

Edward Thomas's Roads from Arras

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Edited by

Andrew McKeown and Adrian Grafe

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* * *

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INTRODUCTION

ANDREW MCKEOWN AND ADRIAN GRAFE

“Yes. I remember Adlestrop—”¹ Would it be fair to say Edward Thomas’s place in the public mind is something like the opening line of his famous—though far from most typical—poem? Is he known beyond “Adlestrop”? Possibly not much. On the other hand he has enjoyed great esteem among poets: from Larkin to Walcott to Hughes, he is an “exemplar”, a “visionary”, even a “father”.² But the gap between Thomas and the public is beginning to narrow. Partly thanks to the work of scholars such as Edna Longley who have got the poems back into print in reliable and annotated editions. But partly also, in true Thomas style, to historical chance: the commemoration of all things World War One has put Thomas back on the bookshelves, where this rather untypical war poet now sits happily alongside Brooke and Owen and Sassoon in Waterstones’ shops. Soon, it is to be hoped, the public will be remembering more than “Adlestrop”. The essays in this volume humbly wish to help that cause.

One explanation for Thomas’s uncertain public appeal may be the enigmatic quality, the elusiveness that characterises his poetry. Nobody has captured that elusiveness better than Elizabeth Jennings in “For Edward Thomas”.³ Whether in the sites and seasons of nature, or in the poet’s words themselves, the speaker claims she has “looked about for” the poet but “not found [him] yet”. Jennings’s speaker seems to “hunt” the poet as much as he haunts and hunts his “Other” (or vice versa). Jennings

¹ Edward Thomas, “Adlestrop”: *The Annotated Collected Poems*, Edna Longley (ed.), (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2008), 126. Hereafter abbreviated to: *Longley*.

² Philip Larkin, *Required Writing* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), 86; “the eternal dewiness of Edward Thomas’s vision”, Derek Walcott, *What the Twilight Says: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1998), 178; Ted Hughes, speech given at the unveiling of the War Poets’ Memorial in Westminster Abbey, 11 November 1985.

³ Elizabeth Jennings, *Collected Poems 1953-1985* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1987), 162-163 (1986).

relates in epiphanic mode that she “suddenly” realizes that the poet’s “art”—her word—lies in his very “reticence”, in the fact that, in his time on earth, over the thousands of British miles he covered on foot, he never left a “print or trace”. And yet, the poems are there, just as, after the passage of Hughes’s “Thought-Fox”, “the page is printed”.⁴

So perhaps the reason for Thomas’s debatable public reception is precisely his love of uncertainty itself. Thomas, argues Andrew McKeown in the opening essay, is a master of infinitely qualified statements and is most himself when questioning himself, his place in time and space and his relationships with others. His negative, dissatisfied accounts of love and family connections are at the centre of a poetic outlook whose standpoints are never confirmed or settled. The same sense of contingency lies behind the endings to his poems, some of which are so enigmatic as to send us back to the start to retrace our steps, while others pivot on strange, even jarring grammatical constructions, while still others, like the “avenue” in “Old Man”, open out onto sightless vistas without signs: “dark, nameless, without end”.⁵

From this starting point, the essay by Ralph Pite explores in depth the context and meaning behind Edward Thomas’s fretful efforts to join the British Army in the years leading up to his enlistment in 1915. That experience marked the end of his time as a family man and hack literary reviewer and saw him emerge as a soldier and poet, though both new roles were very short-lived. Pite’s discussion throws fresh light on Robert Frost’s part in Thomas’s joining up and enables us to see how Thomas’s poems addressed the nature of war at the same time as they addressed nature. If one returns momentarily to Elizabeth Jennings’s fine poetic tribute to Thomas—her poem was included in her *Consequently I Rejoice* collection dating from 1977, a time when relatively few major writers were paying much attention to Thomas, and when they were it was not for the stamp of war on his poetry—it would be impossible to tell from reading her lines that Thomas had been anything other than a nature poet, albeit with a “dark” side (the word is Jennings’s).

Thomas’s relationships with his contemporaries are a rich source of information to further our grasp of the poet. William Wootten examines how Walter de la Mare responded to Thomas’s poems, and analyses the several pieces written in homage, direct or otherwise, to Thomas. The tributes, though admiring and heartfelt, also bear the stamp of a certain

⁴ Ted Hughes, *Poetry in the Making* (London, Boston: Faber and Faber, 1967), 19.

⁵ Longley, 37.

ambivalence centred on de la Mare's belief that Thomas was morbidly inclined. This, argues Wootten, lies behind Thomas's love of Keats. True, writers echo each other across the centuries, but also across much closer spans, as with de la Mare's loving, nostalgic "coo-ee", the closing words of his 1922 poem "Longlegs", dedicated to Edward Thomas.

Jack Thacker's essay discusses the importance of the soil in Thomas's work. The plough has always been a symbolic, metalinguistic presence within poetry: one thinks at once of Hopkins's plough in "The Windhover", the repeated cutting into the earth of which makes it shine. When asked why he joined up, the poet famously replied, while crumbling a pinch of soil between his fingers, "Literally for this."⁶ Thomas's relationship with the earth was of course not only that of the naturalist. As a soldier in World War One he was also firmly rooted in the fields (of Flanders), its mud and earthworks. The motif of the furrow is also then, Thacker believes, an echo of the trenches. The heirs to Thomas's poems about the land (Heaney and Muldoon) both revisit this duality of earth and conflict.

A feature of Thomas's poems which readers might readily describe as one his signatures is the presence of birds. Emilie Loriaux offers an account of the place of birds in Thomas's poetry and draws contrasts and parallels with Thomas Hardy's birds—an apt comparison for many reasons, not least the artistic commitment to a certain kind of poetic melancholy, consolidated by the fact that Thomas knew, reviewed and valued the older man's poetry. A certain reciprocity is potentially envisageable, and Hardy, in fact, also knew Thomas's work, as Ralph Pite suggests in his biography of Hardy.⁷ Exploring the pastoral genre Loriaux asks how far Thomas is the pastoralist, how far his avian poems chime with Hardy's romantic nostalgia or look forward to a darker modernist sensibility, where symbols are broken, rather than regretted. Both Hardy and Thomas were, moreover, especially fond of Keats: Thomas's critical work on Keats⁸ alone proves it, while Hardy's love of Keats has on the whole been given less attention but was every bit as strong.⁹

⁶ Eleanor Farjeon, *Edward Thomas: The Last Four Years* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), 154.

⁷ Cf. on this question: Ralph Pite, *Thomas Hardy: The Guarded Life* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 495 n. 15 (2006).

⁸ Cf. Edward Thomas, *Keats* (Cheltenham : Cyder Press, 1999): facsimile edition of Thomas's 1916 study of Keats.

⁹ As Robert Gittings, exemplary biographer of both Keats and Hardy, makes clear in *The Older Hardy* (London : Penguin), 1980 (1978).

It is perhaps surprising to learn that Edward Thomas has been fully translated into Spanish, and not once but twice. In French, for example, only a handful of his poems have been translated.¹⁰ Mario Murgia from the National University of Mexico discusses the two recent renderings of Thomas into Castillian Spanish and assesses their readability and reliability against the original texts. Murgia offers a third, alternative rendering of Thomas's "Sorrow of True Love". His Hispano-American version opens up another new avenue for Thomas which the present editors hope will be further explored.

Thomas's poems have found devoted readers not only in South America, but also in the Caribbean. Through Derek Walcott's sonnet in homage to Thomas, Helen Goethals teases out the notions of place which Walcott derives from Thomas. Superficially, the two poets diverge. Walcott the West Indian with a post-colonial outlook; Thomas the Rambler on the south downs, signing up to fight an Imperialist war. Yet, Goethals argues, Walcott finds in Thomas an attachment to England as a place and an idea that he can share, thorough the "line" of language, that other intersection where individuals meet and form common spaces.

Edward Thomas once said "The past is the only dead thing that smells sweet."¹¹ Ian Brinton examines how Thomas's poems are drawn to the past, especially through lost places or ghostly hauntings. The texts written about his own failed suicide attempts, are part, Brinton maintains, of the poet's obsessive desire to be somewhere where being—and its attendant complications—cannot be. The self-negating urge, Brinton concludes, is however always offset by the particularities of the observed world, that other obsession of the poet: to note down and record and preserve.

"And willows, willow-herb, and grass, / And meadowsweet, and haycocks dry (...)"¹² Thomas's gift to record the world around him belies a deeper recording of experiences from other places and times. This, argues Adrian Grafe, is what gives Thomas's celebrated "Adlestrop" its uncanny resonance in the reader's mind. For this poem contains within it a reminiscence of love and the eating of food that was the acting out of desire when, many years ago, he met and fell in love with a girl called

¹⁰ *Anthologie bilingue de la poésie anglaise*, Bernard Brugière (pref.), Paul Bensimon, Bernard Brugière, François Piquet and Michel Rémy (eds) (Paris : nrf/Gallimard, 2005), 1154-1160, offers French translations of five of Thomas's poems.

¹¹ "Early One Morning": *Longley*, 126.

¹² "Adlestrop": *Longley*, 51.

Florence. "All poetry is in a sense love poetry", Thomas claimed.¹³ Grafe's account of the parallels between autobiographical memories and "Adlestrop" gives us a brand new reading of a poem we thought we knew.

"There is a conversation taking place", writes Deryn Rees-Jones in her poem "And You, Helen".¹⁴ The penultimate chapter in this volume is written in the form of a conversation between the poet Deryn Rees-Jones and the artist Charlotte Hodes. In it they discuss working together on the project *And You, Helen*, published by Seren Books in 2014. In that book Rees-Jones and Hodes offer words and images as an approach to the life of Helen Thomas, Edward's widow, and through her, the lives of others, left behind by the destruction of war. A film was also made of Helen's experiences. In their conversation they discuss grief and how Helen, not only as his wife and the mother of his children, but as a writer fits into the other story of her husband's poetry. The conversation is illustrated with eight original ink and wash drawings by Charlotte Hodes.

Jean Moorcroft Wilson brings this volume to a close. Drawing on her recently published biography of Thomas, "From Adlestrop to Arras",¹⁵ Wilson focuses on the debate which may well explain why it has proved hard for Thomas to find his proper ground: is he or isn't he a war poet? Taking her cue from Larkin, Wilson argues that of course he is, for he is a poet who "reacts against having war thrust upon him."¹⁶ Wilson ends with a recently discovered poem by Robert Frost: "War Thoughts from Home". In this poem Frost describes an isolated house in the woods surrounded by disused sheds and an abandoned railway carriage. The scene, argues Wilson, is not unlike Thomas's own derelict homes, let out to wind and rain and fallen leaves, imbued with sly overtones, in the manner of his finest displaced war poetry.

Perhaps Thomas's deepest affection of all lay with roads, ubiquitous in both his poetry and his prose. In the Dedication to his 1916 work *The Icknield Way*, Thomas writes: "I know there is nothing beyond the farthest of far ridges except a signpost to unknown places."¹⁷ So it makes perfect sense for us the editors of this volume to give it the title "Roads from

¹³ Edward Thomas, *Feminine Influence on the Poets* (New York: John Lane Company, 1911), 87.

¹⁴ Deryn Rees-Jones, *What It's Like To Be Alive: Selected Poems* (Bridgend: Seren, 2016), 174.

¹⁵ Jean Moorcroft Wilson, *Edward Thomas: From Adlestrop to Arras* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

¹⁶ Philip Larkin, *Ibid.*, 159.

¹⁷ Edward Thomas, *The Icknield Way* (London: Constable & Company, 1916), vi.

Arras”, in the hope that these pieces will offer signposts to hitherto “unknown places”. Elizabeth Jennings has, she wrote in the poem signaled above, looked for Thomas “mostly in woods or down quiet roads”. But the roads Thomas travelled were not always as “quiet” as the ones on which Jennings unsuccessfully sought him. It is only fitting that the last words of this Introduction should be those of Deryn Rees-Jones who, in “And You, Helen”, conflates the English landscape of Thomas’s poems with his experience in France of landscape, war and roads, and especially Helen’s, his widow’s, country walking without the poet:¹⁸

The oak tree knows the field.
She walks now, in its shadow. Nettles, meadowgrass.
All, now, that has travelled between them:
sweat, semen, blood, milk, tears.

¹⁸ Rees-Jones, *op. cit.*, 180.

CHAPTER ONE

EDWARD THOMAS: STANDPOINTS

ANDREW MCKEOWN

Philip Larkin—who cited Edward Thomas as one of his poetic exemplars¹—once said “I have never found / The place where I could say / *This is my proper ground* (...).”² Thomas could have made the same admission. What follows is an account of where he is or isn’t to be found in his poems—his standpoints.

This is a significant issue in two types of poem: first, those of place and time and second, those of relationships with others, where Thomas identifies his human connections only to find himself disconnected—the lover, the son, the father who is somehow always someone somewhere else. This will lead on to a discussion of how Thomas finishes his poems where we will see if his often elaborate, syncopated codas resolve the problems of being somewhere or whether they pursue his love of ungroundedness.

Let us begin with an early poem, “November”. The month of November, says the speaker, is a month of mud, but clear skies also, the skies all the clearer in comparison with the “dirty earth” of autumn below. In the poem Thomas affirms there are those who prefer clear skies, but identifies himself (obliquely as “another”) as a lover of muddy November ground:

Another loves earth and November more dearly
Because without them, he sees clearly,
The sky would be nothing more to his eye

¹ Philip Larkin, *Required Writing* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), 86.

² *Philip Larkin Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 99.

Than he, in any case, is to the sky;
 He loves even the mud whose dyes
 Renounce all brightness to the skies.³

Sky and earth confirm each other's existence in what is, for a moment, a reciprocal harmony. But just for a moment. Thomas's place in this scheme of things, says the poem, is in the last analysis gratuitous: he "in any case" is "nothing" to the sky. From reassuring relatedness we slip into a less familiar place, where affections, such as the poet's love of autumn, are also renunciations.

This pattern is a recurring one: as with place, so with time. Consider "The Bridge". In this short, unsettling lyric Thomas ponders how future and past converge. Using the image of a bridge he imagines how time passes under its arches, time yet to be flowing into time that was. The third and final stanza of the poem adds a jarring twist to what others might have seen as continuity. Resting at the end of his day's walk, Thomas records the lights and shades of nightfall, and remarks:

No traveller has rest more blest
 Than this moment brief between
 Two lives, when the Night's first lights
 And shades hide what has never been,
 Things goodlier, lovelier, dearer, than will be or have been.⁴

If the present is a "blest" moment, time itself seems to be an illusion of perception, past and future are times that have "never been". Against the flux there is only the traveller, a bridge built of moving parts.

A poem which recasts the problems of occupying time and place with a lighter, idiosyncratic touch is "No One Cares Less Than I". At first sight "No-one cares" is hardly about time and place at all. Or, if it is, it is about a place where there is no time, or a time where there is no place, for it is a poem where Thomas the soldier wonders where he will be when he is dead: "Whether I am destined to lie / Under a foreign clod". The curious thing here is that Thomas reconfigures this speculation as a conversation he had with a bugle calling reveille in barracks, only to conclude that the conversation was of course in vain, as only the bugles "know" what they

³ Edward Thomas, *The Annotated Collected Poems*, ed. Edna Longley (Tarsnet: Bloodaxe, 2008), 34.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 66.

said in their call, just as they care not what the speaker barked back in reply on hearing them:

But laughing, storming, scorning,
 Only the bugles know
 What the bugles say in the morning,
 And they do not care, when they blow
 The call that I heard and made words to early this morning.⁵

Strange reciprocity of ignorance between man and bugle! And what a queerly original way of taking himself out of the here and now. In some ways “No-one cares” is a negative companion piece to Brooke’s “The Soldier”, Thomas’s black humour and metaphysical emptiness echoing back on Brooke’s dulcet, rhetorical patriotism, as Edna Longley has noted.⁶ Whatever it is, it is not a poem pro patria, its time and place are cosmic indifference and the inadequacy of expression. That, and its antidote: a measure of wit.

Drawing these threads together, what stands out is that Thomas likes to see things in contradictory terms: here and there, now and then, voice and counter voice. But there is little sense of getting beyond the contradictions to somewhere new. Rather, something wilfully deadlocked ensues in the writing, where opposites rebound on themselves, almost as if the voice were saying: “You see, nothing.”

This becomes all the clearer in the poems dealing with human relationships. In “No one so much as you”, addressed to the poet’s father, Thomas describes the deep bond that links father and son, but goes on to ask if this connection is really love:

For I at most accept
 Your love, regretting
 That is all: I have kept
 Only a fretting

That I could not return
 All that you gave
 And could not ever burn
 With the love you have,

Till sometimes it did seem

⁵ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 299-300.

Better it were
 Never to see you more
 Than linger here

With only gratitude
 Instead of love—
 A pine in solitude
 Cradling a dove.⁷

The fact that this poem has been taken to refer to his feelings for his wife Helen alerts us to the fact that Thomas's position in the poem is hardly unequivocal.⁸ The grounds for misunderstanding are very real. The emotional connection described in "No one so much as you" is apt to make us think of a lover, not a father:

(...) I could not return
 All that you gave
 And could never burn
 With the love you have (...).⁹

This is the poem's first level of uncertainty: who is the addressee? But more than that the poem is also about being in a relationship of unequal emotions, where the speaker feels sympathy, generosity and tenderness, but not love:

My eyes scarce dare meet you
 Lest they should prove
 I but respond to you
 And do not love.¹⁰

We might be tempted to say there is no ambiguity here: the speaker simply does not feel what the other feels. Perhaps, but the point of the poem is subtler, I think, than that. "A pine in solitude / Cradling a dove" is how the poem ends, an image which states the connection between the two while affirming a separation, a solitude in love: one of those untenable but very real standpoints which appear to be Thomas's proper ground.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁸ Cf. Larkin, *Required Writing*, 189.

⁹ Longley, 111.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 111.

Thomas is master of the paradoxical emotional scenario. Take the poem addressed directly to his wife: “And you, Helen”. This poem is part of a series written to his family, around the theme of giving. The “Helen” poem is last in the series, which goes some way to explain the rather off-hand expression adopted in the title. But that off-handedness sets the tone for a poem which is not so much about giving (love etc) as it is about *not* giving or not having the *gift* of giving. The poet would give “so many things” if he had them to give, would return what Helen has lost in the course of their relationship or given to him, would, in a word, give her back her own self. To crown—and further confuse—the backward giving, Thomas would give himself, if only he knew where he were, and if that person were fit for a gift:

(...) If I could choose
 Freely in that great treasure-house
 Anything from any shelf,
 I would give you back yourself,
 And power to discriminate
 What you want and want it not too late,
 Many fair days free from care
 And heart to enjoy both foul and fair,
 And myself, too, if I could find
 Where it lay hidden and it proved kind.¹¹

What fantastic reverse psychology of emotional attachment! As a statement about where he stands in relation to her, or where she stands in his emotions, it is indeed paradoxical, and resonates differently from his other “giving” poems to his children which are lighter-hearted, and read as wills he might make before going off to war.¹² The difference is that with “And you, Helen” Thomas cannot find the proper ground on which a relationship would work: he would need to locate himself to do so, and this, says the poem, eludes his grasp.

One explanation for this elusiveness could be that lovers (and their love) exist in time. Written in May 1916, just a month after the “Helen” poem, “It Rains” depicts a speaker walking in the rain, recalling former lovers kissing in a rain-soaked orchard. This memory returns to him

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹² In order of composition, these poems are: “If I should ever by chance” (to his elder daughter Bronwen); “If I were to own” (to his son Merfyn); and “What shall I give” (to his younger daughter Myfanwy). Longley, 115-16.

through the presence of a parsley flower, which becomes a metaphoric figure of the past revisiting the present, says the speaker:

When I turn away, on its fine stalk
 Twilight has fined to naught, the parsley flower
 Figures, suspended still and ghostly white,
 The past hovering as it revisits the light.¹³

In one sense, the poem can be read as a farewell to love in the manner of Thomas Hardy, as Edna Longley suggests in her annotations.¹⁴ Equally, however, we also feel that Thomas is exploring (or cultivating) his penchant for emotional awkwardness. The linguistic oddity of the title, “It Rains”, a verb form that is sayable but almost never said, mirrors the speaker’s position in relation to love: love happens, but is something or *somewhere* the speaker visits only through memory, that is, the absence that is the past, those absences which fall like rain in the negative forms the poem delights in enumerating: “nothing”, “none”, “never”, “naught”.

Allow me to bring these observations on relationships to a close with a question: Edward Thomas, where do you stand? Clearly, relationships matter, but the labyrinthine routes he takes to other people make for unsatisfying situations. The negativity which seems to be his favoured point of vantage equally suggests dissatisfaction. But these are chosen grounds, or, at least, they are genuinely avowed. Do we ever get beyond the paradox?

To answer this, we need to consider the ends of Thomas’s poems. If we were to try to define “end”, we could say it only actually happens once the final full stop has been passed, or, looked at another way, we could trace it back right to the beginning. Either way, if we unpick the idea of an ending, the thing itself easily becomes unmanageable and unravels into meaningless shreds. Let’s take the thing intuitively for now and leave anxious conceptualising to one side for the moment. Consider “In Memoriam (Easter, 1915)” one of the four single quatrain poems written by Thomas:

The flowers left thick at nightfall in the wood
 This Eastertide call into mind the men,
 Now far from home, who, with their sweethearts, should

¹³ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹⁴ Longley believes “It Rains” has parallels with Hardy’s “At Castle Boterel”. Longley, 294.

Have gathered them and will do never again.¹⁵

The overriding impression is one of subtle but incontrovertible control and release: syntax and metre combine uneasily (“eastertide” displaced to line 2) to form a single utterance which unfolds and withholds simultaneously (hear the multiple adverbial postponements), to pivot finally on the word “again”. This sends us back to re-read the poem, to grasp how its parts have come together in such a short space—saying so much about loss of life through symbols which bear witness to absence (the flowers) while also marking a commemoration. For a poem about the dead, it is remarkably alive.¹⁶

The end of the text is something that never quite happens. True, there is blunt acknowledgement that some soldiers will never pick flowers with sweethearts again. That “never again” is unquestionable. There is also of course the final full stop. But it is just as true that the balancing act of sentence and scansion is so delicately wrought that another impression, very different from finite irreversibility, comes into play: that of something suspended and unresolved, something that must go back and look again, as the end word tells us.

“Thaw”, written in March 1916, almost a year after “In Memoriam (Easter, 1915)”, offers an equally agile balancing act:

Over the land freckled with snow half-thawed
 The speculating rooks at their nests cawed
 And saw from elm-tops, delicate as flower of grass,
 What we below could not see, Winter pass.¹⁷

We notice how adverbial clauses (“over the land”, “at their nests”, “from elm-tops”) delay the declaration of what is after all a simple sentence: the rooks saw winter pass. We also note how singularly the quatrain ends: “Winter pass.” When we connect it back to its syntactical premise (“the rooks saw”) it does of course make sense, but on its own at the end it is estranging, to the ear ungrammatical. As with “In Memoriam”, the sense is to be had by going back over the ground we thought we had covered. Our linear eye and ear must re-set to embrace the

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹⁶ See also Matthew Hollis’s analysis of this poem’s awkward fluidity: Matthew Hollis, *Now All Roads Lead to France* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), 221.

¹⁷ Longley, 114.

utterance anew, repeatedly so, as if what was being said needed to be said again. Like the rooks, the reader is constantly “speculating”.

It is no doubt true that the act of reading is never strictly linear, that the relations between words are established as an ongoing process of checking back and thinking forward. But Thomas puts this process at the heart of his poetry, we might even say it becomes his poetic message. While Edward Thomas and Marshall McLuhan are an unlikely pairing, perhaps, McLuhan’s famous idea—the medium is the message—fits neatly with Thomas’s poems. Especially so with “Thaw”, whose apparent content—the question of perception and the limits to the human point of view—is acted out in the form of the poem itself where the voice is stretched over syntax it struggles to embrace, and stumbles into a conclusion which calls out to be grasped by checking back, over and again.¹⁸

So, to recall my question from the introduction, do the endings to Thomas’s poems redress the sense of ungroundedness felt elsewhere in his poems about time and space and human relations? Or do they add to unfixity? The answer to both these questions is yes. Let me bring in a longer piece to see how Thomas’s endings can be all things to all men. We remember how in “November” the speaking voice established a reciprocity between ground and sky, but found himself, in spite of his affinities with earth, superfluous to this ecological marriage of the spheres. In “The clouds that are so light”, this isolation is corrected insofar as Thomas, the speaker and writer, is the recording voice of natural phenomena, here shadows cast by clouds. “Away from your shadow on me / Your beauty less would be”, says the poet, concluding with the assertion in stanza four that this humble “dark spot”—himself and, by association, the marks he makes—is the record which gives beauty life:

And if it still be treasured

¹⁸ Thomas was interested in the idea of “thought moments”, a term he picked up while reviewing Mark Liddell’s *Introduction to the Scientific Study of English*. Liddell believed that poetry was more a matter of *capturing* the folding and unfolding of thought and feeling rather than squeezing it into rhyme and metre. In his review of Liddell’s book Thomas noted: “He speaks of ‘thought moments’ instead of phrases [...]. It is not a new system of prosody, though it makes the old one ridiculous. It affords no basis for a classification of metres; it leaves blank verse, as before, an infinitely varied line usually of ten syllables”. The implication here is that Thomas sees voice and verse as conflictual entities, the one struggling to accommodate and simultaneously unseat the other. Andrew Motion, *The Poetry of Edward Thomas* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1991), 61.

An age hence, it shall be measured
 By this small dark spot
 Without which it were not.¹⁹

Thomas's anthropocentric point of view, Renaissance in flavour, brings to his writing a sense of connectedness which elsewhere we have found lacking. But the old-fashionedness of the message is challenged by the modernity of the container it comes in: from its numerous negatives ("unilluminated", "less", "without", "not") to its awkward rhymes ("without earth"/"less worth", or "dark spot"/"were not"). True, I am taking these out of context, but it would surely be an act of deafness to miss the jarring, negative mode of expression at work. If we also take into account the semantic darkness of "shadows" (not to mention the echoes of Lady Macbeth in "dark spot") it is hard indeed to find here an unambiguously positive celebration of writing's ability to conjure the world into being. The point is that Thomas is able to state and unstate a standpoint, in this case the experience of beauty and human ability to render it in words along with a sense of finite limitations and human frailty.

So the question rightly put is not "Edward Thomas, where do you stand?" but "Edward Thomas: why do you never take a stand"? How do we interpret his love of ambiguity? One way is to read his writing from a personal, or psychological perspective. This is what Robert Frost does in his teasing tribute to Thomas, "The Road Not Taken", which begins thus:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
 And sorry I could not travel both
 And be one traveler, long I stood
 And looked down one as far as I could
 To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
 And having perhaps the better claim,
 Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
 Though as for that the passing there
 Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
 In leaves no step had trodden black.²⁰

¹⁹ Longley, 106.

²⁰ *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, Edward Connery Lathem (ed.), (London: Vintage, 2001), 105.

The poem recounts the tale of someone hesitating between two roads, and imagining himself telling this story in later years with the claim that his choice of the less travelled path was life-defining.²¹ I will leave aside the joke in the poem about self-mythologising can-do individualism and concentrate instead on the other joke about someone who can't make up his mind. As Frost later made clear, this poem was in part a friendly dig at his walking buddy Edward Thomas: "a friend who had gone off to war, a person who, whichever road he went, would be sorry he didn't go the other. That person was Edward Thomas."²² According to Matthew Hollis, Thomas would suggest walks around the woods of Dymock to take in certain birds or flowers only for these walks to conclude on self-reproach when the chosen routes failed to turn up the wonders and delights Thomas had anticipated.²³ Frost's joke was no doubt meant playfully, though Thomas apparently took it to heart as criticism of his inability to commit to poetry, or his shilly-shallying about the idea of emigrating to America, or indeed his reluctance to commit to war and enlist as others were doing.²⁴ Even so, the idea that Thomas's poems are about dissatisfaction and hesitation between reassuring poles or binary patterns (poetry/prose, England/America) is a telling one. The very small sample I have offered makes plain his interest in negative expression, in negativity itself, we might say.

Of course we can approach Thomas from a biographical perspective and read into the negativity of his poems a Larkinesque "desire for oblivion"²⁵—the result perhaps of what Larkin saw as the domestic oppression and Grub Street servitude under which Thomas chafed, till he found poetry and war.²⁶ But the biographical angle always brings us back to the poems, and I think it makes sense to grasp the negativity other than through the writer's personal quandariness. In his study of the Belgian playwright Maurice Maeterlinck, Thomas offers the following nugget of wisdom: "Anything, however small, may make a poem."²⁷ We could take

²¹ David Orr, *The Road Not Taken: Finding America in the Poem Everyone Loves and Almost Everyone Gets Wrong* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2015) offers an engaging and entertaining account of how Frost's famous poem has come to be (mis)understood in the public mind.

²² Hollis 234.

²³ *Ibid.*, 235.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 236ff.

²⁵ "Wants", *Collected Poems*, 42.

²⁶ Cf. Larkin, *Required Writing*, 188-90.

²⁷ Longley, 290.

his dictum a stage further. Not things, but *nothings*, *absences*, *emptinesses* are what inspire Thomas to write. In our age of grinding positivity, the negative muse has fallen out of favour, but for Thomas things were different. As F. R. Leavis noted, Thomas's poems chimed with the "disintegration, the sense of directionlessness" of early 20th century Modernist sensibility.²⁸

"The best lack all conviction", said Yeats. "I would prefer not to", said Melville. We have seen how Thomas avoids commitment, avoids defining himself in relation to time and place, cultivating instead gaps compiled of negativity. That standpoint is artfully brought about, however, and raises the final paradox I would like to examine here. Let me bring in an excerpt from "Old Man", one of Thomas's earliest attempts at crossing over from prose to poetry:

Old Man, or Lad's-love,—in the name there's nothing
To one that knows not Lad's-love, or Old Man,
The hoar-green feathery herb, almost a tree,
Growing with rosemary and lavender.
Even to one that knows it well, the names
Half decorate, half perplex, the thing it is:
At least, what that is clings not to the names
In spite of time. And yet I like the names.²⁹

"Old Man" is a poem about a plant that Thomas remembers, even though he dislikes its scent, which grew around the door of his house. But more than this, it is a poem about how words insufficiently conjure the things they are the tokens of, or how things adhere but little to their words ("half decorate, half perplex"), or, again, how things and words bring each other into existence in ways that are full of other existences or non-existences ("cling not"). In short it is a poem about language as much as a poem about plants. And what prevails is of course the fact that Thomas likes language: "And yet I like the names."

This helps us to make greater sense of Thomas's love of ambiguity. We have seen how he draws back from commitment to fixed points of reference, be they human, spatial or temporal. And we have seen how the style of his writing enacts ambiguous standpoints, now jarring between the demands of syntax and metre, now poised serenely on rhymes and last

²⁸ F. R. Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, (1932) 1972), 37.

²⁹ Longley, 36.

words. In other words, Thomas's poems and their lack of fixed standpoints are about language, its clumsinesses and its grace: poems where things do and do not fall into place at one and the same time.

William Hazlitt, no doubt meaning to be witty (but being unwittingly meaningful), once remarked of Turner's paintings that they were "pictures of nothing, and very like".³⁰ I am tempted to say as much for Thomas's poems. Or, to put it differently, it is easy to mistake Edward Thomas, to see his poems about birds and trees and farmhouses and country figures as poems about birds and trees and farmhouses and country figures. Thomas himself fell foul of the countryman myth, as the following anecdote, recounted by Philip Larkin referring to what he called the "legend of the dweller in the country idyll", shows:

(...) a literary man (Walter de la Mare? Forrest Reid?) had an appointment in a London teashop with Edward Thomas, whom he did not know. On arrival he saw from the door the healthy, open-air Thomas sitting with an obvious and discontented-looking poet. Advancing to greet them, he discovered that the out-of-doors man was Ralph Hodgson: Edward Thomas was the other.³¹

Edward Thomas never was (and never is) quite what or where we expect him to be. Edward Thomas is always the other.

³⁰ Quoted in David Bromwich, ed. *Romantic Critical Essays* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), 253.

³¹ Larkin, *Required Writing*, 188.

CHAPTER TWO

EDWARD THOMAS'S POEMS ON ENLISTING: “AS IF THE BOW HAD FLOWN OFF WITH THE ARROW”

RALPH PITE

On July 13th 1915, Edward Thomas volunteered for the Army. He was 37 years old and married with three school-age children. There was little if any pressure on someone in his position to offer himself. A year later, Thomas took a further voluntary step and joined an artillery regiment, with the prospect of seeing active service at the front-line. Prior to this, he had been serving as an instructor, teaching recruits to read maps, use a compass and draw panoramas. It was valuable and valued work, for which he was well-qualified, as a nature-writer and a walker and cyclist who knew the English countryside intimately.

As he decided in June 1916 to leave the safe life of the training-camps behind, Thomas wrote “Early One Morning”, one of several of his poems adapting a folk-song—in this case the west country ballad “Rio Grande”, which he included in his anthology *The Pocket Book of Poems and Songs for the Open Air* (1907). The refrain of “Early One Morning” goes: “I’m bound away for ever, / Away somewhere, away for ever.” A few months later, in November, as he prepared to embark for France, Thomas wrote “Lights Out”: “at the borders of sleep”, he says, that “unfathomable / Deep forest [...] all must lose / Their way [...] They cannot choose”.¹ Thomas is “bound” and compelled. His freedom of choice is governed by external forces, and these are as mysterious and impenetrable as the forest which they require him to enter.

¹ Edward Thomas, *The Annotated Collected Poems*, edited Edna Longley (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2008), 126, 135. Except where noted, all quotations are from this edition, using the abbreviation *Longley*.

The clash between volunteering and being compelled—being acted upon and yet, at the same time, acting—is something Thomas’s poetry sought to address and come to terms with repeatedly. It was, furthermore, a significant area of disagreement between him and Robert Frost, his principal poetic interlocutor in 1915 and 1916. Their differences were crystallised and brought into the open by Frost’s “The Road Not Taken”, which Thomas rather objected to, commenting in June 1915:

It is all very well for you poets in a wood to say you choose, but you don’t.
If you do, ergo I am no poet. I didn’t choose my sex yet I was simpler then.
And so I can’t ‘leave off’ going in after myself tho some day I may.²

Likewise, enlisting in the Army, which he was about to do, could neither be avoided nor prevented. A voluntarist account of decision-making falsified Thomas’s situation and was, moreover, a self-idealisation on Frost’s part: “you don’t” choose, Thomas insists, any more than he did himself.

In “Words”, written between 26th and 28th June 1915, just a few weeks after this letter, Thomas asks, similarly, of the language:

Let me sometimes dance
With you,
Or climb
Or stand perchance
In ecstasy,
Fixed and free
In a rhyme,
As poets do.³

“Bound” and “away”, “Fixed and free”: both phrases join obedience to liberty. The 1915 poem, “Words”, celebrates an ideal union; 1916’s “Early One Morning” sings a song that is more melancholy, as it takes up the burden of compulsion. The theoretical perfection (epitomised by rhyme) is now an uncertain, mysterious point that lies beyond the horizon. Similarly, the step “away” from everyday restrictions (“I had burnt my letters and darned my socks”, Thomas says in “Early One Morning”) cannot be reversed; he is going away “for ever”, so he is not free to come back. He is

² Thomas to Frost, 13th June 1915, *Elected Friends: Robert Frost & Edward Thomas To One Another*, edited Matthew Spencer (New York: Handsel Books, 2003), 63-4.

³ Longley 93.

bound to being away. This difference between the two poems epitomises a shift in Thomas's feeling between early 1915 and summer 1916, one that took place as he thought through both of these momentous decisions—first to join up and later to seek active service. They indicate how carefully he both considered in advance the steps he took and reflected on them afterwards.

Robert Frost endorses this. After Thomas died in 1917, Frost praised him for remaining “completely himself”, “sure of his thought” and “sure of his word” throughout his Army life; in 1915, he had been struck by the remarkable way in which Thomas approached the question of joining up. He told him in a letter:

You have let me follow your thought in almost every twist and turn towards this conclusion. I know pretty well how far down you have gone and how far off sideways. And I think the better of you for it all. Only the very bravest could come to the sacrifice in this way.⁴

Frost was Thomas's most intimate friend and an outsider he could confide in. To him, Thomas's correspondence and their conversations were proof he had made himself sure of his word and thought. To his other, English friends, Thomas's enlisting was a more baffling choice, and one that he refused to explain. To his subsequent biographers, it has often seemed more questionable and a moot point whether the decision was either independent or conscious.

Matthew Hollis, for example, claims that Frost, albeit accidentally, “pushed [Thomas] to war”. When he read “The Road Not Taken” in May 1915, Thomas found, Hollis says, that “the one man who understood his indecisiveness the most astutely—in particular, towards the war—appeared to be mocking him for it.”⁵ William Cooke, writing in 1970, saw Thomas as inclined to join the Army from as early as August 1914, and

⁴ Frost to Helen Thomas, 27th April 1917, Frost to Thomas, 31st July 1915, *Elected Friends*, 86, 189.

⁵ Matthew Hollis, *Now All Roads Lead to France: The Last Years of Edward Thomas* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), 235. Thomas seems first to have read the poem, in an earlier version, in November/December 1914. Hollis relies on Lawrance Thompson's narrative. See Lawrance Thompson and R. H. Winnick, *Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph—1915-1938* (New York, Chicago, San Francisco: Holt, Rinehart and Wilson, 1970), 88, 544. And *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, edited Lawrance Thompson (New York, Chicago, San Francisco: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), pp. xiv-xv. *Elected Friends* 49 likewise follows Thompson's account.

was held back only by self-doubt. Thomas feared, Cooke says, that “his age, his bad ankle, and the general condition of his health were against him”.⁶ In the face of these implicitly neurotic accounts, Jean Moorcroft Wilson maintains that a straightforward principal of service was at work. Thomas had been considering a move to the United States, to be closer to Frost; but, she writes, “could not leave England while the war continued without making a contribution”.⁷ R. George Thomas resists similar criticisms by emphasising Thomas’s composure:

the decision to enlist emerged from a confident, mature man and not from a vacillating failure driven by despair to seek an easy way out of emotional, matrimonial, or financial difficulties.

R. George Thomas’s indignation leaks out here but is understandable. Rumours about Thomas’s supposed death-wish, his fear of cowardice and the unhappiness in his marriage have made him appear either compulsive or weak, at this life-changing moment. R. George Thomas’s admirable defence does not explain, nevertheless, Thomas’s motives.

A Pinch of Earth

What prompted him was not straightforward nor easily discerned, not even by him. His poetry does disclose, even so, some of the twists and turns of his thinking, particularly when it is read in conjunction with an iconic, biographical moment. Eleanor Farjeon recalled asking Thomas, on one occasion when they were out walking, “Do you know what you are fighting for?” By way of answer, he:

stopped, and picked up a pinch of earth. ‘Literally, for this.’ He crumbled it between finger and thumb, and let it fall.⁸

R. George Thomas is disparaging about this: Thomas’s “final decision”, he says, “was neither as melodramatic nor as simplistic as Eleanor Farjeon’s

⁶ William Cooke, *Edward Thomas: A Critical Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), 89.

⁷ Jean Moorcroft Wilson, *Edward Thomas: From Adlestrop to Arras: A Biography* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 333.

⁸ Eleanor Farjeon, *Edward Thomas: The Last Four Years*, revised edition, edited Anne Harvey (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1997), 154.