The Poetry of Edward Thomas

by Ian Brinton



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Scope of Topic

The aim of this *Bookmark* is to provide a close critical reading of four of the poems of Edward Thomas and to try to account for that haunting quality which permeates so much of his work.

BOOKS TO READ

The poems discussed are included in *The Collected Poems of Edward Thomas*, edited by R. George Thomas (OUP, 1981).

NOTES

Born in 1878 in South London Edward Thomas's passion for the English countryside was fostered by his ramblings over Wandsworth Common and his holiday visits to his relations in Swindon. Having taken a degree in History at Oxford and having got married in 1899 he had the opportunity of going into the Civil Service, thus providing a steady employment for a family man. Instead he chose the career of writer and found himself hemmed in by reviewing, writing 'popular' topographical works and seeking any form of literary job which might provide for himself and a growing family. He moved house numerous times across the southern counties and this restless search for some kind of peace seemed like a form of nympholepsy, the seeking for an Eden which lay deep in the countryside of those English counties which he so compulsively walked. Bouts of depression dogged him wherever he went brought on by feelings of guilt concerning his insufficient responsibility towards his wife and three children. In addition he rarely had the opportunity to write as he wished because the bills had to be paid by mountains of hack work and it was a tribute to his dedication and seriousness that so many of his reviewing critical judgments turned out to be sound. The turning point was when Thomas met the American poet Robert Frost in 1913 who encouraged him to write poetry using the cadences of human speech. Frost's own 'Mending Wall' and 'After Apple-picking' are examples of what he meant. Between December 1914 and his death at the battle of Arras in 1917 Thomas wrote only 144 poems and they have a quality of being the haunting distillation of a man's hopes and despairs.

A characteristic poem of his has the air of being a random jotting down of chance impressions and sensations, the record of a moment of relaxed and undirected consciousness. The diction and movement are those of quiet, ruminative speech. But the unobtrusive signs accumulate, and finally one is aware that the outward scene is accessory to an inner theatre. Edward Thomas is concerned with the finer texture of living, the here and now, the ordinary moments in which for him the 'meaning' (if any) resides. It is as if he were trying to catch some shy intuition on the edge of consciousness that would disappear if looked at directly. *New Bearings in English Poetry* by F.R. Leavis.

Over the Hills

Often and often it came back again
To mind, the day I passed the horizon ridge
To a new country, the path I had to find
By half-gaps that were stiles once in the hedge,

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The pack of scarlet clouds running across
The harvest evening that seemed endless then
And after, and the inn where all were kind,
All were strangers. I did not know my loss
Till one day twelve months later suddenly
I leaned upon my spade and saw it all,
Though far beyond the sky-line. It became
Almost a habit through the year for me
To lean and see it and think to do the same
Again for two days and a night. Recall
Was vain: no more could the restless brook
Ever turn back and climb the waterfall
To the lake that rests and stirs not in its nook,
As in the hollow of the collar-bone
Under the mountain's head of rush and stone.

(Written January 1915)

This early poem is delightfully caught between ache and glow. The glow of remembered pleasure is tempered, even heightened, by the impossibility of ever repeating the experience. Indeed the value of the place that Thomas is remembering is intimately linked to the impossibility of rediscovering what was, after all, only first found by chance. The opening eight lines are all one sentence and beginning with the repetition of 'often', teasing the mind with the proximity of the experience, it ends with the emphatic 'All were strangers'. The scene of the poem is straightforward enough: in one of his numerous compulsive walks Thomas came across a small corner of an English scene which appeared to him like 'a new country'. It was a place which was discovered by going through 'half-gaps that were stiles once in the hedge' and it had an atmosphere about it which seemed to place the experience outside time:

The pack of scarlet clouds running across
The harvest evening that seemed endless then
And after . . .

A year later, whilst digging his garden, Thomas recalls the scene and immediately associates it with loss: a world which can never be found again. The impossibility of returning is geographically placed by the halting opening lines of the poem where there is a tone of fumbling towards realisation:

Often and often it came back again
To mind, the day I passed the horizon ridge
To a new country . . .

The experience was beyond the horizon and it was a new country. The random nature of the discovery, the 'half-gaps' in the hedges, makes for an impossibility of return: it was found by chance. Thomas's long poem 'Lob' deals again with the transient nature of experience that the poet wants to concretize; having met an old countryman on one of his ramblings he wishes to find him again:

To turn back then and seek him, where was the use?
There were three Manningfords, – Abbots, Bohun and Bruce:
And whether Alton, not Manningford, it was

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My memory could not decide, because
There was both Alton Barnes and Alton Priors.
All had their churches, graveyards, farms and byres,
Lurking to one side up the paths and lanes . . .

In 'Over the Hills' the delightful sense of leisured reminiscence, haunted by Orphic regret, is caught in the quietness of leaning on his spade and seeing it all again in his mind 'Though far beyond the sky-line'. The feeling that Thomas is investing this experience with more than just a regret for an attractive village-green that he would like to revisit is firmly endorsed by the closing imagery of the poem:

. . . no more could the restless brook
Ever turn back and climb the waterfall
To the lake that rests and stirs not in its nook

The comfort and safety of the unstirring lake before it falls into unceasing activity is resonant with that aching nostalgia for a womb-like stillness which precludes all worries and responsibilities. Indeed, what he remembers is that the 'harvest evening' seemed 'endless then'.

Home

Often I had gone this way before:
But now it seemed I never could be
And never had been anywhere else;
'Twas home; one nationality
We had, I and the birds that sang,
One memory.

They welcomed me. I had come back
That eve somehow from somewhere far:
The April mist, the chill, the calm,
Meant the same thing familiar
And pleasant to us, and strange too,
Yet with no bar.

The thrush on the oak top in the lane
Sang his last song, or last but one;
And as he ended, on the elm
Another one had but just begun
His last; they knew no more than I
The day was done.

Then past his dark white cottage front
A labourer went along, his tread
Slow, half with weariness half with ease;
And, through the silence, from his shed
The sound of sawing rounded all
That silence said.

(April 1915)

D.W. Harding, in his 'A Note on Nostalgia' written for the first issue of Scrutiny in 1932, makes the point that the welcoming of death as a rest and a sleep is one expression of the

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tendency: the underlying impulse is not to go forward to meet death, but to go back to a state of freedom from effort, a state which has been approximated to only in prenatal life. That Thomas's nostalgic dissatisfaction with the present was combined with suicidal tendencies is evident from his own prose piece, 'The Attempt', published in *Light and Twilight* (1911):

> To escape from the difficulty of life, from the need of deliberating on it, from the hopeless search for something that would make it possible for him to go on living like anybody else without questioning, he was eager to hide himself away in annihilation, just as, when a child, he hid himself in the folds of his mother's dress or her warm bosom, where he could shut out everything save the bright patterns floating on the gloom under his closed eyelids.

It is also most movingly recorded by Helen Thomas in her biography of the poet, *As It Was* and *World Without End*. In 'Home' Thomas's yearning for a world which precludes the difficulties attendant upon individual life is seen as a merging of the self with nature:

> 'Twas home; one nationality
> We had, I and the birds that sang,
> One memory.

He sees himself as being 'welcomed' by the birds and as having 'come from somewhere far'. However, it is typical of Thomas to see through this sentimentalised picture of himself and the world around him and the second half of the poem reverses the trend of the first half to give a truer picture of 'Home'. The thrush that sings is more real than 'the birds' and even the sense of this being its last song is put into doubt, or 'last but one', and the song is then taken up by other individual birds. The last verse brings us firmly into the particularised real world with the description of a 'dark white cottage front' and the 'sound of sawing'. The poisonous dream has been rejected in favour of the everyday moments of which Thomas took such note. The Berg Notebook entry for April 12th 1915 runs:

> Evening of misty stillness after drizzly day – last thrushes on oaks – then man goes by dark white cottage front to thatched wood lodge and presently began sawing and birds were all still.

It is the firm eye of the naturalist that brings the vague seduction of the dissolution of personality into sharp focus for us to recognise the power of the present.

As the team's head brass

> As the team's head brass flashed out on the turn
> The lovers disappeared into the wood.
> I sat among the boughs of the fallen elm
> That strewed an angle of the fallow, and
> Watched the plough narrowing a yellow square
> Of charlock. Every time the horses turned
> Instead of treading me down, the ploughman leaned
> Upon the handles to say or ask a word,
> About the weather, next about the war.
> Scraping the share he faced towards the wood,
> And screwed along the furrow until the brass flashed
> Once more.

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The blizzard felled the elm whose crest
I sat in, by a woodpecker's round hole,
The ploughman said. 'When will they take it away?'
'When the war's over.' So the talk began –
One minute and an interval of ten,
A minute more and the same interval.
'Have you been out?' 'No.' 'And don't want to, perhaps?'
'If I could only come back again, I should.
I could spare an arm. I shouldn't want to lose
A leg. If I should lose my head, why, so,
I should want nothing more . . . Have many gone
From here?' 'Yes' 'Many lost?' 'Yes, a good few.
Only two teams work on the farm this year.
One of my mates is dead. The second day
In France they killed him. It was back in March,
The very night of the blizzard, too. Now if
He had stayed here we should have moved the tree.'
'And I should not have sat here. Everything
Would have been different. For it would have been
Another world.' 'Ay, and a better, though
If we could see all all might seem good.' Then
The lovers came out of the wood again:
The horses started and for the last time
I watched the clods crumble and topple over
After the ploughshare and the stumbling team.

(May 1916)

The mixture of a leisurely pace and a firmly perceived scene allows this poem, written at the time when Thomas was contemplating volunteering for active service in France, to register the effect of war upon those at home. There is a haunting quality of permanence here which makes this poem a fine counterpart to Thomas Hardy's 'In Time of "The Breaking of Nations"', written in 1915, and one is aware of a sense that

. . . this will go onward the same
Though Dynasties pass.

Thomas's poem has a clear structured movement which both opens and closes with an image of the horse-drawn plough and the 'narrowing' of 'a yellow square / Of charlock' which is completed by the end. Within this framework there are two lovers who 'disappeared into the wood' at the beginning only to re-emerge at the end and, as the centre a conversation between the poet and the ploughman. Even this conversation is introduced by the first statements about the elm being blown down in a blizzard being reported speech allowing us, as when the stage curtains have been drawn back, to then concentrate upon the protagonists who deliver their conversation. The conversation is slow and punctuated:

'When will they take it away?'
'When the war's over.' So the talk began –
One minute and an interval of ten,
A minute more and the same interval.

It reinforces the steady rhythm of the ploughing and has an unhurried purposefulness behind it. The ploughman's question as to whether Thomas has 'been out' is possibly prompted by the poet's being in uniform while the words 'being out' have an ominous sense to them which makes the war feel far from this rural scene. However, any suggestion of pastoral

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incomprehension of the European world of 1915 is swiftly disposed of by the ironic, even mordant, replies made by the poet:

> I could spare an arm. I shouldn't want to lose
> A leg. If I should lose my head, why, so,
> I should want nothing more . .

The whole poem is a moment in time which, had it not been for the war, would never have occurred. After all if the ploughman's mate had not been killed on his second day out in France then the fallen elm would have been moved and 'I should not have sat here'. The abrupt emphasis on the speed and implied determination with which the 'mate' was killed has a bareness to it which finds focus within the yearly cycle of farm existence. It is this awareness of permanence despite narrowing prospects that gives the poem its dignity and quiet positiveness:

> Then
> The lovers came out of the wood again:
> The horses started and for the last time
> I watched the clods crumble and topple over
> After the ploughshare and the stumbling team.

Whereas some critics have commented upon the last image drawing directly upon those of battle, trench warfare even, what one is also aware of is the decisive and functional quality of work on a farm. The charlock had to be ploughed up to free the ground for other crops and although there is an emphasis upon an ending there is also the present participle, 'stumbling', which takes us forward with a sense of qualified hope.

When First

> When first I came here I had hope,
> Hope for I knew not what. Fast beat
> My heart at sight of the tall slope
> Of grass and yews, as if my feet
>
> Only by scaling its steps of chalk
> Would see something no other hill
> Ever disclosed. And now I walk
> Down it the last time. Never will
>
> My heart beat so again at sight
> Of any hill although as fair
> And loftier. For infinite
> The change, late unperceived, this year,
>
> The twelfth, suddenly, shows me plain.
> Hope now, – not health, nor cheerfulness,
> Since they can come and go again,
> As often one brief hour witnesses, –
>
> Just hope has gone for ever. Perhaps
> I may love other hills yet more
> Than this: the future and the maps
> Hide something I was waiting for.

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One thing I know, that love with chance
And use and time and necessity
Will grow, and louder the heart's dance
At parting than at meeting be.

(July 1916)

The Hangers above Steep, near Petersfield, in Hampshire are still there to be visited as they were in Thomas's time when he had a study at the top of the hill at Wick Green and they still present the most astonishing panoramic view. Typically Thomas merges the accurately perceived description of 'the tall slope / Of grass and yews' with a metaphorical sense of the hill's importance to him in turns of another beginning, another new perspective on what is after all 'on the edge of vision'. The anticipatory manner in which the first verse moves into the second to rest with the half-line 'Ever disclosed' emphasises the 'hope' which the poet felt invested in this scene. Indeed the care the movement displays highlights the nature of loss by emphasising the direct brevity of the following line and a half:

And now I walk
Down it the last time.

The care that Thomas spends upon giving his reader a qualified reality, a refusal to rest with the obvious, is finely conveyed between lines 11 and 17 with their commas, hesitations and parentheses suggesting someone who is determinedly concerned with explaining how he feels about the loss of this hill which he never expects to see again. The tone of finality is caught in the mixture of tenses:

. . . the future and the maps
Hide something I was waiting for.

The loss is there as the maps remain for the future but the object of the journey seems placed in the past. Yet again this mood is shifted to one of openness as he recognises that 'love', such as the one felt for this hill of such prospect, may 'grow' given 'chance / And use and time and necessity'. The ending is still out of sight and must not be judged by the beginning: 'the heart's dance' of loss is a reflection upon an accumulation of experience and is more powerful than 'meeting', the outcome of which still lies hidden in the maps.

FURTHER READING

Two pieces of Edward Thomas's prose worth looking at in relation to his poetry are *A Pilgrim and Other Tales* (Everyman's Library, 1991) and *In Pursuit of Spring* (Wildwood House, 1981).

CRITICISM

R. George Thomas, *Edward Thomas, A Portrait* (OUP, 1985)

William Cooke, *Edward Thomas, A Critical Biography* (Faber, 1970)

John Moore, *The Life and Letters of Edward Thomas* (Alan Sutton, 1983)

Edna Longley, *Poetry in the Wars* (Bloodaxe, 1986)

Alun Lewis, *Selected Poems* (Unwin, 1987)

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