

TR 86-23

"Rest and Unrest": Some Rural and Romantic Themes in the Poetry  
of Edward Thomas

by

Charles J. Lagan

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts

Department of English

Rhodes University

Grahamstown

December 1985

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## PREFACE

The scope and focus of this thesis has been determined by the fact that I have tried to present a thematic, though not exhaustive, account of the poetry of Edward Thomas. (I have analysed a representative selection of the poems.) Much has been written on his life and poetry in this past decade to coincide with the centenary of his birth which was celebrated in 1978. Edna Longley, William Cooke and more recently, Andrew Motion have thrown much light on his poetry and I am indebted to them. I acknowledge especially the work of Edna Longley; her Edward Thomas: Poems and Last Poems, though it does not include all the poems, has proved to be an invaluable source because of the many extracts from Thomas's prose incorporated into her notes on his poems. Her book is also rich in suggestive insights into Thomas's poetry.

Unfortunately not all of Thomas's works are available in South Africa. On a brief visit overseas I tried without success to obtain the more important books not available here. I have had to make use of anthologies of Thomas's prose where a particular text was not available, for example, In Pursuit of Spring and The South Country. I thank Ms Yolisa Soul who through the Inter Library Loan services of the University of Fort Hare managed to obtain for me a substantial number of Thomas's prose works.

I wish to thank my supervisor, Professor Ruth Harnett, for the guidance she has given me, my colleagues at Fort Hare for their interest and encouragement, and my wife for providing me with many

opportunities to work on this thesis.

## Chapter One

## INTRODUCTION

Critics of Edward Thomas's poetry have tended to fall into two broad categories: those who see his poetry as a faithful record of a rural England that is no more, and those who see his poetry as the expression of a restless spirit engaged in a quest for fulfilment. Taken singly, I believe, neither view is sufficient. On the one hand, Thomas was no mere recorder of rural delights; his interests were much wider. By training he was a historian. Again, several of his books (indicated and discussed elsewhere in this thesis) show a keen interest in literary criticism. On the other hand, it is not a true reflection of the man to stress merely his quest for fulfilment, though there is ample proof of his melancholic and brooding spirit and his frequent discontent with the quality of his life and work. Clearly, the one aspect of Thomas must be offset by the other. We know from his writing the two selves that are Edward Thomas. His restless spirit must be balanced by the Thomas who could give an immediate and total response to the unique moment of apprehended beauty in nature. The many prose and poetry passages which record these moments show a man whose heartfelt responses were in no way restricted by his restlessness.

It is, therefore, the fusion of these two views of Thomas that I hope to offer in my thesis, drawing on some of his letters and prose works as well as his poetry. Thomas as lover of the rural scene, the intrepid walker of much of southern England, is also the quester in search of his own identity. Scenes in his topographical books often reappear transformed symbolically in his poems. Sometimes a poem may owe its success to the mere pruning of a prose

sketch. It is more likely to be true of his poems that he is describing an actual scene before him (or one reconstructed from his notes) than that he is dealing with a product of the imagination.

In a typical poem the accumulation of detail reinforces the realism of an empirical observation. Thomas's use of a language of direct statement reasserts the matter-of-factness of what he sees. This concreteness is seldom challenged by any level of abstraction or overt intention until the poem's closure, where the thought may often inform the descriptive passage with a new significance. It is this interplay of the merely descriptive (whose immediacy is never lost by the introduction of the symbolic) and the non-discursive elements in the poem (namely, the imagery, rhythm and intuition) that finally unites Thomas the rural writer with the romantic quester.

Thomas's poems, on the one hand, imply a surrendering to the physical world, and, on the other hand, the imposition of an active human consciousness upon it. I believe that there is some basis in the tradition of poetry for the distinctions I find in Thomas's poetry between a passive and an active stance toward experience. Laurence Binyon makes the distinction in poetry between the Mediterranean or Latin influence and the Northern influence. The Mediterranean influence places man at the centre of the universe and the world is seen through his eyes. This view is marked by a social, practical and unsentimental spirit, and finds its strength in its very limitations. In the words of Binyon: "It seeks to impose its own order on the wild and uncontrolled variety of nature".<sup>1</sup> This tradition ignores much that the Northern spirit celebrates. The main characteristics of the Northern tradition are: a love of solitude, a



The poem represents the dimension of mystery that, in the image of the unknown forest, "looms" above and over the scholar-poet; the images of the blackbird and "all the birds" that make music are perceived as equally mysterious and irrational. The force of the mystery is felt as a powerful presence which diminishes the poet's "books and things" and reduces his occupation to insignificance. But there is the task to be performed, the Christian disciplina of "writing well", and the sense of a spiritual rigour that the poet must bring to bear on his task in the face of his overwhelming emotion.

This poem seems to bring together, on the one hand, the elements of passivity and, on the other hand, the human spirit asserting its power in the face of the mysterious and irrational; perhaps also in the face of the abundance and immensity of the physical world.

Seamus Heaney goes on to speak of those "little jabs of delight in the elemental" which are communicated in early Irish nature poetry. These speak to me of an unmediated relationship to external nature such as is found in this small example of what Heaney calls the "surprised by joy" tradition:

The small bird  
let a chirp  
from its beak:  
I heard  
woodnotes whin-  
gold, sudden.  
The Lagan  
blackbird!<sup>6</sup>

This same experience is captured with equal simplicity in a much more conventional piece, "The Cuckoo Song", one of the most famous of the Spring Songs of the twelfth century:



Sing! cuccu, nu. Sing! cuccu.  
Sing! cuccu. Sing! cuccu, nu.

Sumer is icumen in--  
Lhude sing! cuccu.  
Groweth sed and bloweth med  
And springth the wude nu--  
Sing! cuccu.

Awe bleteth after lomb,  
Lhouth after calve cu,  
Bulluc sterteth, bucke verteth,  
Murie sing! cuccu.  
Cuccu, cuccu,  
Well singes thu, cuccu--  
Ne swik thu naver nu!<sup>7</sup>

Though one sees the added strength of a convention at work in the formal ordering of the poem's delights, and in the restraint of the finely registered emotion of the last two lines, so correctly subordinate to the actual delights of the poem, there is an intrinsic energy in the piling up of strident verbs which reveal a power deeper than the verbal statement. It is, I believe, a response to the elemental which breaks through the convention and yet is held, apparently, in check by it.

These two traditions which Binyon notes remain in English poetry as active and passive forces, often creating a tension in a single response to external nature. I shall be looking at Thomas's poetry with this backdrop in mind, showing how he uses the rural scene to dramatize his thoughts and feelings and yet surrendering to its intrinsic mystery.

#### Introductory Remarks

Rest and Unrest, part of the title of the thesis, is also the title of one of Thomas's early prose works which opens with a sketch called "The First of Spring". The story is concerned with the life



of a young unmarried woman. She is both sensitive and unfulfilled and may be taken as a type of Thomas himself. His life may be seen as patterns of rest and unrest, as illustrated by this extract:

Nothing could have been more intimately and exquisitely pleasant than the first moments as she sat down, if it had not been that something in her mind rebelled, was discontented, tremulous, unhappy, and that not on account of any thought left in it from the remote or immediate past, but only, as far as she knew, because along with the surrender to the deep, rich, calm flood of spring came again an aspiration as in former springs, a desire as deep as her nature, a strong but vague and wordless desire to be something other than she was doing or had ever done - an unsatisfied desire, a worship without a skilled priest, nay! without a god even.<sup>8</sup>

It is this "surrender" on the one hand, and the restlessness of a "wordless desire" on the other hand, that I see as characteristic of the poetry of Edward Thomas. These two aspects I deal with in Chapters One, Two and Three of the thesis. Chapter One, which looks at developments in Thomas's prose that anticipate the poetry, whilst also biographical in nature, stresses his rural interests as reflected in the prose.

Andrew Motion asserts that "Edward Thomas's poetry has been victimised by his life".<sup>9</sup> He goes on to explain that hardship denied Thomas the opportunity to write his poetry earlier, and that since his death in 1917 more has been written about his life than about his poems. While this is true, one must add that the particular circumstances of his life profoundly shaped the form and content that his poetry was to take. In this chapter I wish, firstly, to argue this point, and, secondly, to demonstrate that, though Thomas's poetry came in the rapid outpourings of his final two years, it was in fact present from the very beginning of his

literary career, declaring itself in many surrogate forms such as the essay and the loco-descriptive and reflective passages in his topographical prose. In this brief survey of his life I shall therefore deal with those general biographical details that show his love of nature and his lifelong participation both as a reader and a writer in what W.J. Keith in his book The Rural Tradition has called "the rural tradition".<sup>10</sup> I shall also examine a representative choice of Thomas's rural prose to show the promise of the poetry that was later to manifest itself.

i. Boyhood and Early Years

Edward Thomas was born in Lambeth, South London on 3rd March 1879. It was the late Victorian period, a time of extreme financial depression. Robert P. Eckert, Thomas's first biographer, notes that "the Russo-Turkish War was ending with a treaty that found little favour in England; and a financial panic was well started".<sup>11</sup> Edward, baptised Philip Edward "after his father and his maternal grandfather", was the eldest of six sons. Both in looks and temperament he was unlike his father. This may account to some extent for the mutual estrangement that lasted all their lives. His father, Welsh by birth, was a self-made man; he had trained first as a teacher but then became

a staff clerk for the light railways and tramways at the Board of Trade.... He was an ardent Liberal, a confirmed positivist, considered by his more conservative contemporaries something of a radical and a freethinker, a man somewhat self-centred and opinionated, more preoccupied than unfriendly, silent by habit rather than from conscious desire.<sup>12</sup>

These qualities made him somewhat aloof from his growing family with the result that he lost at a formative period that closer intimacy



Wakehurst Road near Wandsworth Common and it was there that his lifelong interest in the countryside began. In the first chapter of The Childhood of Edward Thomas he penetrated "the sweet darkness" which enfolded his life up to the age of four:

But out of dooors, somewhere at the verge of the dark years, I can recall more simply and completely than any spent indoors at that time one day above others. I lay in the tall grass and buttercups of a narrow field at the edge of London and saw the sky and nothing but the sky. There was someone near, probably a servant, necessary but utterly insignificant.<sup>14</sup>

The autobiography abounds in childhood memories such as this, which become significant later in some of his poems where he seeks the key to his personal past only to find, as he describes it in the poem "Old Man", "an avenue, dark, nameless, without end".<sup>15</sup> The fragment of autobiography deals at some length with various childhood experiences in the countryside around London, and mentions the child's frequent summer holidays with relatives in Swindon. It was there that Thomas met David Uzzell, an old man well versed in country matters who might well have stepped out of Richard Jefferies' The Amateur Poacher (1879). In letters to the old man, Thomas affectionately addressed him as "Dad". (Except for Eleanor Farjeon, all Thomas's friends were men. James Ashcroft Noble and David Uzzell seem to have been a part of the father dimension Thomas was denied in his own father.)

What emerges from the fragment of autobiography, therefore, is a sustained interest in nature. This is sharpened and intensified by a reading of the naturalists, especially Richard Jefferies. From the age of twelve Thomas was devoted to the writings of Jefferies. He hardly feels it necessary to mention the fact in the autobiography:

If I say little of Jefferies it is because not a year passed thereafter without many copious draughts of him and I cannot pretend to distinguish amongst them. But very soon afterwards I was writing out in each of his books and elsewhere... those last words of the Amateur Poacher: 'Let us get out of these indoor narrow modern days, whose twelve hours somehow have become shortened, into the sunlight and the pure wind. A something that the ancients thought divine can be found and felt there still.' They were a gospel, and incantation.<sup>16</sup>

His subsequent life was to show with what fidelity he lived out those words of Jefferies which, as a child, he had copied into a notebook. His finest acknowledgement of Jefferies, of course, was in the biography which he wrote, and it is there that we read his mature tribute to the prose. The following extract will show that it was not just for the content that Thomas admired Jefferies' writing:

Jefferies' words, it has been said, are like a glassy covering of the things he described. But they are often more than that: the things are forgotten, and it is an aspect of them, a recreation of them, a finer development of them, which endures in the written words. These words call no attention to themselves... On a moving subject, and amidst friends, he would speak much as he wrote.<sup>17</sup>

The earlier idyllic days of his boyhood were soon interrupted by the reality of school life. One feels the presence of Thomas's father willing the boy on to the attainment of goals he instinctively fought against. His memories of school life are generally negative. He writes:

The whole school impressed and alarmed me. The head master, a thick old grey-bearded heavy-lidded gruff-voiced man with creased florid face and creased black clothes, impressed and alarmed me. I should have done anything he told me, but he never told me to do anything except 'speak up. I'm an old man.'... I knew nothing, I was humbled but hardly stirred to effort. The hundreds of boys also humbled me.<sup>18</sup>



The extract goes on to mention the various class differences between Thomas and the rest of the boys. This fact, aggravated by his own innate shyness, caused him to spend most of his time alone.

But his time was well spent. He read Richard Jefferies, and went bird-nesting in the school environs making notes on the various phenomena he observed. These notes were later worked into essays which, through the school chaplain, came into the hands of the writer and critic, James Ashcroft Noble. Noble was so impressed with the work of Thomas that a first meeting was arranged. This led to several meetings between the boy and the man.

Helen Noble, Thomas's future wife, was the youngest daughter in the Noble family. She reflects on these early meetings between Thomas and her father:

My father helped him a great deal with advice about writing and reading, and with father he got on well and talked well, whose genial kindness and interest slowly broke down David's reserve. My father became very fond of him and used to call him Phil, because his first name was Philip, and my parents had had a little boy called Philip who had died as a baby, and by a strange coincidence David's features and general colouring were very like this baby boy's, and I believe my father felt that this was his boy - the boy of his heart, loving the things he loved, and seeking self-expression in the same way that my father had sought it.<sup>19</sup>

Thomas obviously brought to Noble something more than confirmation of his literary promise. His relationship with Noble was the very antithesis of that with his father. It was at this time that the boy's father began to show his opposition to his son's predilection for writing. Andrew Motion remarks that Thomas's father "interpreted his rural wanderings as listlessness, saw Helen Noble as a hindrance to his career prospects, and frowned on his wish to go to

University".<sup>20</sup>

ii. The Woodland Life

By the time he was nineteen Edward Thomas saw the publication of his first book, The Woodland Life (1897). The full significance of this achievement, I believe, can only be appreciated when seen in the wider context of the growing polarization between Thomas and his father, his relationship with Helen Noble, her father's death, and the fulfilment of his wish to go to Oxford.

Firstly, the publication of The Woodland Life was public recognition of Thomas's ability to write. (Privately, it was the knowledge that a boy's notes and random jottings could be something more than that.) Secondly, the event encouraged Thomas in his confrontation with his father, for here was proof that his was no childish dream. His wish to take up writing as a profession was a serious proposition deserving of attention. Thirdly, the book reinforced his commitment to writing within the rural tradition. James Ashcroft Noble, to whom the book was dedicated, died in April 1896. When the book was published, it must have seemed to some people, certainly to Helen Noble, as not only a confirmation of her father's estimation of the young writer, but also a fulfilment of their mutual hopes. Eckert writes that, on the death of Noble, "Thomas had lost a sincere friend and earnest counsellor, whose influence and encouragement in Thomas's youth was as great as was the influence of Robert Frost in his maturity".<sup>21</sup> With his death, Thomas's relationship with his daughter Helen deepened considerably. The opposition of both families to their continued relationship had two effects: it first strengthened their independent natures, and

then put them firmly on the path that led to their eventual secret marriage. Thomas's decision to follow the promptings of his heart was as firm as his decision to pursue a literary career.

The Woodland Life, an impressive work for a boy in his late teens, is a compilation of prose sketches and a nature diary covering the period of one year. Writing in an essay called "How I Began", published posthumously in The Last Sheaf, Thomas explains the nature of his early work:

By the time I was fourteen or fifteen, I did more; I kept a more or less daily record of notable events, the finding of birds' nests, the catching of moles or fish, the skinning of a stoat, the reading of Richard Jefferies and the naturalists.

These notes aimed at brevity: they were above syntax and indifferent to dignity.<sup>22</sup>

The diary section of The Woodland Life is certainly "above syntax". It reflects the sparseness of the random note on a visual observation. The layout of the text in the diary section resembles in some instances that of poetry. This resemblance is more than superficial for there is a striking similarity between some of the diary entries and groups of lines in the poetry. Here are some diary extracts from the 1896 edition of The Woodland Life:

Marsh-marigolds flowering.

Elms in leaf.  
Flowers of wood-sorrel.  
Blackthorn bloom.

An early cuckoo-flower.  
Water-crickets stirring.  
Purple periwinkle in flower.

Orchard trees lit with blossom.  
Chestnuts coming into leaf.



Deep-red blossom clusters on the ash;  
odorous of the earth, or of peeling bark.  
Missel-thrushes sing on Wandsworth Common.<sup>23</sup>

If we compare some of these diary observations with lines from the poetry, the same sparseness of language and strong visual focus are discernible. For example,

The rock-like mud unfroze a little and rills  
Ran and sparkled down each side of the road  
("The Manor Farm" CP, p.49)

The Combe was ever dark, ancient and dark.  
Its mouth is stopped with bramble, thorn, and  
briar;  
("The Combe", CP, p.57)

The green elm with one great bow of gold  
Lets leaves into the grass slip, one by one.-  
("October", CP, p.247)

The essays in The Woodland Life show the other extreme in the young Thomas, namely, a tendency to write in imitative prose that was often intended to please an adult readership. He probably had these essays in mind when he wrote in "How I Began":

I ravaged the language (to the best of my ability) at least as much for ostentation as for use, though I should not like to have to separate the two. This must always happen where a man has collected all the colours of the rainbow, 'of earthquake and eclipse', on his palette, and has a cottage or a gasometer to paint. A continual negotiation was going on between thought, speech and writing, thought having as a rule the worst of it.<sup>24</sup>

Edna Longley heard in Thomas's "romantic" voice the influence of literature rather than life; she refers us to his passage from The Heart of England to substantiate her point. He writes:

I always carry out into the fields a vast baggage of prejudices from books and strong characters whom I have met. My going forth, although simple enough to the eye, is truly as pompous as that of an rajah who goes through the jungle on a tall and richly encrusted elephant, with a great retinue, and much ceremony and

noise. As he frightens bird and beast, and tramples on herb and grass, so I scatter from my path many things which are lying in wait for a discoverer. There is no elephant more heavy-footed and no rifle more shattering than the egoism of an imitative brain.<sup>25</sup>

It is not surprising that the early prose of Thomas should be imitative. There was, however, much recorded in The Woodland Life which was "lying in wait" and which he captured in his notebook. From the very beginning he relied on his notes. Writing to Harold Monro on 21 December 1909, Thomas remarks:

I have always been a great note-taker... yet I know I have always done best when I have forgotten my notes. I wish I had the courage to burn them all. I believe the taking of them often gives a false permanence to things striking at the moment - to the serious detriment of deeper and less superficial impressions.<sup>26</sup>

When it came to writing his poetry, Thomas ceased to be imitative. He developed his own distinctive voice, a language characteristically ruminative yet sharply focused on the natural world. In the context of the completed poem, Thomas's "notes" were to find a new importance where they served to create and promote those "deeper impressions".

More than any statement from Thomas, The Woodland Life illustrates that Richard Jefferies was his true prosemaster. In the nature diary Thomas had already begun to practise what he admired in Jefferies. One of his favourite Jefferies descriptions will illustrate the point:

One yellowhammer sat on a branch of ash the livelong morning, still singing in the sun, his bright head, his cleanbright yellow, gaudy as Spain, was drawn like a brush charged heavily with colour across the retina, painting it deeply, for there on the eye's memory it

endures, though that was boyhood and this is manhood, still unchanged.<sup>27</sup>

Thomas's comments on this passage from Jefferies reveal much about his own fondness for the clearly apprehended visual detail:

The clearness of the physical is allied to the penetration of the spiritual vision. For both are nourished to their perfect flowering by the habit of concentration. To see a thing as clearly as he [Richard Jefferies] saw the sun-painted yellow-hammer in Stewart's Marsh is part of the office of the imagination. Imagination is no more than the making of graven images, whether of things on the earth or in the mind. To make them, clear concentrated sight and patient mind are the most necessary after love; and the two are the children of love.<sup>28</sup>

The promise of Thomas's later work, therefore, was already evident in this early work. His would be an imagination nourished by the clearly apprehended object. His few excursions into fantasy in the occasional essay were nothing more than experiments in his search for a form that suited his particular powers.

At nineteen Thomas was set in his mental habits as a writer. His interests were already well defined in his choice of subject matter, and the major influences had already made their impact. Edna Longley notes that "economy and observation", the qualities which, she says, William Cooke admired in the nature diary, "were undoubtedly the most important growth point in Thomas's prose, but the 'Romantic' effort to give pattern and colour to his vision mattered also".<sup>29</sup> It was this stability that kept Thomas faithful to his childhood interests during the years he was to spend at Oxford. He was able to read Walter Pater and Arthur Symmonds and to imitate them, yet not lose touch with his rural beginnings.

iii. Oxford Years and Early Marriage

In Chapter Three of As It Was Helen Thomas relates the joy of those idyllic days she and Thomas spent on the Wiltshire Downs before he went up to Oxford. They had stayed at David Uzzell's cottage, spending their evenings in the company of "Dad" and "Granny" who danced while Thomas, perhaps, whistled a jig. Later they drank mead, or Thomas might sing an old ballad, and the party would talk about the days of long ago. During the day the young couple walked deep into the woods or went fishing in the reservoir. But these days were soon over, days that must surely have been the happiest that they would ever experience. Afterwards Helen returned to her employment in London and Thomas went to Oxford.

Thomas's first year at Oxford was marked by loneliness and bouts of melancholy. He had matriculated as a non-collegiate student. This must have contributed to his pessimism, for he lived apart from the student community and out of the atmosphere that might have given him the stimulation one so reticent required. He began to explore the surrounding countryside - Eckert remarks that "he was happiest out of doors, in the brown oak-woods, on the wide grass meadows wandering along the Thames or the Cherwell, among the Cumnor Hills , or boating on the Isis."<sup>30</sup>

He worked for and won a history scholarship to Lincoln College and it was here that he made lifelong friends. He took an active part in college life through participation in debates, literary pursuits and rowing for the college. His interest in literature continued. E.S.P. Haynes, a fellow student at Oxford and lifelong friend of Thomas, recollects that: "Together [we] read Belloc's

Verses and Sonnets; talked of Aubrey's Lives, which Thomas knew almost by heart - he could invent passages of 17th century prose the authenticity of which was never suspected".<sup>31</sup> At this time Thomas continued to write for journals on rural themes and it was probably this income that enabled him to buy and build up a fine collection of rare books. He could not have imagined the circumstances that would force him, a few years later, to sell these same books for bread and rent.

It was at Oxford that Thomas came under the influence of Walter Pater. In his first few months he had bought Gaston de Latour and we may assume that he had read Pater's works as part of the voracious programme of reading that he embarked upon at Oxford. But the influence was never more than a passing fad for Thomas. One early essay called "Felix" shows the Paterean influence both in its style and content. Felix is a young poet-king ruling a prosperous people in a land of fair women. He is described in suitably decadent terms: "His breath came from his mouth as odour from the calyx of a flower". He dined at "ivory tables upheld by rods of glass, with gold feet". The young King's surroundings are described as "fragrant, heavy, lustrous". The King succumbs to a violent death at the hands of his rebellious subjects. Summing up the end of the story Eckert writes:

But gradually his people began to murmur; discord grew. 'I would die an exquisite death', Felix said when fear first came to him. In time the palace gates were broken and the rebels poured in. Silently the young king continued the writing of verses until an arrow pierced his temple. 'You must not rhyme Romeo with row', his poet-friend told him, that his death might be the more exquisite; 'you must not, Felix'.<sup>32</sup>

Though Thomas could write in this vein, he was too earthed



already in rural interests and writing for country journals to pursue it. Besides, his early boyhood reading of the naturalists was a powerful stabilizing force. His interest in Pater could never be more than a passing response to what was then fashionable. When he did imitate that style in later years, it was always with a heightened awareness. At this time his interests were wide-ranging. Helen Thomas indicates the range:

He now read Pater, and Oscar Wilde, and John Addington Symonds. It was the Yellow Book period and he was very interested in the movement, though never carried away by it.... It was an interesting time to be growing up in, and Edward and I were quick to respond to any new ideas in art and literature. But Edward was much more influenced by the old than by the new, and I think The Anatomy of Melancholy and Urn Burial, Tristram Shandy, Lear and Macbeth, and Keats and the Bible, to name a few, were the foundations of his taste.<sup>33</sup>

The one event, however, that was to be both stabilizing and unsettling for Thomas was the news that Helen Noble was pregnant. Understandably, Eckert is silent on the matter. They were married secretly in June 1899, and their first child, Mervyn, was born in January of the following year. The decision to marry, it would seem, was not Helen's. She was distressed when her bohemian friends suggested marriage and when Edward agreed with them. The incident is important as another instance of Edward Thomas's balanced view in an age when "free love" was advocated as "liberating". Helen Thomas records that she was disappointed with Edward's decision to the extent that she wept bitterly that evening. She writes:

He did all he could to comfort me with wise and tender talk, quietly insisting that our love was our own and that no one could interfere with it or spoil it but ourselves, and telling me that free love was only another bondage, a new-thought-out idea with no tradition of human wisdom behind it.<sup>34</sup>

The immediate result of Helen's pregnancy was the unsettling effect upon Thomas who was in his last year at Oxford. He was unable to apply himself to his studies and managed only a second class degree. Eckert stresses his fear for a future for which he was unprepared. At the same time he mentions the role Helen played in her daily correspondence with her husband. Her letters were filled with joy and optimism. Ironically, this pattern was to be with them for the rest of their lives. Helen was to be the consolation Thomas would need in his darkest moods, but she was often a source of frustration to him when that very optimism was in stark contrast to the poverty for which Thomas blamed himself.

When Thomas left Oxford on October 18, 1900, he had already begun to sense something of the pattern his life was to take, but he could not have guessed the stark contrasts to his relatively happy student days. His father made much of the fact that he was now a husband and father and that a "safe" job was more necessary than ever.

#### iv. Country Life: Thomas as Writer and Reviewer

Thomas lived for a short time with his family when he came down from Oxford. It was not satisfactory for several reasons. Firstly, he rightly felt that he should no longer be dependent on his family now that his own responsibilities had increased. Secondly, there was a need for a regular income; he could not depend for daily expenses on the income from essays and articles which at best was uncertain and slow. Finally, there was the growing conflict between Thomas and his father which had renewed itself. Thomas refused to join the Civil Service and his father asked him to leave his home. Helen Thomas, reflecting on the situation, writes:

The natural antagonism of their natures, made life at his home - when he returned from Oxford - no longer possible. Even I, to whom outward circumstances mattered so little, had begun to feel the strain of living in the uncongenial atmosphere. It was not long before an open break occurred between Edward and his father, and we looked about for somewhere else to live.<sup>35</sup>

This early break with his family, at a time when he was exceptionally poor and unsure of himself, forced Thomas to seek what was always to remain a precarious independence. The period from early 1900 to September 1901, prior to his move from London to the countryside, was a time of poverty in a life that was to know great financial hardship. He moved with his family to a small flat in Earlsfield, a suburb that was soon to become a slum; and from there he went to yet another slum, Balham. The despondency for Thomas came not just from his failure as a breadwinner but from the interminable search for work as he walked from newspaper office to newspaper office. For one as shy as Thomas it was no easy task, and we may gather from H.W. Nevinson's account of an interview with him when he came to the Daily Chronicle Office in search of work, that Thomas did not inspire much confidence:

When he first came to see me, I said to myself, "Yet another poet!"... He was tall, absurdly thin, and a face of attractive distinction and ultra-refinement was sicklied over with nervous melancholy and the ill condition of bad food or hunger. Almost too shy to speak, he sat down proudly and asked if I could give him work. I enquired what work he could do, and he said "None".... I asked whether he would like some reviewing on any subject, and on what. He replied that he knew nothing of any subject, and was quite sure he could not write, but certainly he did want work of some sort....Of course he at once became one of my best reviewers, and soon one of my closest friends.<sup>36</sup>

This meeting with Nevinson opened up for Thomas a career in literary journalism, but it was exhausting work, poorly paid and always an



obstacle to his own creative work. It was not surprising that Thomas should have a love-hate relationship with reviewing: he needed the immediate cash payment reviewing afforded for the day to day expenses of the family; the more reviewing he did, the more money he had for his family. But so poorly paid was this work that he had to spend most of his time doing it to make ends meet. If he turned to writing essays, this meant a loss of income. This spiral of circumstances was with Thomas until he enlisted, when for the first time in his life he was free from financial worry. Thomas sums up his feelings about reviewing in an article he wrote in 1914 for Harold Monro's "Poetry and Drama": "The only thing to be said for reviewing is that it produces money, which produces food and clothing for aged parents, fair wives, innocent children..."<sup>37</sup>

When in the Autumn of 1901 Thomas and his wife and child moved to the countryside (never to return again to the city), it was to escape from the squalor of the suburban life they had lived; it was also a response to a desire to be near to that inspiration Thomas found in the rural scene. At a more pragmatic level, it was for financial reasons. The small cottage near Bearsted in Kent had the privacy and peace Thomas could not find in London. Andrew Motion sees the decision to live in the countryside as a more general response to the "Back to the Land" movement then in vogue. He rightly observes, however, that Thomas "was too nearly poverty-stricken to become a noble savage, and Rose Acre (their first country cottage) was too ugly to become a pastoral Utopia".<sup>38</sup>

The birth of their second child, Bronwen, in October 1902 ought to have been an occasion for joy but was yet another reason for self-reproach. Even Helen Thomas, ever the optimist, shows one of

her rare moods of pessimism in a letter to her lifelong friend,

Janet Hooten:

First as I expect you know I am to give to the world another baby in October. This alone is terrible for no one wants the poor wee thing; no one looks forward to its coming, and I least of anyone. I know I shall love it when it lies in my arms, perhaps all the more because I know it will have only me to depend on for love: but now I cannot have any happy thoughts of it. I think of it only with tears in my eye and a fierce pain in my heart, an intolerable aching which wears me out body and soul. It is terrible to me more than to most people perhaps for down crash come my purest ideals. I feel accursed because of this sweet thing lying near my heart. You ask why I do not want it? Because we are very poor; because it means more anxiety for Edward and more work for him. Home will become unendurable to him. Even now poverty, anxiety, physical weakness, disappointments and discouragements are making him bitter, hard and impatient, quick to violent anger, and subject to long fits of depression....You see Edward is at home all day. If he were not I could manage even the two babies with ease, for it is the knowledge that the little worries of domestic life are irritating him that drives me to despair. He cannot have the quiet he needs, and anxiety and discouragement are no fit fortifications against the little worries and irritations that occur where there are young children. How then will it be with two? We cannot afford any extra help; there are no prospects of being less poor. He is selling some of his dearest books to pay for baby clothes and doctor, etc. and as he packs them up I know how he is rebelling at fate, how hard life seems to him, how he regrets it all. But on me who love him more than my life the burden falls doubly. I can no longer be ... the one he looks to for all his joy, for all the sweetest things of life. He cannot love, Janet, he cannot respond to my love. How can he when all is so dark, and I, I have deprived him of it all, the joys of life and love and success. If he would only begin life again without me my heart would rejoice.<sup>39</sup>

Her husband's frustration was his failure to rise above the poverty of those early years, but at a deeper level it was having to acknowledge that his own personal goals as an artist might never be anything but a dream.

Despite the hardship of these early years, his first volume of essays, Horae Solitariae, was published in 1902. The book was a compilation of belles-lettres from several journals and magazines and dates from his university days. That the collection was published at all shows Thomas's determination to be responsive to his ideal, no matter how demanding his daily reading and reviewing. The essay form appears to have been the most suited to Thomas at this time. It had enough scope and adaptability for one as pressed for time as he was; he was able through his essays to give a tentative shaping to many of the insights and themes he would develop later in his poetry; but, more importantly, he was able to put down an essay and take it up again when he had the time. This indeed seems to have been the case with most of his non-commissioned work, as he explains to his friend Gordon Bottomley:

There is no form that suits me, and I doubt if I can make a new form. At any rate I must avoid long things. Perhaps the 'man and a landscape' plan has a future for me. It is really my physical weakness that spoils my work. I can't write more than a small page at a time; then I am interrupted for a week: and so I wander and sprawl.<sup>40</sup>

The essay form, however, was in fashion at this time and Thomas, steeped in the Romantic essayists and the essays of the naturalists, was no stranger to the medium. His contemporary and friend, Arthur Ransome, recalls in his autobiography how he worked in London as an office boy with Hazlitt's Table Talk by his side; at night back in his lodgings he would work on his own essays. But the more sophisticated status afforded the essay was bestowed by Walter Pater. In his essay On Style he had elevated the writing of prose to the level of poetry:

And prose thus asserting itself as the special and privileged artistic faculty of the present day, will be, however critics may try to narrow its scope, as varied in its excellence as humanity itself reflecting on the facts of its latest experience - an instrument of many stops, meditative, observant, descriptive, eloquent, analytic, plaintive, fervid... it will exert, in due measure, all the varied charms of poetry, down to rhythm...<sup>41</sup>

Pater's prescriptions for the writing of prose presented the young aspirant writer with a discipline. Likewise, Pater's particular kind of Idealism had a strong appeal, advocating as it did fidelity to one's "inner vision":

Truth! there can be no merit, no craft at all, without that. And further, all beauty is in the long run only fineness of truth, or what we call expression, the finer accommodation of speech to that vision within.<sup>42</sup>

The "vision within" was embodied in the well-made passage of prose and constituted an ordered world within, though one aloof from the world of facts and experience. Prose, then, could be used in the essay to cover a whole range of feeling that one traditionally found in the long poem. It was through the essay form that Thomas kept alive the submerged poet, the poet "lying in wait"<sup>43</sup> who would become manifest when circumstances were favourable.

In Horae Solitariae we are not surprised to find a mixed bag; there is much that is full of the promise of Thomas's later years and much that is youthful and experimental. There is an evident change in style and content, a move away from the clearly observed outer landscape to an inner reflective landscape. The book's title and epigraph suggest as much:

Among a thousand books, I find hardly one title so opulent as Horae Solitariae. It has for the inward ear a melody that sings apart.<sup>44</sup>

"[S]ing[ing] apart" is what Thomas does for a time in these essays, a song that often fades in the dying falls of the Decadents. Thomas, however, is always able to laugh at himself. His description of an Oxford Don is in the nature of a self-portrait:

In pursuit of words, which soon enthrall him, he goes far rather than deep. Wherever the word has been cherished for its own sake, in all 'decadent' literature, he makes his mind a home. He begins to write, but in a style which, along with his ornate penmanship, would occupy a lifetime, and results in one brochure or half a dozen sonnets. It is a kind of higher philately....He can talk with ease and point about the "strange beauty of grey".<sup>45</sup>

Thomas certainly had his "grey" period as we see in this extract from "February in England" in Horae Solitariae:

Over the grey water rose and fell continually the grey wings of gulls; others screamed with a melancholy dying fall in the grey spaces of heaven, soaring doubtless into silence beyond the mist, in the enjoyment of we knew not what amenities of light and warmth.

Solemque suum, sua sidera norunt.

Grey roofs, grey ships; indeed, only one immobile ruddy sail of a barge, drifting up, coloured the Quakerish raiment of the day. By dipping my pen into the grey Thames ripple I am fain to make grey the reader's mind as it did mine. But words are frail; even the word 'grey', which of all chromatic epithets is most charged with mental and sentimental meaning, has boundaries. The grey changed somewhat; it was night.<sup>46</sup>

The forced repetition of "grey" in this passage fails to convey the feeling that Thomas was striving for. There is nothing there like the precision of the description he achieved in these lines:



The dim sea glints chill. The white sun is shy,  
And the skeleton weeds and the never-dry,  
Rough, long grasses keep white with frost  
At the hilltop by the finger-post;  
The smoke of traveller's-joy is puffed  
Over hawthorn berry and hazel tuft.

("The Signpost", CP, p.23, 11. 1-6)

Here the generation of mood and meaning is realized without the forceful rhetoric of the prose passage. What is common to both passages, however, is Thomas's eye for visual detail. He might indulge the temptation for "grey" or purple passages in the manner of his earlier imitative style, but his first master is Jefferies.

His friend Gordon Bottomley had been quick to see the poet in Thomas. In two letters Thomas wrote to him in August 1904, we read:

I like your suggestion for me very much. Tonight  
I am going to sketch 300 words for a petite  
poème en prose....<sup>47</sup>

Two days later Thomas writes:

I attempted to do the poem in prose, but my  
inability to see clearly what I am writing  
about, - i.e. to see anything as a whole and not  
merely as something with detail here and there,  
- makes it a failure at present.<sup>48</sup>

His attempts, however, were sufficient to allow him to store up those notes towards a poem that he would draw on later.

The treatment of an "inner landscape" persists in Rose Acre Papers (1904) and Beautiful Wales (1905), but there is always a return to a verifiable outer world. This is apparent in the following extract from Beautiful Wales where Thomas is describing a walk in the Welsh hills:

Far off, church bells were celebrating the peace  
and beauty of the morning as I turned into a

lane of which more than twenty yards were seldom visible at one time; and I lost sight of everything else. Tall hedgerow elms and orchard trees held blue fragments of the sky among their leaves and hid the rest. Here and there was a cottage among the trees, and it seemed less the work of human hands than the cordon and espalier trees, apple and pear, and the fan-shaped cherry on the wall, with glowing bark. July, which had made the purple plum and the crimson bryony berry, had made it also, I thought. The lane was perhaps long enough to occupy an hour of the most slow-paced tranquil human life. Even if you talked with every ancient man that leaned on his spade, and listened to every young linnet that was learning to sing in the hazels, you could not spend more than two hours in passing along it. Yet, more than once, as I was pausing to count the white clusters of nuts or to remind myself that here was the first pale-blue flower of succory, I knew that I took up eternity with both hands, and thought I laid it down again, the lane was a most potent magic thing, when I could thus make time as nothing while I meandered over many centuries, consulting many memories that are as amulets. And even as I walked, the whole of time was but a quiet, sculptured corridor, without a voice, except when the tall grasses bowed and powdered the nettles with seed at my feet. For the time I could not admit the existence of strident or unhappy or unfortunite things. I exulted in the knowledge of how cheaply purchased are these pleasures, exulted and was yet humiliated to think how rare and lonely they are, nevertheless. The wave on which one is lifted clear of the foam and sound of things will never build itself again. And yet, at the lane's end, as I looked back at the long clear bramble curves, I will confess that there was a joy (though it put forth its hands to an unseen grief) in knowing that down that very lane I could never go again, and was thankful that it did not come rashly and suddenly upon the white highroad, and that there is no such thing known to the spirit as a beginning and an end. For not without cool shadow and fragrance was the white highroad. Then, after some miles up a hot and silent hill, I came to the lake under the chin of a high summit, and it was cool...49

The detailed description in sense impressions: "Tall hedgerow elms and orchard trees held blue fragments of the sky among their leaves", "white clusters of nuts", "the first pale-blue flower of succory", "the fan-shaped cherry on the wall, with glowing bark",

"the purple plum", and the "crimson bryony berry" - all these serve to place firmly the actuality of the lane "of which more than twenty yards were seldom visible at one time". For Thomas, however, the lane becomes a "magic thing" - something transcending time. The passage begins with the celebration of the multiplicity and beauty of the scene, but by the time we reach the end it has become a composition of place for the purpose of a meditation of quasi-mystical dimensions. The "lane" has become "a wave on which one is lifted clear of the foam and sound of things". The passage is a skillful blending of Richard Jefferies and Walter Pater in which, on the one hand, the concentration on sense impressions leads to a moment of stasis, and, on the other hand, we are made to realise the passing nature of everything.

The passage quoted above is of interest for another reason. It is a good example of Thomas's use of the "Journey" motif as the genesis for a poem or meditative prose passage. In a poem called "The Lane", Thomas takes up some of the ideas present in this passage, the out-of-time theme, and his favourite stratagem of confusing the seasons:

Some day, I think, there will be people enough  
In Foxfield to pick all the blackberries  
Out of the hedges of Green Lane, the straight  
Broad lane where now September hides herself  
In bracken and blackberry, harebell and dwarf gorse.        5  
Today, where yesterday a hundred sheep  
Were nibbling, halcyon bells shake to the sway  
Of waters that no vessel ever sailed....  
It is a kind of spring: the chaffinch tries  
His song. For heat it is like summer too.                        10  
This might be winter's quiet. While the glint  
Of hollies dark in the swollen hedges lasts-  
One mile-and those bells ring, little I know  
Or heed if time be still the same, until  
The lane ends and once more all is the same.                        15  
("The Lane", CP, p.373)

Many of Thomas's prose works, such as The Heart of England



(1906), The South Country (1909), The Icknield Way (1913), and The Pursuit of Spring (1914), were topographical and therefore entailed much journeying on foot throughout England and Wales. Of these earlier topographical books, The Heart of England and The South Country are worthy of special note. In The Heart of England Thomas saw an opportunity to express his natural feelings for the countryside and at the same time to establish himself as an original writer in this area.

Thomas did his research for The Heart of England from April to July of 1906. The manuscript was sent to the publisher on 2 July, and the book was published in December of the same year. During this period Thomas had been forced to move house yet again; he continued to review books for his daily bread; and from the beginning of this time he found the book tedious, not because the subject matter was uncongenial but because of pressure of work. He writes to Gordon Bottomley:

I have just shut up my MS. book of The Heart of England to write a little moan to you. Why can't somebody help me in this awful labour? I work continuously at the cottage from 9.30 to 4.30 every day and squeeze from 1,000 to 1,500 words out of myself, and the result is to be my worst book. There are plenty of landscapes and 'spurred lyric' - in fact 3/4 of the book will be of this kind, and far inferior to Wales because I have less impulse and less material. The rest is pseudo-genial or purely rustic - Borrow and Jefferies sans testicles and guts - except one short love story told just before a fox-hunt which I think pretty good. There are 2 scenes in church, both secular in tone: My Virgilian Schwabism does not come off. And so by wonderful and contemptible determination I have written about 20,000 words this month and have 10,000 words of old stuff that I can use. There remain 30,000 words. Even now I would give up if I dared and lose the 100 cheerfully. I pray it will be my last book if it ever becomes a book. Henceforth I cease to write 'about the country'

and become a reviewer with a wife and family,  
tout court and no deception. Still I hope to do  
the 30,000. What shall it be about?<sup>50</sup>

As one might infer from Thomas's letter, the book lacks unity. It represents really an anthology of some of Thomas's worst and best pieces. Having said this, one must add that it is in this early work that we see what might be described as Thomas's pastoral vision in prose. The book abounds in pictures of a lost England, a passing landscape which Thomas sensed was soon to be no more. It is this vision that informs his uniquely "English" poems such as "The Manor Farm", "The Huxter", "Head and Bottle", "The Barn", "Haymaking" and "Lob". In Chapter XI, entitled "Meadowland", we have the following description of part of a walk Thomas has taken on one of the tracts of country which are discovered by few except such as study the railway maps of England:

On the level again the hollow wood which the willow wren fills with his little lonely song has to be penetrated; the farmyard must be passed through, and the spirit of the road looks in at the dairy window and sees the white disks of cream in the pans and the cool-armed maid lifting a cheese; and at yet another farmyard it loiters in, watching the roses and plume-poppy and lupin of the front garden, going between the stables and the barn, and there spreading out as if it had resolved to cease and always watch the idle wagon, the fair-curved hay-rakes leaning against the wall, and the fowls which are the embodiment of senseless reverie - when lo! the path goes straight across wide and level pastures, with a stream at its side. Seen afar off, losing itself among the elms that watch over the hillside church, the little white road is as some quiet, hermit saint, just returned from long seclusion, and about to take up his home for ever and ever in the chancel; but when we reach the place, he is still as far away, still uncertain in the midst of the corn below. At the charlock-yellow summit the road seems to lead into the sky, where the white ladders are let down from the sun.<sup>51</sup>

This description, like several in the book, though not specific,

carries nonetheless the truth and suggestibility of a watercolour by John Crome. Often, however, scenes and moods generate a more spiritualized pastoral view:

The ways of such a road - when the June grass is high and in the sun it is invisible except for its blueness and its buttercups, and the chaffinch, the corn-bunting, and yellowhammer, the sleepest-voiced birds, are most persistent - easily persuade the mind that it alone is travelling, travelling through an ideal country, belonging to itself and beyond the power of the world to destroy. The few people whom we see, the mower, the man hoeing his onion-bed in a spare half-hour at midday, the children playing "Jar-jar-winkle" against a wall, the women hanging out clothes - these the very loneliness of the road has prepared us for turning into creatures of dream; it costs an effort to pass the time of day with them, and they being equally unused to strange faces are not loquacious, and so the moment they are passed they are no more real than the men and women of pastoral:52

But this England known to Thomas, the England of long unbroken traditions, customs and crafts, was about to be changed. He must have sensed that he was among the last to witness its passing. He records the persons and places, the living remnants of a world that would be no more with the coming of World War I:

The old man's tools in the kitchen are noble - the heavy wrought-iron, two-toothed hoe, that falls pleasantly upon the hard clay and splits it without effort and without jarring the hand, its ash handle worn thin where his hand has glided at work, a hand that nothing will wear smooth; the glittering, yellow-handled spades and forks; the disused shovel with which he boasts regretfully that he could dig his garden when he lived on deep loam in a richer country than this; and still the useless "hop-idgit" of six tynes - the Sussex "shim" - which he retains to remind others, and perhaps himself, that he was a farmer once.53

The "old man" in the passage might well be a portrait of David Uzzell. Here he becomes yet another manifestation of Thomas's great

rural type, "Lob", who appears in the poem of the same name.

A somewhat Chaucerian type is Richard the ploughman whom we meet in a chapter entitled "Faunus". He is, perhaps, more aptly described as belonging to the Richard Jefferies' tradition, for he is surrounded by, and seems unconsciously to be a part of, the great activity of nature:

Richard the ploughman is worthy of his plough and team. He moves heavily with long strides over the baked yellow field, swaying with the violent motion of the plough as it cuts the stubborn and knotty soil, and yet seeming to sway out of joy and not necessity. He is a straight, small-featured, thin-lipped man, red-haired and with blue eyes of a fierce loneliness almost fanatical. Hour after hour he crosses and recrosses the field, up to the ridge, whence he can see miles of hill and wood; down to the woodside where the rabbits hardly trouble to hide as he appears, or to the thick hedge with marigolds below and nearly all day the song of nightingales. The furrow is always straight; he could plough it so asleep, and sometimes perhaps he does. The larks sing invisible in the white May sky. The swallows and woodlarks and willow wrens and linnets, with their tenderest of all mortal voices, flit and sing about him. Partridges whirr and twang. A fox steals along the hedge, a squirrel glows and ripples across a bay of the field. And for a little time he notices these in a mild complacency.<sup>54</sup>

William Cooke points out that this pastoral vision is checked by an awareness that the rhythms of rural life are being broken down. In The Country (1913), for example, Thomas writes:

The countryman is dying out, and when we hear his voice, as in George Bourne's Bettesworth Book, it is more foreign than French. He had been long in a decline, and now he sinks before the Daily Mail like a savage before pox or whisky. Before it is too late, I hope that the Zoological Society will receive a few pairs at their Gardens. With them... should be some Gypsies. They are at least as interesting, though often not as beautiful, as anything at the Zoo. At the price of a first-rate cigar one

of them could be fed for a week, or a family for a bottle of wine; they will eat almost anything. They give endless quiet amusement to civilized men who behold what they have risen from, and what some would like to return to again.<sup>55</sup>

Though there is a note of bitterness here, Thomas elsewhere resigns himself to the change that is taking place:

There is nothing left for us to rest upon, nothing great, venerable, or mysterious, which can take us out of ourselves, and give us that more than human tranquility now to be seen in a few old faces of a disappearing generation. To be a citizen of infinity is no compensation for the loss of that tranquillity. When we grow old what will grant any of us that look? Certainly not statistics and the knowledge that we have lived through a time of progress unparalleled in history.<sup>56</sup>

The poetry was to reflect the changes that Thomas recorded more nostalgically in the prose. The language, however, in its tenderness, allows no lingering of the heart. Later, when he was called to make the supreme sacrifice, the England he was willing to fight and die for had become simplified in the image and symbol of a handful of soil. Asked if he knew what he was fighting for, "[h]e bent down, picked up a handful of earth and, crumbling it between his fingers, replied, 'literally for this'".<sup>57</sup>

The Heart of England registers one final note that looks towards the poetry. In an otherwise ordinary essay called "One Green Field", Thomas touches on the nature of human happiness:

Happiness is not to be pursued, though pleasure may be; but I have long thought that I should recognize happiness could I ever achieve it. It would be health, or at least unthwarted intensity of sensual and mental life, in the midst of beautiful or astonishing things which should give that life full play and banish expectation and recollection. I never achieved it, and am fated to be almost happy in many different circumstances, and on account of my



forethought to be contemptuous or even disgusted at what the beneficent designs of chance have brought - refusing, for example, to abandon my nostrils frankly to the "musk and amber" of revenge; or polluting, by the notice of some trivial accident, the remembrance of past things, both bitter and sweet, in the company of an old friend. Wilfully and yet helplessly I coin mere pleasures out of happiness. And yet herein, perhaps, a just judge would declare me to be at least not more foolish than those men who are always pointing out the opportunities and just causes of happiness which others have. Also, the flaw in my happiness which wastes it to a pleasure is in the manner of my looking back at it when it is past. It is as if I had made a great joyous leap over a hedge, and then had looked back and seen that the hedge was but four feet high and not dangerous. Is it perhaps true that those are never happy who know what happiness is?<sup>58</sup>

This was to be a recurrent theme in the poetry as Thomas pondered on the past or reflected on the passing nature of the present moment:

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,  
The pack of scarlet clouds running across 5  
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 10  
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 15  
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.  
("Over the Hills", CP, p.77)

Here the moment is recognized in memory but cannot be relived in its totality. Nor is happiness necessarily something which belongs to the future:

This is my grief. That land,  
My home, I have never seen:  
No traveller tells of it,



However far he has been.

And could I discover it,  
I fear my happiness there,  
Or my pain, might be dreams of return  
Here, to these things that were.  
("Home", CPL, p.117, 11.9-16)

In "The Glory", Thomas seeks to embrace the paradoxical nature of his position, but the poem abounds in alternatives all of which serve to make the moment more elusive:

Or must I be content with discontent  
As larks and swallows are perhaps with wings?  
And shall I ask at the day's end once more  
What beauty is, and what I can have meant  
By happiness? And shall I let all go,  
Glad, weary, or both? Or shall I perhaps know  
That I was happy oft and oft before,  
Awhile forgetting how I am fast pent,  
How dreary-swift, with naught to travel to,  
Is Time? I cannot bite the day to the core.  
("The Glory", CP, p.199, 11.19-28)

Except for a few months during the war and during his military training at the various camps, Thomas was seldom without a demanding work schedule. In his letters we find frequent references to deadlines and his relentless struggle to meet them. After The Heart of England, he was immediately immersed in a series of literary projects, many of which he pursued simultaneously. He was engaged in the editing of The Book of the Open Air (1907), and a month later, in July 1907, his The Pocket Book of Poems and Songs for the Open Air was published. In August of the same year he was walking in Richard Jefferies' country (Wiltshire) as part of his research for his Richard Jefferies (1909). In March 1908 he had completed this work and was already researching in Sussex, Surrey and Kent for his The South Country (1909). Simultaneously he was working on a book on George Borrow.

The South Country was not so much a quest for the Heart of

England as a quest for the meaning of nature itself. In "July" he ponders the significance of those ordinary scenes that are a part of our memories: a boy driving cattle along the roadside, the roadside "pillowed with white aspen-down"; a boy hanging on a gate to watch a gipsy-cart passing. He writes: "These things also propose to the roving, unhistoric mind an Eden, one still with us, one that is passing, not, let us hope, the very last".<sup>59</sup> But it is not merely the observer of lost Edens who speaks in this passage. The emergent poet in Thomas takes these observations a step further:

Some of these scenes, whether often repeated or not, come to have a rich symbolical significance; they return persistently and, as it were, ceremoniously... but meaning I know not what. For example, I never see the flowers and scarlet stained foliage of herb-robert growing out of some old stone-heaps by the wayside without a feeling of satisfaction not explained by a long memory of the contrast between the plant and the raw flint; so also with the drenched lilac bloom leaning out over high walls of unknown gardens; and inland cliffs, covered with beach, jutting out westward into a bottomless valley in the mist of winter twilights, in silence and frost. Something in me belongs to these things, but I hardly think that the mere naming of them will mean anything except to those - many perhaps - who have experienced the same. A great writer so uses the words of every day that they become a code of his own which the world is bound to learn and in the end take on to itself. But words are no longer symbols; and to say 'hill' or 'beech' is not to call up images of a hill or a beech-tree, since we have so long been in the habit of using the words for beautiful and mighty and noble things very much as a bookkeeper uses figures without seeing gold and power. I can, therefore, only try to suggest what I mean by the significance of the plant in the stoneheap, the wet lilac, the misty cliff, by comparing it with that of scenes in books where we recognise some power beyond the particular and personal.<sup>60</sup>

It is this significance in the ordinary and its elusiveness that he was to celebrate later in "Words", where he gives to words and images a new freshness.

In several passages in The South Country Thomas appears to be seeking something beyond nature, to be demanding more from his own language as he alternately probes and reflects on the meaning of a host of deeply personal evocations of nature. "The End of Summer", an example of this, has the shape of a typical Thomas poem in its movement from detailed description to a reflective closure:

All night for a week it rains, and at last there is a still morning of mist. A fire of weeds and hedge-clippings in a little flat field is smouldering. The ashes are crimson, and the bluish-white smoke flows in a divine cloudy garment round the boy who rakes over the ashes. The heat is great, and the boy, straight and well made, wearing close gaiters of leather that reach above the knees, is languid at his task, and often leans upon his rake to watch the smoke coiling away from him like a monster reluctantly fettered, and sometimes bursting into an anger of sprinkled sparks. He adds some wet hay, and the smoke pours out of it like milky fleeces when the shearer reveals the inmost wool with his shears. Above and beyond him the pale blue sky is dimly white-clouded over beech woods, whose many greens and yellows and yellow-greens are softly touched by the early light which cannot penetrate to the blue caverns of shade underneath. Athwart the woods rises a fount of cottage-smoke from among mellow and dim roofs. Under the smoke and partly scarfed at times by a drift from it is the yellow of sunflower and dahlia, the white of anemone, the tenderest green and palest purple of a thick cluster of autumn crocuses that have broken out of the dark earth and stand surprised, amidst their own weak light as of the underworld from which they have come. Robins sing among the fallen apples, and the cooing of wood-pigeons is attuned to the soft light and the colours of the bowers. The yellow apples gleam. It is the gleam of melting frost.<sup>61</sup>

In this extract we have the equivalent of the descriptive composition of place that most of the "nature" poems have as a characteristic. There is a precise time scale: "All night - for a week - it rains". There follows a vivid and sensuous description of the fire, the ashes, the smoke from the "wet hay". There is mention

of the wider scene, the cottage smoke and the early autumn flowers, the scene ending with the realistic but equally symbolic mention of "robins singing among the fallen apples", and the "gleam of melting frost". Thomas then continues with the reflective, often philosophical, conclusion which appears to be generated by the atmosphere and symbolic force of the description:

Under all the dulcet warmth of the face of things lurks the bitter spirit of the cold. Stand still for more than a few moments and the cold creeps with a warning, and then a menace into the breast. That is the bitterness that makes this morning of all others in the year so mournful in its beauty. The colour and the grace invite to still contemplation and long draughts of dream; the frost compels motion, the scent is that of wood-smoke, of fruit and of some fallen leaves. This is the beginning of the pageant of autumn, of that gradual pompous dying which has no parallel in human life, yet draws us to it with sure bonds. It is a dying of the flesh, and we see it pass through a kind of beauty which we can only call spiritual, of so high and inaccessible a strangeness is it. The sight of such perfection as is many times achieved before the end awakens the never more than lightly sleeping human desire of permanence. Now, now is the hour; let things be thus; thus for ever; there is nothing further to be thought of; let these remain. And yet we have a premonition that remain they must not for more than a little while. The motion of the autumn is a fall, a surrender, requiring no effort, and therefore the mind cannot long be blind to the cycle of things as in the spring it can when the effort and delight of ascension veils the goal and the decline beyond.<sup>62</sup>

Probing the "dulcet warmth of the face of things", Thomas seeks to uncover the nature of those "bonds" that seem to tie him to the scene and its "spiritual" significance.

In Rest and Unrest (1910) and Light and Twilight (1911) Thomas continues to explore the symbolic significances of scenes and characters. In Rest and Unrest, for example, an essay entitled "The Fountain" presents a young girl (a recurrent topic in Thomas). She

is indeed a source of refreshment in the setting he describes:

It was a month when the sun was as a lion in the sky....I was walking along the beach under a vertical sandcliff that shut out all the land except a fringe of heather over the edge. A fish could have breathed as well as I in the heat. There was no escape.<sup>63</sup>

Overcome both by the heat and the solitude, he is about to take his rest when the girl materializes "as if a fountain had leaped out of the sand". He goes on to describe her outward appearance, but she is as much a thought as a person:

She was standing not ten yards away with her face towards me but looking at the sea. She was dark, not tall, and slender, her eyes blue and cold and still. Her brow was like a half-moon under her brown hair and was of a most pellucid purity and utterly serene. The blue of her dress was very cool against the yellow of the gorse. She might have been eighteen, not more. Her hair was wet and fell down over her breast and beyond her waist in two long plaits. She had seaweed in both her hands and it hung down to the ground motionless, like dripping bronze.<sup>64</sup>

He continues in this vein, seeing her as an epiphany of nature itself: "The gravity, the dark simplicity, above all the exquisite combination of wildness and meekness in the girl would be worthy of the most sacred fountain, whether emerging among moss and crags and the shadows of crags or among sunlit grass". He thinks of her responding to nature in the purity of a first response, and he ends by identifying her with all those glad and joyful intimations that flooded his early memories:

As a boy it was of such a being that I used to think though my imagination was not energetic enough to body it forth quite clearly when I felt, in loneliest places among the woods or clouds, that my footfalls had scared something shy, beautiful, and divine. And more than so, she was akin to the spirit abroad on many days that had awed or harassed me with loveliness - to the spirit on the dewy clovers, in the last



star that hung like a bird of light scattering gold and silver from her wings in the cold blue and gloomy rose of the dawn; to the spirit in mountain or forest waters, in many unstained rivers, in all places where Nature had stung me with a sense of her own pure force, pure and without pity.<sup>65</sup>

For Thomas, however, a writer intent upon earning five pounds a week (if he was lucky), she is a passing moment: "She was in sight for less than a minute as I went from the sea over the moor, and when I turned in one of its hollows she had disappeared and I saw nothing but sea and sky, which were one".<sup>66</sup>

In such passages as this above, and there are many such passages in Thomas's writing, one feels the instinctive groping after the brief, complete and rounded statement which is characteristic of the lyric poem. In Light and Twilight we find passages where Thomas is able to reflect with a new richness on the meaning of his personal experiences. No longer do the people in his prose represent ideas, rural types or personae of his suppressed poetic self. In "The Stile", for example, he examines the nature of an experience with another person, using the setting itself to dramatize a feeling of oneness. The setting is established with more than usual economy and he is soon relating how he and a friend became "mystically" united in the course of a late evening walk:

When he spoke I had already the same thing in the same words to express. When either of us spoke we were saying what we could not have said to any other man at any other time.

But as we reached the stile our tongues and our steps ceased together, and I was instantly aware of the silence through which our walking and talking had drawn a thin line up to this point. We had been going on without looking at one another in the twilight. Now we were face to face. We wished to go on speaking but we could not. My eyes wandered to the rippled outline of the dark heavy hills against the sky, which was



now pale and barred with the grey ribs of a delicate sunset. High up I saw Gemma; I even began trying to make out the bent star bow of which it is the centre. I saw the plain, now a vague dark sea of trees and hedges, where lay my homeward path.<sup>67</sup>

As the silence grows between the two men, so the landscape both dramatizes and is a substitute for their speech:

Now and then a few unexpected, startled, and startling words were spoken, and the silence drank them up as the sea drinks a few tears. But always my roving eyes returned from the sky, the hills, the plain to those other greenish eyes in the dusk, and then with a growing sense of rest and love to the copse waiting there, its indefinite cloud of leaves and branches and, above that, the outline of oak-tops against the sky. It was very near. It was still, sombre, silent. it was vague and unfamiliar. I had forgotten that it was a copse and one that I had often seen before. White roses like moths penetrated the mass of the hedge.<sup>68</sup>

They bid each other "Good-bye", but Thomas continues to analyze the experience in terms of the natural setting:

Confidence and ease deepened and darkened as if I also were like that still, sombre cloud that had been a copse, under the pale sky that was light without shedding light.<sup>69</sup>

This experience of unity with another leads to an insight about his own spiritual identity and oneness with the world. What began therefore as an experience of unity with another, and their eventual parting, becomes finally a great spiritual affirmation about his own life and the universal nature of a particular experience:

I did not disturb the dark rest and beauty of the earth which had ceased to be ponderous, hard matter and had become itself cloudy or, as it is when the mind thinks of it, spiritual stuff, so that the glow-worms shone through it as stars through clouds. I found myself running without weariness or heaviness of the limbs through the soaked overhanging grass. I knew that I was more than the something which had been looking out

all that day upon the visible earth and thinking and speaking and tasting friendship. Somewhere - close at hand in that rosy thicket or far off beyond the ribs of sunset - I was gathered up with an immortal company, where I and poet and lover and flower and cloud and star were equals, as all the little leaves were equal ruffling before the gusts, or sleeping and carved out of the silentness. And in that company I had learned that I am something which no fortune can touch, whether I be soon to die or long years away. Things will happen which will trample and pierce, but I shall go on, something that is here and there like the wind, something unconquerable, something not to be separated from the dark earth and the light sky, a strong citizen of infinity and eternity. The confidence and ease had become a deep joy; I knew that I could not do without the Infinite, nor the Infinite without me.<sup>70</sup>

From 1911 when Light and Twilight appeared, to April 1914 when In Pursuit of Spring was published, Thomas had written no less than fourteen books. In the autumn of 1911, four books were published: The Tenth Muse, Celtic Stories, Maurice Maeterlinck and The Isle of Wight. In September of that year he suffered a severe breakdown in health caused by overwork and accelerated by financial worry. Andrew Motion reflects on some of the consequences:

As before, but much more grievously, illness made him reject the one stable element in his life, Helen, while at the same time forcing him to rely on her faithfulness. Her tolerance and patience only made him detest himself for disappointing her hopes.<sup>71</sup>

His friends suggested several "cures", none of which appealed to Thomas. In the end he took a holiday in Wales which combined writing with pleasure because he was working on a new commission to write on George Borrow.

Edward Thomas's breakdown in health may also be seen in the nature of a break-through when we view it with hindsight. When he returned from Wales he was in relatively better spirits. The same

pressing need for money still existed, as did his sensitive awareness of his responsibility for his family. There was, however, a new sense of purpose, the sense, perhaps, of a new beginning. He had begun to face himself and to become aware of his own darker side. In an undated letter to Eleanor Farjeon, for example, he confides:

You see the central evil is self-consciousness carried as far beyond selfishness as selfishness is beyond self denial, (not very scientific comparison) and now amounting to disease and all I have got to fight it with is the knowledge that in truth I am not the isolated self-considering brain which I have come to seem - the knowledge that I am something more, but not the belief that I can reopen the connection between the brain and the rest.<sup>72</sup>

Just as Thomas had begun to look at his own personal problems, so too his critical powers were brought to bear on his writing. His books on Swinburne and Pater were as much a long hard look at his own practice as a writer as an appraisal of those authors. He was soon putting into practice the insights he had stated in Walter Pater. In December of 1913 he writes to Eleanor Farjeon:

The autobiography grows, now a few pages on my father and mother, now on school work, now on play, now on pigeons, and so on. I don't know if it will turn out to have any continuity at all. My object at present is daily to focus on some period and get in all that relates to it, allowing one thing to follow the other that suggested it. It's very lean but I feel the shape of the sentences and alter continually with some unseen end in view. I have practically no other work.<sup>74</sup>

His fragment of autobiography is indeed "lean" and must be seen as the first fruits of a transformation in style. He avoids the overtly literary phrase, and resists the temptation to use the self-conscious or ornamental expression. But perhaps the most important fact about the autobiography was that Thomas was here

looking at himself in a more positive light. The "unseen end" was to be the poetry for which these years were a more intense form of preparation. The "end" was tangibly in sight when, on 4 October 1913, Ralph Hodgson introduced him to the American poet, Robert Frost. Both men were later to gain much through their meeting - for Thomas, encouragement; for Frost, timely recognition. Andrew Motion points out that "[b]oth had been disappointed by some aspects of marriage, both had threatened suicide, and both resented the public's neglect of their work".<sup>75</sup>

As we shall see later, their relationship went much deeper. What seems important to stress here is the initial impact of the meeting on what might be called Thomas's spiritual biography. In Pursuit of Spring records a physical and spiritual quest in which Thomas sets out to find not only Spring but also his own creative springs. He eventually finds Spring in "the grave of Winter", but the book also abounds in tentative and partial epiphanies, unrealised moments that merely appear to have the promise of something greater. For example, coming out of the solitude of the night, Thomas approaches an inn.

The inn door, which was now open, was as the entrance to a bright cave in the middle of the darkness: the illumination had a kind of blessedness such as it might have had to a cow, not without foreignness; and a half-seen man within it belonged to a world, blessed indeed, but far different from this one of mine, dark, soft, and tranquil. I felt that I could walk on thus, sipping the evening silence and solitude, endlessly. But at the house where I was staying, I stopped as usual. I entered, blinked at the light, and by laughing at something, said with the intention of being laughed at, I swiftly again naturalized myself.<sup>76</sup>

The "blessedness" mentioned here, which is but half perceived and alien, is more completely captured later in a poem called "The Owl"

(CP, p.119). What Thomas found, however, through his meeting with Frost, was the fulfilment that had eluded him most of his writing life. He had now truly come in from the dark, he had found the poet in himself. When Frost spoke of the undeclared poetry in Thomas's prose, he mentioned in particular some sections of In Pursuit of Spring. When in "March" Thomas wrote:

Now I know that Spring will come again,  
Perhaps tomorrow: however late I've patience  
After this night following on such a day.  
("March", CP, p.15)

he was but three poems old. He could not have guessed how glorious that Spring would be, but the long "day" was over.

## Chapter Two



## Introductory Remarks

An early poem by Edward Thomas, called "An Old Song" (CP, p.53), contains images that reveal much about how he understood the gift of his intense poetic outpouring, that surge of creative energy in the last three years of his life.

The sun set, the wind fell, the sea  
Was like a mirror shaking:  
The one small wave that clapped the land  
A mile-long snake of foam was making  
Where tide had smoothed and wind had dried       5  
The vacant sand.

A light divided the swollen clouds  
And lay most perfectly  
Like a straight narrow footbridge bright  
That crossed over the sea to me;               10  
And no one else in the whole world  
Saw that same sight.

I walked elate, my bridge always  
Just one step from my feet:  
A robin sang, a shade in shade:               15  
And all I did was to repeat:  
    'I'll go no more a-roving  
    With you, fair maid.'

("An Old Song", CP, p.53)

The image of the desolate shore reached by the sea, touched by light, has been seen by Edna Longley as "Thomas's sterility now irrigated by his new inspiration".<sup>1</sup> There is another source for this view in a letter which Thomas wrote to Eleanor Farjeon and which I have quoted above in another context. Thomas is unusually frank:

You see the central evil is self-consciousness carried as far beyond selfishness as selfishness is beyond self denial, (not very scientific comparison) and now amounting to a disease and all I have got to fight it with is the knowledge that in truth I am not the isolated self-considering brain that I have come to seem - the knowledge that I am something more, but not the belief that I can reopen the connection between the brain and the rest.... Please

forgive me and try not to give any thought to  
this flat grey shore which surprises the tide by  
being inaccessible to it.<sup>2</sup>

A month later in another letter she writes: "Now perhaps the strong  
warm tide which you tell me of is beginning to reach me".<sup>3</sup>

This image of an isolated shore cut off from the sea is an apt  
one. Elsewhere, Thomas confessed that for him "social intercourse  
[was] only an intense form of solitude".<sup>4</sup> Throughout his life he  
worked in relative isolation from the literary currents around him,  
and though he was writing all his life, he was hindered through  
circumstances from writing poetry, his true creative form, until the  
age of thirty-six.

What is perhaps most significant, however, about this image of  
the sea shore is the inherent notion of passivity. It is this  
concept that I wish to explore in this chapter in relation to a  
group of Thomas's nature poems. Firstly, Thomas saw the gift of his  
poetic muse as something having little or nothing to do with his own  
volition. Eleanor Farjeon writes: "In the first months of 1915  
Edward's letters were chiefly concerned with the stream of poetry  
which was now in flood...." <sup>5</sup>

She adds:

The poems teemed in him every day as he walked  
up the hanger to his study. 'I can hardly wait  
to light my fire,' he wrote, in the excitement  
of new creation that was robbing the old  
unhappiness of its power.<sup>6</sup>

Secondly, Thomas clearly thought about his poetry in the terms  
previously noted, that is, in images of nature, for he writes, in an  
undated letter to Eleanor Farjeon on this topic, remarking that his

own poetry "isn't running just now".<sup>7</sup> He saw poetic inspiration as a great overwhelming force, perhaps gracing him as a wave graces the shore.

This passive stance towards his muse, I would assert now, and hope to show in my analysis of poems later, manifests itself in the following features:

- i. Thomas's creative disposition whereby he surrenders to the uncertainties and polarities of an experience.
- ii. Thomas's own description of his poetic voice.
- iii. The ways in which the reader experiences the unfolding of a typical poem by Thomas. The dramatic import, often submerged in the poem's setting, is a shared discovery; shared - because Thomas through his characteristically tentative poetic diction, a process of reasoning sometimes, rather than an articulated statement, allows for this mutual experience.

These points will, I hope, become explicit in my analysis of the relevant poems.

I would sum up these three features in one phrase, "lying in wait", which comes from the poem "Old Man" (CP, 1.34, p.21). I shall be looking at this poem later and the phrase will come up in several instances where what is happening seems best described by it. I shall conclude this chapter with a discussion of "Lob", Thomas's long poem dealing with the rural tradition. This poem brings together much of what I shall be saying about individual poems in this chapter. My procedure, then, will be to discuss the theme of passivity as it shows itself in the selected group of poems, stressing where necessary the all-embracing nature of this concept as it touches on the poet and his verse.

1. Edward Thomas's Creative Disposition

Many of Thomas's poems show a characteristic surrendering to the particularities of an experience and a willingness to embrace the uncertainties and doubts that emerge in thinking through an experience. In poem after poem there is implicit the conviction that there is no convenient formula that might contain or explain away the intellectual or emotional tensions that life, in its more intense moments, offers to man. So tentative is the mood of Thomas that we find in the ruminative and hesitant syntax of his verse the language of a man in thought. We overhear him, so to speak, in a process of exploration as he ponders, hesitantly, the various nuances or partial solutions open to him.

In the early poem "Old Man" (CP, pp.19-21), Thomas struggles to recollect a moment in childhood; the partial hint of this moment is brought to mind through the present action of a child who plucks at a bush "Whenever she goes in or out of the house" (l. 12). He is unable to recollect when first he plucked the herb or smelt its perfume. He admits that he has "mislaid the key" (l. 32). For the purpose of reference I quote the poem in full:

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           5  
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.

The herb itself I like not, but for certain  
I love it, as some day the child will love it   10  
Who plucks a feather from the door-side bush  
Whenever she goes in or out of the house.  
Often she waits there, snipping the tips and shrivelling  
The shreds at last on to the path, perhaps  
Thinking, perhaps of nothing, till she sniffs   15  
Her fingers and runs off. The bush is still

But half as tall as she, though it is as old:  
So well she clips it. Not a word she says;  
And I can only wonder how much hereafter  
She will remember, with that bitter scent, 20  
Of garden rows, and ancient damson-trees  
Topping a hedge, a bent path to a door,  
A low thick bush beside the door, and me  
Forbidding her to pick.

As for myself,  
Where first I met the bitter scent is lost. 25  
I, too, often shrivel the grey sheds,  
Sniff them and think and sniff again and try  
Once more to think what it is I am remembering,  
Always in vain. I cannot like the scent,  
Yet I would rather give up others more sweet, 30  
With no meaning, than this bitter one.

I have mislaid the key. I sniff the spray  
And think of nothing; I see and I hear nothing;  
Yet seem, too, to be listening, lying in wait  
For what I should, yet never can, remember: 35  
No garden appears, no path, no hoar-green bush  
Of Lad's-love, or Old Man, no child beside,  
Neither father nor mother, nor any playmate;  
Only an avenue, dark, nameless, without end.

The landscape in this poem is the uncertain terrain of memory, and the poet's medium, words, the unreliable "key" to that past. The poem is as much about the creative act and the making of poems as it is about the elusive memory of the shrub Old Man or Lad's Love.

Edna Longley refers us to Cooke for the prose sketch "Old Man's Beard", and adds that both sketch and poem echo an actual childhood memory recorded in The Childhood of Edward Thomas:

With one of these friends, a girl, I went home  
once and in her back garden I first saw dark  
crimson dahlias and smelt bitter crushed stalks  
in plucking them. As I stood with my back to the  
house among the tall blossoming bushes I had no  
sense of any end to the garden between its brown  
fences: there remains in my mind a greenness, at  
once lowly and endless.<sup>8</sup>

She sees the poem as the inauguration "and exploration of memory which occupies so much of Thomas's poetry. It analyses the very nature of the process before he goes on to pursue individual



memories in such poems as 'Adlestrop', 'Over the Hills', 'The Cuckoo', and 'The Mill Pond'.<sup>9</sup> Her view of the poem is rich and suggestive in terms of the possible entries into Thomas's poetry.

Cooke is mainly interested in showing "Old Man" to be an example of how Thomas was able, fairly early in his poetry, to register his own voice. He writes of the poem: "[It] shows a fruition of Frost's influence, but it was the influence that Thomas quickly assimilated into his own more intimate, more ruminatory voice".<sup>10</sup>

In a poem called "Parting" (CP, p.107) Thomas writes: "The Past is a strange land, most strange" (1.1). Thomas evokes this "strange land" in several of his poems; it is often half perceived, but always held in the gentle tension of fact and mystery. In "Old Man" he embodies this tension in a language that strains and gropes through syntactical twists, pauses and hesitations. What he does is well described in the phrase "lying in wait" (1.34). This is a characteristic Thomsonian response; an experience is allowed to offer all its possibilities to the considering mind. The opening lines immediately register the ambivalences in the poem. The very title "Old Man" is checked and counter-checked in the first two lines; the rhythm hesitates and hovers around the uncertainty of the herb's name. By the third line Thomas has abandoned the opening doubts to offer a more precise description of the herb, which in line 4 is emblematically as well as literally placed "with rosemary and lavender". In the space of four lines three major themes are enunciated, namely, age ("Old Man"), remembrance ("rosemary") and youth ("Lad's love"). These are touched on in the poem more by implication than by direct treatment.



Lines 5-8 introduce a secondary thrust in the poem, namely, the poet's quarrel with his own medium, words. Line 6 suggests that words conceal and confuse the essential properties of the herb. The problem Thomas raises is the age-old one of how a word, which is itself a material object, can evoke a particular meaning or signification. Is not everything in language, except its meaning, material? The mystery of the herb, then, is presented in personal, philosophical and creative dimensions. Another way of putting the problem is to ask how language can resurrect an experience which is buried in the memory. In a poem called "The Word" (CP, p.221) Thomas describes this limbo of the past as "the undefiled/Abyss of what can never be again" (ll.4-5), where "All [is] as is a childless woman's child / And its child's children" (ll.3-4). In "The Word" Thomas's answer to the problem of memory and the past is that nature herself, through her own language, renews our experience for us. He writes:

One name that I have not -  
Though 'tis an empty thingless name - forgot  
Never can die because Spring after Spring  
Some thrushes learn to say it as they sing.  
There is always one at midday saying it clear  
And tart - the name, only the name I hear.  
While perhaps I am thinking of the elder scent  
That is like food, or while I am content  
With the wild rose scent that is like memory,  
This name suddenly is cried out to me  
From somewhere in the bushes by a bird  
Over and over again, a pure thrush word.  
(ll. 11-22)

Here the particular, unique experience of the past is propagated by nature; "word" and "thing" are one in the "pure thrush word". We are renewed by our past, he suggests, through an involuntary act, when the mind is caught off guard, "While perhaps I am thinking of the elder scent...". In "Old Man" the futility of deliberately forcing the pace, so to speak, is dismissed. In lines 26-29, Thomas says

that it is vain for him to try by an act of memory to open the door  
to the past:

I, too, often shrivel the grey shreds,  
Sniff them and think and sniff again and try  
Once more to think what it is I am remembering,  
Always in vain....

Here the rhythmic pile up of verbs, the repetitions of "and", and the disruptive flow of "what it is I am remembering" underline the mental strain and futility of recalling the past. The series of negatives initiated in line 36 with the enumeration of "garden", "path", and "green bush", "father", "mother", and "playmate", only serve to heighten the failure. What he can observe in the present from watching the child, he cannot recall of his own childhood. The familiar homely scene in which one is surrounded by the assurances of father and mother (his beginnings, literally), and the ongoing life with another, namely, the companionship of a "playmate" - these are denied him. The homely image of "a bent path to a door" (1.22) has become in the poem's closure "Only an avenue, dark, nameless, without end" (1.39). The cold formality of "avenue", in contrast to "bent path", heightens the alien generality and strangeness of the concluding vision. The last line of the poem becomes progressively more reductive as it moves towards a more menacing "namelessness" in the failure to identify a first experience of the herb. The profound existential themes of birth and death, youth and age, are raised.

"Old Man", the fourth poem Thomas wrote, if tentative and exploratory in nature, is nonetheless representative of the poetry he was to write. It graphically places him at "the door" of his past, "lying in wait" for those hints that are the stuff of his poetry. His poems are the result of his holding in tension the surface paradoxes in an experience because of the deeper mysterious

unknown which is finally recognized and accepted. This poem is about a failure not only to trace an experience, but also to recognize a moment of happiness and an opportunity for integration through it. Thomas is convinced that the success of such a venture is always a gratuitous one. Such graced moments cannot be planned, the best one can do is to "[lie] in wait" for a door that may or may not be opened.

As early as 1906 Thomas had sounded this theme of "lying in wait". A passage in The Heart of England (some of which I have quoted in Ch.I in another context) clearly shows that he acknowledged in himself the tendency to allow bookish knowledge to eclipse the uniqueness of external nature. He humorously reflects:

I always carry out into the fields a vast  
baggage of prejudices from books and strong  
characters whom I have met. My going forth,  
although simple enough to the eye, is truly as  
pompous as that of a rajah who goes through the  
jungle on a tall and richly encrusted elephant,  
with a great retinue, and much ceremony and  
noise. As he frightens bird and beast, and  
tramples on herb and grass, so I scatter from my  
path many things which are lying in wait for a  
discoverer. There is no elephant more  
heavy-footed and no rifle more shattering than  
the egoism of an imitative brain.<sup>11</sup>

When it came to writing his poetry, however, Thomas had laid aside the "vast baggage from books". A poem called "Digging" (CP,p.169) shows how radical his surrender to external nature was:

Today I think  
Only with scents,- scents dead leaves yield,  
And bracken, and wild carrot's seed,  
And the square mustard field;

Odours that rise  
When the spade wounds the roots of tree,  
Rose, currant, raspberry, or goutweed,  
Rhubarb or celery;

The smoke's smell, too,  
Flowing from where a bonfire burns                   10  
The dead, the waste, the dangerous,  
And all to sweetness turns.

It is enough  
To smell, to crumble the dark earth,  
While the robin sings over again                   15  
Sad songs of Autumn mirth.

The paradox in this poem is that what appears to be destructive becomes regenerative. The "enough" (l.13) that Thomas settles for in the last stanza is not a compromise but a commitment.

The spirit of the poem was already present in an essay Thomas wrote in 1909. In the essay Thomas gives himself over to a sensuous banquet as he describes the transition from winter to spring. His concluding paragraph anticipates the poem:

Frost seems also to play a part in sharpening the characteristic odours of winter, such as the smell of cherry-wood or the currant bushes freshly cut by the pruner, of tar when they are dipping hop-poles, the soil newly turned and the roots exposed by the gardeners. And there is a peculiar languid sweetness in the smell of grass when the rime is melting rapidly under the sun. Above all, the fragrance of the weed-fire is never so sweet as when its bluish and white smoke heaves and trails heavily and takes wing at dawn over the frost and its crimson reflections of the flames and among the yellow tassels of the dark hedge.<sup>12</sup>

The prose extract emphasizes the transitional period between winter and spring more clearly. The poem, however, is more concentrated and the imagery of decay and regeneration is dominant in the poem. The only strong verb we associate with the speaker is "think" (l.1), which is qualified by the emphatically placed "Only with scents" in line 2. Just as it is "enough/ To smell, to crumble the dark earth" in order to be a part of the scene, so too it is enough for Thomas to be present as a focus of awareness, passively registering through

the senses the various and rich beauty of the captured moment. The gratuitous nature of the experience is emphasized by the lack of initiative on his part. The "Odours that rise" (l.5) depend on the chance happening, the spade "wounding the roots". The fire, at once destructive, purgative and regenerative, is one with the robin's song which is "sad" yet has mirth. The poem is likewise a response to, and an acceptance of, the polarities of an experience. Thomas allows the experience to be mediated, as it were, through him. This is done by the self-effacing language he has chosen to use. The poem's title is important in this respect, because the act of "Digging" is itself a form of mental disengagement and identification with the earth.

The poem testifies to the spirit's strength over a physical world of decay. It also indicates the way in which Thomas can be "content with discontent" ("The Glory", CP, p.119, l.19), or, as he expressed it in "Liberty":

And yet I still am half in love with pain,  
With what is imperfect, with both tears and mirth,  
With things that have an end, with life and earth,  
And this moon that leaves me dark within the door.  
("Liberty", CP, p.255, ll.24-27)

In another characteristically passive stance in a poem called "Over the Hills" (quoted below), Thomas surrenders himself in an act of recalling an experience. The poem toys with the imperfection of his remembrance, the failure to get in touch with the original quality of the experience, and the present intimations of that past experience which Thomas recognizes as a state of happiness.

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,  
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, 10  
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 15  
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.  
("Over the Hills", CP, p. 77)

The first seven and a half lines are factual description of the remembered experience. Such phrases as "new country" (1.3) and "half-gaps" (1.4) also suggest the spiritual and mysterious quality of the experience. The "inn" (1.7), too, is described with something more than fond association. The quality of being "kind" while not necessarily jarring with the idea of "strangers" does evoke something less than homeliness. I think Thomas wants to register a feeling which evokes something of the "new country", perhaps a state of blessedness or awe. However, he does not recognize the quality of that remembered moment until

... one day twelve months later suddenly  
[He] leaned upon [his] spade and saw it all,...

(1. 9-10)

It is while he is unconsciously receptive, when he is not thinking, that the past moment comes back to him. There is, however, no means by which he can recapture the moment of bliss after the initial recognition.

This striving for the past moment, so elusive in its quality, is expressed in the poem's rhyme scheme, which, in the first half of the poem, is so stretched that the chime is hardly discernible. The



opening line, for example, only finds its chime in 1.6; 1.3 in 1.7; the para-rhyme of "ridge" and "hedge" underlines, perhaps, the lack of fulfilment. As the chimes grow faint, so too the reality of the "new country", which Thomas seeks deliberately to evoke, grows faint. However, with the note of acceptance in the poem's conclusion, we have a closer and more emphatic rhyme scheme that seems to carry the authority of a more dogmatic stance which is clinched in the concluding couplet.

As its title implies, "Over the Hills" is not so much a place as a state. The poem is a quest for happiness, but for Thomas that happiness is of this earth. What he seeks is beyond the power of words to represent. Line 14 with the emphatic "Recall" and line 15 with the opening phrase "Was vain..." introduce the strong dismissal of the possibility of recall. The metaphor is built into the landscape he describes, "the new country", so that the impossibility of recall is a characteristic of the very experience he would remember.

In "The Unknown Bird" (CP, p. 85) and "The Word" (CP, p. 221), Thomas again yields characteristically to past experiences, making his poems out of the very uncertainties, teasing the thought through a web of language that is not really adequate to the experiences.

In "The Unknown Bird" he recalls a unique moment from the past (four or five years ago) when he heard a bird singing:

Three lovely notes he whistled, too soft to be heard  
If others sang; but others never sang  
In the great beech-wood all that May and June.  
No one saw him: I alone could hear him  
Though many listened. Was it four years  
Ago? or five? He never came again.

The first line opening with three words containing strong stresses: "Three lovely notes..." - suggests the notes of the bird. The second half of the line, however, suggests the mysterious and perhaps metaphysical nature of the experience. Here the line is balanced and qualified by "too soft to be heard", where the vowels are muted by the consonantal sequence of t's. The qualifications continue into l.2. The remaining four lines of the verse paragraph reflect the factual and mysterious aspects of the experience by means of which the elusive and quasi-spiritual nature of the experience is brought out. For example, the imprecision of "Was it four years / Ago? or five?" reinforces the internalization of the event, and helps to make its significance spiritual rather than experiential.

The second verse paragraph continues the established confusion of the factual and the mysteriously elusive. Lines 7-9, for example, recall the experience in matter of fact language, whereas lines 10-11 relapse into less verifiable, and by contrast, more subjective statement:

Oftenest when I heard him I was alone,  
Nor could I ever make another hear.  
La-la-la! he called, seeming far-off -  
As if a cock crowed past the edge of the world,                      10  
As if the bird or I were in a dream.

Thomas can claim only the sound of the bird as proof of its reality and it is a sound that is sometimes near but more often distant. In the manuscript poems of the Berg Collection<sup>13</sup> lines 9 and 12-14 read:

La la la! it called, seeming far-off,  
Yet that he travelled through the trees I knew,  
And sometimes neared me, though still behind some bar  
He sounded.<sup>14</sup>

Though Thomas has struck out "still behind some bar" in the second

draft of Poem 27 in the Berg Collection, the phrase does give some weight to the idea of the bird's mysterious nature and strengthens the idea already suggested in the poem of the bird's spiritual and therefore elusive quality.

Thomas continues to reflect on the nature of the experience:

Yet that he travelled through the trees and sometimes  
Neared me, was plain, though somehow distant still  
He sounded. All the proof is - I told men  
What I had heard.  
I never knew a voice, 15  
Man, beast, or bird, better than this. I told  
The naturalists; but neither had they heard  
Anything like the notes that did so haunt me  
I had them clear by heart and have them still.  
Four years, or five, have made no difference. Then 20  
As now that La-la-la! was bodiless sweet:  
Sad more than joyful it was, if I must say  
That it was one or other, but if sad  
'Twas sad only with joy too, too far off  
For me to taste it. But I cannot tell 25  
If truly never anything but fair  
The days were when he sang, as now they seem.  
This surely I know, that I who listened then,  
Happy sometimes, sometimes suffering  
A heavy body and a heavy heart, 30  
Now straightway, if I think of it, become  
Light as that bird wandering beyond my shore.

("The Unknown Bird", CP, pp. 85-87)

The recollection brings to Thomas a quasi-mystical experience which he describes in the last line as becoming "Light as that bird wandering beyond my shore". In The Happy-Go-Lucky Morgans, Thomas's one novel, perhaps autobiographical in many parts, "Mr Torrance" recalls the song of an unknown bird which proved a source of irritation to his father:

...I fancied it was up there watching the clouds  
and very distant things in hope of a change; but  
nothing came, and it sang again, and waited ever  
in vain. I laughed at it, and was not at all  
sorry to see it there, for it had stood on that  
perch in all the happy days before, and so long  
as it remained the days would be happy. My  
father did not like the bird, but he was often  
looking at it, and noted its absence as I did.  
The day after my sister died he threw a stone

at it - the one time I saw him angry - and killed it. But a week later came another, and when he heard it he burst into tears, and after that he never spoke of it but just looked up to see if it was there when he went in or out of the porch.<sup>15</sup>

I would agree with Edna Longley that "The Unknown Bird" may "represent the summons of [Thomas's] imagination".<sup>16</sup>

In terms of my theme the poem demonstrates again how Thomas allows the paradoxes or polarities of an experience to develop together in a poem. The bird is "unknown" yet the poet never doubts its reality, though he concedes that he alone heard it and that the "naturalists" were not able to identify it. The bird is at once near and distant and its song is "joyful" and "sad". While the bird could easily have become an opportunity of escape for Thomas, it has become, "If [he should] think of it" (l.31), a transforming influence.

As with "Digging", "Old Man" and other poems we have looked at, this poem suggests attitudes and postures essentially passive. From the moment we hear the rhythmically stressed "Three lovely notes", it seems as if Thomas is listening, "lying in wait", for the import of his own reflections. The use of the verb "to hear" is present in some form or other such as "haunt" (l.18), or "taste" (l.25). The syntax of:

But I cannot tell	25
If truly never anything but fair	
The days were when he sang, as now they seem.	

is so qualified with negatives, a conditional clause and words such as "seem" that it seems that Thomas is reluctant to opt for anything more explicit than the knowledge which he enunciates in line 28

which is private and subjective.

For Thomas the key to the past, and therefore to the very stuff of a poem, may often reside in the power of a single word to evoke a multitude of images and feelings. In such poems as "Old Man", "Adlestrop" and "Home"[3], we have examples of this. In a poem called "The Word" (CP, p.221) Thomas examines such a situation where the condition of receptivity, namely, the maintaining of an open mind, is as important as having an open ear.

The first part of the poem deals with a private and public past which are irrevocably lost in a limbo beyond recall.

There are so many things I have forgot,  
That once were much to me, or that were not,  
All lost, as is a childless woman's child  
And its child's children, in the undefiled  
Abyss of what can never be again. 5  
I have forgot, too, names of the mighty men  
That fought and lost or won in the old wars,  
Of kings and fiends and gods, and most of the stars.  
Some things I have forgot that I forget.

The opening couplet betrays a tone of indifference, perhaps, to what must after all have been trivia. The simile of the "childless woman" in l.3 suggests on the part of Thomas a loss of creative ability, a failure to preserve or propagate the past in his present experience. He successfully concretizes that loss by dramatizing the unrealized potential of the woman. The emphatically placed "All lost..." (l.3), the striking simile, and the finality of line 5, all serve to stress the sense of loss. But not all that has been lost is of equal value. The historical or public paraphernalia of memory clearly counts little for Thomas. Lines 6-9, with the litany of the lost, comes near to a tone of mockery. Thomas is preparing us for the transition, the really felt concern in the poem:



But lesser things there are, remembered yet,           10  
Than all the others.

Lesser in terms of historical and public importance, these "things" have the power to invigorate and renew the human spirit and feed the poet's mind:

One name that I have not -  
Though 'tis an empty thingless name - forgot  
Never can die because Spring after Spring  
Some thrushes learn to say it as they sing.  
(ll.11-14)

The "name" Thomas refers to is the sound of the thrushes' song, "thingless" in the sense that it does not have the significances of "mighty men" (l. 16) or "Kings", "fiends" and "gods" (l. 17). It is not a thing in the sense of objects of memory released from the past. Here the sound which = word = thrush is renewed "Spring after Spring" (l. 13) in the generation of nature, which, unlike "a childless woman's child" (l. 3), renews itself effortlessly, independent of human effort and volition. This renewal of experience, Thomas is at pains to point out, happens when the mind is caught off-guard, engaged by one or other of the senses so that we can, as it were, "think / Only with scents", that state of surrender which Thomas invites in "Digging" (CP,p.169, ll.1-2).

The poem continues:

There is always one at midday saying it clear           15  
And tart - the name, only the name I hear.  
While perhaps I am thinking of the elder scent  
That is like food, or while I am content  
With the wild rose scent that is like memory,  
This name suddenly is cried out to me                   20  
From somewhere in the bushes by a bird  
Over and over again, a pure thrush word.

What Thomas is describing here is that moment, perhaps intuitive, when meaning is accessible without the mediation of language. There



is no intellectual process required, no straining after partial recognitions of a lost past such as is dramatized in the first nine lines of the poem where the qualifications and hesitations suggest the futility of such an exercise. In the above section the meaning is, by contrast, "cried out to [him]... / Over and over again, a pure thrush word" (ll.20 and 22).

This poem again illustrates the necessity for surrender to the renewing powers of experience and the need for the human will to be subservient to the disclosures inherent in nature. The poet's function, Thomas appears to be saying here, is to be willing to "[lie] in wait" for those moments.

#### ii. Thomas's Poetic Voice

In "Aspens" (CP, p.233) Thomas examines the nature of his poetic voice. Characteristically he identifies it with the passive image of the aspen that must do as it does. In the poem the aspens are apart from "the inn, the smithy, and the shop" (l.2) and appear not to have any part in the clamour of life described in the second stanza. The poem opens:

All day and night, save winter, every weather,  
Above the inn, the smithy, and the shop,  
The aspens at the cross-raods talk together  
Of rain, until their last leaves fall from the top.

The "whisper" of the aspens mentioned in line 9 is clearly heard in the opening line; it is a fairly accurate description of the voice of Thomas for above all he wished to avoid the rhetorical excesses that characterized much of the poetry of his day. A typical poem by Edward Thomas has the quality of being overheard. The elements in the first stanza we readily associate with Thomas. There is the air,

the wind and rain, but there is also the cycle of day and night and the processional change of the seasons.

As the second stanza makes clear, the world of Thomas, the world he wishes to be associated with as a poet, is that of the smithy and the inn, their sounds representing an unbroken continuity with an unchanging past.

Out of the blacksmith's cavern comes the ringing                   5  
Of hammer, shoe, and anvil; out of the inn  
The clink, the hum, the roar, the random singing -  
The sounds that for these fifty years have been.

In his poem Thomas celebrates those sounds again and in doing so propagates them.

The aspens endure as a presence above all the noise of that rural life:

The whisper of the aspens is not drowned,  
And over lightless pane and footless road,                   10  
Empty as sky, with every other sound  
Not ceasing, calls their ghosts from their abode,...

The poem is a subtle competition between sounds, the sounds of life, sharp, monosyllabic, metallic, and the pervading sounds of the aspens, the poetic spirit at work transforming to a new significance that which is worn and familiar. This inspiration and influence (the aspens are not unlike Coleridge's "Eolian Harp" in their active and passive functions)<sup>17</sup> does not merely coexist with the natural world but reflects and heightens it. The whisper of the aspens evokes a more spiritualized world:

A silent smithy, a silent inn, nor fails  
In the bare moonlight or the thick-furred gloom,  
In tempest or the night of nightingales,                   15  
To turn the cross-roads to a ghostly room.

It is in the last two stanzas that Thomas is explicit in his self-identification with the aspens:

And it would be the same were no house near.  
Over all sorts of weather, men, and times,  
Aspens must shake their leaves and men may hear  
But need not listen, more than to my rhymes. 20

Whatever wind blows, while they and I have leaves  
We cannot other than an aspen be  
That ceaselessly, unreasonably grieves,  
Or so men think who like a different tree.

Though Thomas had a limited recognition as "Edward Eastaway", he was never in his lifetime to obtain the praise and recognition that later years bestowed on his poetry. When he offered the poems to fellow poets, they failed to recognize their worth. Harold Monro passed them over for inclusion in his series on Georgian poets, W.H. Hudson was not enthusiastic about them, editors looked to the established young "trees" then appearing. In the face of this, Thomas's faith in his own poetry gave him the strength to write on and to endure his disappointments. The "must" in l.19. came from the knowledge of the poetry of his time. He was one of the best critics of the day, recognized the worth of Frost, and may be said to have established that poet in England through his reviews of his early work. He first recognized the promise of Ezra Pound and the worth of W.H. Davies.<sup>18</sup> With true humility he knew that his own poetry was good. He knew above all that his poetry was a response to that which was most naturally himself.

His poetry was often a response to the deep unreasonable grief within him.<sup>19</sup> "Beauty" (CP, p. 97), written on 21 January 1915, looks back autobiographically to a time when Thomas knew something akin to the experience of the dark night of the soul. His wife Helen often mentions the "cloud" that would come over him. She writes:

After a ghastly hour or two with supper still uneaten on the kitchen table he would say: "Go to bed, I'm not coming," and I would know that he would sit up all the night, and in the morning would be deeper in despair than ever - or that he would go for a walk till morning, and perhaps from the silence of the night and from the natural sounds of early dawn, and from the peace of solitude and the beauty of intangible things he would find healing and calm.<sup>20</sup>

At the time of writing this poem Thomas had begun to find a relative peace and fulfilment. His friendship with Robert Frost had much to do with this and, of course, his new found freedom in poetry. In "Beauty" he is therefore not describing a present mood but recalling a moment from the past. The objectivity he brings to the experience is reflected in the powerfully apt images. The poem opens with the agitated rhythms of mental confusion:

What does it mean? Tired, angry, and ill at ease,  
No man, woman or child, alive could please  
Me now. And yet I almost dare to laugh  
Because I sit and frame an epitaph -  
'Here lies all that no one loved of him                      5  
And that loved no one.'  
(ll. 1-6)

His old response to the state described in the first two lines of the poem was to search for therapy in nature, literally to walk the mood out of himself. He is now able to confront the situation in a poem. The mock epitaph helps him to laugh, if only for a moment, and to find some objectivity. But this does not plumb the matter deeply enough, for "in a trice that whim/ Has wearied".

The river images offer a more concrete and satisfying "objective correlative" of the poet's malady:

But, though I am like a river  
At fall of evening while it seems that never  
Has the sun lighted it or warmed it, while  
Cross breezes cut the surface to a file,                      10

This heart, some fraction of me, happily  
Floats through the window even now to a tree  
Down in the misting, dim-lit, quiet vale,  
Not like a pewit that returns to wail  
For something it has lost, but like a dove  
That slants unswerving to its home and love. 15  
There I find my rest, as through the dusk air  
Flies what yet lives in me: Beauty is there.  
(ll. 7-18)

The image of the cold, dark and slow-moving river agitated by "cross breezes" which "cut the surface to a file" brings out his sense of desolation and torment. The unusual analogy of a river's surface as a file heightens the harshness of the experience. Though the river comparison is striking, its force is diminished somewhat by the syntactical ordering. The image is introduced by "though", thereby relegating it to a concessional clause. The main clause is a positive assertion of hope which ends with the emphatically positive ideas (expressed in the subordinate clause) of "home" and "love".

The "epitaph" construction of lines 4-6a sets up the main division in the poem between the poet's passive and active presences. In line 5 we are invited to see him as dead. The river image, equally passive, depicts a more self-pitying mood. Line 11 introduces the change, a change that does not depend on the poet's will but rather on a mutual affinity between the subject and the object as he responds to the "beauty" of the scene. The verbs "floats" (l. 12) and "slants" (l. 16) support this reading. The image of the bird is reminiscent, perhaps, of the soul leaving the body. In this instance, however, there is the suggestion of integration in the several meanings of "rest" in line 17. Thomas was to admit several times that the writing of poetry was a spiritual reawakening for him - a recognition of beauty, perhaps.

The poem's movement through several forms of the singular

pronoun (I, me, him) registers the stages in the transformation of the poet's mind until the penultimate line where he asserts "I find my rest", the "I" being the integrated personality. The poem demonstrates again how Thomas can use a passive stance to work through an experience, waiting on an unforced development rather than imposing something extraneous.

If Thomas can use nature as a symbol of his "rest", as in the poem "Beauty", this surrender may also lead to restlessness, as in "Interval". On the surface the poem appears to be merely descriptive:

Gone the wild day. A wilder night Coming makes way For brief twilight.	
Where the firm soaked road Mounts beneath pines To the high beech wood It almost shines.	5
The beeches keep A stormy rest, Breathing deep Of wind from the west.	10
The wood is black, With a misty steam. Above it the rack Breaks for one gleam.	15
But the woodman's cot By the ivied trees Awakens not To light or breeze.	20
It smokes aloft Unwavering: It hunches soft Under storm's wing.	
It has no care For gleam or gloom: It stays there While I shall roam, Die and forget	25



The hill of trees,  
The gleam, the wet,  
This roaring peace.

30

("Interval", CP, p.39)

A closer look reveals, however, that the poem is concerned with more than weather and landscape. Thomas appears to be presenting mimetically the physical world, its force and wildness, stresses and tensions, stretched out over the short-lined stanzas. The terse, rhymed quatrains with their persistent enjambments and energetically placed verbs seem to mime plastic nature. The stanzas appear to be compact, for most of them are ended by a full stop. The rhyme scheme, however, tugs at that compactness, and indeed a closer look reveals tensions within the quatrains.

In stanza one the first line seems to come to an abrupt end at the full-stop. However, its sense is carried on by the half chime of "wilder" in line 2 and carried even more rapidly by the participle "coming" (l. 3) and the verb phrase "makes way". The two verbs in line 3 are fleetingly suspended in movement by the rhetorical pause required after the participle "coming" and the necessity to complete the enjambment to line 4. Within the stanza we have the contrasts of "wild day" and "wilder night"; then the degrees of "Gone", "Coming" and "makes way" set up their own momentum within the stanza which ends with the more relaxed line 4.

Stanza two gets its energy from the inversion. The adverbial clause, made interesting by the rich detail of its phrases "firm soaked road", "beneath pines", "To the high beech wood", is made to reach out to its main clause: "It almost shines". Again, as in stanza one, the verbs imply the force of nature. The road, symbol of some degree of human presence,<sup>21</sup> "mounts" and "shines" before being

lost in the "beech wood".

Stanza three, with the oxymoron "stormy rest"(l. 10) and the rhythmic effects of lines 11-12 where rest and storm are implicit, maintains the tensions of stanzas one and two.

Stanza four contrasts the wood and sky. The "gleam", perhaps the short-lived poetic fulfilment of Thomas himself, is held in tension between twilight and night.

The image of the "woodman's cot" in stanza five, the subject of further description in stanzas six and seven, is contrasted with the "I" in line 28. (The "cot" rests secure "under storm's wing", l.24.) Thomas sets up the deliberate romantic image of the cot as a contrast to the starker "I" which in its quest has none of that stability suggested, almost emblematically, in the images of "ivied trees", and the "smoke" that rises "unwavering". Thomas, though he lived in several country cottages, was never able to see his domestic surroundings in such tranquillity. In such poems as "The Signpost" (CP, p.23) and "The Other" (CP, pp.27-33), early significant poems (to be treated later), we have an insight into the nature of this reconciliatory tension which Thomas calls "This roaring peace", line 32 of "Interval".

It is only towards the end of the poem that we meet the "I". The first six stanzas have been mainly descriptive but the forces of nature, essentially passive, in the poem take on a more active importance because of their elemental force. When the poet does appear in the landscape, it is for the briefest of moments, "while I shall roam,/ Die and forget". Not only is his life a brief

"interval" against the background of nature and its forces, but Thomas also with typical self-effacement, leaves the last line to nature, "making way" for a reconciliation, "This roaring peace".

Thomas's passivity often takes the form of an unwillingness to be dogmatic, or to use other terms, of an openness to the polarities of an experience. A characteristic poem contains the working out of two points of view, two sets of contrasting images, or perhaps two voices. A typical example is the poem "Two Pewits" (CP, p.139).

Under the after-sunset sky	
Two pewits sport and cry,	
More white than is the moon on high	
Riding the dark surge silently;	
More black than earth. Their cry	5
Is the one sound under the sky.	
They alone move, now low, now high,	
And merrily they cry	
To the mischievous Spring sky,	
Plunging earthward, tossing high,	10
Over the ghost who wonders why	
So merrily they cry and fly,	
Nor choose 'twixt earth and sky,	
While the moon's quarter silently	
Rides, and earth rests as silently.	15

Ostensibly this poem is about two pewits at dusk. They are described in flight as they move "now low, now high" and as "merrily they cry". Rhythmically the poem suggests their physical movement. The poem does, however, invite a closer look as we see through the eyes of the perceiver who "wonders why". The poem is a vivid presentation of the universe as tension within stillness, and stillness within tension. Caught between earth and sky, the pewits are "More white than is the moon on high" and "More black than earth". An added ambivalence is suggested in the words "sport and cry". The observed scene may be regarded as the externalization of a human emotion that is concerned with choice and the alternatives or polarities from which one chooses life or death. The poet is present as a "ghost",

in a position of neutrality between two worlds and unable to make a choice or understand fully the options. The poem "Liberty" (CP, p. 225) makes explicit what is hinted at here: "I still am half in love with pain, / ... With things that have an end, with life and earth" (ll. 24-26). The moon is the physical light that evokes this neutral consciousness. In "Two Pewits" Thomas sees and embraces both parts of the opposition simultaneously without real commitment to either.

In "Birds' Nests" (CP, p. 43), we have Thomas the naturalist, the keen observer of minutiae of natural life, who could rightly boast to his wife Helen, in a poem entitled "Helen" (CP, p. 299), of his "clear eye" (l. 7), one of the gifts he would bestow on her.

The opening stanza, general in nature, places the poem's movement within the seasonal cycle. Nests which had been built in spring, enduring through summer and unnoticed by the poet, are finally revealed by autumn winds. This seasonal cycle is rounded off in the last stanza by the inclusion of winter. The poem ends on a regenerative note which hails a new cycle of life as the nest becomes a veritable Noah's ark of new life.

In stanza one we have an interesting syntactical structure:

The summer nests uncovered by autumn wind,  
Some torn, others dislodged, all dark,  
Everyone sees them: low or high in tree,  
Or hedge, or single bush, they hang like a mark.

The phrase "Everyone sees them..." is so placed that it looks both backwards to lines 1 and 2, and forwards to lines 3 and 4. The rhyme "dark" is aptly supported by "mark" to bring out the obvious presence now of the hitherto concealed nests. This structuring by means of which we experience the concrete items in the poem is yet

another way by which Thomas allows the physical, external world to impinge on our senses. There is no attempt to stand in front of the observation, to obscure it with subjective impressions. The only word in this stanza that suggests something more than the physical reality is, perhaps, the word "mark" in line 4 where the sense could also be that each mark was an indication of what he had missed.

In the second stanza Thomas establishes a contrast between the "Everyone" of line 3 and the "I" of line 6. The "shame" that he admits is the shame of the naturalist or expert who has to acknowledge his limitations. It may be that Thomas the poet is speaking in this admission. The point of his missing the nests is, after all, the point to the poem. The lost opportunity, however, enhances the mysterious and elusive in nature, endearing it more to us.

Since there's no need of eyes to see them with        5  
I cannot help a little shame  
That I missed most, even at eye's level, till  
The leaves blew off and made the seeing no game.

In the third stanza Thomas is playfully dismissive of his failure to notice the nests:

'Tis a light pang. I like to see the nests  
Still in their places, now first known,                10  
At home and by far roads. Boys never found them,  
Whatever jays or squirrels may have done.

He does admit to the pleasure of knowing about the nests as a private and intimate secret. The word "like" in line 9 has a more than conventional connotation for Thomas. In "Old Man", for example, he writes of the herb: "The herb itself I like not, but for certain/ I love it, as some day the child will love it" (ll. 9-10); later he writes: "...I cannot like the scent,/ Yet I would rather give up







In his fine poem "Words" (CP, p.217) Thomas was perhaps more explicit about this passive role, while at the same time making it clear that the poet stands "in waiting" with the knowledge of his craft. Both ideas are implicit in the poem:

Out of us all  
That make rhymes,  
Will you choose  
Sometimes -  
As the winds use 5  
A crack in a wall  
Or a drain,  
Their joy or their pain  
To whistle through -  
Choose me, 10  
You English words?

In the opening stanza we have the assertion that he is a maker of rhymes (an active role) and yet the more powerful statement in the imagery is the wish that he be chosen as an instrument (ll.6-7). His thought is not to press words into service for his own schemes but to be at their disposal.

As Thomas's prayer is answered and he is indeed "chosen", the sheer abundance of words, and yet the discipline of his rhymes, gives substance to line 57 which describes the poet as "fixed and free". The poem is "fixed and free" in both its sheer indulgent abundance of imagery, and the rapidity of its glancing similes and the continual pause and pull of its rhymes. The poem then is self-fulfilling in the realization of the poet's wish.

The freedom which the poem manifests is the product of its deliberate construction. Thomas explains the rhyme scheme (which we shall examine later) in poetic terms in the last stanza where the images of "dance" (l. 52) and "climb" (l. 54) are used respectively

to suggest the spontaneous and chance aspect of creativity and the more self-conscious aspect of craftsmanship. In terms of these two ideas of "dance" and "climb[ing]" one may see the poem's movement as a process of swift enjambments and moments of stasis, at one time sprinting and at another climbing, rhymes looping sometimes, at other times acting as steps in the "climb" which ends with the poet "standing" at an apotheosis, "In ecstasy,/ Fixed and free".

In the second stanza there follows a group of similes that collectively attempt to state something qualitative about the nature of the poet's medium, words:

I know you:	
You are light as dreams,	
Tough as oak,	15
Precious as gold,	
As poppies and corn,	
Or an old cloak:	
Sweet as our birds	
To the ear,	20
As the burnet rose	
In the heat	
Of Midsummer:	
Strange as the races	
Of dead and unborn:	
Strange and sweet	25
Equally,	
And familiar,	
To the eye,	
As the dearest faces	
That a man knows,	30
And as lost homes are:	
But though older far	
Than oldest yew,-	
As our hills are, old,-	
Worn new	35
Again and again;	
Young as our streams	
After rain:	
And as dear	
As the earth which you prove	40
That we love,...	

In Thomas's long poem "Lob" the function of Lob is to name places and things, to make a union between man and his world, a world which is at once strange and known. We know reality through

the words by which we grasp it. In the poem "Words" there is the relationship of human emotion and the otherness of the physical world. We experience at once the contrasts between "dreams" and "oak" and the range of feeling in lines 15-17. "Sweet as our birds" (l. 18) recalls the "pure thrush word" in Thomas's poem "The Word" (CP, p.221). Just as we strive to describe the quality of an object through words, Thomas seeks through images to render the quality of words.

Words reflect the past and look to the future, hence the comparison, "Strange as the races / Of dead and unborn". The "K" rhyme here (see p.99 below) sets up its own particular contrast between abstract and concrete items in the two lines; the "M" rhyme, too, offers a playful association with "rose" and "knows". The opening line "I know you", is developed by the whole stanza as it runs through a range of emotions and expressions that clarify or render more complex the "love" that Thomas feels. Lines 39-41, syntically part of lines 12-13, seek to bring all the images together in "earth" (l.40): "I know you:/ You are.../...as dear / As the earth which you prove/ That we love" (ll.12-13 and 39-41). To paraphrase: Because we have, like Job, created the world through words, these in turn through place names, through the descriptions and images in the written and spoken word, reflect back our love of the earth.

The penultimate stanza focuses on the "sweetness" of places, particular places that evoke special memories for Thomas. Lines 50-51 announce a common theme in Thomas, the relationship between names and things in the context of memory and the recalling of an experience. In "Adlestrop" (CP, p.71) that name is the key to the re-living of the experience:

Yes, I remember Adlestrop-  
The name, because one afternoon  
Of heat the express-train drew up there  
Unwontedly. It was late June.

The steam hissed. Someone cleared his throat. 5  
No one left and no one came  
On the bare platform. What I saw  
Was Adlestrop - only the name  
And willows, willow-herb, and grass,  
And meadowsweet, and haycocks dry, 10  
No whit less still and lonely fair  
Than the high cloudlets in the sky.

And for that minute a blackbird sang  
Close by, and round him, mistier,  
Farther and farther, all the birds 15  
Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire.

Not only does the name release the experience, it also becomes a centre from which the poet reaches out, transcending the limited time and place, enlarging his awareness. In "Words" Thomas wants to savour those realities (things) that are released by words (names) but which are not always close to consciousness. In "Old Man", too, he is aware of this dimension as he struggles to recall the past.

The last stanza of "Words" takes up the petitionary tone of the first:

Let me sometimes dance  
With you,  
Or climb  
Or stand perchance 55  
In ecstasy,  
Fixed and free  
In a rhyme,  
As poets do.

The poem responds to the petition amply, for Thomas has indeed danced verbally, his rhymes leaping and vaulting stanzaic spaces. The poem has also been a "climb". This becomes apparent as the imagery in the second half of the poem takes on the panoramic perspective of a great landscape viewed from a mountain summit.

There is a biographical proof that much of the poem was written while Thomas was on one of his journeys. J.W. Haines relates that Thomas composed the poem:

...partly on a bicycle ride between Gloucester  
and May Hill and partly on the Hill itself,  
whence, sitting down, he could see the Hills  
of Wales,

"And Herefordshire  
And the villages there,"

as he wrote. He brought it down, written out,  
to breakfast next morning, and finally polished  
it on the road to Coventry in the afternoon.<sup>22</sup>

The reference, then, in the last stanza is to the real physical "climb" that Thomas made on his journey and to the "ecstasy" which, in his poetic fulfilment, he was to experience. There are few poems in Thomas's work that so joyfully celebrate the poet's medium, words, and their influence upon the physical world through which we receive them back again incarnate in the apprehended beauty of nature. Edward Thomas is at their service "lying in wait", "fixed and free".

The complexity of the rhyme scheme (see diagram, p. 99 below) is such that when we have read the rhymes of the first eleven lines, namely, ABCBCADDEFG, we have touched through rhyme a substantial part of the poem. These rhymes chime throughout the poem. (The number of rhymes in the poem is one short of the twenty-six letters of the alphabet; one is tempted to think Thomas meant to have twenty-six.) An explanation of the rhymes reveals much about the poem and the poet.

The poem opens with an ABC rhyme scheme which sets the opening



six lines off from the stanza (except for some remote coincidences of sound). There are, however, links with the rest of the poem through assonance and repetition, for example, "Choose" (l. 3) and "Choose" (l. 10) and the assonance of "choose" (l. 3), "through" (l. 9), "Choose" (l. 10) and "You" (l. 11). When we move away from the ABC scheme, the DD couplet of lines 7 and 8 takes us into the heart of the poem to lines 36 and 38 (line 36 is caught up in the oxymoron "worn new" [l. 35]) and the couplet DD participates in this development. The E rhyme is more embracing, touching as it does the last line (l. 59), "As poets do", where the sense reflects the development from the metaphorical "whistle through" to "poets do". The E rhyme also touches lines 12, 33, 35, and 53. The F rhyme fits structurally within the enfolding of the E rhyme which embraces lines 10, 26 and the couplet 56 and 57.

The G rhyme, lines 11 and 18, I find interesting because it brings together, in "words" (l. 11) and "birds" (l. 18), the fascination that birds had for Thomas and their relationship to poetry and words. The idea of birdsong, a pure language and poetic intuition, is central to "The Unknown Bird" (CP, p.85); the images of the poet and the bird are also brought together in the poem entitled "M.E.T." (CP, pp. 277-9):

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

(ll. 37-40)

Other poems reflect this relationship of bird-word-poet. In "March" (CP, pp.15-17) the "thrushes" (l. 16) are vehicles of intuition. In "Snow" (CP, p.69) the bird is part of the "child'[s]" "sighing" and vision of nature; in "Adlestrop" (CP, pp.71-73) "a blackbird"

(l.13), and "all the birds / Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire", represent the transformation of a very ordinary moment into something memorable. In "The Cuckoo" (CP, p.81) the bird, herald of spring, is a bird associated with the death of a man the poet knew. "The Owl" (CP, p.119) also plays a transforming role in "telling [the poet] plain[ly] what [he] escaped" (l. 11). In "Two Pewits" (CP, p.139) the birds are an occasion for the poet, "the ghost who wonders why" (l.11), to reflect on the inherent contrasts in experience. In ["Health"] (CP, p.179) the bird in lines 40-46 is used as an image of the poet's mood. "She Dotes" (CP, pp.185-187), "The Word" (CP, p. 221), and "Sedge-Warblers" (CP, pp.213-215) are all concerned with the relationship of birdsong and the communication of intuition, and the limitations of the word. Other poems containing this theme of man and bird are "The Thrush" (CP, pp.251-253) and "I never saw the land before" (CP, p.311), especially stanzas four and five. In this poem Thomas as poet sees the inadequacy of language for the expression of certain kinds of feeling. In "After you speak" (CP, p.329), "the lark" (l.10) is an image of mediation between the speaker and the "you" of line 1. In "Merfyn" (CP, p.293) Thomas sees his own poetic work in terms of "a blackbird's song" (l. 17).

To return to the discussion of rhyme in "Words", the H rhyme scheme forms yet another section within the F scheme, in the rhymes "dreams" (l. 13) and "streams" (l. 37). The lines balance nicely as does the thematic admixture of dreams and streams. Just as words and dreams reveal an inner life, so too the streams that spring from the earth reveal its inner resources.

In this section there is also a series of contrasts such as

"joy" and "pain" (1.8); "strange" (11.23 and 25) and "familiar" (1.27); the present as expressed in lines 29 and 30 and the past as in line 31; and finally the oxymoron "Worn new" (1.35). There is a more concentrated variety of rhyme and rhyme categories in the middle section of the poem; for example, the rhymes HIJKLMNPOQ appear between lines 13 and 37. "Eye" is a half rhyme (1.28) which is partnered by "Equally" in line 26.

If one might think of rhymes in terms of an octave in music then there is an interesting range of rhyme between "ear" (1.19) and "dear" (1.39). If we think of these as the extremes in the octave, we could regard "Midsummer" (1.22), "familiar" (1.27), "are" (1.31) and "far" (1.32) as a minor scale within the octave of sound.

### iii. Edward Thomas's Rural Muse

"Lob" (CP, pp.159-167) may be read as a quest for Thomas's rural muse personified in the collective personality of "Lob" who appears in Thomas's prose, and elsewhere in his poetry, under various guises of the old man, wise in country matters and steeped in a forgotten past, a past often threatened by change. The poem invites contrast with "The Other" (CP, p.27) where the quest is for self-integration. We shall be looking at this poem in the next chapter. The discussion of "Lob" that follows owes much to Edna Longley's comments on the poem (Longley, pp.230-253).

Thomas must surely have had Lob in mind when he wrote these words in The Country:

I warrant, every man who was ever any good had  
a little apple-faced man or woman like this  
somewhere not very far back in his pedigree.  
Where else will he get his endurance, knowledge  
of the earth, his feeling for life and for what

that old man called God? When a poet writes, I believe he is often only putting into words what such another old man puzzled out among the sheep in a long lifetime. You cannot persuade me that the peak-faced poets think of all these things about earth and men by themselves.<sup>23</sup>

The poem opens with a reference to Wiltshire as a setting. Thomas had spent many boyhood holidays in Wiltshire, and it was, of course, there that he met one of the living incarnations of Lob, David Uzzell. "Lob" must surely be an oblique tribute to the man.

Wiltshire, Edna Longley reminds us, is also the home region of Richard Jefferies, Thomas's earliest and most profound influence. Jefferies was one of the great visual influences on Thomas. Such books as The Gamekeeper at Home and The Amateur Poacher opened up for the young Thomas a world of observation, minute and panoramic. They drew on no other source but the countryside which Jefferies knew and loved.

In the opening chapter of Richard Jefferies, Thomas offers a description of Jefferies' Wiltshire that is rivalled only by Gilbert White's descriptions of Selbourne. Edna Longley notes that for Thomas "Wiltshire was a rich imaginative seam concentrating every stratum of civilization in England".<sup>24</sup>

In the opening lines we are immediately introduced to the theme of the quest:

At hawthorn-time in Wiltshire travelling  
In search of something chance would never bring,  
An old man's face, by life and weather cut  
And coloured,- rough, brown, sweet as any nut,-  
A land face, sea-blue-eyed, - hung in my mind                      5  
When I had left him many a mile behind.

The result of the quest will not be a "chance" epiphany, or an experience that will merely throw some light upon the poet's own personality. In this case Thomas knows the nature of that which he is seeking; it is a past culture, a tradition, and he has clues about what to search for. In "The Other" Thomas is not sure, for what he seeks is a part of himself. The "Old Man" of l.3 is one in a long gallery of Thomas's originals. Like the old man in Wordsworth's "Resolution and Independence", the legendary character Lob is the product of nature. In Thomas's poem he is submerged in nature and yet is alive in the names of all its places, and in the living folk-lore of the people. In lines 3-5, he is identified with nature, his face "by life and weather cut", "land face" with "sea-blue eyes". The phrase "hung in my mind" (l. 5) suggests also the spiritual nature of Lob, for he is as much a tradition and culture as a living person.

Edna Longley notes that "There are really three Lobs in the poem."<sup>25</sup> There is the historical part of the poem in which Thomas shows much delight in discussing the inroads of Lob into every walk of rural life; there is the squire introduced in line 43 who, in his knowledge of Lob, reveals himself as a veritable candidate for that position; finally, there is Thomas himself who in his knowledge of both the tradition and the living people reveals himself as the poetic progenitor of the Lob who is celebrated and propagated in the poem bearing his name. Of all the manifestations of Lob, the poetic one that Thomas represents and which keeps open the paths on which the tradition thrives, is the most important. Thomas, too, knows those paths:

All he said was: 'Nobody can't stop'ee. It's  
A footpath, right enough. You see those bits  
Of mounds - that's where they opened up the barrows



Sixty years since, while I was scaring sparrows. 10  
They thought as there was something to find there,  
But couldn't find it, by digging, anywhere.'

In these lines Thomas says "Yes" to following the direction of the Lob figure. There is the suggestion in lines 11-12 that the quest will not be successful if carried out in the over-purposeful manner of the early professional excavators who found nothing through their digging. If Thomas's digging is to be successful then it must be carried out in a spirit that is open to more than chance, a spirit which is not quenched by mere rational expectation ("thought", l.11) such as that of the early diggers who left behind only "those bits / Of mounds".

Clearly the object of the quest is in the questing. Thomas considers some of the problems attendant on the quest and in doing so turns up some of the verbal artifacts that reveal Lob's trail:

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 15  
My memory could not decide, because  
There was both Alton Barnes and Alton Priors.

In this rhythmically strained passage with its hesitations and qualifications Thomas offers a precise reason for the futility of the quest for Lob and in doing so conveys his obsession with it. The place-names are a confusion of names of similar sounding villages, and to add to the confusion, they are all much alike:

All had their churches, graveyards, farms, and byres,  
Lurking to one side up the paths and lanes,  
Seldom well seen except by aeroplanes; 20  
And when bells rang, or pigs squealed, or cocks crowed,  
Then only heard. Ages ago the road  
Approached. The people stood and looked and turned,  
Nor asked it to come nearer, nor yet learned  
To move out there and dwell in all men's dust. 25  
And yet withal they shot the weathercock, just  
Because 'twas he crowed out of tune, they said:

So now the copper weathercock is dead.  
If they had reaped their dandelions and sold  
Them fairly, they could have afforded gold. 30

All the villages mentioned are in the South-east part of Wiltshire and were probably quite remote even to Thomas's contemporaries. They depict a world that was already beginning to change and which would be no more after World War I. Like the inn in Thomas's poem "Up in the Wind" (CP, p.3) these villages are cut off from the better known routes. They constitute a world apart and a way of life that has its own intrinsic rhythms and routines.

In the rhythm of "...Ages ago the road / Approached" Thomas cleverly suggests the tentative encroachments of the outside world. The emphatic placing of "road" at the end of a line, and the equally emphatic placing of "Approached" at the opening of the next and the tentative movement of the line: "The people stood and looked and turned", suggests the caution of the people who inhabit these remote and timeless villages. Suspicious of outside influences, they assert their own life and values. The people of the villages, however, are as capable of universal folly as other folk; this seems to be the point to the incident in line 26 about the weathercock.

Just as the village where Thomas first met Lob is illusive, so too is his identity among the locals (though he could be one of them):

Many years passed, and I went back again  
Among those villages, and I looked for men  
Who might have known my ancient. He himself  
Had long been dead or laid upon the shelf,  
I thought. One man I asked about him roared 35  
At my description: ' 'Tis old Bottlesford  
He means, Bill.' But another said: 'Of course,  
It was Jack Button up at the White Horse.  
He's dead, sir, these three years.' This lasted till  
A girl proposed Walker of Walker's Hill, 40

'Old Adam Walker. Adam's Point you'll see  
Marked on the maps.'

Everyone has a different idea about the identity of Lob, and of course this is, in a sense, the whole point of the poem. Lob is as much a spiritual as a physical presence. The irony in these lines is the fact that the types Thomas is talking with are, in their own way, aspirants to the role of Lob. The only precise knowledge we are given is in lines 40-42, and the wry afterthought that it is "Marked on the maps", a typical rustic rejoinder. The name "Old Adam Walker" is full of symbolic resonances. Thomas had previously referred to Lob as "my ancient" (l. 33). As we shall see later, Lob is something of an Adam in his role as a namer of objects and places in the rural world. The name the girl proposes (l. 40) also suggests that which is timeless and yet also on the move.

Of the men Thomas speaks to, one comes to the fore. We hear his voice in line 43 and it occupies most of the poem until line 145. He is the squire's son, and here he is responding to the girl's suggestions about Lob:

'That was her roguery'  
The next man said. He was a squire's son  
Who loved wild bird and beast, and dog and gun  
For killing them. He had loved them from his birth,      45  
One with another, as he loved the earth.  
'The man may be like Button, or Walker, or  
Like Bottlesford, that you want, but far more  
He sounds like one I saw when I was a child.  
I could almost swear to him. The man was wild      50  
And wandered. His home was where he was free.  
Everybody has met one such man as he....'

Lines 42-46, the description of the squire's son, could pass for a description of Lob; he loves wild bird and beast "as he loved the earth". However, it is the claims he makes to knowing about Lob that are impressive. The scope of his knowledge, national rather than

parochial, and the authority of his assertions, mark him out from the other voices.

This section of the poem, including the girl's interjection, the squire's son's intervention, and Thomas's short sketch of the latter, raises some interesting points structurally. First, Thomas has the girl put forward a fairly definite view about the identification of Lob; and, as we have seen, it has some strong symbolic overtones. Secondly, the squire's son dismisses it and then goes on to give an account of a meeting with Lob which is related in such poetic terms as to suggest that the squire's son has more than a hearsay interest or involvement in the matter. Thirdly, we have Thomas the poet who presides over all of these three personae. What we have within the poem is a forcefield of varying types of Lob influence; names are suggested, claims and counter claims are made, and through it all Lob emerges in varying forms of clarity.

The long passage, the speech of the squire's son, is of course the vision of Thomas as poet ( a Lob figure in his poetic role as namer, originator of sayings and propagator of the rural tradition). We should be aware, then, that it is Thomas, as Lob figure in the poetic sense above, who speaks through the Squire's son who in turn describes to us his memories of Lob. What we have, therefore, is an intricate set of Chinese boxes all contained within the poem "Lob".

We listen, then, simultaneously to Lob describing and being described:

Does he keep clear old paths that no one uses  
But once a life-time when he loves or muses?  
He is English as this gate, these flowers, this mire. 55  
And when at eight years old Lob-lie-by-the-fire  
Came in my books, this was the man I saw.

He had been in England as long as dove and daw  
Calling the wild cherry tree the merry tree,  
The rose campion Bridget-in-her-bravery; 60  
And in a tender mood he, as I guess,  
Christened one flower Live-in-idleness,  
And while he walked from Exeter to Leeds  
One April called all cuckoo-flowers Milkmaids.  
From him old herbal Gerard learnt, as a boy, 65  
To name wild clematis the Traveller's-joy.  
Our blackbirds sang no English till his ear  
Told him they called his Jan Toy "Pretty dear".  
(She was Jan Toy the Lucky, who, having lost  
A shilling, and found a penny loaf, rejoiced.) 70  
For reasons of his own to him the wren  
Is Jenny Pooter. Before all other men  
'Twas he first called the Hog's Back the Hog's Back.  
That Mother Dunch's Buttocks should not lack  
Their name was his care. He too could explain 75  
Totteridge and Totterdown and Juggler's Lane:  
He knows, if anyone. Why Tumbling Bay,  
Inland in Kent, is called so, he might say.

In this section Lob is presented as the traveller-poet, the namer of places, and plants, and phenomena in nature. Through the power of the word he humanizes the landscape, leaving in his wake a fusion of man and nature, sometimes a riddle, or a touch of humour unexplained in the silence of history. This litany of place-names is sounded again throughout the poem, and, Thomas suggests, it is the function of literature to keep alive such traditions (just as it is the function of the believer to repeat his prayers and ejaculations). The "old paths" kept open ensure not only the memory of the Lob-types, the literary paths of the rural tradition, but also the very love of the earth. Thomas was to write later in "Words" (CP, p.219) of the earth and words. Words, our love of them and our use of them, are seen in the earth, for words are as "dear / As the earth which you [words] prove / That we love" (ll. 39-41). Words have brought us close to the earth through our ability to identify ourselves with the earth; and the earth, in the names we have given to places, reflects ourselves and our human past. Lob as poet and namer is the spirit abroad in the world, calling things into existence and renewing them.



Lob as depicted in the following passage is not only a namer, but also a doer, with the practical man's inherent distrust of humbug and pretension. He is no respecter of persons:

But little he says compared with what he does.  
If ever a sage troubles him he will buzz 80  
Like a beehive to conclude the tedious fray:  
And the sage, who knows all languages, runs away.  
Yet Lob has thirteen hundred names for a fool,  
And though he never could spare time for school  
To unteach what the fox so well expressed, 85  
On biting the cock's head off, - Quietness is best,-  
He can talk quite as well as anyone  
After his thinking is forgot and done.  
He first of all told someone else's wife,  
For a farthing she'd skin a flint and spoil a knife 90  
Worth sixpence skinning it. She heard him speak:  
"She had a face as long as a wet week"  
Said he, telling the tale in after years.  
With blue smock and with gold rings in his ears,  
Sometimes he is a pedlar, not too poor 95  
To keep his wit.

The originator of sayings, his language is spiced with humour and frankness and the proverbial bluntness and honesty of the rustic. He is also celebrated in great literature:

                    This is tall Tom that bore  
The logs in, and with Shakespeare in the hall  
Once talked, when icicles hung by the wall.  
As Herne the Hunter he has known hard times.  
On sleepless nights he made up weather rhymes 100  
Which others spoilt.

In the middle of line 101 a more menacing and modern allusion is made as Lob changes to Hob. There is mention of violence and war. The first references are veiled in folk-tales where the menace is often subordinated to the story.

                    And, Hob, being then his name,  
He kept the hog that thought the butcher came  
To bring his breakfast. "You thought wrong" said Hob.  
When there were kings in Kent this very Lob,  
Whose sheep grew fat and he himself grew merry, 105  
Wedded the king's daughter of Canterbury;  
For he alone, unlike squire, lord, and king,

Watched a night by her without slumbering;  
He kept both waking. When he was but a lad  
He won a rich man's heiress, deaf, dumb, and sad, 110  
By rousing her to laugh at him. He carried  
His donkey on his back. So they were married.  
And while he was a little cobbler's boy  
He tricked the giant coming to destroy  
Shrewsbury by flood. "And how far is it yet?" 115  
The giant asked in passing. "I forget;  
But see these shoes I've worn out on the road  
And we're not there yet." He emptied out his load  
Of shoes. The giant sighed, and dropped from his spade  
The earth for damming Severn, and thus made 120  
The Wrekin hill; and little Ercall hill  
Rose where the giant scraped his boots....

The serious note that the name Hob introduces ensures that the poem does not reflect an indulgent mood of nostalgia. The first three lines, it has been suggested by Andrew Motion, call to mind the "'old shepherd Hobbe, Crimea Veteran' from [Thomas's] essay 'It's a Long Long Way'".<sup>26</sup> Thomas had written this essay during the early years of the war. He had been putting together some thoughts and feelings of the English people about the war. Motion concludes that the lines concerning Hob and the "butcher" reflect the "unimaginative complacency" of the jingoist, unaware of the impending danger of war. Cooke sees the reference to the "hog" as an oblique reference to the fat patriot in "No Case of Petty Right or Wrong"<sup>27</sup> (CP, p.257), thus placing this section within the context of contemporary events, the war in particular. Lob, then, in his outwitting of the giant, in his mental alertness and resilience, is of the stuff of the common people who are not to be unnerved by the threat of invasion nor deluded by a false complacency. The giant coming "to destroy / Shrewsbury by flood" may be seen as a reference to the fear of invasion then present in the minds of some people. Thomas, in the tradition of Lob, was to give his life in the protection of all the values that Lob stands for.

Lob lives on as do the legends he has created and continues to

create. He lives in place-names and sayings, local tales and in the several variations of Jack:

While still

So young, our Jack was chief of Gotham's sages.  
But long before he could have been wise, ages  
Earlier than this, while he grew thick and strong      125  
And ate his bacon, or, at times, sang a song  
And merely smelt it, as Jack the giant-killer  
He made a name. He, too, ground up the miller,  
The Yorkshireman who ground men's bones for flour.

Edna Longley in her discussion of these lines notes that Lob is one of "The Wise Men of Gotham", "Jack" of "Jack the Giant-Killer" and "Jack and the Beanstalk". "The Yorkshireman" (l. 129) refers, perhaps, to the northern giant Thunderdell who in one story comes after Jack in the best "Fee fi, fo, fum" tradition.<sup>28</sup> Jack, of course, survives the occasion, and his survival is synonymous with that of England. Thomas's poem "Lob" is a testimony to that triumph.

In the closing section of the poem, the anecdotal is abandoned as the poem's argument reaches a climax in a rush of names and allusions:

Do you believe Jack dead before his hour?      130  
Or that his name is Walker, or Bottlesford,  
Or Button, a mere clown, or squire, or lord?  
The man you saw, - Lob-lie-by-the-fire, Jack Cade,  
Jack Smith, Jack Moon, poor Jack of every trade,  
Young Jack, or old Jack, or Jack What-d'ye-call,      135  
Jack-in-the-hedge, or Robin-run-by-the-wall,  
Robin Hood, Ragged Robin, lazy Bob,  
One of the lords of No Man's Land, good Lob, -  
Although he was seen dying at Waterloo,  
Hastings, Agincourt, and Sedgmoor, too, -      140  
Lives yet.

The chief statement of the passage is "The man you saw.../Lives yet". In between its two parts, the speaker gives another series of Lob-types,<sup>29</sup> some historical, such as Jack Cade, others such as Jack

Moon suggestive of half-wittedness. The titles Jack-in-the-hedge and Robin-run-by-the-wall continue to imply the theme of man and nature found elsewhere in the poem. The fleeting reference to No Man's Land, an actual place (according to Longley) in the middle of the South Downs, prepares us for the allusions to battles and war in the final lines of the poem. Lob has survived Waterloo, Hastings, Agincourt and Sedgmoor. He is, among other things, a soldier,<sup>30</sup> as Thomas was to be in the last years of his life.

There follows a series of conditions or impossibilities based on traditional patterns and thus in the spirit of the poem, which if fulfilled will ring the death-knell of Lob:

'...He never will admit he is dead  
Till millers cease to grind men's bones for bread,  
Not till our weathercock crows once again  
And I remove my house out of the lane  
On to the road.' With this he disappeared 145  
In hazel and thorn tangled with old-man's-beard.  
But one glimpse of his back, as there he stood,  
Choosing his way, proved him of old Jack's blood,  
Young Jack perhaps, and now a Wiltshireman  
As he has oft been since his days began. 150

The contemporary Lob, the squire's son, appropriately disappears "In hazel and thorn tangled with old-man's-beard". It is tempting to interpret these concrete items symbolically. The suggestion of magic powers accompanies both the hazel and the thorn. More likely, however, is the association of Lob as a traveller through the extended meanings of old-man's-beard and traveller's joy. Lob is of "old Jack's blood,/ Young Jack['s] perhaps". This is a vision of Lob with which we are left, "old" and yet ever new as "Young Jack"; past, but also the surviving present.

Our view of Lob is partial as he leaves us; we see his back where he has paused "[c]hoosing his way...". We may not confront

him, just as Thomas may not confront his "Other" in the poem "The Other" (CP, p.33), where he concludes in lines 109-110 :

He goes: I follow: no release  
Until he ceases. Then I also shall cease.

Lob moves ahead, creating the tension necessary to continue the quest. For Thomas, the rural poet, the poetry is in the questing, in keeping open old paths, "lying in wait" for something "chance [can] never bring" ("Lob", 1.2).



## Words

1 A Out of us all  
 2 B That make rhymes  
 3 C Will you choose  
 4 B Sometimes  
 5 C As the winds use 5  
 6 A A crack in a wall  
 7 D Or a drain,  
 8 D Their joy or their pain  
 9 E To whistle through  
 10 F Choose me, 10  
 11 G You English words?

12 E I know you:  
 13 H You are light as dreams  
 14 I Tough as oak,  
 15 J Precious as gold, 15  
 16 K As poppies and corn,  
 17 I Or an old cloak:  
 18 G Sweet as our birds  
 19 L To the ear,  
 20 M As the burnet rose 20  
 21 N In the heat  
 22 O Of Midsummer:  
 23 P Strange as the races  
 24 K Of dead and unborn:  
 25 N Strange and sweet 25  
 26 F Equally,  
 27 O And familiar,  
 28 Q & F To the eye,  
 29 P As the dearest faces  
 30 M That a man knows, 30  
 31 O And as lost homes are:  
 32 O But though older far  
 33 E Than oldest yew,  
 34 J As our hills are, old,  
 35 E Worn new 35  
 36 D Again and again;  
 37 H Young as our streams  
 38 D After rain:  
 39 L And as dear  
 40 R As the earth which you prove 40  
 41 R That we love.

42 S Make me content  
 43 T With some sweetness  
 44 U From Wales  
 45 U Whose nightingales 45  
 46 V Have no wings,  
 47 S From Wiltshire and Kent  
 48 W And Herefordshire,  
 49 W And the villages there,  
 50 V From the names, and the things 50  
 51 T No less.

52 X Let me sometimes dance  
 53 E With you,  
 54 Y Or climb  
 55 X Or stand perchance 55  
 56 F In ecstasy,  
 57 F Fixed and free  
 58 Y In a rhyme,  
 59 E As poets do.

### Chapter Three

## Introductory Remarks

If Edward Thomas is a poet "in waiting", one who allows the qualities of an experience to impress themselves upon him, one who hovers between the factual and the mysterious, refusing to take sides, then this passivity or "lying-in-wait", may also be seen as those moments of stasis, epiphanies perhaps, in a quest which, if not always carried out with relentless deliberation, is nonetheless apparent throughout his prose and poetry. It is this active dimension to his poetry, the romantic striving outwards through moments of certainty and doubt, which I want to deal with in this final chapter.

The structure of this chapter may be visualized, then, as a working through various groups of images, all of which constitute the landscape of Thomas's quest. I shall stress again, as in chapter two, the oxymoronic nature of Thomas's stages of integration in the quest.

My method in this chapter will be to examine key poems, refer in passing to others, and where possible, look to Thomas's prose for substantiation of points made.

Central to my discussion will be Thomas's "The Other" which stands in relation to this chapter as "Lob" does to chapter two. Just as "Lob" may be seen as the central work in Thomas's rural quest, so also "The Other" is central to those poems which are concerned with his personal quest for integration.

In his Dedication to Harry Hooton in The Icknield Way, Thomas

wrote of that ancient road:

The end is in the means - the sight of that beautiful long straight line of the Downs in which a curve is latent - in the houses we shall never enter, with their dark secret windows and quiet hearth smoke, or their ruins friendly only to elders and nettles - in the people passing whom we shall never know though we may love them. Today I know that I walk because it is necessary to do so in order both to live and to make a living. ...I could not find a beginning or an end of the Icknield Way. It is thus a symbol of mortal things with their beginnings and ends always in immortal darkness.<sup>1</sup>

This reflection on the Icknield Way is an apt place for us to begin in considering Thomas as poet-quester. Like most of his symbols, such as the sky, the wood and the inn, the road is first of all a real road, the Icknield Way, one he has walked several times, and therefore an immediate and concrete part of his experience. He moved easily from the physical landscape of concrete detail to the symbolic. That so many of his poems concern the various phases in journeying is not surprising when we reflect on the great amount of walking he did. His symbols and imagery, therefore, derive a personal power and authority from his experience.

The creation of a merely symbolic world devoid of any basis in sensation was practically impossible for Thomas. He accepts and takes to heart the Paterean dictum that one must seek beauty with the eye; he writes disparagingly of those who ignore the senses:

For the last hundred years ideas and the material of ideas have come to the reading classes mainly through books and bookish conversation. Their ideas are in advance of their experience, their vocabulary in advance of their ideas, and their eyelids are a little weary.<sup>2</sup>

The poems we are to examine, though they have a more obvious

symbolic import than his nature poems, are nonetheless earthed in the physical world. Thomas is always a poet of the earth. His physical journeys, often remembered moments from his prose, move easily into the symbolic landscape of his inner world but return again to the tangible, the really real of earthly life.

i. Roads

In the poems I shall examine under this title, the journey motif, in one or other of its stages, is apparent. The poem's setting, in most cases, is also a composition of place for reflection and reappraisal as Thomas comes to terms with a feeling or idea, more often as intuition or a doubt.

In "The Signpost" (CP, pp. 23-25) we have two points of view set up against each other. The poem's movement is a reflection upon these two points of view. As Andrew Motion puts it, we have "a mind actually engaged in the act of thinking rather than offering its concluded thoughts".<sup>3</sup> The opening six lines are clearly more than descriptive:

The dim sea glints chill. The white sun is shy,  
And the skeleton weeds and the never-dry,  
Rough, long grasses keep white with frost  
At the hilltop by the finger-post;  
The smoke of traveller's-joy is puffed                      5  
Over hawthorn berry and hazel tuft.

The description implies neutrality. There appears to be an indecisiveness in the very elements of the landscape itself. The sea is "dim" and merely "glints"; the sun is "white" as is the grass, and the "travellers's joy" covers the colourful and striking object, the "hawthorn berry". There is no dominant image. Even the ironic closing rhyme of "puffed" and "tuft" highlights the ambivalences in



the passage by contrasting that which is expansive with that which is checked or limited.

The second paragraph introduces the more dramatized and consciously apparent ambivalences in the poem, namely, the two voices:

I read the sign. Which way shall I go?  
A voice says: You would not have doubted so  
At twenty. Another voice gentle with scorn  
Says: At twenty you wished you had never been born. 10

The ironic voice in line 10 is, as Thomas points out, also "gentle". Though it is authoritative, it is not dismissive of the youthful point of view, the earlier romantic self of the prose. What is important is that the possibility for a dialogue be maintained. The question posed in line 7, "Which way shall I go?", is not an ethical one, nor is it one requiring an answer in strictly worded terms. What is important is the created tension, the quest embarked upon. As in "The Other" which Thomas wrote after "The Signpost", it is the questioning rather than the quest that matters.

The dialogue continues in line 11 onwards interspersed with descriptive detail:

One hazel lost a leaf of gold  
From a tuft at the tip, when the first voice told  
The other he wished to know what 'twould be  
To be sixty by this same post. 'You shall see'  
He laughed - and I had to join his laughter- 15  
'You shall see; but either before or after,  
Whatever happens, it must befall,  
A mouthful of earth to remedy all  
Regrets and wishes shall freely be given;  
And if there be a flaw in that heaven 20  
'Twill be freedom to wish, and your wish may be  
To be here or anywhere talking to me,  
No matter what the weather, on earth,  
At any age between death and birth,  
To see what day or night can be, 25  
The sun and the frost, the land and the sea,

The less experienced voice insisting on pat answers to questions comes through in lines 11-14. The voice stands out in contrast to the quiet rhythmic effects of lines 11-12, where the activity of nature is made a background to the frantic and questioning presence of man.

There follows a rather long passage by the second voice, something of a retort, admonitory in tone. Here the voice of "experience" speaks. The language is spiced with the conventional phrases of the folk-story, the warnings of traditional wisdom offered by the old man to the young man. In line 18 onwards, for example, we are told that "A mouthful of earth to remedy all / Regrets and wishes shall freely be given". This would put an end to the present questioning and questing. A paraphrase of the second voice, however, suggests that the existential uncertainties might, in the end, be more congenial than a flawed heaven. Thomas was to come back to this idea in a later poem called "Home [1]":

This is my grief. That land  
My home, I have never seen;  
No traveller tells of it,  
However far he has been.

And could I discern it,  
I fear my happiness there,  
Or my pain, might be dreams of return  
Here, to these things that were.

("Home [1]", CP, p. 117, ll. 9-16)

In "The Signpost" Thomas is saying that it is perhaps better to remain with the "things that were". His contemporary, Robert Frost, was to say something similar in "Birches" where he expresses his wish to "get away from earth awhile" (l. 48)<sup>4</sup> but to return finally to the world of the senses.

The natural imagery of the opening lines is repeated in line 26, where the condition of time and place is summed up in almost conventional terms:

Summer, Autumn, Winter, Spring,  
With a poor man of any sort, down to a king,  
Standing upright out in the air  
Wondering where he shall journey, O where?' 30

In these closing lines, however, the earth, despite the Hardy-esque "Neutral Tones", is thought of as a positive place on which to be. The conditions of existence, the questing stance of "Wondering where..." is placed above the strange and unknown precisely because it is the lot of all men, "a poor man of any sort, down to a king".

If the poem does come full circle there is nonetheless progress in the process of viewing two attitudes, the one wanting certainty in the knowledge of an answered question, the other finding, perhaps, a deeper security in the wisdom of insecurity. Both points of view are parts of the total acceptance of the here and now with its burden of freedom which offers the possibility of choice. The real "Signpost" is that which points inwards towards the self and personal commitment. The all-embracing nature of that commitment for Thomas is expressed in line 29: "Standing upright out in the air", where the sense of presence, exposure and involvement in life are simply expressed in the line's adverbial modifications. The line also conveys a sense of awakening or resurrection, and a vulnerability which seems desirable if we are to be truly alive to life and the directions it might offer at any moment. It is this openness to life and the quest which is the reward of, and final justification for, the kinds of exposure Thomas makes in the various surrenders these poems ask of him, be they the savouring of an

experience, the embracing of its polarities, or the acceptance of the innate mystery that words suggest.

The stoic acceptance that we find in this poem is present in the other poems we shall be looking at. If there is any reprieve from the conditions of existence it rests in the passing moments of integration that many of these poems record. These moments are always gratuitous, often a discovery in the midst of things or a "beyond" hinted at or held in remembrance.

Concerning the theme of integration implicit in the quest paradigm, R. George Thomas makes some interesting points that throw light on Thomas's poetry. Writing on Thomas's development as a writer he remarks that:

His lifelong struggle as a writer centred around the need to come to terms with his own rifted personality. Particularly after 1910 when he seemed more and more determined to spend less time as a reviewer in order to devote more energy to the writing of sketches, narratives, tales, and natural observations based on his absorbing interest in human life lived in natural surroundings, Thomas appeared to lose touch with the taste of the growing popular audience which was so necessary for commercial success. His letters reveal his distaste for editors and publishers who urged him to become a specialist 'country writer'.<sup>5</sup>

It is this "rifted personality" that comes face to face with the alter ego in Thomas's long poem "The Other" (CP, pp. 27-33) and it is here that Thomas first makes his attitude to the quest clear. In "The Other" it is not a simple matter of asking "Which way shall I go?" For Thomas, an acceptance of ambiguity is inescapable. The Doppelganger theme in this key quest-poem has been treated exhaustively by Andrew Motion<sup>6</sup> and I owe much to his analysis. My debt to Edna Longley's understanding of the poem will be apparent.<sup>7</sup>

My interest, however, is to show not only the quest motif, but to stress the poem's rural setting and sense of place. The opening stanza stresses that the "forest" from which the speaker emerges is a very real, if also symbolic, one:

The forest ended. Glad I was  
To feel the light, and hear the hum  
Of bees, and smell the drying grass  
And the sweet mint, because I had come  
To an end of forest, and because 5  
Here was both road and inn, the sum  
Of what's not forest. But 'twas here  
They asked me if I did not pass  
Yesterday this way? 'Not you? Queer.'  
'Who then? and slept here?' I felt fear. 10

The journey motif is immediately registered. The "forest" in this poem may be taken to symbolize the unknown self. (In "Lights Out" it will have come to mean an area of formlessness, sleep, and perhaps extinction.) Lines 2-6, however, with the series of sense images, are offered as a contrast to the forest: "Here was road and inn, the sum / Of what's not forest". The security of the images "road" and "inn" is soon diminished by the quick succession of questions which dramatize the new mood of doubt, disharmony and hesitancy. By the end of the stanza the inn has become not a place of rest but a place of inquisition. The short sentence "I felt fear", which ends the first stanza, sounds the predominant note for the remainder of the poem.

In the second stanza the syntax deliberately confuses the pursuer and the pursued:

I learnt his road and, ere they were  
Sure I was I, left the dark wood  
Behind, kestrel and woodpecker,  
The inn in the sun, the happy mood  
When first I tasted sunlight there. 15  
I travelled fast, in hopes I should  
Outrun that other. What to do  
When caught, I planned not. I pursued



To prove the likeness, and, if true,  
To watch until myself I knew. 20

The narrator leaves what proves to be a tentative and transitory world (ll. 12-15). The inquisition, in stanza 1, has exposed the unsatisfactory nature of the inn as the end of the quest. The "Glad[ness]" of line 1 gives way to fear. The second half of the stanza depicts, through the rhythm, the paradoxical nature of the eager pursuer and the fearful pursued. Line 16, for example, begins: "I travelled fast," but this statement is immediately checked by the pause represented by the comma. The line also introduces the confusion between pursuer and pursued. This confusion, of course, underlines the truth that this is the dramatization of one mind in search of integration. In some traditional quests (like the Grail quest for spiritual vision) the goal is harmony, not only through a deeper self-knowledge but also through a greater knowledge of others. It is significant, therefore, that the quest is begun in an obvious gathering place, the inn, and is initiated through the questioning of others. This integration into the world of others represents that smashing of the house of glass, a destruction which Thomas saw necessary for himself:

I built myself a house of glass:  
It took me years to make it:  
And I was proud. But now, alas,  
Would God someone would break it.

But it looks too magnificent. 5  
No neighbour casts a stone  
From where he dwells, in tenement  
Or palace of glass, alone.

("I built myself a house of glass" CP, p. 215)

In this short poem Thomas suggests the crippling self-consciousness from which he suffered all his life. As I have already mentioned in Chapter II, he had written to Gordon Bottomley: "social intercourse

is only an intense form of solitude".<sup>8</sup> Later he confesses:

I grow very dull. I am always talking about  
personality and looking for it in others and  
envying it in its most varying kinds, and am so  
conscious of my own lack of it and so disgusted  
that daily (I think) I give myself less and  
less chance of ever putting forth a little of  
it.<sup>9</sup>

In "The Other" Thomas sees the need (and is perhaps better prepared) to break the glass house of self-consciousness. In lines 29-30 of the third stanza he does show some disdain towards those "others".

I tried the inns that evening  
Of a long gabled high-street grey,  
Of courts and outskirts, travelling  
An eager but a weary way,  
In vain. He was not there. Nothing                      25  
Told me that ever till that day  
Had one like me entered those doors,  
Save once. That time I dared: 'You may  
Recall' - but never-foamless shores  
Make better friends than those dull boors.              30

This stanza with its strong negative impact is a cameo of the life of Thomas as artist and personality. At no time does Thomas separate his artistic dissatisfaction from his personal yearnings for peace and integration. He could remark of his prose work, Oxford (1903): "It is neither good hack work nor good Edward Thomas. It will hurt me very much to see it in print".<sup>10</sup> This discrepancy between what Thomas sensed he could do and what economic necessity, time, and lack of choice forced him to do (so that he became a writing animal), highlighted and underlined the divisions within his own personality, and led to the many cathartic encounters with the ridiculed personae we find in his prose. "Those dull boors" are the people with whom Thomas had to deal as a reviewer, who seldom, if ever, appreciated the quality of his work or the time spent on producing it. The mood of this stanza is carried over into stanza four:

Many and many a day like this  
Aimed at the unseen moving goal  
And nothing found but remedies  
For all desire. These made not whole;  
They sowed a new desire, to kiss 35  
Desire's self beyond control,  
Desire of desire. And yet  
Life stayed on within my soul.  
One night in sheltering from the wet  
I quite forgot I could forget. 40

The "Other" has become depersonalized as the "unseen goal", and the "I" of the narrator is choked in a syntax that assumes a passive stance at first, before the movement is clogged and cloyed in mid-stanza by an oppressive inward preoccupation with the death-wish. The word "desire" is used five times in the middle four lines of the stanza. The fact, not the cause, of survival is stated in the transition (l. 37), "And yet / Life stayed...". Though the last line suggests a mental state bordering on complete unconsciousness, this is off-set by the fact that the speaker has taken shelter "from the wet". The will to live continues at some instinctive level.

Thomas in this stanza shows how accomplished a craftsman he could be in the placing of poetic techniques at the service of his meaning. Having rejected social intercourse, in the previous stanza, for the isolation of "never-foamless shores", in the fourth stanza he offers a further exploration of introspection and anxiety - what he describes in line 24 as "an eager but weary way". The stanza illustrates both the eagerness and weariness of Thomas's state of mind. The opening line, line 31, limps monotonously into line 32 where the restless and urgent need to take up and respond to the quest is stressed in the insistent trochaic rhythm of "unseen moving goal". The anti-climax in lines 33-34 is suitably contrasted with the more relaxed iambics of "And nothing found but remedies / For

all desire". The second half of line 34 again registers through its stressed monosyllabics the frustration and sense of futility he experiences through the incompleteness of his experience. The fin de siècle sentiments in mid-stanza are evoked by the muted vowels of "not whole", "sowed", "beyond control"; the four rhymes "goal", "whole", "control" and "soul" also contribute to the all-pervading atmosphere of weariness. These sounds are contrasted with the more energetic "yet", "night", "wet" and "forget".

Stanza five takes us back to the place of inquisition, the social plane, where the narrator, confronted with the interaction of others, is forced into "guile" (l. 44). His impact upon them is registered in visual imagery which is accentuated by the silence:

A customer, then the landlady  
Stared at me. With a kind of smile  
They hesitated awkwardly:  
Their silence gave me time for guile. 44

These lines rhythmically bring out the mental and physical hesitation and the mutual puzzlement. This is done by such devices as punctuation and polysyllabic words such as "hesitated" and "awkwardly".

When the narrator speaks, the "guile" is immediately registered in the deliberately ambiguous forty-fifth line:

Had anyone called there like me, 45  
I asked. It was quite plain the wile  
Succeeded. For they poured out all.  
And that was naught. Less than a mile  
Beyond the inn, I could recall  
He was like me in general. 50

The words "like me" (l. 45) might well be read "as I have", in which case the likeness between the speaker and the "Other" is being

played down. In stanza six it is clear that the "Other" is a more gregarious self than the narrator. Intuitively, however, the narrator senses that in their meeting something is to be gained by talking frankly and listening. The use of the word "confess" (l. 52) carries connotations of guilt, though this may not be acknowledged consciously by the narrator. The stanza does set up a balancing of items, and a neutralizing of opposites, that opens the way for new insights. Firstly, the rhymes and certain other words check and qualify each other: "less": "confess"; "confess": "guess"; "less" and "more". Secondly, within and between the lines there is a balancing in "bore": "bore"; "eager", "could not wait" and "caution". Thirdly, there is the ambiguity of a phrase in line 53: "To find him out and to confess". On the surface, at least, the stanza suggests a certain readiness on the part of the speaker to declare his good faith by confessing his true situation:

He had pleased them, but I less.  
I was more eager than before  
To find him out and to confess,  
To bore him and to let him bore.  
I could not wait: children might guess        55  
I had a purpose, something more  
That made an answer indiscreet.  
One girl's caution made me sore,  
Too indignant even to greet  
That other had we chanced to meet.        60

If "children might guess" (l. 55), it is because they do not speak from a basis of duplicity. The speaker reads the "caution" of one girl as an insight into his own hedging, and this drives him into solitude. There is, however, some knowledge gained if it is only an awareness of his frustration and the recognition of the need to confess, that is, to be openly a part of that outer world. The children's reactions amount to an intuitive grasp of the innocence to be regained.



In the next stanza there is a moment of stasis where there seems to be a fusion between the narrator and the "Other":

I sought then in solitude.  
The wind had fallen with the night; as still  
The roads lay as the ploughland rude,  
Dark and naked, on the hill.  
Had there been ever any feud 65  
'Twixt earth and sky, a mighty will  
Closed it: the crocketed dark trees,  
A dark house, dark impossible  
Cloud-towers, one star, one lamp, one peace  
Held on an everlasting lease: 70

A close reading of the stanza does suggest a movement towards integration. Certainly at the level of the natural world there is something akin to the kind of experience that Richard Jefferies records in The Story of My Heart. This union with the universe is the very essence of Jefferies' autobiography, as this extract taken at random shows:

I now became lost, and absorbed into the being or existence of the universe. I felt down deep into the earth, and high above into the sky, and farther still to the sun and stars. Still farther beyond the stars into the hollow of space, and losing thus my separateness of being came to seem like a part of the whole.<sup>11</sup>

I do feel, however, that the narrator does not find an integration with the "Other". Instead, he opts for an aesthetic experience. The reference to "mighty will" (l. 66) which presides over everything, holding everything in apparent harmony, does not reconcile the tensions within the stanza. The realistic imagery is not taken up in the imaginative vision, the mood sought is carried by the movement of the lines. Lines 62-64, for example, depict a peaceful rural scene; lines 65-67 add a spiritual and enlarged dimension to the scene. What seems to belie this harmony, however, is the series of agitated rhythmic turns from mid-line 67-69 "...crocketed dark trees, / A dark house, dark impossible /

Cloud-towers, one star, one lamp, one peace". If anything, the rhythm seems to suggest that it is a provisional peace. The meaning appears to be a statement of harmony, the movement of the lines suggests disharmony.

Thomas has reproduced something of a Thomsonian vision of nature in this stanza. A line such as "Twixt earth and sky..." (l. 66) is Thomsonian in scope. (The rhythms and metre, of course, do not reflect the eighteenth century.) The synthesis Thomas the artist was seeking here is hinted at in an essay called "The Other Man", in The Pursuit of Spring:

He rambled on and on about himself, his past, his writing, his digestion; his main point being that he did not like writing. He had been attempting the impossible task of reducing undigested notes about all sorts of details to a grammatical, continuous narrative. He abused note-books violently. He said that they blinded him to nearly everything that would not go into the form of notes; or, at any rate, he could never afterwards reproduce the great effects of Nature and fill in the interstices merely - which was all they were good for - from the notes. The notes - often of things which he would otherwise have forgotten - had to fill the whole canvas. Whereas, if he had taken none, then only the important, what he truly cared for, would have survived in his memory, arranged not perhaps as they were in Nature, but at least according to the tendencies of his own spirit.<sup>12</sup>

The "great effects of nature" as the synthesis of a life of artistic fulfilment was what eluded Thomas all his life. He sustains this vision in the eighth stanza:

And all was earth's, or all was sky's:  
No difference endured between  
The two. A dog barked on a hidden rise;  
A marshbird whistled high unseen;  
The latest waking blackbird's cries        75  
Perished upon the silence keen.

The last light filled a narrow firth  
Among the clouds. I stood serene,  
And with a solemn quiet mirth,  
An old inhabitant of earth. 80

Here particulars are at the service of the greater vision. The "dog" and the "marshbird" and the "blackbird" are part of an inclusive vision in which the narrator is also defined against the "silence", and stands "serene" amid other creatures as "An old inhabitant of the earth".

Stanzas six, seven and eight are best seen as a prelude to stanza nine where Thomas stands back, as it were, to analyze the nature of this moment of stasis in his psychological journey:

Once the name I gave to hours  
Like this was melancholy, when  
It was not happiness and powers  
Coming like exiles home again,  
And weakness quitting their bowers, 85  
Smiled and enjoyed, far off from men,  
Moments of everlastingness.  
And fortunate my search was then  
While what I sought, nevertheless,  
That I was seeking, I did not guess. 90

In contrast to what has gone before, this stanza is a display of self-knowledge and a perceptive analysis of the past. It prepares us for the decisiveness of the concluding stanzas.

Commenting on the sense of this stanza Edna Longley instructs us to read "When ... bowers" as "a self-contained clause in which Thomas suggests an alternative description (to 'melancholy') of his state: 'happiness and powers / Coming... / And weaknesses quitting...'" She adds that "An understood 'I' is the subject of 'Smiled' and 'enjoyed'."<sup>13</sup>

The personifications, "happiness" and "powers" seen as "exiles

returning", and "weakness quitting their bowers", reestablish the allegorical nature of the poem. They also help to submerge the "I" which is syntactically divorced from the verbs in line 86. The effect of this self-effacement is to emphasize the gratuitous nature of the "moments of everlastingness" (l. 87). Stressed again is the poet's "unseen goal" - "That I was seeking, I did not guess". The last three lines of the stanza (ll. 88-90) restate the truth that it is the poet who is found, taken up, as it were, into the new experience that transcends his own limited, rational expectations. The experience is not the result of an inquisition, nor did it depend on any act of the will.

Another reading of this difficult stanza might be: "when powers coming and weakness[es] quitting smiled and enjoyed...". In this reading Edward Thomas then identifies himself with the strengthening (of talent) and the realization of his ability which prospered in those hours which became "moments of everlastingness". (In the CP, which I am using, R. George Thomas in line 85 of the poem has "weakness" rather than "weaknesses". The idea of returning strength and new found power is, however, preserved in both readings.)

The events in the penultimate stanza have the dramatic suddenness one associates with, for example, The Pardoner's Tale. Thomas had begun the quest in an inn with an inquiry; it is now ended in an inn. There is irony in the fact that it is the "Other" who finds the narrator:

That time was brief: once more at inn  
And upon road I sought my man  
Till once amid a tap-room's din  
Loudly he asked for me, began  
To speak, as if it had been a sin,  
Of how I thought and dreamed and ran  
After him thus, day after day:

He lived as one under a ban  
For this: what had I got to say?  
I said nothing, I slipped away.

100

The colloquial phrase "my man" (l. 92) does not conceal the deeper meaning. The "Other" is more perceptive of the real nature of the quest. He shows the narrator's emotional intensity in the vigour of the three verbs in line 96, "thought and dreamed and ran", whose sense is carried by the enjambment into the next line. The quest has engaged him intellectually, emotionally and physically.

I think Andrew Motion is partially correct when he says:

What confronts Thomas is not so much the anger of a distinct entity as the disappointment he feels at failing to prolong the wholeness described in previous stanzas. He realizes that he must continue to pursue it despite the difficulties which will beset his journey.<sup>14</sup>

I say "partially correct" because Thomas's experiences of harmony and wholeness in those earlier stanzas were, in the first place, a false integration in a prolonged Paterian moment that was never quite real. The provisionality of such an experience was always clear from the beginning, in the phrase "the unseen moving goal" (l. 32). This provisionality is again suggested in the last stanza where the narrator concludes that the quest is in the questing:

And now I dare not follow after  
Too close. I try to keep in sight,  
Dreading his frown and worse his laughter.  
I steal out of the wood to light;  
I see the swift shoot from the rafter  
By the inn door: ere I alight  
I wait and hear the starlings wheeze  
And nibble like ducks: I wait his flight.  
He goes: I follow: no release  
Until he ceases. Then I also shall cease.

105

110

In this final stanza there is conveyed both the physical and mental alertness of one engaged in life. The shifting rhythms



dramatize the calculating hesitancy of adjustment. For example, the enjambment (ll. 101-102) is abruptly stopped by the short-stressed monosyllabics of "Too close", and also by the fact that the sentence ends. His fear is now fear of the known rather than the unknown. There is also the knowledge that integration will always be both gratuitous and momentary. This is, in fact, the conclusion of many of his poems, namely, the realization that, in surrendering, a moment of "blessedness" is experienced. Responding to the penumbra of an experience, the "unseen goal", the poet "lying in wait" will find content with discontent, where questing is the quest.

In one of his finest poems, "Roads" (CP, pp. 263-67), Thomas, though still preoccupied with the theme of the quest, probing the meaning of life and death, is nonetheless able to show his genuine love for roads as physical realities named and used by man. In the final section of this poem there is a significant reaching out to the wider world through a compassionate awareness of the war in France:

I love roads:  
The goddesses that dwell  
Far along invisible  
Are my favourite gods.

Edna Longley notes that "Thomas's ABBA rhyme scheme, the last line picking up the first, suggests through the poem the continuity of roads, as does the sinuous brevity of the quatrains".<sup>15</sup> The stanza sets up an immediate tension between the traveller, "I", and the eternal presences that draw him on. Throughout the poem, within stanzas and between them, this point is graphically dramatized by the use of enjambments.

Roads go on  
While we forget, and are

Forgotten like a star  
That shoots and is gone.

Line 5 recalls some observations Thomas made in chapter one of  
The Ickniel Way:

Writers have treated the road as a passive means to an end ... but the earliest roads wandered like rivers through the land, having, like rivers, one necessity, to keep in motion. We still say that a road "goes" to London, as we "go" ourselves.... We may go or stay, but the road will go over the mountains to Llandovery, and then up to Tregaron. It is a silent companion always ready for us, whether it is night or day, wet or fine, whether we are calm or desperate, well or sick. It is always going: it has never gone right away, and no man is too late....

Why go straight? There is nothing at the end of any road better than may be found beside it. The straight road, except over level and open country, can only be made by those in whom extreme haste and forethought have destroyed the power of joy, either at the end or at any part of its course. Why, then, go straight?<sup>16</sup>

In the poem Thomas invests the road with a being all its own; this is a preparation for the latter part of the poem where the presence of goddesses and ghosts transforms the road into a Dantesque highway of souls.

The road going on forever is contrasted with our transience as shooting stars (ll. 7-8). The verb "are" in line 6 is caught up and suspended fleetingly in the enjambment, only to be halted by the emphatically placed "Forgotten" in line 7, an arrangement which reinforces the idea of the swiftness of our lives and the abruptness of our end. But there is a degree of human feeling that is not eclipsed by the ghosts and invisible goddesses. This resides in the dominance of the opening line, "I love roads". This "love" is as much a presiding spirit as are the evocations of the supernatural.

On this earth 'tis sure  
We men have not made                   10  
Anything that doth fade  
So soon, so long endure:

The hill road wet with rain  
In the sun would not gleam  
Like a winding stream                   15  
If we trod it not again.

They are lonely  
While we sleep, lonelier  
For lack of the traveller  
Who is now a dream only.               20

Stanzas three, four and five begin the fusion between man and road which Thomas develops later. The theme here is a favourite one with Thomas: the road has its autonomy, for it "goes on", but it also reflects the influence of man in how he perceives it, names it, and uses it. "If we trod it not again" (l. 16), its meaning would be lost. As in the poem "Lob" in which Lob names the physical world and marries man and the physical universe through this naming, so too man invests the road with meaning, direction, purpose, making it a metaphor, as well as a means to an end. Without this human intentionality the road would have lost something. Thomas seems to suggest in this last stanza that the road also makes us, shapes the meaning that our lives might take on.

The talk of "sleep" in line 18 sounds the note for a confusion of the physical road, the "I", Thomas, and that supernatural realm Thomas has called up. Just as the road "goes on", so too it connects and mediates between light and darkness:

From dawn's twilight  
And all the clouds like sheep  
On the mountains of sleep  
They wind into the night.

(ll.21-24)

Andrew Motion's perceptive criticism of this stanza deserves

quotation in full for the light it casts on the quality of Thomas's craftsmanship:

These lines offer an example of Thomas's writing at its most suggestive and concentrated. The journey is now conceived as a temporal rather than a physical one, and the 'dawn's twilight' from which it begins contains two opposite times of day (morning and evening) reconciled in one. This union is strengthened by the following image of sheep. The 'And' beginning the line in which it occurs implies that 'the clouds like sheep' are seen at dawn. But dawn itself has already been compared to dusk, and sheep are counted to send people to sleep, not to awaken them. The clouds also confuse the physical with the temporal world. The primary sense of the image is clearly that the fluffy cumulus clouds resemble unshorn sheep, yet in the following line - 'On the mountains of sleep' - the clouds become rather than simply ornament the mountains. The close similarity between the key words 'sheep' and 'sleep' contributes to this, but it is substantiated by the fact that clouds resemble mountains as often as they do sheep. (Compare Thomas's line 'The sunset piled / Mountains on mountains of snow and ice in the west' in 'March'.) In other words, by running the unpunctuated lines into one another here, he transforms insubstantial things, clouds and sleep, into substantial things, sheep and mountains, and vice versa, until their proper character is in doubt. And the effect of this is to reduce time and place to a single, concentrated moment which sanctions the visionary, Bunyanesque glimpse of Heaven and Hell in the succeeding stanza.<sup>17</sup>

The next turn may reveal	25
Heaven: upon the crest	
The close pine clump, at rest	
And black, may Hell conceal.	

This bringing together of the elements of the poem through impressionistic transformation does not take away from the concreteness of Thomas's imagery. "The close pine clump" is very real. The monosyllabics of lines 27-28 underline this point, contrasting, as they do, with the more elevated diction of "may reveal / Heaven" and "may Hell conceal." Edna Longley aptly comments that "Line division and syntax dramatize the different surprises of





Stanzas nine, ten, eleven, twelve and thirteen of "Roads" constitute a unit of sense. They begin with the evocation of "Helen of the roads" (l. 33), and end with that goddess's name in line 52, "As Helen's own are light":

Helen of the roads,  
The mountain ways of Wales  
And the Mabinogion tales,                    35  
Is one of the true gods,

Abiding in the trees,  
The threes and fours so wise,  
The larger companies,  
That by the roadside be,                    40

And beneath the rafter  
Else uninhabited  
Excepting by the dead;  
And it is her laughter

At morn and night I hear                    45  
When the thrush cock sings  
Bright irrelevant things,  
And when the chanticleer

Calls back to their own night  
Troops that make loneliness                    50  
With their light footsteps' press,  
As Helen's own are light.

The unity of the sequence is apparent in the linking enjambments and the syntactical stitching.

Thomas explains the reference to "Helen of the roads" in a letter to Eleanor Farjeon. He says of his poem:

Helen is the lady in the Mabinogion, the Welsh lady who married Maxen the Emperor and gave her name to the great old mountain roads - Sarn Helen they are all marked on the maps. Do you remember the 'Dream of Maxen'? She is known to mythologists as one of the travelling goddesses of the dusk. But perhaps I don't convey much in my 16 verses.<sup>20</sup>

Helen's also being the name of his wife gives added dimension to the context. In "The Dream of Maxen" as recorded in The Mabinogion, the

story of Helen ("Elen" in some translations) and the construction of roads to link the fortresses across the land, are part of a wider canvas which includes warring, love of country, and even preservation of the ancient British language. These concerns were close to the heart of Thomas, as is reflected in "Lob", and it was easy for him to see similarities between the concerns of the "Dream of Maxen" and issues in his own day.

That his own wife, Helen, might be close to his thoughts, is obvious. The "Dream of Maxen" is also the story of a quest for the lady in Maxen's dream. Maxen explains to the wise men of Rome: "I have had a dream and in that dream I have seen a girl, and because of her there is not life or being nor existence in me".<sup>21</sup> The dream initiates a quest for the lady. Messengers are sent to roam the world seeking news of her. On meeting her and winning her, they grant her wish which is to be given Britain.

In a letter to his wife (quoted by R. George Thomas) Edward Thomas writes:

That Helen is more real than the lady in the four verses of [Song (2)]. Oh, you needn't think of another lady. There would have to be two to make a love affair and I am only one. Nobody but you would ever be likely to respond as I wished. I don't like to think anybody but I could respond to you. If you turned to anybody else I should come to an end immediately.<sup>22</sup>

His wife is present, therefore, below the surface of the poem. It is the mythical Helen of the Roads that concerns us in these stanzas. She is present "in the trees" (l. 37) "And beneath the rafter" (l. 41) and he hears her laughter "When the thrush cock sings" (l. 46), and she is present in her "light" footsteps (l. 52).

The sudden appearance of "Troops" in line 50, within the context of the haunting Helen, registers the theme of war and the theme of death. Thomas was aware of the imminent possibility of being sent to France. Some of his companions had made up their minds to go; at this stage he had been asked to consider it but as yet had not made his choice.

Now all roads lead to France  
And heavy is the tread  
Of the living; but the dead                    55  
Returning lightly dance:

Whatever the road bring  
To me or take from me,  
They keep me company  
With their pattering,                    60

Crowding the solitude  
Of the loops over the downs,  
Hushing the roar of towns  
And their brief multitude.

There is a letting go in lines 57 and 58 as Thomas accepts the possibility of death. Indeed he regards death less than something that he moves towards than as a presence keeping him "company" (l. 59). The final stanza shows just how closely Thomas lived with the thoughts of war, the roads he might be asked to travel and the end they held in store. These closing stanzas show not so much a death-wish, as some have suggested, as a compromise. Thomas wrote most of his poetry in the atmosphere of an army camp in preparation for war. He continued to walk much of the countryside, but now as a soldier on routine marches. "Roads" reflects the ambivalences of his new form of life. Thomas describes some of the conditions and occasions when he would write his poetry:

I got home a week ago for 24 hours. Now this weekend has to be spent in camp with no work to do except look after the hut while my superior is away. These are the worst days. The only real cure is to get quite alone and write. I can sometimes get the hut empty and write. Then I

sometimes write in the train going home late.<sup>23</sup>

Donald Davie sees the last three stanzas of this poem as an expression of the death-wish.<sup>24</sup> For this to be so, one would have to explain away the particular brand of patriotism which Thomas expressed in his decision to enlist. In "This is no case of petty right or wrong" (CP, p. 257) he expresses something of this emotion:

This is no case of petty right or wrong  
That politicians or philosophers  
Can judge. I hate not Germans, nor grow hot  
With love of Englishmen, to please newspapers.  
Beside my hate for one fat patriot 5  
My hatred of the Kaiser is love true: -  
A kind of god he is, banging a gong.  
But I have not to choose between the two,  
Or between justice and injustice. Dinned 10  
With war and argument I read no more  
Than in the storm smoking along the wind  
Athwart the wood. Two witches' cauldrons roar.  
From one the weather shall rise clear and gay;  
Out of the other an England beautiful  
And like her mother that died yesterday. 15  
Little I know or care if, being dull,  
I shall miss something that historians  
Can rake out of the ashes when perchance  
The phoenix broods serene above their ken.  
But with the best and meanest Englishmen 20  
I am one in crying, God save England, lest  
We lose what never slaves and cattle blessed.  
The ages made her that made us from the dust:  
She is all we know and live by, and we trust  
She is good and must endure, loving her so: 25  
And as we love ourselves we hate her foe.

This poem was written less than a month before "Roads" and may, I feel, be taken as the authoritative view on what Thomas considered himself to be doing as a soldier.

Thomas the quester, in the penultimate stanza of "Roads", seems to move in a neutral area between the ghostly company of those returning from France and the natural solitude of the earth itself. The last stanza, however, shows in its reference to "the loops over the downs", and "the roar of towns", a commitment to the earth and

therefore to life itself.

If Edward Thomas's ghosts were "company", "Crowding the solitude / Of the loops over the downs" (ll. 61-62) and "Hushing the roar of towns" (l. 63), there were other consolations at once less dramatic, and perhaps more congenial, which provided "company" through the stages of his quest. We now consider these moments; all of them, characteristically, moments in a journey.

ii. "Moments of everlastingness"

In the poems that follow - "I never saw the land before" (CP, p. 311), "The Bridge" (CP, p. 123), "The Path" (CP, p. 311) and "The Lane" (CP, p. 373) - Thomas explores what he calls those "Moments of everlastingness" ("The Other", l. 87). These moments, characteristically, are earthed in a particular place and almost always come at a particular point in a journey.

In Light and Twilight (1911) Thomas speaks about a day "when what met the eye was far less than what was apprehended".<sup>25</sup> Often the seen is a signpost to the unseen; a penumbra surrounding the perception impinges upon the poet and reader. The intuition gained is often ambiguous in stating a sense of both timelessness and transience. The resulting paradoxical tension is often reflected in contrastive imagery within the poem which states the polarities and then tries to unite them.

In "I never saw that land before" (CP, p. 311) Thomas recalls a moment in a journey when the beauty of a particular scene evokes intimations of something ("that land") beyond the landscape itself.



The experience is irrevocable. Lines 1 and 2 with the repetitions of the adverb-verb construction, "I never saw" and "can never see", and the finality of the end-stopped line 2, reinforce this. The illusiveness of the experience is, perhaps, apparent in the rhyme scheme ABABA, where the fifth line of each stanza, though registering a harmony, moves independently towards a new thought or insight, just as Thomas's goal moves irrevocably out of focus.

I never saw that land before,  
And now can never see it again;  
Yet, as if by acquaintance hoar  
Endeared, by gladness and by pain,  
Great was the affection that I bore... 5

Stanzas two and three provide the setting, the valley, from which the intuition arises. The description comes structurally at the centre of the poem:

To the valley and the river small,  
The cattle, the grass, the bare ash trees,  
The chickens from the farmsteads, all  
Elm-hidden, and the tributaries  
Descending at equal interval; 10

The blackthorns down along the brook  
With wounds yellow as crocuses  
Where yesterday the labourer's hook  
Had sliced them cleanly; and the breeze  
That hinted all and nothing spoke. 15

It is important to stress that this landscape is, in all likelihood, not imaginary. Edna Longley offers this prose extract from In Pursuit of Spring (pp. 235-6) as its possible origin:

I rode...into the valley of the Sheppey. To within a mile of Wells I was to have this little river always with me and several times under me... It was a delightful exit... On both hands grassy banks rose up steeply. The left one, when the rockery was passed, was topped with single thorn trees, and pigs and chickens did their duty and their pleasure among the pollard ashes below... The left bank being steeper, is either

clothed in a wood of ivied oaks, or its ridgy turf and scattering of elms and ash trees are seldom interrupted by houses... Then on both hands the valley does without houses. The left side is a low, steep thicket rising from the stream, which spreads out here into a sedgy pool before a weir, and was at this moment bordered by sheaves of silver-catkin'd willow, fresh-cut.<sup>26</sup>

In both the prose extract and the poem, the landscape is familiar and homely. Mention is made of the "ash-trees", "chickens", "elms", "blackthorns", and the stream. When we compare the descriptions we can see that Thomas, in the poetry, is finding the quintessence of the experience, and that whereas he is content in the prose merely to describe (the prose was often written to strict deadlines), in the poetry he has time to ponder the significance of the physical detail and to use language to explore its meaning.

The "breeze / That hinted all and nothing spoke" introduces, as it were, the inner landscape of the poem, the elusive, hinted goal.

In "The Bridge" Thomas is still moving towards his "goal" in what is yet another moment of "everlastingness" in the quester's pilgrimage. The poem's focus, as the title suggests, is a bridge, a place of rest at the end of a day's journey but also a meeting place for time past and present.

I have come a long way today:  
On a strange bridge alone,  
Remembering friends, old friends,  
I rest, without smile or moan,  
As they remember me without smile or moan.        5

The first line, a statement of fact, ends abruptly to prepare for the transition to a change of mood. The bridge is "strange" because it is symbolic of a moment of stasis as well as being a place of rest.

The rhyme scheme has been noted by Edna Longley.<sup>27</sup> Lines 4 and 5 in each stanza have the same rhyme word and lines 1 and 3 have the same pattern of internal rhyme. The internal rhyme promotes a forward movement which is checked by the BB ending of lines 4 and 5. The dominance of similar sounds also creates the trance-like state of the out-of-time suspension that the poem describes.

The movement of the lines in stanza one suggests the physical and emotional movement. The moment of rest in line 4, the reminiscence in line 3 and the repetition in lines 4 and 5, all contribute to the reflective mood of the stanza.

The second stanza takes up the same structural arrangement:

All are behind, the kind  
And the unkind too, no more  
Tonight than a dream. The stream  
Runs softly yet drowns the Past,  
The dark-lit stream has drowned the Future  
and the Past. 10

The dream-like mood is enhanced here by the repetitions of sound. Just as the sounds of "dream" and "stream" (l. 8) elide, so too the idea of "dream" and the concrete image of stream are united. In line 10, therefore, the dream has become "The dark-lit stream [which] has drowned the Future and the Past".

In the final stanza Thomas reflects on the significance of this brief moment "between / Two lives" (ll. 12 and 13):

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. 15

Freed from the burden of the Past and an unknown Future, Thomas is on a "bridge" which represents a suspended moment between two points of time. The "moment" is an attempt at integration which, as the imagery indicates, is both affirmative and negative. Twilight is that time when neither light nor darkness reigns. The imagery is an admixture of "first lights / And shades" (ll. 13 and 14).

The "goal" or ideal, therefore, remains elusive. A "hint" is all that is offered.

In "The Path" (CP, p.143) Thomas explores the symbolism of a path in relationship to the "level road" (l. 3) and the "precipitous wood below" (l. 2). The path represents the more imaginative way, though the poem suggests that it may be fraught with danger and perhaps, delusion in the end. But it is traditionally the path of children, and perhaps, for Thomas, the path his imagination must take in the wake of his new found poetic strength. The alternative, or perhaps that which must be reconciled with the path, is the "level road" (l. 3). This is the way chosen by "men and women" (l. 6) and it is a way of limitation.

"The Path" concretizes and highlights the nature of these two ways through a series of exploratory sentences which, syntactically and rhythmically, dramatize the hesitations, doubts and certainties of both ways until the poem ends suddenly, but having opened up new paths for the reader to ponder.

The opening sentence, through its syntactical ordering, is allowed to run swiftly towards the main clause:

Running along a bank, a parapet

That saves from the precipitous wood below  
The level road, there is a path...

The delaying of the subject helps to set up an air of expectation and creates a sense of secrecy and hushed revelation (as a children's story might do) about the path's existence. From the first line a sense of danger is announced in "parapet" and "precipitous".

The path "serves"

Children for looking down the long smooth steep,  
Between the legs of beech and yew, to where                   5  
A fallen tree checks the sight: while men and women  
Content themselves with the road and what they see  
Over the bank, and what the children tell.

In terms of function the path makes the wood accessible. There appears to be no other reason for it. The children are attracted by the wood, and their vision of it is described by Thomas in such a way as to suggest that they see it in spite of the adults. The phrase "Between the legs of beech and yew" (l. 5) is reminiscent of how children often see not so much around us as through us, using their lack of height to advantage. The children's vision is, however, checked by "A fallen tree" (l. 6), the image perhaps taking up the idea of danger hinted in the opening lines; both words, "parapet" and "fallen", anticipate the word "invaded" (l. 10). Just as the "fallen tree checks the sight", so also the syntax checks the flow of the poem with its hesitations and "checks".

The word "check" has other implications in the poem. In a wider sense it refers to mental limitations. The "men and women" (l. 6) are content with the "check" of "what they see / Over the bank, and what the children tell". These lines may be analysed into units



representing a series of "checks" or qualifications affecting adults who "content themselves": "with the road"; "and what they see"; "over the bank"; "and what the children tell".

Clearly, with the adults it is the imagination that is being checked; for the children it is the physical sight that is hindered, but this merely increases their curiosity. The poem raises the question of whether we need a "check" or not, and what the excesses inherent in following the imagination are. The next section suggests that the imagination may be fragile because even the children's passage destroys its beauty:

The path, winding like silver, trickles on,  
Bordered and even invaded by thinnest moss        10  
That tries to cover roots and crumbling chalk  
With gold, olive, and emerald, but in vain.

Here again the syntax cleverly allows a possibility to be entertained only to be frustrated in the last phase, "but in vain", where the encroachments of the wood are rendered null. The winding movement of the path (in contrast to the progress of the level road) is again rhythmically suggested. The verbs "winding" and "trickles" invest the path with some autonomy of movement, perhaps the movement of children walking. The wood's encroachments are not without beauty- "gold", "emerald" and "olive"; the symbolic import of the images should not blind us to the great visual perception Thomas had.

The children perceive no danger; unconsciously they overcome it in their natural way:

The children wear it. They have flattened the bank  
On top, and silvered it between the moss  
With the current of their feet, year after year.        15

The presence of the children is not a chance one, they are there "year after year" (l. 15), as much a part of the scene as nature itself. The word "current" suggests as much, for it identifies them with the path which had been described as "winding" and "trickl[ing]". The path is the concretization of the imagination of the children.

The road is desolate and uninteresting by comparison:

But the road is houseless, and leads not to school.  
To see a child is rare there, and the eye  
Has but the road, the wood that overhangs  
And underyawns it, and the path that looks  
As if it led on to some legendary 20  
Or fancied place where men have wished to go  
And stay; till, sudden, it ends where the wood ends.

The repetition of the phrase "but the road" (ll. 16 and 18) draws attention to the road's lack of interest or purposefulness. It is "houseless" and "leads not" (l. 16); it is a means without an end, and has no intrinsic beauty. The one word used to describe the road is "level", and that appears to be the only positive attribute it has. The diction used to describe the wood, on the other hand, is emotive and suggestive. Such words as "precipitous", "overhangs" and "underyawns" connote danger and mystery.

But what if, despite the attractiveness of the path, it should turn out to be an escapist choice? May it not lead to "some legendary / Or fancied place where men have wished to go / And stay" (ll. 21-23)? Thomas, with the release of his new found poetic power, had begun to look more deeply into that "wood", and must have felt, at times, a sense of uncertainty about the purpose of his new life. He had been living now in various army camps in the South of England, for the most part seeing his family when he got a week-end

pass. The disruption of the way of life he had lived prior to this was dramatic.

For Thomas, finally, the path affirms the powers of the imagination and, perhaps, the occupational risks in following its promptings. The harmony and integration he seeks between the two ways is denied him. It remains an elusive goal for the path "ends where the wood ends". It is only much later that Thomas does confront the wood's mystery when in "Lights Out" (CP, p. 367) he writes:

I have come to the borders of sleep,  
The unfathomable deep  
Forest, where all must lose  
Their way, however straight  
Or winding, soon or late; 5  
They can not choose.

Many a road and track  
That since the dawn's first crack  
Up to the forest brink  
Deceived the travellers, 10  
Suddenly now blurs,  
And in they sink.

Here love ends -  
Despair, ambition ends;  
All pleasure and all trouble, 15  
Although most sweet or bitter,  
Here ends, in sleep that is sweeter  
Than tasks most noble.

There is not any book  
Or face of dearest look 20  
That I would not turn from now  
To go into the unknown  
I must enter, and leave, alone,  
I know not how.

The tall forest towers: 25  
Its cloudy foliage lowers  
Ahead, shelf above shelf:  
Its silence I hear and obey  
That I may lose my way  
And myself. 30

The vision here characteristically moves between the physical and the metaphysical. Thomas, the traveller of known roads and paths, is

also the quester confronted now with the darker mystery of man's spiritual goal. Here "[He] cannot choose". The surrender to mystery is the acknowledgement of human limitation. Thomas writes in The Childhood of Edward Thomas of a recurring dream that helps to place this poem in a proper autobiographical perspective:

It happens mostly when I am lying down in bed waiting for sleep, and only on nights when I sleep well. I close my eyes and I find myself very dimly seeing expand before me a vague immense space enclosed with invisible boundaries. Yet it can hardly be called seeing. All is grey, dull, formless, and I am aware chiefly by some other means than sight of vast unshapely towering masses of a colourless subject which I feel to be soft. Through these things and the space I grope slowly. They tend to fade away, but I can recover them by an effort perhaps half a dozen times, and do so because it is somehow pleasant or alluring. Then I usually sleep. During the experience I am well awake and am remembering that it is a repetition, wondering what it means and if anything new will occur, and taking care not to disturb the process.<sup>28</sup>

In "The Lane" Thomas uses a favourite device, the confusion of the seasons, to create the out-of-time quality of an experience. The lane is an actual lane that Thomas walked with his wife in September of 1916 and which he recalled in this poem written in December 1916. R. George Thomas's note is instructive:

This poem is written on a loose leaf inserted into the book in which Bod is written. At the bottom of the leaf is a note by Helen Thomas: 'Sent from Codford', where Thomas was awaiting embarkation. In a letter to Helen from Codford, dated 22 Jan. 1917, he wrote: 'You never mentioned receiving those verses about Green Lane, Froxfield [near Steep]. Did you get them? They were written in December and suggested by our last walk there in September.' Perhaps these are the verses referred to in his letter to Eleanor Farjeon from Trowbridge on 2 Nov. 1916: 'I did something else too coming down in the train on a long dark journey when people were talking and I wasn't, but I have got it still to finish.' If the poem was written in two stages, this may explain the discontinuity suggested by

the dots after 1. 8.<sup>29</sup>

That Thomas, in all likelihood, wrote the poem on the train journey which he describes as a "long dark journey" (presumably because of "black-out" requirements), is given some substance by the imagery of darkness in the closing lines of the poem.

The detail of the opening lines, which is typical of Thomas's poems, places emphasis on the finely observed visual imagery:

Some day, I think, there will be people enough  
In Froxfield to pick all the blackberries  
Out of the hedges of Green Lane, the straight  
Broad lane where now September hides herself  
In bracken and blackberry, harebell and dwarf gorse. 5

There is a sense of abundance and reality about the setting, and the first three lines betray the affection that Thomas feels for the place. The images of "bracken", "blackberry", "harebell and dwarf gorse", create a strong impression of the now. In the second section, however, Thomas begins to react to the inner landscape of the mind as his reflexive responses to the scene build up a more subjective and imaginative setting. This begins with the suggestion of temporal juxtaposition in line 6 where "Today" and "yesterday", though separated by a comma and the word "where", are nonetheless seen in close proximity:

Today, where yesterday a hundred sheep  
Were nibbling, halcyon bells shake to the sway  
Of waters that no vessel ever sailed....  
It is a kind of spring: the chaffinch tries  
His song. For heat it is like summer too. 10  
This might be winter's quiet. While the glint  
Of hollies dark in the swollen hedges lasts -  
One mile - and those bells ring, little I know  
Or heed if time be still the same, until  
The lane ends and once more all is the same. 15

In line 4 we have had mention of "September", in line 9 "a kind of



spring", and in line 10 "summer". In the following line we read: "This might be winter's quiet". The imagery of "hollies dark in the swollen hedge" is a hint of darker intimations, and while they last and the bells ring, the moment of stasis is maintained. In this instance there is experienced a premonition rather than a moment of harmony.

### iii. Journeys Home

Edward Thomas wrote three poems entitled "Home". The first was written on 23rd February 1915, the second on 17th April 1915, and the third on 10th March 1916. The first two are pre-enlistment poems and the third reflects the influence of army camp life. All three are important within the wider context of our theme of quest in Thomas's journeys. I shall not discuss them in detail but consider some of the issues they raise.

At the time of writing "Home" [1] (CP, p. 117) Thomas had begun to consider the possibility of joining Frost in America, but there was also the question of the war and whether or not he should enlist. A month later he was to clarify many of the issues in his poem "Lob" where he is certain, at least in poetic terms, why he must enlist. In February he was still coming to terms with the release of his poetry. The poem we shall look at is, therefore, an exercise of meditation rather than an account of a powerfully felt issue.

In terms of Thomas's journey towards integration, the poem registers a moment of discontent:

Home [1]

Not the end: but there's nothing more.  
Sweet Summer and Winter rude  
I have loved, and friendship and love,  
The crowd and solitude:

Thomas seems to be poised in a Limbo between life and death - what life has had to offer he has sampled to the full, a love of nature, friendship with others, and "solitude".

But I know them: I weary not;                    5  
But all that they mean I know.  
I would go back again home  
Now. Yet how should I go?

The lines are succinct and final; they give no impression of doubt or hesitation. The second stanza ends with what seems merely a rhetorical question; however, the question is also probing, as the strained and somewhat difficult flow of lines 7 and 8 suggest. Stanzas three and four put the problem more dramatically:

This is my grief. That land,  
My home, I have never seen;                    10  
No traveller tells of it,  
However far he has been.

And could I discover it,  
I fear my happiness there,  
Or my pain, might be dreams of return       15  
Here, to these things that were.

The reference to Hamlet's soliloquy "To be or not to be" (l. 11) relates the poem's title "Home" to the more symbolic issue of death. Thomas's fear is that the experience of the afterlife might be a desire to return to this life and all that he knew and loved (stanza 1). I cannot accept R. George Thomas's reading of stanza four; he understands the words "there" and "here" (ll. 14 and 16) to mean respectively, "Thomas's parents' home in Balham... and his own home at Steep".<sup>30</sup> This view would seem to obstruct the obvious symbolic directions the poem takes.

The fifth stanza prepares us for the stoic last stanza:

Remembering ills, thought slight  
Yet irremediable,  
Brings a worse, an impurer pang  
Than remembering what was well. 20

No: I cannot go back,  
And would not if I could.  
Until blindness come, I must wait  
And blink at what is not good.

Thomas "cannot go back" (l. 21) and by this he surely means that nostalgia, that is, escape into the past, is no solution, nor is an imaginative projection into the future. He opts for the stoic response, to "blink at what is not good". There is, then, for him no moment of unity or peace. In "Parting" (CP, p. 107) he had dismissed the past as "that strange land" (l. 1), and here he acknowledges that the past has "nothing more" (l. 1).

The stoic view, however, is provisional. There are moments when the "here" of "Home" [1] is blissful and harmonious. In "Home" [2] (CP, p. 177), for example, a less stoic note is sounded:

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, 5  
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 10  
And pleasant to us, and strange too,  
Yet with no bar.

The thrush on the oak top on the lane  
Sang his last song, or last but one;  
And as he ended, on the elm 15  
Another 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                      20  
Slow, half with weariness half with ease;  
And, through the silence, from his shed  
The sound of sawing rounded all  
That silence said.

Thomas describes a moment of union with man and nature. The moment comes at the end of a journey (stanza 2) and appropriately, the sound of birdsong heralds and deepens it. The short sixth line in each stanza clinches the certainty of the feeling. In contrast to "Home" [1], there is no straining to make intellectual points; the B rhyme in lines 2, 4, and 6 of each stanza underlines the pervading harmony. The poem ends with the homely image of the labourer, at one with his world, ending his day with the rhythmically timeless activity of sawing wood.

In "Home" [1] and [2] a movement towards unity in the familiar world of one's surroundings is an obvious goal; Thomas is content to be like the "labourer" in "Home" [2] and find his peace within a world of "weariness" and "ease" (l. 21). It is, perhaps, the introduction of the "labourer" in this poem that ends the reverie; he also adds a dimension to the word "home" which enlarges and widens the idea into something more than the fond recollections of a merely nostalgic vision. I shall consider this development in "Home" [3] (CP, p.285).

Edward Thomas's way of life changed when he enlisted. The monastic routine of writing and reviewing - those long hours of solitude in his study, apart from his family and friends - came suddenly to an end. This change in life is reflected in "Home" [3]. In letters to Eleanor Farjeon and Gordon Bottomley, Thomas speaks about his new environment. To Eleanor Farjeon he writes:

My dear Eleanor How nice to go to Coldwaltham (nicer to up Waltham). We are kept much indoors by weather unsuitable for mapping. This is Sunday a wet thawing Sunday and not really a holiday but just a day when few know what to do unless they are on leave. Somebody said something about homesickness the other day. It is a disease one can suppress but not do without under these conditions.

We are all in a turmoil of speculations. We are to have a new (and worse) sergeant major. The instructors are to be shuffled about and some (I expect) to go. Men over 30, they say, are to be transferred to fighting units as unfit for officers.

I can't write a bit. I am restless till I can. Can you and do you, in the snow? I am hoping everyone will clear out of the hut soon and leave me alone. The snow is all dirty again and I can't walk alone here and nobody wants to walk. You will have Helen down when this comes perhaps.<sup>31</sup>

Life in military camp was completely different from anything he had ever known. Clearly, he did feel the separation from his wife Helen and his family. In its place he was offered a temporary and tentative fellowship which he described to Gordon Bottomley:

Now in a week or so we are off to another camp, probably to Romford. Nobody wants to go, least of all I, as I can see people I want to in London. Still, in camp I found I could get on with people I had nothing in common with and almost get fond of them. As soon as we were in London the bond was dissolved and we had blank looks for one another.<sup>32</sup>

"Home" [3] is about these tentative relationships in army life, made the more emphatic precisely at those moments when what constitutes us most as individuals comes to the fore, drawing attention to, and alienating us from, one another.

The opening stanzas, 1, 2, 3, and 4, emphasize the feeling of comradeship in a day-long march. (The word "we" is used fourteen



times in the poem.) The temporary nature of this unity is brought out in the contrasting wildness of the background. This landscape dramatizes the underlying alienation each person feels within. In letters Thomas mentions his daily exercises in the surrounding countryside. He mentions in particular the wildness of the landscape and his sense of captivity, especially at weekends, when the soldiers were restricted to a two-mile radius. The poem begins energetically:

Fair was the morning, fair our tempers, and  
We had seen nothing fairer than that land,  
Though strange, and the untrodden snow that made  
Wild of the tame, casting out all that was  
Not wild and rustic and old; and we were glad. 5

In line 3 "the untrodden snow" is perhaps symbolic of the unknown and unfamiliar, and at the same time the familiar and merely surface area of relationships, the "Wild" and "tame".

The "wildness" of the setting seems to cast out not only what is "tame" but also what is domestic and conventional. The journey has about it a sense of discovery.

The second and third stanzas quickly establish the sense of time passing:

Fair too was afternoon, and first to pass  
Were we that league of snow, next the north wind.

The transition from morning to afternoon is sudden: the coming of darkness, the third stage of the journey, is dealt with in a more reflective mood:

There was nothing to return for except need.  
And yet we sang nor ever stopped for speed,  
As we did often with the start behind. 10  
Faster still strode we when we came in sight

Of the cold roofs where we must spend the night.

The "cold roofs" (l. 12) is the same image of bleakness and solitude that we find in "Rain" (CP, p. 259) where Thomas speaks of "the wild rain / On this bleak hut, and solitude" (ll. 1-2). Though no substitute for home, they do respond eagerly to the sight of the army huts which represent "sleep and food and fellowship" (l. 14):

Happy we had not been there, nor could be,  
Though we had tasted sleep and food and fellowship  
Together long.  
                    'How quick' to someone's lip                      15  
The word came, 'will the beaten horse run home.'

Thomas does not leave us in any doubt about his army life. He found it artificial and strange, the bond between men merely functional and tentative. The mention of the word "home" causes deeper reflection:

The word 'home' raised a smile in us all three,  
And one repeated it, smiling just so  
That all knew what he meant and none would say.  
Between three countries far apart that lay                      20  
We were divided and looked strangely each  
At the other, and we knew we were not friends  
But fellows in a union that ends  
With the necessity for it, as it ought.

There is a moment of truth in the silence that ensues. Each man knows that he is alone, that he is part of a unique past and a unique set of emotions and memories that add up to home. But there is a deeper alienation in the thought that friendships in army life preclude any real intersubjective sharing at a meaningful level. The "captivity" is emotional and intellectual.

The three men walk towards the huts, each one, presumably, preoccupied with his own thoughts:

Never a word was spoken, not a thought                      25

Was thought, of what the look meant with the word  
'Home' as we walked and watched the sunset blurred.

The rhyme sounds of "word" and "blurred" are repeated in the two lines following:

And then to me the word, only the word,  
'Homesick', as it were playfully occurred:

The levelling effect of the rhyme (it heightens the sense of the inner preoccupation of the three men with their own thoughts) is in contrast to the word "Homesick" which comes to mind vividly, being placed emphatically at the beginning of line 29. With the word comes a new trend of thought as we glimpse what lies underneath the outward expressions of comradeship. The emphatic conclusion is explicit of the nature of army life:

No more. If I should ever more admit  
Than the mere word I could not endure it  
For a day longer: this captivity  
Must somehow come to an end, else I should be  
Another man, as often now I seem,  
Or this life be only an evil dream.

Thomas was able to cope with army life by not allowing thoughts of normal life to intrude. This psychological state is graphically illustrated in a letter to his wife, the second last letter he was to write to her. He explains:

I, you see, must not feel anything. I am just, as it were, tunnelling underground and something sensible in my subconsciousness directs me not to think of the sun, at the end of the tunnel there is the sun. Honestly this is not the result of thinking; it is just an explanation of my state of mind which is really so entirely preoccupied with getting through the tunnel that you might say I had forgotten there was a sun at either end, before or after this business....<sup>33</sup>

It is this kind of stoicism that is reflected in lines 30-35 above, where tension between the couplet form and the run-on lines

dramatizes the checked emotion.

Though the "captivity" never did quite "come to an end" (ll. 32 and 33) in the sense that Thomas was able to resume civilian life (he died in uniform), there was a brief moment reflected in his poems that marks an optimistic stage in his quest. I shall deal briefly with these poems insofar as they reveal a positive side to Thomas, reflecting, it seems to me, those things he held dearest in relationship to his wife and family.

iv. "Household Poems"

A short poem called "Thaw" (CP, p. 289) introduces us to a brief respite in Thomas's poetic journey. The poem is significant because it heralds a change in mood, coming as it does after "Home" [3] which is pessimistic in outlook. The "thaw" is therefore a reference not only to the seasonal change but to Thomas's happier preoccupation with his wife and family in the four "household poems" (his term) that follow. The poem is just four lines.<sup>34</sup>

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

The "land" (l. 1) is the identical landscape of "Home" [3] but the perspective is that of nature ("the speculating rocks"). Thomas sees, or has us see, from their perspective, "the elm tops". The activity of the rocks indicates new life and continuity following the natural rhythm of the seasons. The mottled effects of a thawing landscape are suggested in the rhythmic pauses and in the loosening effect of the vowels on the consonantal heavy d's of "land", "freckled" and "half-thawed". The succession of l's in line 3

prolongs this dissolving process. Again in line 4 Thomas suggests human limitation through the brevity of the predominantly monosyllabic words. The Winter that has passed (if only for a time) is also the symbolic winter of Thomas's own state of mind. This poem leads us into the "household poems" which we shall consider briefly.

For a passing moment Thomas was to turn his gaze outwards to those he loved. The group of poems (a brief rift in the clouds for Thomas) he called the "household poems". The move away from self-preoccupation and introspection might be seen as Thomas's poetic last will and testament to his family.<sup>35</sup> He died a year later.

Edna Longley remarks of the poems as a group that:

The place names (names of village, parish, field, farm, house and brook) in the poems were all taken from the country around Hare Hall Camp - near Romford in south-east Essex. Thomas liked this area 'more and more' ... and the names indicate that camp life had not dulled his interest in his surroundings.<sup>36</sup>

Her remarks on the content and structure of the poems are suggestive:

The 'household poems' are unified by a number of factors: the motif of 'giving'; the place names; the couplet form; the expression of desirable human attributes in terms of the countryside. They constitute the apotheosis of all Thomas's 'catalogues', his exhaustive detailing of the natural scene.... But although these poems form a peak of celebration and tenderness in his work, each exhibits a characteristic reservation or under-tow. The conditions attached to the 'gifts' recall the tests or drawbacks which accompany fairy gifts in folk lore. Various techniques reinforce this traditional element: sing-song rhythms, exaggerated feminine rhymes, incantatory refrains. Certain phrases are hallowed by time and use: 'shall all forever be hers,' 'once on a time,' 'As far as a man in a



day could ride.' 37

The poems to Thomas's children form a unit, but I shall look more closely at "Bronwen" and only make brief references to the other two:

If I should ever by chance grow rich  
I'll buy Codham, Cockriden, and Childerditch,  
Roses, Pyrgo, and Lapwater,  
And let them all to my elder daughter.  
The rent I shall ask of her will be only 5  
Each year's first violets, white and lonely.  
The first primroses and orchises -  
She must find them before I do, that is.  
But if she finds a blossom on furze  
Without rent they shall all for ever be hers, 10  
Codham, Cockriden, and Childerditch,  
Roses, Pyrgo and Lapwater, -  
I shall give them all to my elder daughter.  
("Bronwen", CP, p. 291)

In common with "Merfyn" (CP, p. 293) "Bronwen" opens with the hypothetical "If". The opening lines in both poems are not only hypothetical but also highly improbable. We expect the logical structure:

If..... (Hypothesis)  
Then..... (Consequence)  
But..... (Denial of hypothesis)  
Therefore..... (Modification of the "If" clause)

In both poems we find only the first two elements of the structure and a series of conditions that must be fulfilled. If the statements in both poems are hypothetical, then we may ask what is present that is not hypothetical. Both poems reflect the assumption of shared values about natural beauty; they also express mutual love in terms of physical nature. This expression of affection might easily slip into sentiment if the logical structure was not present as a formal device. This necessary distancing is also achieved by the

translation of human affection into the language of commerce, for example, "I'll buy" (l. 2), "let" (l. 4), and "rent" (l. 5). The presence of couplet rhymes contributes to the control of emotion.

Having delivered over the first fruits of Spring and having fulfilled the condition of doing so before her father has found them, Bronwen will have paid her rent. Line 10 has an incantatory ring to it and the declaratory tone of a legal decree, all of which is reminiscent of a fairy tale:

Without rent they shall all for ever be hers.

The repetition of the names:

Codham, Cockridden, and Childerditch,  
Roses, Pyrgo and Lapwater, -

absolutizes them beyond the value of what might be bought, "let" or "rent[ed]", and, having lifted them above the merely material, the poet is able to say:

I shall give them all to my elder daughter.

The poems generally explore the difference between being and having, and how the wrong kind of possession, which can destroy authentic being, must be restrained by the fulfilling of certain conditions. (I shall explore this point later.) In the place-naming of both poems there comes together, in a synthesis of thought and feeling, that which delighted Thomas most, the celebration of person and place in the interaction between them. For Thomas, word and world are cognate.

In the poem to his son Merfyn ("Merfyn", CP, p. 293) we have

the same kind of structure as in "Bronwen".

If I were to own this countryside  
As far as a man in a day could ride,  
And the Tyes were mine for giving or letting, -  
Wingle Tye and Margaretting  
Tye, - and Skreens, Gooshays, and Cockerells, 5  
Shellow, Rochetts, Bandish, and Pickerells,  
Martins, Lambkins, and Lillyputs,  
Their copses, ponds, roads, and ruts,  
Fields where plough-horses steam and plovers  
Fling and whimper, hedges that lovers 10  
Love, and orchards, shrubberies, walls  
Where the sun untroubled by north wind falls,  
And single trees where the thrush sings well  
His proverbs untranslatable,  
I would give them all to my son 15  
If he would let me any one  
For a song, a blackbird's song, at dawn.  
He should have no more, till on my lawn  
Never a one was left, because I  
Had shot them to put them into a pie, - 20  
His Essex blackbirds, every one,  
And I was left old and alone.

Then unless I could pay, for rent, a song  
As sweet as a blackbird's, and as long -  
No more - he should have the house, not I: 25  
Margaretting or Wingle Tye,  
Or it might be Skreens, Gooshays, or Cockerells,  
Shellow, Rochetts, Bandish, or Pickerells,  
Martins, Lambkins, or Lillyputs,  
Should be his till the cart tracks had no ruts. 30

The first fourteen lines are taken up with the "If" clause: "If I were to own this countryside...", dependent on the main clause, "I would give [these places] all to my son". This is followed by the first condition: "If he would let me any one / For a song, a blackbird's song, at dawn" (ll. 16-17). The conditions set out in line 17 become progressively more stringent: from "for a song", with its connotations of "for nothing", to a "blackbird's song" and finally, "at dawn". The exhaustive catalogue of "Tyes" (a 'tye' was originally an outlying common, later an enclosed field), and features of landscape such as "copses", "ponds", "roads" and "ruts", which make up lines 2-14 and which Thomas would give to his son, are not only reminiscent of the world of Thomas's prose but might be

said to represent the total substance of his poetry. For example, lines 8-12, in particular, contain a list of those ordinary rural delights of England, often taken for granted but seldom at the time celebrated in verse. One finds them celebrated more often in the visual arts. They appear here as phenomena that Thomas particularly loves and all of them appear as titles to or items in a poem.<sup>38</sup> What Thomas would give to his son, therefore, is that which is represented by his poetry. That may be what Thomas alludes to in lines 23-24: "Then unless I could pay, for rent, a song / As sweet as a blackbird's, and as long -".

The conditions for giving to his son are that Thomas be allowed to retain his interest in these stretches of landscape ("Tyes") through an agreement whereby his son should "let... any one / For a song, a blackbird's song, at dawn". Edna Longley remarks:

...if Thomas should himself abuse his condition, repudiate the values located in the blackbirds by some brutality, he loses all his rights in the heritage. He will become an outcast ('old and alone') unless he can make suitable amends. This violent imagery may reflect a potentially destructive element in Thomas's relationship with Merfyn....<sup>39</sup>

The closing lines of the poem, however, contain a self-imposed condition which Thomas knows he cannot fulfil. Through this clause he believes he is able to ensure that his son's inheritance is intact.

In "Myfanwy" (CP, p. 295), Thomas appears to break the "giving" motif because, speaking of his daughter, he declares: "I shall not give her anything". However, Thomas implicitly contradicts this statement in the course of the poem by use of a series of negatives. He will not give her "South Weald" nor "Havering" because then she

would be no better than that line of queens who languished there.<sup>40</sup>

What shall I give my daughter the younger  
More than will keep her from cold and hunger?  
I shall not give her anything.  
If she shared South Weald and Havering,  
Their acres, the two brooks running between,                     5  
Paine's Brook and Weald Brook,  
With pewit, woodpecker, swan, and rook,  
She would be no richer than the queen  
Who once on a time sat in Havering Bower  
Alone, with the shadows, pleasure and power.                     10  
She could do no more with Samarcand,  
Or the mountains of a mountain land  
And its far white house above cottages  
Like Venus above the Pleiades.  
Her small hands I would not cumber                                     15  
With so many acres and their lumber,  
But leave her Steep and her own world  
And her spectacled self with hair uncurled,  
Wanting a thousand little things  
That time without contentment brings.                                 20

"Samarcand" with its distant romantic associations would be no better. What he does wish to leave her is "Steep and her own world". The Thomas family lived at Steep then and the place was very dear to them.

The poem tapers down to the image of a small bespectacled girl with uncurled hair. She occupies the last six lines of the poem and we are invited to contrast her with "Venus above the Pleiades" (l. 14), the image which comes just before this. Thomas is making the point that it is more important being in your own world than having in one that is strange and alien. This (as Edna Longley points out)<sup>41</sup> is surely the point of the much greater poem by Yeats, "Prayer for my Daughter". Myfanwy, like her mother Helen, was short-sighted. This fact, however, in the poem serves to stress the existential state of all of us in the precariousness of life. For Thomas the gift worth having is that edge to life where fulfilment is precisely



Wanting a thousand little things  
That time without contentment brings.

(ll. 19-20)

because this gives us a creative attitude to having rather than the inertia of the queen at "Havering Bower / Alone, with the shadows, pleasure and power" (ll. 9-10).

The line "I shall not give her anything" derives new meaning in the light of the poem's complete statement. If we rehearse the various likely stresses on subject, verb, object, the sentence makes a multitude of meanings possible within the theme of giving. The line then has a richness beyond the mere statement of refusal.

We are left, then, with the prospect of a little girl who, though in her "own world", is nonetheless open to life, actively engaged in life and growth, "wanting", not in the sense of craving, but in the more creative sense of desiring through possessing an active consciousness living out its moments. It is her "own world" because it is natural to her and in it she can cope with the "howling storm" through which (for Blake and Yeats in "The Sick Rose" and "A Prayer for my Daughter" respectively) innocence is lost.

In "Helen" (CP, p. 299) Thomas states again that that which is finally worth giving comes from "that great treasure-house" (l. 14) of human potentialities that so often are unrealized or become stunted in a human life:

And you, Helen, what should I give you?  
So many things I would give you  
Had I an infinite great store  
Offered me and I stood before  
To choose. I would give you youth,

All kinds of loveliness and truth,  
A clear eye as good as mine,  
Lands, waters, flowers, wine,  
As many children as your heart  
Might wish for, a far better art 10  
Than mine can be, all you have lost  
Upon the travelling waters tossed,  
Or given to me. If I could choose  
Freely in that great treasure-house  
Anything from any shelf, 15  
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, 20  
And myself, too, if I could find  
Where it lay hidden and it proved kind.

The poem is also an honest attempt to confront the failures of his married life even if he does not solve anything. The series of gifts finally arrives at "I would give you back yourself"; a remark which reiterates the primacy of being over having and, in less traditional terms, sounds again the cautionary note of being able to discern and recognize true needs: "And power to discriminate / What you want and want it not too late" (ll. 17 -18).

The last two lines of the poem open up again the note of self-preoccupation from which the "household poems" had been free. Thomas was to resume the quest for his true self not, however, for the sake of self-gratification but because, as the poem states, it is perhaps the best gift to give to anyone, to find oneself, where that self lies "hidden".

+ + + +

Most of what we know of Thomas's life as an active soldier in France is recorded in a private diary he kept during his last three months. From it we are able to piece together something of his life and preoccupations up to the day of his death when he was killed at an

observation post while directing fire in the Battle of Arras. What is more interesting, however, is what the diary reveals about Thomas the artist and poet living under the daily stress of war. Firstly, the diary reveals Thomas the note-taker writing in war conditions in very much the same style as he had written twenty years earlier when as a boy in his late teens he had kept that first nature diary that found its way into The Woodland Life. Secondly, the diary shows that he had not lost his eye for natural beauty even in the scarred landscape of the battlefield. Some of the diary entries juxtapose nature and war in memorable ways. For example, two entries from March 1917 read:

14. Ronville O.P. Looking out towards No Man's Land what I thought first was a piece of burnt paper or something turned out to be a bat shaken at last by shells from one of the last sheds in Ronville. A dull cold morning, with some shelling of Arras and St. Sauveur and just 3 for us. Talking to Birt and Randall about Glostershire and Wiltshire, particularly Painswick and Marlborough. A still evening - blackbirds singing far off - a spatter of our machine guns - the spit of one enemy bullet - a little rain - no wind - only far-off artillery.

16. Larks and great tits. Ploughing field next to orchard in mist - horses and man go right up to crest in view of Hun at Beaurains. Cold and dull. Letters to Helen and Janet. In the battery for the day. Fired 100 rounds from 12-1.30. Sun shining but misty still. Letter from Bronwen. The first thrush I have heard in France sang as I returned to Mess at 6 p.m. Parcel from Mother - my old Artist boots. Wrote to Hodson. A horrible night of bombardment, and the only time I slept I dreamt I was at home and couldn't stay to tea...42

From the first entry (14 March) the image of a bat, unnaturally exposed in daylight, and blackbirds singing in the midst of machine-gun fire, in their own way are as striking and memorable as the images of war recorded in Wilfred Owen's poetry. On 4 April the entry reads:

4. Up at 4.30. Blackbirds sing at battery at 5.45 - shooting at 6.30. A cloudy fresh morning. But showery cold muddy and slippery later. 600 rounds. Nothing in return yet. Tired by 9.15 p.m. Moved to dug-out in position. Letter from Helen. Artillery makes air flap all night long.<sup>43</sup>

The phrase "Blackbirds sing at battery..." seems to express with poetic power the ironic juxtaposition of nature and war and the capacity, perhaps, for nature to triumph finally in a restoration of peace and the natural rhythms of life.

On the last pages of the diary (undated) Thomas records something more than observation:

The light of the new moon and every star  
And no more singing for the bird...  
I never understood quite what was meant by God  
The morning chill and clear hurts my skin while  
it delights my mind.

Neuville in early morning with its flat straight crest with trees and houses [see Diary, April 1] - the beauty of this silent empty scene of no inhabitants and hid troops, but don't know why I could have cried and didn't.<sup>44</sup>

Given the existential dangers of war, the reference to God is perhaps not unusual. Though Thomas in his writing seldom makes reference to the deity, I find explicit in the notions of passivity and quest, which I have been considering, the essential qualities for a religious sensibility.

The last entry describing the deserted landscape, the "empty scene of no inhabitants and hid troops" seems to have touched Thomas with that same compassion we find in "The Owl" (CP, p.119), and the

same stoic strength is expressed in "but don't know why I could have cried and didn't".

Eleanor Farjeon offers as a fitting self-description for Edward Thomas the following words taken from his essay "The end of the Day": "I rose up, and knew that I was tired, and continued my journey".<sup>45</sup> In its biblical simplicity this quotation speaks of Thomas the man, the poet, the lover of words, the traveller of the English roads. His poetry continues to speak for him, and will endure, I believe, as long as "Aspens ... shake their leaves" ("Aspens", CP p.233, l. 19) and some men listen.



APPENDIX: Thomas on the Use of Words

In his later years Thomas often reflected on his medium, words. In The Last Sheaf he tells of his excesses of style in an effort to please the "elders":

If I wrote what really pleased or concerned me, like a walk all day or all night in Wiltshire, I had in view not the truth but the eyes of the elders, and those elders clothed in the excess and circumstance of elderliness regularly assumed in the presence of children.<sup>1</sup>

The early essays of The Woodland Life show this tendency towards the elaborate use of words, and we are conscious of the young man straining to please the more elderly readers of the magazines and journals in which his sketches and essays appeared.

In an essay called "How I Began" in The Last Sheaf Thomas speaks about the problems of writing in a way that predates much of what Robert Frost was later to say about poetic diction:

Talking prose is natural to most of the species; writing is now almost as common, if not as natural; having it published when written is the third step which distinguishes the author from the more primitive minority of mankind.... Everyone begins by talking, stumbles into writing, and succumbs to print.

The first step is the most interesting and the most difficult to explain and describe. I shall leave it alone. The second step is very interesting, and less difficult to explain and describe, yet I can remember little of it. I can only remark here that the result of teaching a child to read before it can write is that it begins and usually ends by writing like a book, not like a human being. It was my own experience. From the age of one, I could express by words and inflections of the voice all that ever sought expression within me, from feelings of heat, cold, hunger, repletion, indigestion etc., to subtle preferences of persons and

things. But when I came to write the slowness of that unnatural act decimated and disconcerted my natural faculties....

The slowness made it practically impossible to say what I was thinking, even if I tried. I did not try hard. I do not believe that it was by any means my sole or chief aim to write what I was thinking, or what I should have spoken had my correspondent been in the same room with me. I felt it to be highly important that I should use terms such as I had met in books, seldom if ever in speech. Nor do I remember hearing it said that I could, or should, write as I thought or as I spoke.<sup>2</sup>

This judgement of his early work was made in the light of his experience as a poet and reflects much of the thinking of the time about "the colloquial-dramatic elements" that had been neglected in the poetry of the day. <sup>3</sup>

It is, however, in Thomas's specifically critical work that he clarifies his own standpoint regarding the diction of prose and poetry. In his Walter Pater: A Critical Study (1913), which pre-dates his meeting with Frost, he writes on matters that he and Frost were to discuss much later.<sup>4</sup> In this work he sets down his views about his own use of the medium, words; he also lays to rest the lingering ghost of Pater's influence. Here, for example, are Thomas's thoughts on the relationship between literature and speech:

Literature is further divided in outward seeming from speech by what helps to make it in fact more than ever an equivalent of speech. It has to make words of such a spirit, and arrange them in such a manner, that they will do all that a speaker can do by innumerable gestures and their innumerable shades, by tone and pitch of voice, by speed, by pauses, by all that he is and all that he will become.<sup>5</sup>

Here are set down the challenges he was to meet in his own poetry - and how close it comes to Frost's views. Thomas is not saying, as many have mistakenly thought, that speech rhythms are a mere copying

of the spoken word. "Literature... [has to] arrange [words] in such a manner, that they will do all that a speaker can do..."(*my italics*). This arrangement of words is part of the poet's task.

Thomas saw in Pater's self-conscious style some of his own early excesses. He saw, for example, how Pater's words in drawing attention to themselves obscured the objects denoted by them. He observed too how this style inhibited such important elements as rhythm and flow. He writes:

His very words are to be seen, not read aloud; for if read aloud they betray their artificiality by a lack of natural expressive rhythm. His closely packed sentences, pausing again and again to take up a fresh burden of parenthesis, could not possibly have a natural rhythm. <sup>6</sup>

This artificiality of style not only inhibits natural rhythm; for Thomas it also underlines a lifelessness and lack of a real living experience. He sees this especially in Pater's The Renaissance about which he writes:

Thus his prose embalms choice things, as seen at choice moments, in choice words.... It is not the style of ecstasy such as can be seen in Jefferies' Story of My Heart, or Sterne's Journal to Eliza, or Keats' last letter to Fanny Brawne. Hardly does it appear to be the style of remembered ecstasy as in Traherne's Centuries of Meditation or Wordsworth's Tintern Abbey. It is free from traces of experience.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, in his criticism of Pater's Essay on Style Thomas the poet speaks. His sensitivity to "You English words" is clear in his thinking. He writes:

Pater was, in fact, forced against his judgment to use words as bricks, as tin soldiers, instead of flesh and blood and genius. Inability to survey the whole history of every word must force the perfectly self-conscious

writer into this position. Only when a word has become necessary to him can a man use it safely; if he try to impress words by force on a sudden occasion, they will either perish of his violence or betray him. No man can decree the value of one word, unless it is his own invention; the value which it will have in his hands has been decreed by his own past, by the past of his race. It is, of course, impossible to study words too deeply, though all men are not born for this study: but Pater's influence has tended to encourage meticulousness in detail and single words, rather than a regard for form in its largest sense. His words and still less his disciples have not been lived with sufficiently. Unless a man write with his whole nature concentrated upon his subject he is unlikely to take hold of another man.<sup>8</sup>

It was in his poetry especially that Thomas was to show the intimate relationship between a finely focused "concentration" and an exact verbal apprehension. It is in the poems that we see the pleasing authority of the "necessary word" used with a new joy so that Thomas could write in "Words":

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

("Words", CP, p, 218, ll. 52-59)

There was, however, a positive side to influence. If Thomas did avoid the artificial diction of Pater, he was also enriched by Pater's sense of the concrete world. Edna Longley quotes Arthur Ransome writing on Thomas for "The Bookman" Gallery (The Bookman, March 1907) where he observes that Thomas "was influenced by Pater and Richard Jefferies; by Pater in his precision of speech, by Jefferies in his accuracy of observation".<sup>9</sup> This unlikely juxtaposition is evident in "Words" where Thomas reflects on the familiarity and strangeness of his medium. I requote the relevant

lines:

I know you:  
You are light as dreams,  
Tough as oak,  
Precious as gold,  
As poppies and corn,  
Or an old cloak:  
Sweet as our birds  
To the ear,  
As the burnet rose  
In the heat  
Of Midsummer:  
Strange as the races  
Of dead and unborn:  
Strange and sweet  
Equally,  
And familiar,  
To the eye,  
As the dearest faces  
That a man knows,  
And as lost homes are:  
("Words", CP, p. 217, ll. 12-30)

The poem's movement is a darting between the exquisite and fleeting on the one hand and the familiar and established on the other. Thomas draws his similes from rural and Romantic sources but it is perhaps his power to touch the familiar with the spell of strangeness, and through this to reconcile them, that shows he has outgrown his influences.

Thomas saw that words were part of a living and changing context. In the poem "Words" it is significant that he would have words "choose" him. He sees in Pater's prose a failure to recognize this fact:

It appears to have been Pater's chief fault, or the cause of his faults, that he trusted those powers [innate creative powers] too little. The alternative supposition is that he did not carry his self-conscious labours far enough. On almost every page of his writing words are to be seen sticking out, like the raisins that will get burnt on an ill-made cake. It is clear that they have been carefully chosen as the right and effective words, but they stick out because the labour of composition has become so



self-conscious and mechanical that cohesion and perfect consistency are impossible. The words have only an isolated value; they are labels; they are shorthand: they are anything but living and social words.<sup>10</sup>

For Thomas, an over-fastidiousness with words, such as is found in Pater's self-consciousness, robs both prose and poetry of that rhythm "which only emotion can command".<sup>11</sup> Already in A.S. Swinburne: A Critical Study (1912) Thomas was stressing the need for a more living diction in poetry. It was in his late prose and, more resolutely, in his poetry that Thomas applied those ideas he had expressed theoretically in his critical works.

NOTES

CHAPTER 1

1

Laurence Binyon, Landscape in English Art and Poetry (London: Cobden - Sanderson, 1931), p. 8.

2

According to The Oxford Companion to English Literature, Taliesin was a British bard, perhaps a mythic personage. If he lived he flourished around 550.

3

Binyon, p. 9.

4

Binyon, p. 10.

5

Seamus Heaney, "The God in the Tree", in Preoccupations: Selected Prose, 1968-1978 (London: Faber, 1980), p. 183.

6

Heaney, p. 181.

7

R.T. Davies, Medieval English Lyrics (London: Faber, 1963), p. 52.

8

RU, p. 8.

9

Motion, p. 12.

10

W.J. Keith, The Rural Tradition (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1975), p.  
12.

11

Eckert, p. 4.

12

Eckert, p. 5.

13

COET, p. 9.

14

COET, p. 15.

15

CP, p. 21 (l. 39).

16

COET, p. 134.

17

A Language Not to be Betrayed: Selected Prose of Edward Thomas,

selected and introd. by Edna Longley (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1981), p. 180.

18

COET, p. 7.

19

AIW, p. 16.

20

Motion, p. 15.

21

Eckert, p. 31.

22

TLSh, p. 17.

23

TWL, p. 233.

24

TLSh, p. 19.

25

THE, pp. 133-134.

26

SPP, p. 283.

27

Richard Jefferies, The Open Air, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1904),  
p.32.

28

Coombes, p. 53.

29

Longley, p. 142. Cooke (p.105) draws our attention to the familiarity between the terse entries in the nature diary in Thomas's The Woodland Life and some of the nature poems. Thomas never lost the habit of note-taking. His war diary, the last writing he did, is strikingly similar to the nature diary, his first prose work.

30

Eckert, p. 45.

31

Eckert, p. 47.

32

Eckert, p. 43.

33

AIW, p. 51.

34

AIW, pp. 58-59.

35

AIW, p. 80.



36

H.W. Nevinson, Changes and Chances (London: N.P.), p. 195.

37

"Reviewing: An Unskilled Labour", Poetry and Drama, No 1 (March 1914), 37.

38

Motion, p. 17.

39

Helen Thomas in a letter to her friend Janet Hooton, quoted in Cooke, p.35.

40

"To Gordon Bottomley", 26 June 1904, Letter 15, (Bottomley, p.57).

41

Walter Pater, Appreciations: With an Essay on Style (London: Macmillan, 1910), pp. 11-12.

42

Pater, p. 10.

43

CP, "Old Man" (l. 34).

44

HS, p. 1.

45

Oxford, pp. 114-16.

46

HS, p. 125.

47

Bottomley, p. 61.

48

Bottomley, p. 61.

49

PET, pp. 43-4.

50

Bottomley, pp. 106-7.

51

THE, pp. 57-8.

52

THE, p. 59.

53

THE, p. 122.

54

THE, p. 24.

55

TC, pp. 21-2.

56

TC, p. 6.

57

An incident recalled by Eleanor Farjeon (Farjeon, p.154).

58

THE, p. 84.

59

SPP, p. 68.

60

SPP, pp. 68-9.

61

SPP, p. 69.

62

SPP, pp. 69-70.

63

RU, p. 137.

64

RU, p. 138.

65

RU, pp. 143-44.

66

RU, p. 144.

67

PET, pp. 139-40.

68

PET, pp. 140-41.

69

PET, p. 141.

70

PET, pp. 141-42.

71

Motion, p. 21.

72

Farjeon, p.13.

73

See Appendix below for Thomas's remarks on the use of words.

74

Farjeon, p. 51.

75

Motion, p. 23.

76

PET, p. 193.

## CHAPTER 2

1

Longley, p. 179.

2

Farjeon, p. 13.

3

Farjeon, p. 18.

4

"To Gordon Bottomley", 17 March 1904, (Bottomley, p. 53).

5

Farjeon, p. 107.

6

Farjeon, p. 108.

7

Farjeon, p. 104.

8

COET, pp. 15-16.

9

Longley, p. 154.

10

Cooke, p. 171.

11

THE, pp. 133-134.

12

PET, pp. 90-1. (Cited in Longley, p.253.)

13

The Berg Collection (see CP, p.84) refers to a collection of manuscripts in the New York Public Library containing Poems 27 (two drafts), 28, 29, 31, and 32. All are dated by the poet.

14

CP, p. 84.

15

Longley, p. 196.

16

Longley, p. 196.



17

Longley, p. 290.

18

Thomas's works of criticism are: Richard Jefferies (1909), Feminine Influence on the Poets (1910), Maurice Maeterlinck (1911), Algernon Charles Swinburne (1912), George Borrow (1912), Lafcadio Hearn (1912), Walter Pater (1912), Keats (1916), and A Literary Pilgrim in England (1917). Edna Longley's praise and plea for Thomas as critic in A Language Not to be Betrayed, p.xiii, deserves our attention:

The Critical Heritage volumes on Pound and Yeats contain several items by Edward Thomas; he features in the recent Casebook on Hardy's poems. It is time that his contribution to his own critical heritage was fully recognized.

19

See "Aspens" (l. 23).

20

WWE, p. 83.

21

In TIW Thomas writes: "We still say that the road 'goes' to London, as we 'go' ourselves" (p. 1).

22

Quoted in Longley, p. 277.

23

TC, p.9, quoted in Longley, p.234.

24

Longley, p. 232-33.

25

Longley, p.239.

26

Motion, p. 107-8.

27

Cooke, p. 218.

28

Longley, pp. 248-51.

29

See Longley, pp.251-53, for useful discussion on lines 133-41.

30

Longley p. 252.

### CHAPTER 3

1

TIW, pp. vi-vii.

2

WP, p. 69.

3

Motion, p. 82.

4

Collected Poems of Robert Frost, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1943),  
p.153.

5

CP, p. xix.

6

Motion, pp. 30-56.

7

Longley, pp. 163-70.

8

Bottomley, p. 53.

9

Bottomley, p. 96.

10

Motion, p. 30.

11

Richard Jefferies, The Story of my Heart (London: Longmans, 1891),  
p. 10.

12

SPP, p. 19.

13

Longley, p. 167.

14

Motion, p. 49.

15

Longley, p. 317.

16

TIW, pp. 1-5.

17

Motion, p. 129.

18

Longley, p. 317.

19

Longley, p. 318.

20

Farjeon, p. 182.

21

The Mabington, trans. Jeffrey Grantz (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976), p. 122.

22

CP, p. 409.

23

CP, p. 408.

24

Donald Davie, "Lesson in Honesty", TLS, 23 Nov. 1979, p.21.

25

Edward Thomas, Light and Twilight (London: Duckworth, 1911), p. 73.

26

Longley, pp. 341-42.

27

Longley, p. 216.

28

COET, p. 152.

29

CP, p. 421.

30

CP, p. 390.

31

Farjeon, p. 188.

32

Bottomley, pp. 255-6.

33

Longley, p. 329.

34

Thomas's complete poems include several short poems that are reminiscent of the terse diary notes in TWL. Such poems are "Tall Nettles", "A Tale", "In Memoriam", "Easter 1915", "Cock-crow", and "Cherry Trees".

35

Longley, p. 331.

36

Longley, pp. 330-31.

37

Longley, p. 331.

38

See, for example, "Two Pewits" (CP, p. 137), "November Sky" (CP, p.11), "As the Team's Head Brass" (CP, p. 329), and "The Pond" (CP, p. 331).



39

Longley, p. 334.

40

Edna Longley's note is instructive:

Havering, Havering Bower. Reviewing a book called Romantic Essex in 1901 Thomas remarks: 'We are grateful ... for the mere repetition of such names as Ashingden, Cressing, Havering-atte-Bower ...' The manor of Havering was held by the kings of England for several centuries. The word 'Bower' indicates that it became particularly associated with their queens, beginning with Queen Eleanor of Provence in 1267. Among the queens who actually resided there were Isabella, child-bride of the deposed Richard II, and Joanna, widow of Henry IV, who was imprisoned on a charge of treason and witchcraft and returned to Havering to die. Thomas's reference, however, may be less specific. (Longley, p. 336).

41

Longley, p. 335.

42

CP, p. 476.

43

CP, p. 480.

44

CP, p. 481.

45

Farjeon, p. 217.

APPENDIX

1

TLSh, p. 15.

2

TLSh, pp. 15-16.

3

See George MacBeth, rev. of Georgian Poetry: 1912-1922, ed. by James Reeves, London Magazine, 2, No. 3 (June 1962), 74-80.

4

Andrew Motion demonstrates Thomas's anticipations of Frost's theories about language in his chapter, "The Sound of Sense" (Motion, pp. 57-90).

5

WP, p. 210.

6

WP, p. 104.

7

WP, pp. 108-109.

8

WP, pp. 215-16.

9

Longley, A Language Not to be Betrayed, p.xix.

10

WP, p. 213.

11

WP, p. 218.

ABBREVIATIONS

Poems and Selected Prose of Edward Thomas

- CP        The Collected Poems of Edward Thomas.  
            Ed. and introd. by R. George Thomas. Oxford:  
            The Clarendon Press, 1978.
- Longley    Edward Thomas: Poems and Last Poems.  
            Ed. and introd. by Edna Longley. London:  
            Collins, 1973; rpt. Plymouth: Macdonald  
            & Evans, 1978.
- PET        The Prose of Edward Thomas. Sel. by  
            Ronald Gant. London: The Falcon Press, 1948.
- SPP        Edward Thomas: Selected Poems and Prose.  
            Ed. and introd. by David Wright.  
            Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981.

Prose Works by Edward Thomas

- ACS        Algernon Charles Swinburne. London: Secker,  
            1912.
- COET      The Childhood of Edward Thomas. London:  
            Faber, 1938.

- HS            Horae Solitariae. London: Duckworth,  
1902.
- KEATS        Keats. London: Jack, 1916.
- LPE           A Literary Pilgrim in England. London:  
Methuen, 1917.
- MM           Maurice Maeterlinck. London: Methuen, 1911.
- RAP           Rose Acre Papers. London: Duckworth, 1910.
- RJ            Richard Jefferies, His Life and Work.  
London: Hutchinson, 1909.
- RU            Rest and Unrest. London: Duckworth, 1910.
- TC            The Country, London: Batsford, 1913.
- THE           The Heart of England. Oxford: Oxford  
University Press, 1982.
- TIW           The Icknield Way. London: Constable, 1929.
- TLSh          The Last Sheaf: Essays by Edward Thomas,  
London: Jonathan Cape, 1928.



TWL        The Woodland Life. London: Blackwood, 1897.

WP        Walter Pater: A Critical Study. London:  
Secker, 1912.

Biographical, Bibliographical and Critical Works on Edward  
Thomas.

Cooke      William Cooke. Edward Thomas: A Critical Biography.  
London: Faber, 1970.

Coombes    H. Coombes. Edward Thomas. London:  
Chatto & Windus, 1956.

Farjeon    Eleanor Farjeon. Edward Thomas: The  
Last Four Years. London: Oxford  
University Press, 1958.

Motion     Andrew Motion. The Poetry of Edward Thomas.  
London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980.

Bottomley   Letters from Edward Thomas to Gordon Bottomley.  
Ed. and introd. by R. George Thomas. London:  
Oxford University Press, 1968.

Eckert      Robert P. Eckert. Edward Thomas: A Biography  
and a Bibliography. London: Dent, 1937.

AIW Helen Thomas. As It Was. London:  
Faber, 1956.

WWE Helen Thomas. World Without End. London:  
Faber, 1956.

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