In my discussion of the cadet poem in chapter seven, I noted in passing that Housman’s view of poetry, as presented in his 1933 lecture *The Name and Nature of Poetry*, was a strongly anti-intellectualist one: “Poetry is not the thing said but a way of saying it”; “Meaning is of the intellect, poetry is not”; “Poetry indeed seems to me more physical than intellectual” ([11], pp. 364, 365, 369). The symptoms of the presence of poetry are “a shiver down the spine” or “a constriction of the throat and a precipitation of water to the eyes”; we are told that the “seat” of the sensation of poetry is “the pit of the stomach” (ibid., p. 370), and in a letter he remarks that his solar plexus “makes my poetry for me.”¹ This view, which is a legacy of Romanticism,² is both absurd in itself and a strange view for Housman in particular to advance. It is absurd because any activity that trades in the precise use of words is perforce an intellectual one; hence, contrary to what Housman seems to suggest in the lecture, there can be no physical or physiological criterion for good poetry. Archibald MacLeish’s endlessly cited dictum that “a poem should not mean but be” (p. 41) is one of the stupidest things ever said about poetry, since it ought to be obvious that having meaning is a poem’s way of being. This general truth applies par excellence to Housman’s own verse: as we noted in the earlier discussion (and as his brother Laurence pointed out to him),³ his own poetry displays an exemplary concern for exactitude of meaning. The power of Housman’s verse would be nothing without its meaning.⁴ The poetic impact of his lines can no more be separated from their meaning.
than, to adapt an example of Wittgenstein’s (I, §332), when one sings a melody with musical expression it would make sense to try to sing the expression without the melody.5

There are indeed not a few places in Housman’s writings and reported remarks that contradict the line taken in the lecture. His brother Laurence recorded that Housman thought of Ruskin “rather as a curiosity of literature whose manners were charming but whose meaning was negligible” (p. 54). Swinburne, Housman tells us, “came to write like an automaton, without so much as knowing the meaning of what he said” ([11], p. 293). These are intended to be criticisms of Ruskin and Swinburne, one presumes, not simply descriptive remarks. Housman also faulted his brother’s own poetry in terms that made absolutely clear the paramount importance he attached to meaning.6 Again, in a letter to Andrew Gow concerning a submission for the Chancellor’s English Verse Prize, he attacked the piece on which his advice was being sought as lacking in meaning: “It seems to be a rather random assemblage of pretty words, or words which [the author] thinks pretty, without much to express but a vague agitation of mind” ([12], ii, p. 406). All this hardly coheres with Housman’s praise of Shakespeare and Blake in the 1933 lecture. Shakespeare, he informs us, “would sometimes pour out his loveliest poetry in saying nothing”; in a poem of Blake’s “the meaning is a poor foolish disappointing thing in comparison with the verses” ([11], pp. 366–7).7 Housman’s 1933 lecture caused an uproar, and in a letter to his brother after the event he wrote, defensively: “I did not say that poetry was the better for having no meaning, only that it can best be detected so” ([12], ii, p. 349). But this is wrong: to aver, as Housman did in the lecture, that “meaning is of the intellect, poetry is not” is to make a constitutive, not an epistemic, point; it implies that the quality of poetry has nothing to do with its meaning.

The slogan “meaning is of the intellect, poetry is not” clashes not just with the kind of verse that Housman wrote but also with his scholarship. Anyone who reads through some of Housman’s textual criticism is quickly impressed by his logical powers: much of what he writes, indeed, when he attacks or defends a particular reading, is of a logical rather than a linguistic nature. But if Horace, or Propertius, or Manilius, or Lucan wrote from his solar plexus, not from his brain, what is the point of using logic to try to establish his text? Why should we expect a poetic text to make any kind of sense? How exactly can logic help us emend ravishing nonsense? There are indeed many places where Housman’s logical sense led him as badly astray as Bentley’s did