

---

# Paragraphoi

---

This section publishes short essays that explore topics of interest to the profession. Submissions should run to no more than 1200 words. Diverse opinions and spirited exchanges are welcome. The editor, however, reserves the right to return essays deemed unsuitable for the format.

## A Cautionary Tale

David Kovacs

*University of Virginia*

This true story is intended to warn interpreters of literature written at some remove from us in time. The warning consists in an interpretation and its clear refutation by the facts. The interpretation is my own, produced under favorable circumstances: I was trying to interpret a poem written in my own century and in my own language. Yet I have since come across hard evidence that my interpretation is completely wrong. Not inadequate, partial, or insufficiently nuanced, but plain-as-a-pikestaff, broad-as-a-barndoor wrong. The story suggests some cautions about the whole interpretive enterprise. I offer up my own failure so that others may be wiser by my folly.

The poem in question is by A. E. Housman. Here it is in its entirety.

### EPITAPH ON AN ARMY OF MERCENARIES

These, in the day when heaven was falling,  
The hour when earth's foundations fled,  
Followed their mercenary calling  
And took their wages and are dead.

Their shoulders held the sky suspended;  
They stood, and earth's foundations stay;  
What God abandoned, these defended,  
And saved the sum of things for pay.

Anyone who is familiar even in a superficial way with Housman's poetry is aware of its romantic admiration, even envy, of those who die in battle. Yet this particular piece, which I first met in *The New Oxford Book of English Verse*, seemed to me to contain other and quite different elements as well. The essential feature of these lines, it seemed to me, was the palpable hyperbole of the claims made for these soldiers. Heaven had been falling and earth's founda-

tions fleeing, before these soldiers entered the scene. Since their intervention, heaven is securely aloft and earth's foundations are once more immobile. Even God had abandoned the things that these men stood for, and in their zeal for what is right they have outdone even the Almighty. They have saved "the sum of things," the Lucretian phrase for the entire universe. The hyperbole, I supposed, was clearly meant to discredit. And the reason why the claims of heroism are being subjected to deflation is given in the last line of each stanza. The high pretensions of the world-savers are unmasked by one sordid fact: these were not patriots who enlisted out of love or conscripts doing their duty, but hired soldiers. They are dead because they got more in the way of emolument than they had bargained for: they "took their wages and are dead," they "saved the sum of things for pay."

Before I learned the truth about this poem, I did experience what would have been misgivings had I thought them through. The poem did not seem entirely successful. The irony of the hyperbole was splendid, but somehow a bit gratuitous. Mercenaries, of all soldiers, have the least lofty moral claims, and it seemed incongruous for the poet to be deflating what no one was likely to inflate. But deflationary hyperbole was familiar to me, and I never thought to doubt that this was the kind of rhetoric Housman was employing.

The end to my complacent ignorance came quite by chance. In searching out an article in the *Papers of the Leeds and District Classical Association*, I discovered, in a nearby volume, a 1920 paper by W. Rhys Roberts on the ὦ ξεῖν', ἀγγέλλειν epigram of Simonides.<sup>1</sup> The paper ended with a list of modern adaptations, including Housman's "Epitaph." It was here that Roberts mentioned an important fact: in the early years of the First World War, German propaganda charged England with employing a "mercenary," i. e. a professional, army, and it is to this charge that the poem published in the *Times* on 31 October 1917 alludes as it commemorates the third anniversary of the First Battle of Ypres.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>W. Rhys Roberts, "Eleven Words of Simonides," *Papers of the Leeds and District Branch of the Classical Association*, no. 10 (Cambridge 1920).

<sup>2</sup>Even in a well-documented period such as the second decade of our century, it proved surprisingly difficult to find contemporary documents to corroborate what Roberts reported as common knowledge. The London *Times* for 23 November 1914, p. 10, quotes a *Berliner Zeitung* article in which a German soldier calls a British soldier "this mercenary." A pamphlet called "Facts about the War" published by William Heinemann around 1915 has a section called "German Views of British Soldiers" in which paragraphs from the *Cologne Gazette* are quoted contrasting the unwarlike British shopkeeper, who pays for mercenaries to protect his money bags, with the Germans, whose war-casualties come from all ranks of society. There was this much truth in the charge: before the New Army Scheme of Lord Kitchener, the tiny British Expeditionary Force of ca. 150,000 was made up largely of professional soldiers.

At once all was clear. The mercenaries of the poem were not really mercenaries at all: they had merely been *represented* as mercenaries by enemy propaganda. The point of the poem was to show, in the light of their heroic conduct on 31 October 1914, how absurd this accusation was. In short, my earlier interpretation was a howler. The poem, so far from saying "These men are mercenaries: so much for exaggerated claims of heroism," says "These men are heroes: so much for false charges of venality."<sup>3</sup>

The difficulties with the poem that I had earlier swept under the rug now vindicated the new interpretation. There was, on my earlier reading, no reason for high claims to be made—and refuted by ironic exaggeration—about mercenaries. But it makes sense for a poet to use the mercenary charge as a foil to the soldiers' heroism. Indeed, one of the claims, "What God abandoned, these defended," can be plausibly attributed only to the poet *in propria persona* and would be very odd as a parody of official views of soldierly sacrifice: conventional eulogy sees brave soldiers in a just cause *cooperating* with the deity, whereas Housman himself, whose poems regularly cast doubt on the justice of God, is free to allege that the soldiers *surpassed* God in their concern for the right. Exaggeration, while it can discredit and undercut, can also be part of a different rhetorical strategy. Carried through boldly, as it is here, it can make clear the magnitude of the soldiers' accomplishment, an accomplishment thrown into high relief by the charge.

My own earlier reading of this poem looks uncommonly foolish in hindsight, though I can now note that my howler has company.<sup>4</sup> It nevertheless makes sense to ask what general conclusions my experience suggests and what warnings it holds for those who interpret literature that is at all remote in time or circumstance from us. Several suggest themselves.

First, accepting the principle that there may be many true interpretations of a work of literature, each shedding light from its own angle, does not mean that there is no such thing as a false interpretation. I produced one. Moreover, it is plain in this case that false interpretation is not merely non-illuminating

---

<sup>3</sup>Anyone who wants further proof that the poem was understood by its first audience as unqualified praise of the dead should look at the placement of the poem in the *Times*: it comes just below a long editorial on the heroism of the British and French forces in Belgium, which asserts, in effect, that they saved the world.

<sup>4</sup>See, for example, Richard Wilbur, "Round About A Poem of Housman's," reprinted in C. Ricks, ed., *A. E. Housman: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs 1968) 87-99. Wilbur quotes an acquaintance of his, of whose literary judgment he has, in general, a high regard, and whose view of the poem is identical to my erroneous one. Wilbur feels this is wrong and spends considerable energy in arguing against it, but in the absence of the important fact that I happened to come across, he does not carry all before him.

but positively tenebrificacious, and if ideas like mine came to be cited respectfully in discussion of the poem, they would be shedding darkness. It is hard to know precisely what moral to draw for classical studies, but at least we should notice that progress is not inevitable and that a contribution to interpretation may subtract from the sum of truth.

Second, it is worth noting—in order to make allowance for—the kind of mistaken interpretation to which the mind of one late-twentieth-century reader unthinkingly gravitated. With an effortlessness and untroubled ease that now seem frightening, I instinctively ironized the poem's unironic point, that the dead soldiers had saved something of great value—the world, in fact—at enormous cost to themselves. It seemed obvious that Housman's sensibility in this poem must be like that of most serious literature since his day, in which the rhetoric of irony and deflation is much commoner than the rhetoric of eulogy. So strong was this instinct that I ignored the real difficulties of my interpretation and was perfectly happy to concede that the poem might not be very successful rather than consider that my reading of its tone might be a misreading. For the literary sensibility of our entire culture, the First World War was, of course, a watershed. But Housman, who was born in 1859, had a sensibility fully formed long before 1914. Hence, although he writes in my language and belongs to my century, some of my own instinctive literary reactions are not only irrelevant to an understanding of his poetry but positively misleading. *A fortiori* this is likely to be true of antiquity.

Third, we should note that the problem is compounded when, as in our poem, the language is charged with irony but of a different kind from the one we are accustomed to. I was not wrong to detect irony in the highly charged language of "Epitaph," to feel that something was "up." In my second and corrected reading there is irony, too. This time it is not at the expense of soldiers or of those who regard their deaths as noble. Rather, its target is, in the first instance, German propaganda: the poem unmasks the ludicrous lies propaganda tells, ludicrous because their cynicism is refuted by the facts, for no one would give up his life for any amount of pay. But there is also irony at the expense of the universe. It was mere men who saved the sum of things, and in this they were nobler than God himself. The wage they received for their heroic exertions was death. There is a pessimism in the poem that is almost genial, akin to Oscar Wilde's famous dictum "No good deed ever went unpunished."<sup>5</sup> So my

---

<sup>5</sup>Cf. also the genial pessimism of Housman's other soldier-epitaph, whose speakers say, "Life, to be sure, is nothing much to lose; / But young men think it is, and we were young."

uninformed sensibility was right in detecting irony, wrong only in the kind of irony detected.

Our poem may furnish an instructive parallel for interpreters of ancient literature. Take the *Aeneid*. The now-famous division between “optimists,” who read a poem of praise and support for Augustus and his policies, and “pessimists,” who detect dark or ironical undertones questioning the adequacy of his regime, should perhaps make room for a sensibility different from that of the late twentieth century.

There is arguably an irony in the *Aeneid* of a different sort from the one debated by “optimists” and “pessimists,” an irony parallel to the sentiment of “What God abandoned, these defended” in Housman’s “Epitaph.” Vergil is under no illusions about the government of the universe. He stands in the pessimistic tradition of Homer, Hesiod, Pindar, Herodotus, and Greek tragedy, which sees a justice in the world that is only partial and intermittent. The world on this view is governed in the last resort by Zeus, but his justice is sometimes hard to trace, and other divinities, often acting from motives that are not moral, frequently have a hand in shaping the destinies of heroes. Trouble is conceived of as the natural lot of man, and even the luckiest of mortals have an admixture of evil in their good fortune. Goodness is not always rewarded by happiness, and not rarely the most deserving or the most innocent of mortals meets an untimely end. With the victory of Aeneas over Turnus, the sum of things has been saved, yet the poem cannot end on a note of triumph without unjustly ignoring the losses sustained by the mortal participants in the combat, losses to which the universe is indifferent but which we as fellow mortals cannot ignore if we are to retain what is most essential about our humanity. It may be that the polytheistic pessimism heard in “*tantaene animis caelestibus irae?*” provides a better key to the poem’s intent than ironies more in keeping with modern sensibility. The “pessimists” will be right about the poem, therefore, when they learn that pessimism, in ages before our own, was a view of the world as a whole and not merely of the political situation. It is not necessarily despairing and rarely nihilistic. It is compatible with high regard for the efforts of struggling mortals.

Samuel Johnson records the following advice from a college tutor: “Read over your compositions, and wherever you meet with a passage which you think is particularly fine, strike it out.” A similar austerity is demanded from literary critics when they conceive of an interpretation they find particularly congenial to the spirit of their own age: they should think again. The Housman poem shows us that we must learn to recognize for what they are the habits of thought, feeling, and literary expression that are peculiar to our own age.

When we interpret ancient literature, we must be aware that in certain important respects we are at a disadvantage, cut off by deep changes of sentiment that are as great a barrier to interpretation as the ancient languages themselves. Unwariness on this point means risking interpretative failure on a scale as disastrous as my own failure—but without any contemporary records to prove us decisively wrong.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup>I would like to thank S. J. Harrison, John F. Miller, and Mark Morford for helpful comments.