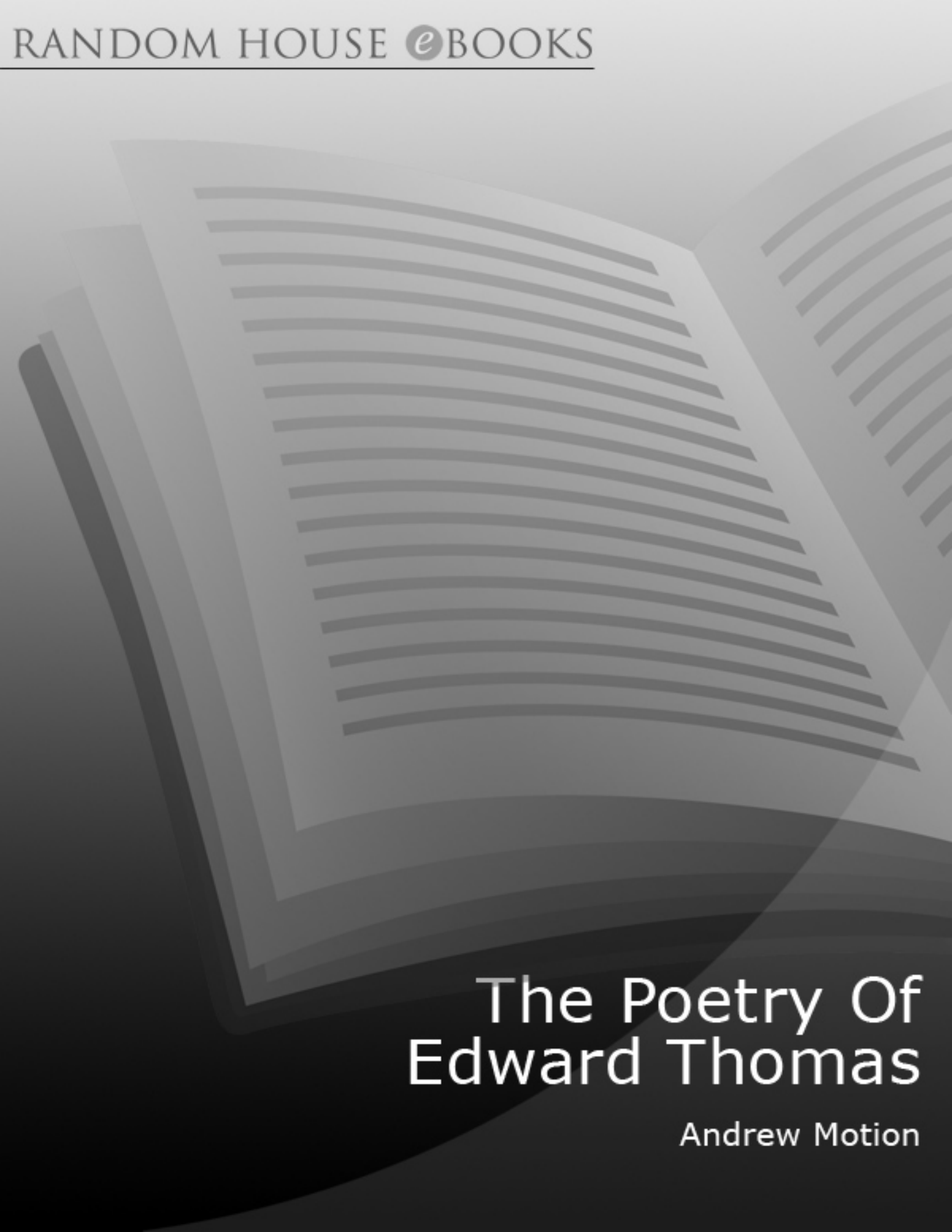


RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Poetry Of Edward Thomas

Andrew Motion

CONTENTS



Cover

About the Book

Also by Andrew Motion

Dedication

Title Page

Introduction

1 Biographical

2 Double Vision

3 The Sound of Sense

4 Patriot and War Poet

5 Friend and Countryman

Notes

Index

Acknowledgments

Bibliography

Copyright

About the Book

When Edward Thomas died at Arras in 1917 few people thought of him as a poet. Yet in the two years before his death, after a lifetime writing prose, Thomas wrote some of the most enduring poems of his day: poems of war, nature, friendship, despair and exultation. Andrew Motion's pioneering study of Thomas's life and achievement is scholarly yet utterly absorbing, combining an account of his struggles as a writer with perceptive readings of individual poems.

Andrew Motion's books include a biography, *The Lamberts: George, Constant & Kit*, and several prize-winning collections of poetry, the most recent of which is *Love In A Life*. He is currently writing the authorized biography of Philip Larkin.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Poems

The Pleasure Steamers
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Dangerous Play: Poems 1974-84
Natural Causes
Love In A Life

Biography

The Lamberts: George, Constant & Kit

Criticism

Philip Larkin

Fiction

The Pale Companion

Edited with Blake Morrison

The Penguin Book of
Contemporary British Poetry

For Joanna Jane

The Poetry Of Edward Thomas

ANDREW MOTION



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INTRODUCTION



EDWARD THOMAS'S FIRST collection of poems appeared shortly after his death in 1917 and was given half a page of praise in the *Times Literary Supplement*. A few months earlier the same journal had reviewed the first publication in England of T. S. Eliot's *Prufrock and Other Observations*: 'Among other things which pass through the rhapsodist's mind are "dust in crevices, smells of chestnuts in the streets, and female smells in shuttered rooms, and cigarettes in corridors and cocktail smells in bars". The fact that these things occurred to the mind of Mr Eliot is surely of the very smallest importance to anyone - even to himself. They certainly have no relation to "poetry", and we only give an example because some of the pieces, he states, have appeared in a periodical which claims that word as its title.'¹ These antithetical reactions neatly summarise the quarrel which dominated English poetry during the first quarter of this century. On one hand imperialists like Alfred Austin and Sir Henry Newbolt fought a rearguard action on behalf of Victorian values, and on the other experimenters

like Ezra Pound and Eliot himself accused them of producing 'a horrible agglomerate compost, not minted, most of it not even baked'.² In the middle, and criticised by both sides, but enormously popular with the public at large, stood the Georgians.

Subsequent years have seen this latter group treated with increasing hostility. Instead of being praised for reconciling the best old and new attitudes they have been mocked as 'gently unambitious',³ or dismissed as reactionary. They have, in fact, commonly been denied any important role whatsoever in the formation of distinctively 'modern' poetry. The credit for this, and the term 'Modernist' itself, has been given to Pound and Eliot. Reasons for the shift in opinion are easily adduced. Many Georgian attempts to escape the constraints of the nineteenth century appear at best half-hearted and at worst futile. But such criticism has had unfortunate side effects. While accurately identifying weaknesses in the Georgians themselves, it has risked misrepresenting those who were only loosely connected with them. And among the casualties of this general condemnation, Thomas is pre-eminent. Either he is found guilty by association or - more usually - separated from them altogether on the grounds that no one who sympathised with their aims could write with his distinction. As a result, the proper context of his work has been denied, and its various debts and allegiances overlooked. The following evaluation finds him writing, as it were, slightly to the left of centre - drawing much from the Georgians but also anticipating the Modernists in several important respects. It is a position which allowed him, like Thomas Hardy and Robert Frost, to effect 'a "quiet" and unaggressive poetic revolution as important as the more publicised *coup d'état* of Pound and Eliot'.⁴

Although Thomas never knew the Modernists by that name, his reviewing acquainted him with the conception, if not the fulfilment, of their purpose. The various groups which prepared the way for their achievement were active in London from at least 1912, when the Futurist Marinetti gave a series of lectures expounding a broadly symbolist aesthetic that led, in due course, to 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' and *The Waste Land* (1922). Of all these blows to orthodoxy the most forceful were struck by the Vorticists and the Imagists, and Thomas, who had already (in 1911) published a study of Maurice Maeterlinck, was well equipped to interpret their effect. This did not, on the face of it, lead him to admire them. He had described Maeterlinck's symbolism as 'nothing but wind',⁵ and was similarly scornful of the anthology *Des Imagistes* (1914): 'The majority fall into two categories. Either they are translations or paraphrases, or they are written in the manner of translations.'⁶ Privately, in a letter to his Georgian friend Gordon Bottomley, he had been even more damning: 'What imbeciles the Imagists are.'⁷ A more celebrated and extended attack had previously been directed against Pound, whose early book *Personae* (June 1909) Thomas had approved because it contained 'no golden words shot with meaning; a temperate use of images and none far fetched; no flattering of modern fashions; ... no apostrophe, no rhetoric'.⁸ This praise outraged many of Thomas's friends, but it was not their advice which moved him, five months later, to criticise 'the turbulent opacity of [Pound's] peculiarities'⁹ in *Exultations*. His change of heart conformed in every respect to his poetic credo, and by repudiating Pound's more adventurous subversions he defined the boundaries of his tolerance:

a poem of the old kind has a simple fundamental meaning which every sane reader can agree upon; above and beyond this each one builds as he can or must. In the new there is no basis of this kind; a poem means nothing unless its whole meaning has been grasped.[10](#)

These reservations about Imagism were less constricting in practice than they seem in theory. When Amy Lowell listed six attributes in her anthology *Some Imagist Poets* (1915) she identified qualities which could equally well characterise his own poetry:

1. To use the language of common speech ...
2. To create new rhythms ...
3. To allow absolute freedom in the choice of subject ...
4. To present an image ...
5. To produce poetry that is hard and clear, never blurred nor indefinite.
6. Finally, most of us believe that concentration is of the very essence of poetry.[11](#)

The fact that these aims are sufficiently indeterminate to describe not only Thomas but a wide variety of authors suggests that strict Imagists were not espousing entirely new principles, but isolating a number of old ones and thereby making them seem unfamiliar. Imagism, in other words, is a matter of selection and amplification. The same can also be said of fully-fledged Modernism, which shares many of its strategies; but because the point to which Eliot and Pound developed them is so advanced, it is easy to overlook any equivalents in Thomas. Yet the Imagists' juxtaposition of miniature fragments, and the Modernists' generous use of collage and montage, both find their discreet counterpart in his poems. 'The long small room' is

typical of the way in which he refers to a variety of objects with such quick clarity that orthodox pictorial and narrative techniques are replaced by what one of his earliest reviewers called 'disconnected impressions':[12](#)

The long small room that showed willows in
the west Narrowed up to the end the
fireplace filled,
Although not wide. I liked it. No one guessed
What need or accident made them so build.

Only the moon, the mouse and the sparrow
peeped
In from the ivy round the casement thick.
Of all they saw and heard there they shall
keep
The tale for the old ivy and older brick.

When I look back I am like moon, sparrow
and mouse
That witnessed what they could never
understand
Or alter or prevent in the dark house.
One thing remains the same - this my right
hand

Crawling crab-like over the clean white page,
Resting awhile each morning on the pillow,
Then once more starting to crawl on towards
age.
The hundred last leaves stream upon the
willow.

The sense of insecurity and isolation conveyed here in visual terms appears elsewhere in linguistic ones. But Thomas's 'intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings'

is more reticent than Eliot's. Instead of toying with incoherence in order to reflect a bafflingly complex and fragmented society, he prefers to record individual moods and intuitions hovering at the limit of articulation. 'Old Man' shows him doing so at length, and in a number of other poems his fascination with what is evasive takes a more local form. As he struggles to bring himself as close as is possible in language to the very grain and texture of experience, he is aware that the words he employs establish a difference between themselves and their object. The opening of 'Adlestrop' is a neglected instance:

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

Thomas wrings from the name 'Adlestrop', by suspending it at the line-end, a series of unspoken associations with ideal rural communities. But when he returns half way through the poem to repeat that 'What I saw / Was Adlestrop - only the name', it is a signal for those associations to accelerate away from his reach. They satisfy him for no more than the 'minute' he stops there:

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

These various kinds of disruption affect the form as well as the content of Thomas's poems. In [Chapter 3](#) his rhythms and syntax will be discussed at length, but in the present context it is worth stressing that his persistent modifications of the regular iambic pentameter anticipate Eliot's bolder experiments. (Seventy-six of his 142 poems

show this in operation.) Both poets arouse traditional expectations only to disappoint them, with the result that attention is drawn to the autonomy of the artefact at the same time as its subject becomes apparent. One consequence of this is that 'reality' is denied an absolute identity, and is seen instead to be conditioned by the temperament, mood and circumstances of the person observing it. Prufrock, for example, acknowledges that his view of the universe is highly individual, and thereby insists on the plurality of experience. And when Eliot introduces phrases from foreign languages and other poets – as he frequently does in *The Waste Land* – this emphasis is still more strongly felt. Every inclusion shows the concern with relativism which stands at the heart of the Modernist movement:

I sat upon the shore
Fishing, with the arid plain behind me
Shall I at least set my lands in order?
London Bridge is falling down falling down falling
down
Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina
Quando fiam uti chelidon – O swallow swallow
Le Prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie
These fragments I have shored against my ruins
Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe.
Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.
Shantih shantih shantih

Thomas's borrowings are nothing like as persistent as this, and they always create a specifically English rather than an international context. References to folk-songs and ballads are particularly common, and although they have gone almost unnoticed, Bottomley's observations that 'his memory for them was extraordinary, his repertoire unfathomable'^{[13](#)} is amply justified by numerous outbursts

of enthusiasm in the prose. 'Of all music,' Thomas wrote in *The Heart of England* (1906),

the old ballads and folk songs and their airs are richest in the plain immortal symbols. The best of them seem to be written in a language that should be universal, if only simplicity were truly simple to mankind. ... They are in themselves epitomes of whole generations, of a whole countryside.¹⁴

Almost exactly a hundred years before, Wordsworth had justified the *Lyrical Ballads* with similar protestations, and more recently several other poets had taken up the cause. W. B. Yeats was chief among them, and introduced his *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* in the knowledge that 'if any one will turn these pages attending to poets born in the 'fifties, 'sixties, and 'seventies he will find how successful are their folk songs and their imitations'.¹⁵ It is important, too, for Thomas's admiration to be seen against the background of research done by such folk-song collectors as F. J. Child and Cecil Sharp, and to realise that the war emphasised what he called ballads' 'national'¹⁶ character. But he no more needed these influences to form his taste than he needed the war to shape his patriotism. His profound admiration for White, Cobbett and Jefferies had already created it. Throughout the decade before the first Georgian anthology appeared, he founded his belief in a poetic revival on the conviction that recovery of folk material would give 'a vigorous impulse'.¹⁷ Whenever he found signs of its good effect - as he did in John Masefield's *The Tragedy of Nan* (1909) - he praised it as evidence of a healthy correspondence between past and present: '[This book] has been able to preserve the simplicity of the ballad

while enriching it with the beauty of a grave and sensitive modern spirit that has brooded long upon it.’¹⁸

The same quality is evident in Thomas’s own work, as one of the two poems called ‘An Old Song’ illustrates. The original (‘The Lincolnshire Poacher’) is simultaneously relished and adopted as a discipline:¹⁹

I was not apprenticed nor ever dwelt in famous
Lincolnshire;
I’ve served one master well and ill much more than
seven year;
And never took up to poaching as you shall quickly
find;
But ’tis my delight of a shiny night in the season of
the year.

Elsewhere such precise parallels shrink to the diminutive scale of inversions and archaisms like ‘tis,’ ‘o’er’ and ‘neath’. These, which have usually been interpreted as a sign of arrested development in Thomas’s diction, are strategically placed throughout his poetry to hint at its ‘pedigree of dimmest antiquity’.²⁰ The same purpose is filled by more extensive references: they are the literary equivalent of stable, ideal landscapes where ‘every swelling of the grass, every wavering line of hedge or path or road [is] an inscription brief as an epitaph’.²¹ Among many other examples, the re-use of the Elizabethan lyric ‘There is a Ladie sweet and kind’ in ‘Song’; the weather-rhyme which begins ‘November Sky’ (‘November’s days are thirty: / November’s earth is dirty’); and the reference to traditional poems in the titles and bodies of ‘The Ash Grove’, ‘Song’ (‘Early one morning’) and ‘Over the Hills’ – all provide him with the touchstone he seeks. A similar debt occurs in ‘Lights Out’: the lines ‘all must lose / Their way, however straight / Or winding, soon or late’ glance at the literally

time-honoured phrases of an early English poem called 'The Ploughman', which Thomas had included in his anthology *This England*:

The plowe gothe mony a gate,
Botherly and eke late,
In winter in the clay.

The same principles govern his choice of quotations from more recent poems. The function of his selection is to convey a sense of responsibility and indebtedness to the native English past, and to bring its admirable qualities forward into the present. As he says in the fruitful paradox of 'Words', they are 'Worn new / Again and again'. The line 'Moments of everlastingness', from 'The Other' is conspicuous as an adaptation of Vaughan's 'Bright shootes of everlastingness'; the description of thrushes singing in 'March' is closely modelled on Coleridge's 'The Nightingale'; and the opening of 'Lob' almost reproduces the first line of Swinburne's 'Tale of Balen'.

All these borrowings, and the characteristics they summarise, testify to a number of important distinctions between Thomas's aims and those of his avant-garde contemporaries. Where he gives only 'disconnected impressions', they provide a series of fragments; where he subtly upsets conventional forms and modes of depiction, they radically reshape them; and where he establishes a national context for his work, they create a cosmopolitan one. No matter how much one insists on the similarity in intent, the differences in degree are significant. But while they make it impossible to call him a covert Modernist, they are not absolute enough to brand him as a pure and simple Georgian either. He built his poems in the same wide gap between the two camps that he had occupied in a theoretical sense during his years as a reviewer. From 1900 to 1912 he chronicled the rise of Georgian poetry and

commended many of its aspects – particularly its appearance of being ‘English yet not aggressively imperialist.’²² But he also criticised its defects with such vigour that he may be said to have taken the role of mentor to an entire poetic generation. Close friendship with many of its members – notably Bottomley, W. H. Davies and Walter de la Mare – strengthened his association: it did not prevent him from asserting his independence.

Edward Marsh introduced the first *Georgian Poetry* anthology²³ ‘in the belief that English poetry is once again putting on a new strength and beauty’.²⁴ But Thomas’s reviews were quick to point out that work by several of those included had ‘taken an unmistakable direction before the accession of George V’.²⁵ He had praised the virtues they claimed for themselves as early as 1903, when he had said, ‘I know of no other age that has abounded in lesser writers of verse with so much originality. We have to look back as far as Tottel’s *Miscellany* or *England’s Helicon* for an assembly of contemporaneous writers anything like this.’²⁶ His objection to Georgian poetry, in other words, was more often made with regard to its name than its intentions, which were strikingly like his own:

To be Georgian in 1912-1915 ... connoted several things. It meant to be ‘modern’, in the sense that Georgians shared with most pre-war poets the prevailing spiritual euphoria and the confidence that poetry was being infused with a new, vital release of creative energy. It meant also to be anti-Victorian, to write poetry which, in tone, form and diction, was free from both *fin de siècle* weariness and Victorian ‘painted adjectives’.²⁷

As this suggests, the term describes 'primarily a certain temper, or a set of mind, and not (strictly speaking) a poetic school',²⁸ and it is from this imprecise context that Thomas's poems grew. The Georgians' colloquial diction, their pastoralism, and their experiments with dramatic verse complement his own practice. To say, with Philip Hobsbaum and others, that 'only a superficial classification would relate [him] to the Georgians',²⁹ risks allowing scorn of their shortcomings to obscure the fact of their influence.

But while sharing many of their aims, Thomas was quick to chastise their failures. It is difficult now to consider the poets as 'revolutionary' at all, but Abercrombie's insistence that 'the whole of language must be left open to the poet',³⁰ and the crude attempts at realism typified by Brooke's sonnet 'Channel Passage', shocked contemporary sensibilities. It was only as the war advanced, and the original Georgians were dispersed or replaced by less gifted successors, that polemicism gave way to complacency. Thomas had been alert to these dangers from the first, and when he reviewed Gibson's *The Nets of Love* in 1905, he commented on them:

Just as, in thinking about life, we cry out for a return to nature and her beneficent simplicity, so we are apt to cry out for a return to simplicity in literature. ... [Gibson is] trying to write as if there were no such thing as a Tube, Grape Nuts, love of Nature, a Fabian Society, a bill for the reform of the marriage laws.³¹

The same distinction was made with regard to Gibson's book *Fires*, in which the lack of 'false poetical writing' was approved, but the plainness 'rather drearily galvanised into movement',³² was condemned. Thomas realised that even the pioneer Georgians sometimes replaced natural

simplicity with coy naïveté, and never made the same mistake in his own poems. Indeed, his objectivity as a reviewer, and his integrity as a poet, allowed him to distil their aims so successfully that many of them were unable to recognise him as a kindred spirit. Marsh was 'largely ignorant of him',³³ Munro refused to publish his poems or argue for their inclusion in the anthologies, and he admitted himself that they were 'sufficiently new in their way to be unacceptable if the reader ... doesn't get any effect before he begins to consider and see their "unfinish"'.³⁴

As well as defining his poetic theories in relation to the Georgians and early Modernists, Thomas also acknowledged the influence of two other contemporaries who resist categorisation: Robert Frost and Thomas Hardy. He called Frost's *North of Boston* (1914) 'one of the most revolutionary books of modern times'³⁵ and, in his reviews, outlined his own aesthetic:

These poems are revolutionary because they lack the exaggeration of rhetoric, and even at first sight appear to lack the poetic intensity of which rhetoric is an imitation. Their language is free from the poetical words and forms that are the chief material of secondary poets. ... Many, if not most, of the separate lines and separate sentences are plain and, in themselves, nothing. But they are bound together and made elements of beauty by a calm eagerness of emotion. ...³⁶

Hardy's example was equally supportive. Like Frost, he encouraged Thomas to cultivate an understating and colloquial diction, and shared his dislike of the bardic and mythological modes used by the avant-garde. Hardy's folk-songs, and his presentations of rural scenes and characters

also show strong resemblances to Thomas's, and there are a number of moments at which these become specific. In 'Lob', for instance, Thomas uses the blackbird's song ('Pretty dear') from Hardy's poem 'The Spring Call' as an expression of stable Englishness. But such similarities should not conceal the fact that, in at least two respects, the poetic temperaments which inform them are substantially different. Where Hardy's irony is cosmic, Thomas's is provisional; and where Hardy usually trusts the past as a means of illuminating the present, Thomas is less sanguine about the chance and value of recall. As 'Over the Hills' indicates, he has no difficulty in relating 'now' to 'then', but habitually does so only to find the connections imperfect and the comfort unreliable:

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,
Though far beyond the sky-line. It became
Almost a habit through the year for me
To lean and see it and think to do the same
Again for two days and a night. Recall
Was vain: no more could the restless brook
Ever turn back and climb the waterfall
To the lake that rests and stirs not in its nook,
As in the hollow of the collar-bone
Under the mountain's head of rush and stone.

For all its singularity, Thomas's 'distinctively modern sensibility'³⁷ was formed by profound familiarity with writers who were, to use his own words in 'Lob', 'English as this gate, these flowers, this mire'. It is this quality which he believed that Hardy and (in theory more than practice) a few Georgians exemplified. By manifesting it himself he came to occupy a crucial place in the development of twentieth-century poetry. Although frequently passed over by critics – Donald Davie, for instance, does not mention him once in *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* – he was one of the first, and most subtle, colonisers of the fruitful middle ground on which many subsequent poets have established themselves. W. H. Auden, R. S. Thomas, Philip Larkin and Ted Hughes have all recorded their debts to him. In doing so, they have made clear the good effect of his originality, and justified his evolutionary rather than revolutionary aims. Throughout the following chapters these are analysed in detail, with the intention that their remarkably successful execution should be appreciated, and in the belief that they are of the utmost importance for understanding our contemporaries.

CHAPTER ONE

BIOGRAPHICAL



EDWARD THOMAS'S POETRY has been victimised by his life. Hardships delayed its appearance until his final two years, and since his death at Arras in 1917 biographies have outnumbered critical appreciations. The following narrative does not, therefore, provide more than a survey of his career.¹ Subsequent chapters discuss four of its dominant features – his melancholy, his friendship with Robert Frost, his patriotism, and his social isolation – but their main concern is his poetry.

Philip Edward Thomas was born in Lambeth on 3 March 1878, the eldest son of Philip Henry and Mary Elizabeth Thomas (née Townsend). His mother, whom Edward resembled in looks and temperament, was twenty-five years old, and like his father had been born and brought up in Wales. But her 'very retiring and shy and sad' character²

was dominated by her husband's more stern and ambitious personality. Mr Thomas had trained as a teacher, and while other members of his family went to work in the railway workshops at Swindon, he joined the Board of Trade in London as a staff clerk for light railways and tramways. His real interests, however, were politics – he was a Lloyd-George Liberal – and religion. Although instinctively a free-thinker, he had not entirely abandoned formal religious practice, and after sampling various orthodoxies, eventually renounced Unitarianism for Positivism in 1910. Nine years later he became a minister in the Holborn 'Church of Humanity'. While this allegiance led him to claim that 'The master I follow is one who sets me free to make the most and best of whatever is within me',³ his wish for self-improvement led him to tyrannise Edward. Four junior schools were tried and rejected, evening classes were encouraged, and weekly attendance at the local Unitarian chapel was made compulsory. Not surprisingly, the result of these good intentions was a serious and painful difference between the two, as the unforgiving poem 'P.H.T.' later made plain:

I may come near loving you
When you are dead
And there is nothing to do
And much to be said.

To repent that day will be
Impossible
For you, and vain for me
The truth to tell.

I shall be sorry for
Your impotence:
You can do and undo no more
When you go hence,

Cannot even forgive
The funeral.
But not so long as you live
Can I love you at all.

When Edward was nearly two the family moved to Wakehurst Road, Wandsworth, and subsequently to 61 Shelgate Road, Clapham. It was here that he began to find a replacement for his father's material aspirations. Exploration of the nearby common, and visits to relatives in Swindon, bred a love for the English countryside which was to shape his mature life. At this stage, too, he started to read the rural writers whose interests were to influence his own. Richard Jefferies, in particular, served as a model for his prose style, and he gave the last words of *The Amateur Poacher* (1879) the status of a creed:

Let us get out of these narrow modern days, where twelve hours have somehow become shortened, into the sunlight and the pure wind. A something that the ancients thought divine can be found, and felt there still.^{[4](#)}

His identification with Jefferies did not simply loosen the ties of his 'accidentally Cockney nativity',^{[5](#)} it sapped his inherited sense of belonging to Wales as well. In spite of other holidays spent with his parents' families in Newport, Caerleon and Swansea, he came to see himself as being only 'flimsily connected [with it] by birth, a few acquaintances, love of the country and a useless sentiment'.^{[6](#)} The reformed poacher David ('Dad') Uzzell, whom Thomas frequently met in Wiltshire, captured his imagination more completely than any ancestral loyalties. On their walks together through the woods between Wooton Bassett and Swindon he began to note down details

of the scenery in a manner 'as near as possible to the style of Jefferies',⁷ and thereby to map the course his life would take.

His father, however, had different ideas, and when Thomas was sent to Saint Paul's, Hammersmith, it was with the express wish that he should be educated for the Civil Service. But his resistance increased with age, and the social inferiority he felt at school confirmed his independent resolve. Although he was placed in a lively History VIII which included E. C. Bentley and G. K. Chesterton, his greatest pleasures were not provided by formal lessons, but by expanding his nature notes into essays. Several of these were shown to the minister of his chapel who, feeling them to be of more than average competence, showed them to a distinguished member of his congregation, James Ashcroft Noble. Noble – retired from the editorship of the *Manchester Examiner* and now working as a literary critic for the *Spectator*, the *Academy* and the *Daily Chronicle* – had in fact only recently moved to London from Liverpool. After reading the essays he invited their author round to his new home at 6 Patten Road, in Wandsworth. His interest was strengthened by the coincidence of his having had a son called Philip, who had died young; and the admiring company of his wife and three daughters helped to make the house a congenial refuge for Thomas. The girls quickly nicknamed him 'the genius', and the second of them, Helen Berenice, slowly wore down his reserve with her open and friendly manner.

Thomas's experience of female society at this age – he was seventeen – was negligible, and his natural shyness made any sort of close friendship difficult. But as his visits to Patten Road continued into 1895, Noble encouraged him to court Helen. Their walks and conversations are charmingly recounted by Helen herself in *As It Was* and *World Without End*, and, as she says, their mutual

sympathy soon became 'unconscious love'⁸ in spite of some opposition. Although Noble had helped Thomas by placing some of his essays in the *Speaker* and the *New Age*, and had recommended him to keep the diary which was included in his first book, *The Woodland Life* (1897), Mrs Noble resented his intrusion into the family. Moreover, the advice she gave her daughters directly contradicted their instincts. Helen, especially, was intensely aware of natural beauty, and throughout her life she tended to see herself as a kind of earth mother: 'I took a pride in my health and strength. [Edward] and I read Richard Jefferies, and with delight I found the joy in one's body spoken of there as if it were right and good.'⁹ When she impulsively introduced herself to Mrs Thomas, Mrs Noble was shocked by her forwardness, and forbade further meetings with Thomas. When Helen's father died early in April 1896, the affair seemed hopeless. For Thomas, too, all was not well. His own father interpreted his rural wanderings as listlessness, saw Helen as a hindrance to his career prospects, and frowned on his wish to go to university. But such interference only increased their affection: correspondence became secret, and before he went to Oxford in 1897 they had become lovers.

Their refusal to marry was a deliberate rebellion against the conventional morality of their parents. 'We hated the thought of a legal contract', Helen said. 'We felt our love was all the bond that there ought to be, and if that failed it was immoral to be bound together. We wanted our union to be free and spontaneous.'¹⁰ For Thomas's first few months at Oxford their freedom was unconstrained. Before and after their 'honeymoon' with the Uzzells they had no thought of marriage until, in May 1899, Helen realised she was pregnant. On being told the news, the family for which she was working as a nursery governess in London sacked her, and her mother refused to see her. Alarmed by this

intolerance, she turned to some friends in Hammersmith, the Potburys, whom she admired for their Bohemianism. But to her dismay, Mrs Potbury counselled marriage and, more importantly, so did Thomas. It was their first serious disagreement and when, on 20 June 1899, the despised 'legal contract' was signed in Fulham Registry Office, she was aware that her husband felt burdened with responsibilities he could not adequately support.

In the year he had spent as a non-collegiate student, living at 113 Cowley Road, Oxford, Thomas had worked for and won a history scholarship to Lincoln College. Here, when his reticence and social naïveté had started to disappear, he found a community in which he could realise his potential. His tutor, whom he liked, was Owen Edwards, and in addition to his set work he found time to row in torpids, collect rare books and begin a novel, *Olivia Patterson*, with one of his several friends, E. S. P. Haynes. This, like the pastoral essays he continued to write, was strongly influenced by the presiding genius of Oxford letters, Walter Pater. For many years after, in fact, Thomas struggled to free himself from this debt, and the shadow it cast was not finally dispelled until 1913, when he published a full-length, hostile study of his erstwhile hero. Other, more pragmatic debts were also making themselves felt. Although his father generously agreed to pay for his final year as an undergraduate, Thomas could see no means of increasing the income of £80 a year that he made by writing, and the anxiety this provoked was enough to threaten his happiness. 'I love Helen', he wrote to a friend, 'and that is enough; though I wish the affair had not such a bad outlook on the face of it.'¹¹ His fears quickly appeared well-founded. No sooner had their son, Merfyn, been born, in January 1900, than poverty forced Helen to move in with the Thomases, and her husband to ask Haynes for money to pay the nurse. Their original carefree optimism was dashed