek and Latin texts have been exposed,

inspire in “Housman” a passion to undo corruption, to retrieve what was, in textual terms, original, and thus to recover, even to resurrect, truth.

The notion, or the fiction, of “resurrection” thus links “Housman,” beyond his own awareness, with the dreams or after-life memories of “AEH”; and in their long first-Act encounter they debate this question. “AEH” enjoins “Housman” to a sense of the supreme value of textual scholarship in these terms: “Textual criticism is a science whose subject is literature . . . Literature . . . being the work of the human mind with all its frailty and aberration . . . the science of textual criticism must aim for degrees of likelihood . . . But it is a science none the less . . . Textual criticism is the crown and summit of scholarship” (Stoppard 38-9). Yet – and this is a recurrent feature of the play – such resonant rhetoric proves inconclusive, and its speaker leads himself away into seemingly different thoughts and desires: “If I had my time again, I would pay more regard to those poems of Horace which tell you you will not have your time again. Who knows how many tomorrows the gods will grant us?” (39). And, later in the same scene but differently again: “To be the fastest runner, the strongest wrestler, the best at throwing the javelin – this was virtue when Horace in his dreams ran after Ligurinus across the Field of Mars, and Ligurinus didn’t lose his virtue by being caught” (43).

If scholarly textual criticism is seen by the eager, young “Housman” as potentially the queen of sciences, neither he nor his older self is unaware of competing attractions – competing, perhaps merely parasitic, yet in the end possibly complementary; the attractions of poetry, above all perhaps of worldly self-conscious love poetry; the attractions of the society reflected in such poetry, Roman and Greek, in both cases allowing acceptability and value to inter-male erotic sexuality and love; and the attractions to be found in the eschewal of long-term perspectives, whether of history or of personal memory, and in a compensating pursuit of pleasure, as advocated by Pater and later by Wilde, in the singular moment. It is within the field of Greek poetry and literature that, at the climax of their dialogue, “Housman” and “AEH” concur upon a

particular ideal image (one which recurs throughout Act 2), that of “the Sacred Band of Theban youths,” “a hundred and fifty pairs of lovers” who “were never beaten until Greek liberty died for good at the battle of Chaeronea” (43). “Housman,” confronted with this image, declares “I would be such a friend to someone,” and, a little later, “Love it is, then, and I will make the best of it” (44). If ancient society offers a model for the harmonious pursuit of multiple values, then, these values include and are perhaps dominated by the value of love. Yet such a conclusion, albeit acceptable to “Housman,” remains importantly ambiguous. Is such all-embracing love sustainable – was it a mere coincidence that the idealised Theban lovers were committed to warfare, and that war cost them their lives? Again, and in terms of the title of Stoppard’s play, if “love” goes together with a harmony of, or a fusion between, other values, does it enjoy this status, as it were, spontaneously and through its own resources, or is it rather a value, and an emotion, “invented” (rather as, for Jowett, Classics serves a broader social purpose) precisely so as to fulfil this function? And yet again, can such love, either as an “invention” or as an emotional experience, remain coherent and humanly sustainable?

“AEH,” near the end of this dialogue, sets up against each other Ruskin the moralising critic and Pater the flirtatious aesthete, and says to “Housman” “You’ll be all right one way or the other. I was an absolutely safe First too” (46). The line of thought here is elusive but vital. “Housman” has seized euphorically on the possibility of a life dedicated to all his ideals at once. “AEH” purports to know better, and doubly so. For one thing, criticism and poetic pleasure are two paths not one – Ruskin or Pater, “one way or the other.” For another thing, there will be major upsets – only such a prospect would justify the disillusioned reassurance he offers to his over-assured younger self. Moreover, upset – blockage, mystery, disharmony, trouble – will proceed as much, or more, from within rather than from without, and “failure” may be, for any ideal of harmonious and all-uniting love, endemic, not least because such love may not be shared – it takes two to tango. “Love, said Sophocles, feels like the ice held in the hand by children. A piece of

ice held tight in the fist" (44). The phrase is echoed, near the end of the play, along with the play's title, by Wilde: "In the mirror of invention, love discovered itself. Then we saw what we had wrought, rapture and pain together, the ice that burns who clasp it" (98). The differences are telling: Wilde is confident, verbally flamboyant and supremely vain; "AEH" is rueful – and learned, relying not on a profession of personal experience but on an obscure and fragmentary Greek source. Wilde professes mutuality – "what we had wrought" – at the moment where he has denied it – "Bosie is my creation, my poem" (98). "AEH" dwells, in his formulation, not upon pain, nor rapture, but on the transience of ice that will not be held.

With "AEH," then, near the first Act's ending, "Housman" settles, at worst and at best, for love – and for textual criticism; both ways, for virtue, pure and heroic in itself and refusing, or seeking to undo, in one field and another, corruption. Act 2 depicts the working out of this commitment. The first half of the Act traces a narrative arc within the relationship of the two young men, through scenes shared by them and also by Pollard (Housman's fellow Latin Scholar) and a new character, Chamberlain. Chamberlain is their contemporary; he is not an Oxford graduate but is a "homosexual" (still not yet nameably so) and thus aware of the feelings of "Housman" for Jackson and of the limits set by "civilised society" upon their expression.

These limits are further contextualised by scenes set within what one may call the "print society" of later Victorian London. Three new characters – Henry Labouchere, Frank Harris and William Thomas Stead, the first a Liberal MP, all three of them journalists – harangue each other about parliamentary reform of (heterosexual) crime, masculine military virtue, and (once again) the legends of Greek heroic male love. They share few values beyond a sense of the importance of publicity. They regard themselves as promoters of the increasing reputation of Oscar Wilde. They are unaware of "Housman." What is going on here?

Clearly, I think, Stoppard is not dramatizing a social field which refuses awareness of "homosexuality." Both Chamberlain

and Labouchere take it for granted (as they also take for granted the necessity of limits upon its public expression). It is, rather, “Housman” who ignores or refuses such a characterization of his emotions or desires. He needs to, since he clearly cannot expect Jackson to deploy such language; in their final scene together their exchange is movingly awkward –

HOUSMAN Did she [Rosa, Jackson’s girl-friend] think Pollard was sweet on you?

JACKSON She didn’t talk about Pollard. You aren’t, are you?

HOUSMAN You’re my best friend. (77)

Jackson seems ready to leave matters there; “Housman” drives the issue to a conclusion which for him is self-destructive, deploying as he does his classical learning, his admiration for ancient “virtue,” and, no less, his well-developed vein of scornful irony:

Theseus was never so happy as when he was with his friend. They weren’t sweet on each other. They loved each other, as men loved each other in the heroic age, in virtue . . . Virtue! What happened to it? . . . Virtue is what women have to lose, the rest is vice. Pollard thinks I’m sweet on you, too, though he hardly knows he thinks it. Will you mind if I go to live somewhere but close by? . . . Did you really not know even for a minute? (79)

“Housman” rejects his love, and, with it, himself or at least half of himself – he tears his heart in sunder – as if it were a mere invention. He rejects the friendship which Jackson is keen to maintain. He thereby retains, potentially, his own control over the love which, at least for himself, he has invented. Furthermore, as subsequent scenes will show, he retains a control, which, by Wilde, will be sacrificed or abandoned, over his own public standing and legal security. He remains, to the worlds both of newspaper publicity and of punitive legalism, unknown. He remains, and increasingly, becomes, an obsessive, sharp-tongued, and supremely gifted textual scholar. Where Wilde is arguably invented by the whims of others, he invents himself, as “AEH.”

Within this invented role of “AEH,” what has become of the projects and ideals assumed and embraced by “Housman”? The ideal of textual scholarship has been triumphantly fulfilled (and Stoppard’s enthusiasm both for such scholarship and for the Greek and Latin texts upon which Housman practised it shines out radiantly from the whole play). The ideal of physical and athletic beauty, as a part or the whole of “virtue,” has, with the departure of Jackson from the stage (and with the news of his death in old age), revealed its inevitable transience. (A poem of Housman, *To An Athlete Dying Young*, is cited by Chamberlain in Stoppard’s play – “Early though the laurel grows,/It withers quicker than the rose” (Housman, “Poem XIX” 41). Poetic achievement and its acknowledgement have come to “AEH” but, as far as the play goes, seem to have left him unimpressed (here Stoppard does some justice to Housman’s own apparent attitude, while leaving room for that attitude to be viewed, in “AEH,” as one more self-protective façade). It follows that the potential “harmony” between such ideals as these – a harmony confidently attributed by Jowett to Greek antiquity, and (I have argued) embraced hopefully by the student “Housman,” has been left completely unfulfilled – by implication, in “modern” times, insusceptible of fulfilment.

Love, Modernity and Nostalgia: The Projects of “AEH”

If modernity has made love out of date, might nostalgia revive or recapture it? Stoppard’s play engages in a good deal of dispersed debate about “modernity,” particularly in the scenes, in each act, between senior Oxford dons and self-important London journalists (roles which Stoppard envisages being shared, across the two Acts, by the same group of actors). And the preoccupation with modernity is obsessively linked with the profession of nostalgia:

RUSKIN I was seventeen when I came up to Oxford. That was in 1836, and the word ‘Aesthete’ was unknown. (9)

PATTISON I was not quite seventeen when I first saw Oxford. That was in 1830 and Oxford was delightful then, not the overbuilt slum it has become. (14)

AEH I was eighteen when I first saw Oxford, and Oxford was charming then, not the trippery emporium it has become. (27)

Two voices offer something different. For Pater nostalgia has no place:

PATER To burn with a gem-like flame is to capture the awareness of each moment. To form habits is to be absent from those moments. (19)

For Jowett, the past is a country best left far behind:

JOWETT I was eighteen when I came up to Oxford. That was in 1835, and Oxford was an utter disgrace . . . The great reform of the fifties laid the foundation of the educated class that has spread moral and social order . . . The modern university exists by consent of the world outside. We must send out men fitted for that world. (16-7)

As for “Housman,” he develops, by Act 2, a complex but powerful sense of the relations between the passage of time and the responsibilities of textual scholarship. It is expressed to his friend Pollard (as it could not be expressed to his beloved Jackson) and it is worth quoting at length – for its own sake, as the last extended speech of “Housman,” and as a fair representation of the attitudes of Housman himself in maturity at the head of his academic profession:

[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 faint-hearted, an elaboration of the real thing, which is only to shine some light, it doesn’t matter 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 . . . Posterity has a brisk way with manuscripts: scholarship is a small redress against the vast unreason of what is taken from us – it’s not just the worthless that perish, Jesus doesn’t save. (73-4)

For Jowett the (classical) past is useful; for other dons the (academic) past is desirable but irretrievable. For “Housman” it is, with labour, open to discovery; its value lies in its truth. This seems scientific and objective. It is not. “Jesus doesn’t save” – and the light that shines in darkness has to be supplied by the heroic textual scholar; it is he who (in this sense) “saves.” Given the conscious blasphemy of the speech, alluding as it does to the opening of John’s Gospel, one could say: the textual scholar, equipped with divine power, “resurrects” texts and their authors.

Edmund Gosse asked: “What has Providence done to Mr Hardy that he . . . should shake his fist at the Creator?” (qtd. in Fowles 235). What has Providence, or Jesus, done to “Housman” to provoke such blasphemy? One answer has already appeared in Stoppard’s play, in “Housman’s” prominent (because almost unique) dialogue with a female character, his sister, which opens Act 2:

HOUSMAN I stopped believing . . . when I was thirteen.

KATE That was only to punish Him for mother dying.

HOUSMAN And by God, he stayed punished. (Stoppard 54)

As a self-proclaimed atheist, like Hardy, “Housman” is modern. Modernity has no place for ancient virtuous heroic male-with-male love (whether or not sexually expressed). Modernity does have a place (as the character of Chamberlain is there to say and show) for private self-defensive “homosexual” coteries. It also has a place, glamorous though dangerous, for aesthetes, like Wilde, whose self-invention is indistinguishable from the changes of contemporary fashion. “AEH” is modern, unlike them, by being a textual critic.

Partly this is because much, in textual criticism, remains to be done, having previously been done badly (often in Germany) or (in England and with some resonant exceptions) not at all. Partly it is because modernity can be understood as a heroically humanist rejection of traditional theism, seen as a complacent self-delusion similar to those indulged in by lesser textual critics. One might also

argue that the residual ambiguity, within textual criticism, between the rediscovery of true texts and their substitution by plausible but conjectural emendations recapitulates, or anticipates, a characteristic aspect of literary modernity, even post-modernity. But another factor, too, makes textual criticism modern – its fascination with the ancient world. Stoppard's play is centred on a character who, already in the generation before Ezra Pound or James Joyce or T. S. Eliot, is committed to necromancy, to myth, and, above all, to the project which Jesus could not carry through but which he himself can fulfil; the project of resurrection.

"AEH," in time, is capable of total recollection, across the span both of his life's experiences and of his immensely rich textual knowledge. In space he is liminal, at once sleeping (restlessly) and (at least in imagination or in desire) dead (like Eliot's Phoenician Phlebas, or *Hamlet's* Ghost) (Eliot 71). He spans worlds. He seeks, in some measure, to reunite worlds – the living with the dead, an aged with a youthful self. At a level higher than Wilde's, but in a way comparable with his, he serves, as a resurrector and resuscitator of his and others' pasts, needs that are not objective but subjective, not scientific but deeply and (despite and through the staginess of Stoppard's play) secretively personal. All this may involve nostalgia, and even nostalgia for some aspects of an "academy." But the words seem inadequate. What is "AEH" for? What is he after? Might sheer nostalgia reverse time and undo the past? Might it bring someone back from the dead?

Here one touches on one of the play's most repeated references and citations:

nec Lethaea valet Theseus abrumpere caro
vincula Pirithoo. (Horace, *Odes* 4.7.27-28)

The Greek hero Theseus went to Hades to release his beloved friend Pirithous from death. He could not do it – could not "bring him up from Hades." Aeneas, similarly, was led down to Hades and thence to Elysium, and returned – but alone and sad, suspended between the future projected for and upon him by Jupiter and the

Troy which he longingly but vainly remembers. His nostalgia is in turn comparable to that of a famous poem by Catullus evoking, from its own Roman-republican “modernity,” the bygone past when gods and humans met and conversed and loved (Catullus 64). Catullus and Virgil, of course, are poets on whose works Housman worked wonders of textual criticism; in the case of Catullus the achievement amounted, at one point, to a total restoration of sense, and this is rehearsed in Stoppard’s play (Diggle and Goodyear 913-4; Stoppard 37-8). But closer than them to the verbal texture of the play is the earlier citation, from Horace’s *Odes*.

And Housman the mature Professor, known for the rarity of his public judgments on the literary merits or emotional appeal of the poems whose text he discussed in his public lectures, once made an exception for Horace’s *Ode* 4.7. The anecdote is recounted in Graves’s biography, concluding with Housman’s reported utterance: “‘That’, he said hurriedly, almost like a man betraying a secret, ‘I regard as the most beautiful poem in ancient literature’, and walked quickly out of the room” (Graves 171-2).

The anecdote depicts a textual critic confronted, within the terms of his own discipline, with something – a poem and a phrase of poetry, a loving friendship and a beloved’s death – which at once desiderates an act of recovery and stipulates its impossibility. It is with such a challenge as this that the project of “AEH,” within Stoppard’s plays, repeatedly engages.

If this is so, why? Does “AEH” want the past to happen once again? Certainly his memory, or his resuscitative powers, seem prone to self-repetition: “I think we’re in danger of going round again” (Stoppard 46). I take it, rather, that we are to see “AEH” in a double light, and actuated, hence, by a double project; in this sense he is like “Housman,” though the projects are different, as is the balance between them. On the one hand “AEH” professes, from the start, composure – composure in the face of a death he presents as extraneous to him – “Cremation, but very decent I believe: a service at Trinity College and the ashes laid to rest – for fathomable reasons – in Shropshire, a county where I never lived and seldom set foot” (1).

Such composure he brings to his final speech in Act 1, a lecture, remembered or improvised in fantasy, expounding another Horatian *Ode*. Yet the exposition slips, through translation, into the acknowledgment of an “unaccustomed tear,” wept both by Horace’s persona and by himself (Stoppard 49-51). Like Housman, “AEH” is moved by poetry to uncontrollable emotion; like Housman, the poetry in question rehearses a past which can be and cannot be recovered. “AEH” is, in his identity, liminal, and, in his will, divided; he is divided between acceptance (of division) and division (which demands but defies acceptance). And so his project, in Stoppard’s play, involves a quasi-scientific, even historical, rehearsal of a past – his own and that of his contemporaries – which is also an attempted re-run, an “alternative history,” a longing attempt to achieve something stronger than nostalgic recall, stronger even than (though requiring nothing less than) “resurrection.” It is an attempt to change what is past, to locate its points of opportunity and decision: to locate them and perhaps to redirect them.

In Stoppard’s earlier play *Travesties*, the leading character Henry Carr, of whose unreliable memories the play largely consists, reflects momentarily on the opportunity he may have had, to avert the Russian Revolution. In his first masterpiece *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead* the titular characters have, and miss, two chances to catch the attention of Hamlet and to divert him, from thoughts of suicide and later from his intended death in England. In Stoppard’s *Jumpers* – a play whose intellectual focus seems to lie on the question of the existence of God – another professor, obsessed with his own arguments and concerned for his career prospects, neglects his wife’s pleas for emotional support. Most recently Stoppard’s play *Leopoldstadt* traces across three generations the lives and the deaths (that is, the murders by Nazis) of a family of Viennese Jews – a family in some ways like Stoppard’s own ascendant family, of whom he and his mother became, through opportunities both seized and missed, some of the few survivors. Stoppard thus has, on this admittedly partial line of interpretation, something of a track record as a dramatist of what

might have happened, and of what did but might not have happened.

Why would “AEH” want to change the past? Because of its unfulfilled projects – the projects, embraced by “Housman,” of love which involves, at once, science and bodily delight and virtue, love at once ancient and modern. Could they have been fulfilled, all together? Not, it seems, by “Housman.” His failure to satisfy Oxford examiners bespeaks, perhaps, nothing more nor less than a degree (!) of contempt for the nature of their demands, coupled with a confidence in his own revised version of what counts as true intellectual commitment and harmonious humanity. His refusal of Jackson’s friendship seems grounded in the fact that it was not, in his own terms, love. Neither response, and neither failure, is shown to be inevitable. Both failures are shown to be partly determined by objective external circumstances and pressures. Both are also seen, by Stoppard’s audience, to be caused by a certain self-preoccupation, already strong in “Housman,” and, in “AEH,” enhanced. Both roles centre on privacy – on concealments which conceal themselves in and as eloquence. Given this, “resurrection” can, at best, illuminate the pressures and desires that make it seem desirable and at the same time render it, as a force for possible change, ineffectual.

To conclude: the theme of resurrection, and of its impossibility, is staged in *The Invention of Love*, not only through the play’s basic device – the presence of “AEH” – but also through explicit Biblical echoes, allusions and parodies. “Housman” imagines the hills near his childhood home as “Mount Pisgah,” a site from which the “promised land” of Israel’s future destiny may be viewed but, by the viewer, never reached (Deuteronomy 34.1-4). Much play is made in the early scenes of Act 2 with the name of John the Baptist, to whom the Oxford college attended by “Housman” and his student friends is dedicated; his diet of “locusts and wild honey” is evoked in an early scene of Act 1, as is his exposure to danger and death – “It’s the Baptist School of Hard Knocks. First the Wilderness, then the head on the platter” (Stoppard 10).

“Housman” will experience “wilderness” (in Oxonian rejection and no less in academic success) and the “sundering,” of self from self, more drastically undergone by St John; above all he is being cast as one who proclaimed a positive future – even a “modernity” – which he experienced, in his own life, in ways largely negative. Another early Biblical reference in the play questions the viability even of the future (or present) new Kingdom, promised by Jesus. In Matthew’s “Sermon on the Mount” one reads Jesus’ saying “Can people pick grapes from thorns, or figs from thistles?” (Matthew 7.16).

The answer, of course, is: No. And “Housman,” once again in an early boating scene with his friends – and seemingly without any preparation (also without attracting any comment from the play’s critics) – cries out: “False quantities in all around I see, yea we have been forsaken in the wilderness to gather grapes of thorns and figs of thistles (Stoppard 10).

The undergraduate, parodying a line from a famous hymn (“Change and decay in all around I see”) fuses the parody with a stagey reference to the “wilderness,” once home of John the Baptist, which the preaching of Jesus had failed to transform, leaving his putative followers the impossible task of bringing what is fruitless to some kind of fruit.

If we take such citations and allusions, by whomever they are voiced in Stoppard’s play, to be part of the staged project of “AEH” – the project, I have suggested, of resurrection against all possible odds – then a final and rather bravura reference, in the play and in the role of “AEH,” may also find an interpretative home. In a final and very moving exchange with “Housman,” “AEH” corrects the younger man’s earlier and venial error:

Before you publish, by the way, the first of the Roman love elegists was not Propertius, strictly speaking. It was Cornelius Gallus . . . Only one line of Gallus survived. The rest perished. . . . Virgil wrote a poem for him: how much immortality does a man need? . . . he killed himself. But by then he’d invented the love elegy. (101-2)

This is virtuoso stuff. Gallus is known, as a poet, through references in two Virgilian Eclogues, and hence can claim priority as, if not “the inventor of love (poetry),” still the first Latin elegiac love poet. Gallus is known in other ways – as “AEH” goes on to say: “He fought on the winning side against Antony and Cleopatra” (102).

Summing up, “AEH” declares that “there’d been songs . . . valentines . . . mostly in Greek, often charming . . . but the self-advertisement of farce and folly, love as abject slavery and all-out war – madness, disease, the whole catastrophe owned up to and written in the metre – no; that was new” (102).

In the first place, Stoppard here, as I take it, allows “AEH” to be wrong, about “abject” love poetry and about the priority, in writing it, of Gallus or of any Roman poet; an obvious precursor is Sappho, and Stoppard’s later play *Rock ‘n’ Roll* places great emphasis on her poetry. More importantly, the characterisation here of “love” is, on the lips of “AEH” or of any other character in *The Invention of Love*, at once persuasive, compelling, and new. It differs vastly from the “heroic love” admired by the young “Housman.” It acknowledges a far greater mixture of experience, within love, than either of the play’s two main roles has drawn together at any earlier point. “The whole catastrophe,” then, is what it has been the achievement of the play to resurrect; not “harmony” and not Stoical self-suppression, but tragic loss accepted and, by such acceptance, retrieved.

Thirdly – and, as the conclusion to both Stoppard’s play and my article, the point makes itself – to name “Antony and Cleopatra” is to point, at once, towards the Shakespearean play in which “abject slavery,” “all-out war,” “farce and folly” are most magnificently invented and acknowledged in their full combination, and to the relationship – however far it may be retrievable through historical record, and however much shared and competitive “invention” it may have involved – between, precisely, Antony and Cleopatra. If Stoppard’s play reflects on love and on invention, its weight lies, surely, on the constant necessity to re-invent what already exists – yet exists only insofar as its full range of

disharmony is not suppressed in the name of any single-minded project or ideal.¹

Note:

Many thanks, for comments and suggestions, to John Ginman, Helen Lloyd, Merritt Moseley, and John Stokes.

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