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Labor Limae ad Unguem: The Making of a Schopshire Lad

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LABOR LIMAE AD UNGUEM

THE MAKING OF A SHROPSHIRE LAD. A Manuscript Variorum.
By Tom Burns Haber. Seattle and London: University of
Washington Press, 1966. xi, 322 pp.

A. E. Housman published only two volumes of poetry during his lifetime, both of them slender. The first was published in 1896 and was entitled *A Shropshire Lad*; the second came out in 1922, and was simply called *Last Poems*. Actually they were not the last, for two additional volumes were published after the poet's death, edited by his brother Laurence. A collected edition of the poems appeared in 1959, edited by Haber, the author of the book under review.

The small quantity of Housman's poetry is of course no indication of their excellence. His poems are gemlike: romantic in tone, classic in form. They are also classic in theme, for Housman shared with Horace the Roman poet's preoccupation with the shortness of life and the poignant beauty of the Spring.

What Haber does in the present volume is to take us behind the scenes and show us Housman's notebooks in which he wrote the drafts of the poems in *A Shropshire Lad*. I am not sure why he has called it a "Manuscript Variorum." My understanding of the term "variorum" is of a critically edited text with the collated commentaries of various hands (variorum scriptorum).

A book like this of course is of extremely limited appeal, but it is not without value to the professor of rhetoric or of poetry who wishes to point out the verbal perfection of a poem. The secret of good writing (it is said) is competent rewriting. Keats did not arrive at the phrase "deep-browed Homer" at one leap: he had first used an inferior adjective, and it was only after much rewriting that he hit upon that splendid word—deep-browed—which is the mark of genius.

So with Housman. One example will suffice.

Loveliest of trees, the cherry now
Is hung with bloom along the bough,
And stands about the woodland ride
Wearing white for Eastertide.

That stanza, written in the Spring of 1895, attained its present perfection only after four words in the original draft had been discarded. The original stanza would have read:

Loveliest of trees, the cherry now
Is hung with bloom under the bough

And stands about the woodlands wide
Wearing snow for Eastertide.

"Along" for "under", "woodland ride" for "woodlands wide", "white" for "snow"—small alterations; but it is of such little things that the perfection of great poetry consists.

MIGUEL A. BERNAD

THE BIG DYNAMIC HEMINGWAY

PAPA HEMINGWAY. A Personal Memoir by A. E. Hotchner.
New York: Random House, 1966. xii, 304 pp., with photographs.

We heard of Hemingway's death on an afternoon in July 1961, just outside of Cambridge, Massachusetts. We were in a streetcar on our way to (or was it on our way from?) an informal lawn party to which we had been invited. We were an international group. There was an editor from Finland, a novelist from Germany, a school superintendent from Israel, a Member of Parliament from England, the house master of a Colegio Mayor in Madrid. There were lady teachers from India, from Southern France, and from Cambridge University in England. There were Africans, Indians, a Ceylonese, a Brazilian, a Japanese, and this lone member from the Philippines. We filled the streetcar: all the seats were taken, some of us had to stand. Someone (I think it was the Spaniard) said in a low voice: "Hemingway is dead. I heard it over the radio." The word was passed along, and the shock of it stayed with many of us for the rest of that summer.

What shocked us was not his death—that had to come some time—but the manner of his dying. An accident, it was said. He was cleaning his shotgun and it went off: so they said; but we found that difficult to believe. How could an accident like that happen to a man who knew guns as well as Hemingway did?

In a few days, what we had suspected became an acknowledged fact. Hemingway's death was no accident. He had committed suicide.

For the rest of that summer the members of the Harvard International Seminar could not seem to forget that event. The subject would crop up in our formal sessions and in our informal gatherings. I remember the delegate from Israel making a plea that we should once for all drop the subject: as he put it, we should respect Hemingway's way of ending his life. But the subject would not down. It