WJEC AS/A Level English Literature
Unit 2: Poetry Post-1900

Edward Thomas

Selected Poems
(Faber)

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Literary Biography of Edward Thomas

Introduction

The place of Edward Thomas in the history of modern poetry in English is assured if a little uncertain – due perhaps to a writing described by John Freeman as 'singular without making any effort to be singular'.[1] Although he came to poetry relatively late in life, the 144 poems he composed in a flurry of creativity between 1914 and 1917 have earned him widespread recognition as what Edna Longley terms one of 'the half-dozen poets who, in the early twentieth century, remade English poetry.'[2] Often celebrated as a quintessentially English writer, distinctive Welsh resonances make themselves felt in Thomas's work, unsettling but also enriching his portrayals of place, language and nationhood.

Life and Work

Phillip Edward Thomas was born in Lambeth, London, on 3 March 1878; some of his earliest memories are of being 'out of doors...ly[ing] in the tall grass and buttercups of a narrow field at the edge of London' (Lambeth was then on the outskirts of the city).[3] He spent his early childhood in south London, taking pleasure as a boy in roaming over Wandsworth and Wimbledon Commons as an escape from the suburban streets. In spite of what he called his 'accidentally cockney nativity', he considered himself to be 'mainly Welsh'.[4] His father, Phillip Henry Thomas, was born in Tredegar to Welsh-speaking parents, while his mother, Mary Elizabeth Townsend, was from Newport, then in Monmouthshire. An aspirational, middle-class family of modest means, they were part of the by then well-established 'London Welsh' community. His father, who worked for the Civil Service, knew David Lloyd George; the family employed Welsh-speaking servants, and they attended a Unitarian chapel in London, through which Thomas met his first literary mentor, James Ashcroft Noble. From a young age Thomas spent many holidays in Wales, visiting extended family in places such as Swansea, Pontardulais and Ammanford, and he soon developed a '"passion for Wales" which never left him.'[5]

The son of a railway fitter, Thomas's father had worked his way up to become a clerk in the railways section of the Board of Trade. As the eldest of six sons, Thomas was too often subject to what he perceived as his father's

1   *The Bookman*, April 1919, p. 22.

2   Edna Longley, Introduction to *Edward Thomas: The Annotated Collected Poems* (Tarset, Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2008), p. 11.

3   Edward Thomas, *The Childhood of Edward Thomas* (London: Faber and Faber, 1938), p. 14.

4   Edward Thomas, *The South Country* (London: Dent, 1909), pp. 23–4.

5   Jean Moorcroft Wilson, *Edward Thomas, From Adlestrop to Arras: a Biography* (London, New Delhi, New York and Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 11.

overbearing drive and ambition, and would eventually baulk at his wish that he should follow him into the Civil Service, preferring instead to earn a living by his pen. In Thomas's autobiographical writings, Phillip is portrayed as a strict figure with whom his sensitive, reserved son could find little common ground. However, his strong political convictions and Liberal sympathies had an effect on Thomas as a young man, when he would accompany his father to hear 'John Burns, Keir Hardie and the Socialists.'[6] He identified with and loved his mother, a shy and introspective person like himself. She had been born in Headingly, Yorkshire, and was partly English as well as Welsh – a fact seen by one biographer to account for Thomas's 'love of England as well as Wales'.[7] In contrast to the traditionally male-oriented culture of Victorian England, Thomas seems to have felt from an early age an affinity with women and female-oriented aspects of culture: in his autobiography, he remembers his domestic workers by name and 'the grace, smoothness and gentleness' of his aunt Margaret's voice.[8] He also found alternative father figures outside of his family home: it was while staying in Wiltshire at his grandmother's that he met 'Dad' Uzzell, an elderly gamekeeper, who introduced him to the rhythms and language of country life. Uzzell appears in many guises in Thomas's writing, not least in the poem 'Lob', Thomas's famous portrayal of an archetypal rural man.

In fact, it is the country itself that seems to have been one of the primary formative influences in Thomas's life: he later said that '[a]lmost as soon as I could babble, I "babbled of green fields"'.[9] Thomas found release from the pressures and stifling class structures of middle-class London in his frequent rural visits, free as he was 'to roam the countryside... in the company of boys who might be considered too "low" for him in London'.[10] As an adolescent, he was greatly affected by nature writer Richard Jefferies, copying into each of his books words from Jefferies's *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.'[11] It is perhaps of no surprise that he moved away from London with his wife at the first opportunity, adopting the Home Counties to the south and west of London as his home. Restlessly walking the country roads, either alone or in company, was how he dealt with the deep depression and work-related stress that were to blight him throughout his life: walking was also, for him, a means of binding literary friendships, and, eventually, would go hand in hand with poetry.

A precocious young adult, Thomas was educated at Battersea Grammar School and then in the History Sixth Form at St Paul's public school, Hammersmith. He went on to win a scholarship to study history at Lincoln College, Oxford, studying under the Welsh intellectual O.M. Edwards. Although he never felt that he fitted in at school, he began to keep a nature diary and publish essays and

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6   *The Childhood of Edward Thomas*, p. 105.

7   Moorecroft Wilson, *From Adlestrop to Arras*, p. 13.

8   *The Childhood of Edward Thomas*, p. 19. As Moorecroft Wilson notes, in writing a book called *Feminine Influence on the Poets* (1910), Thomas 'may have been thinking partly of his own early childhood, which was shaped by women.' *From Adlestrop to Arras*, p. 23.

9   Edward Thomas to H.N. Sturmer, 4 April 1900, Berg Collection of the New York Public Library.

10 William Cooke, *Edward Thomas: a Critical Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), p. 18.

11 *The Childhood of Edward Thomas*, p. 134.

articles about the countryside, and his first book, *The Woodland Life*, was published in 1897 when he was only 18. Around this time, he met Helen Berenice Noble, the daughter of his literary mentor. Interested in the early feminism of the 'New Woman', she also shared his Shelleyan ideals of free love, and they married quickly when Helen was already pregnant with their first child, Mervyn, before Edward was due to take his finals. A daughter, Bronwen, followed soon after, and a third child, Myfanwy, was born in 1905.

Although Helen's unfailing love and support gave Thomas a framework of stability in which to write, he often struggled with family life. Forced to seek out employment as a literary 'hack' in the busy world of Edwardian print to support his wife and children, he found the work ill-paid and exhausting: he once told a friend 'I am sick of books and am selling many old possessions now (prose; never poetry, I hope).'[12] Nonetheless, many of his reviews and critical studies – works such as *Richard Jefferies* (1909), *Walter Pater* (1913) and *Maurice Maeterlinck* (1911) – still find appreciation. He was primarily known in his day as an author of country books, such as *The South Country* (1909) and *In Pursuit of Spring* (1914), but he also wrote essays, including *Horae Solitarae* (1902), impressionistic short fictions, and autobiographical texts, such as the novel *The Happy-Go-Lucky Morgans* (1913). While critics have assumed Thomas wasted his talents on his literary journalism, his prose has in recent years been awarded greater recognition, signalled by the publication of the five-volume *Edward Thomas: Prose Writings, A Selected Edition* (Oxford University Press, 2011-2017).

Literary journalism allowed Thomas to develop an in-depth appreciation of English poetry past and present, while allowing him access to many of the key literary figures of his day: he became great friends with the Welsh writer W.H. Davies, whose work he championed, and he associated with the likes of Hilaire Belloc, W.H. Hudson, Walter de la Mare and Rupert Brooke. It was meeting American poet Robert Frost in October 1913 that finally kick-started Thomas's poetry. Their shared interests and ways of thinking led to the rapid advance of their friendship, as they walked for hours in the countryside near where Frost was staying in Gloucestershire. Frost's ideas on ordinary speech in poetry, his focus on the 'sentence-sound', would have a great influence on Thomas. It was Frost, too, who encouraged his diffident friend to take confidence in his poetic gift, and Thomas's deliberations over whether to start a new life in North America near Frost are recorded in Frost's famous poem 'The Road Not Taken'.

The path Thomas eventually did take led to the war, and France; although when the First World War broke out Thomas at 36 was too old to be conscripted, he volunteered anyway, and was eventually commissioned as Second Lieutenant in the Royal Artillery and posted to the front line. Going to war was for him a defence of poetry and a catalyst for creativity: he wrote his first poem 'Up in the Wind' in 1914 and completed the last of his 144 poems on 13 January 1917. Yet his work avoids the nationalistic jingoism of other WWI poetry, and we might see him as a 'war poet' in Phillip Larkin's sense, as 'not one who chooses to commemorate or celebrate a war, but one who reacts against having a war thrust upon him.'[13] Thomas was killed by shell-blast at Arras during the Easter Offensive on 9 April 1917, and his *Poems* (1917) and *Last Poems* (1918) were published only after his death. There ended a 'uniquely intense poetic

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12 Edward Thomas to Jesse Berridge, 10 September 1904, quoted in Cooke, *Edward Thomas*, p. 41.

13 Phillip Larkin, *Listener*, 70 (10 October 1963), p. 561.

journey',[14] which would change the course of twenty-century poetry. Remembered by poet Alun Lewis as the figure who 'brooded long / On death and beauty – till a bullet stopped his song', the voice of Edward Thomas continues to haunt us today.[15]

14   Longley, Introduction to *Edward Thomas: the Annotated Collected Poems*, p. 11.

15   Alun Lewis, 'All Day It Has Rained...', in Cary Archard (ed.), *Collected Poems* (Bridgend: Seren, 2007), p. 23.

Contexts

Welsh Cultural Contexts

In popular mythology, Thomas is often prized as a quintessentially 'English' poet, whose ability to capture and immortalise the sounds and beauty of the English countryside is given added poignancy by war. His Englishness was emphasised by several of the writers who knew him: Walter de la Mare, for instance, described his poems as 'a mirror of England.'[16] But recently, critics and readers have begun to notice the importance of Wales, and the writer's Welsh family background, to his voice and vision. Andrew Webb, for instance, has presented persuasive evidence suggesting 'Thomas self-identified as a Welshman.'[17] As a history scholar, Thomas was fascinated by origins, and he would often study his Welsh family tree.[18] His enthusiasm for Wales's landscape, history and traditions was encouraged by his many family visits to south and west Wales. His father in 1897 sent his sons to stay for three months of the summer in Ammanford, Carmarthenshire (Sir Gaerfyrddin), to immerse themselves in its Welsh-language culture – a trend repeated in following years. This decision to reconnect his sons with their heritage was perhaps inspired by a broader Welsh cultural renaissance in the final decade of the nineteenth century, following the founding of the *Cymru Fydd* self-government movement [Cymru Fydd is translated as Young Wales or, literally, Wales to Be]. In Ammanford, Thomas and his brothers attended the Gwynfryn School, which was something of a 'hothouse' at this time for nonconformist preachers and aspiring poets.[19] Here the brothers had the opportunity to learn about Welsh metrical forms, and were encouraged to participate in local and national eisteddfodau.

William Cooke insists that '[a]lthough he never spoke or understood the language, [Thomas] always regarded himself as Welsh, and his visits there were visits home.'[20] Some of his early feelings of connection to Wales were generated by song; one in particular seems to have inspired an almost overwhelming, bodily sense of longing and obligation:

My early feeling for Wales culminated in my singing of Moore's 'Minstrel Boy', was clinched and fostered by it. I knew only of Welsh harps. I supposed the minstrel boy with his wild harp slung behind him was

16 Walter de la Mare, 'Foreword', in R. George Thomas (ed.), *Edward Thomas: Collected Poems* (London: Faber & faber, 2004), 246–253 (249).

17 Andrew Webb, 'Edward Thomas and Welsh Culture', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 37 (2017), 274–288 (274).

18 Moorecroft Wilson, *From Adlestrop to Arras*, p. 11.

19 Huw Walters, *Canu'r Pwll a'r Pulpud: Portread o'r Diwylliant Barddol Cymraeg yn Nyffryn Aman* (Caernarfon: Cyhoeddiadau Barddas, 1987), p. 148; see also Andrew Webb, 'Edward Thomas and Welsh Culture', 276.

20 Cooke, *Edward Thomas*, p. 18.

Welsh and as I sang the song I melted and trembled with a kind of gloomy pleasure in being about to die for Wales, Arthur's and Llewelyn's Wales, the 'land of song'.[21]

Early then, Thomas developed the belief that a Welsh culture, 'hidden' away in mainstream British life, should not be 'forgotten or unpraised.'[22] But he was little interested in the Romantic-inspired Celtic Revival that found popularity in the 1890s. He was more influenced by the political and cultural vision of his tutor of history from 1897-1900 at Oxford, O.M. Edwards, a key Welsh-language cultural figure who 'viewed the past with an artist's eye rather than through a researcher's microscope.'[23] Edwards's *Cartrefi Cymru* [Homes of Wales], published in 1896, has been described by M. Wynn Thomas as 'the most influential of books to be published about Wales in the last decade of the nineteenth century'.[24] The scholar inspired many young Welsh writers of the time – and also Edward Thomas. After reading O.M. Edwards's historical story of the Welsh people, *Wales* (1901), Thomas wrote to elicit suggestions for 'any kind of work which I could do far away from libraries, to help you and the Welsh cause.'[25] There might be reason for us to suspect, then, that O.M. Edwards's call in 1894 for a new sort of 'literature that will be English in language and Welsh in spirit' was interesting for Edward Thomas.[26] Certainly, in a review of

The Dublin Book of Irish Verse in 1910, Thomas declares support for writing in which 'English is used as a foreign tongue by writers who were born to it'.[27] His poetry, too, would introduce in its use of sound and syntax a subtle 'strangeness' to the English language.

Another way in which Thomas was influenced by O.M. Edwards was in his sense of the landscape and domestic spaces as the store for a threatened culture. While in bigger nations, grand institutions and buildings, such as the Houses of Parliament or Buckingham Palace, are seen to embody a sense of the nation, O.M Edwards held in *Cartrefi Cymru* that in Wales it was the countryside and more particularly the rural 'hearth' that were the true centres of cultural identity. This idea is explored again and again in Thomas's writing, whether that be in *Beautiful Wales*, in which Thomas travels across the Welsh landscape to give an account of its culture, or in his poetry. In 'As The Team's Head-Brass' for instance, a field and a fallen elm appear to signify a traditional culture and community threatened by war. Many poems, such as 'Old Man', 'The Barn', 'The Manor Farm' and 'Up in the Wind', focus on rural buildings and homely spaces, such as barns, cottages and old pubs, as sites of memory (we are reminded that for a short while in 1908, Thomas worked as the first Assistant Secretary for the Royal Commission on Ancient Monuments for Wales and Monmouthshire).

Thomas's feelings towards Wales were

21 Edward Thomas, 'Addenda to an Autobiography', Berg Collection of the New York Public Library.

22 Cooke, *Edward Thomas*, p. 18.

23 'Edwards, Sir Owen Morgan (1858-1920), man of letters', *Dictionary of Welsh Biography* https://biography.wales/article/s-EDWA-MOR-1858 [accessed 27 August 2020].

24 M. Wynn Thomas, *The Nations of Wales*, 1890-1914 (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2016), p. 106.

25 Hazel Davies, 'Edward Thomas: Twelve Unpublished Letters to O.M. Edwards', *National Library of Wales Journal*, 28/3 (1994): 335–46 (343).

26 O.M. Edwards, 'Introduction' in *Wales*, 1/1 (1894): 1.

27 Edward Thomas, 'Review of *The Dublin Book of Irish Verse*', *Morning Post*, 6 January 1910, p. 12.

complicated and variable. In 1914 on the eve of war, he told Jesse Berridge that he was 'slowly growing into a conscious Englishman.'[28] This suggests that for him, national identity is not simply a given, but is instead a current or idea that an artist may 'consciously' shape and develop according to their circumstances. His poetry often suggests that the war brought out the complexity of national identity in the British Isles, calling into question what it really meant to fight for 'home'. In one of several of his poems with that title, three men on a journey, supposedly soldiers, are similarly touched by the mention of the word –– yet it gradually introduces a feeling of division between the men, rather than unity:

> The word "home" raised a smile in us all three,
> And no one repeated it, smiling just so
> That all knew what he meant and none would say.
> Between three counties far apart that lay
> We were divided and looked strangely each
> At the other...
>
> 'Home' ('Fair was the morning')[29]

Rejecting the all-dominating myth of 'Britannia', Thomas explores Welsh, English and British identities in their 'intimate reality'.[30] Affiliations are summoned up by a word, a moment, a complex of feelings. This is how Edna Longley could claim that 'his Welsh horizons, which make 'home' itself ever unstable, prompt many kinds of poetic border-crossing.'[31]

Welsh Literary Contexts

Edward Thomas knew several important Welsh poets. He helped secure the reputation of his friend W.H. Davies, known through his *Autobiography of a Super-Tramp* (1908) for his down-and-out wanderings in Wales, England, America and Canada. He once described Davies's style as 'as simple as a cave man's drawing on bone, and yet of an atmosphere dense with sorrow', elements to which he often aspires in his own poems.[32] In addition to London-Welsh connections like Davies, the relationships he developed with writers in Wales also afforded him an insider insight into Welsh-language literary culture. While attending Gwynfryn summer school, he met its principal Watkin Hezekiah Williams, who, known by his bardic name Watcyn Wyn, was a writer and former winner of the Eisteddfod Chair. In *Beautiful Wales*, Thomas praises Watcyn Wyn's work, and includes translations of two of his poems. During his first extended summer in Ammanford in 1897, Thomas also developed what would be a lifelong friendship with John Jenkins, known by his bardic name as Gwili, who would go on to win the crown in the 1901 Eisteddfod and become Archdruid of the Gorsedd. Thomas's 1912 biography *Lafcadio Hearn* is dedicated to Gwili, and he also appears as a figure in *Beautiful Wales*. Elis Jenkins, Gwili's nephew, recalls how 'the two of them would walk in the Swansea Valley talking like mad

28   *Letters of Edward Thomas to Jesse Berridge*, ed. Anthony Berridge (London: Enitharmon, 1983), p. 74.

29   Edward Thomas, 'Home' ('Fair was the morning') in Matthew Hollis (ed.), *Edward Thomas: Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), pp. 123–124 (p. 123). Except when stated, all references to the poetry are to this edition and henceforth will be given in the body of the text.

30   Edward Thomas, Review of *The Dublin Book of Irish Verse*.

31   Longley, Introduction to *Edward Thomas: the Annotated Collected Poems*, pp. 21–22.

32   Edward Thomas, 'A Poet at Last', *The Daily Chronicle*, 21 October 1905, p. 3.

in the language understood of poets and thinkers',[33]and Thomas's walks with Gwili seem to have further knotted his emotional ties to Wales, as noted in his diary in April 1899:

> Day by day grows my passion for Wales. It is like a homesickness, but stronger than any homesickness I ever felt – stronger than any passion. Wales indeed, is my soul's native land, if the soul can be said to have a *patria* – or rather, a *matria*, a home with the warm sweetness of a mother's love, and with her influence, too.[34]

Here we see the 'homesickness' that finds its way into many of Thomas's poems described in explicit terms as a Welsh longing, a 'hiraeth'. Wales is associated with the 'soul', and by association, poetry, and also (in contrast to a then male-dominated British State) with femininity. Yet, while Wales was in a practical sense accessible to Thomas as a walker and writer, in his poetry his 'soul's native land' is portrayed as persistently unreachable, out of sight:

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

'Home' ('Not the end')[35]

His speakers are frequently in mourning for origins they have forgotten, or maybe have never known – a past that cannot be fully described in the English language ('No traveller tells'). No wonder Gwili likened Thomas to a 'great exile priest.'[36] The Welsh literary influences gleaned from Thomas's association with Watcyn Wyn and Gwili are many. His fascination with Welsh folktales and a pre-Christian past he derived in part from Watcyn Wyn; in *Celtic Stories* (1911) he retells four Welsh and seven Irish folktales, and his short story 'The Fountain' includes a reference to the legend of Llyn y Fan Fach in the 'fairy bride' who leaves her human marriage to return to her home under the lake. Welsh legend also has a subtle presence in his poems: in 'Tears' a pack of hounds appears as 'a great dragon / In Blooming Meadow that bends towards the sun',[37] while 'Roads' makes a direct reference to Helen of the Hosts, the 4th-century wife of a Romano-British emperor whose story is told in 'The Dream of Macsen Wledig' in the *Mabinogion*.

Elis Jenkins also tells us that 'From some of the letters that Gwili kept, it is clear that Edward used to consult him about Iolo [Morganwg, the eighteenth-century Welsh writer] and [George] Borrow, and the *Mabinogion*, and the Welsh metrical system.'[38] Thomas is known for his innovative adaptation of traditional English poetic forms, and these are linked by Andrew Webb to his engagement with *cynghanedd*, an intricate patterning of alliteration, accents, and rhyme in Welsh-language poetry that goes back as far as the sixth century.[39]

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33 Elis Jenkins, 'Edward Thomas: Some of His Welsh Friends', *National Library of Wales Journal*, 15/2 (1967): 147–156. Available at: http://www.terrynorm.ic24.net/edward%20thomas.htm [accessed 10 September 2020]

34 Quoted in R. George Thomas, *Edward Thomas: A Portrait* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1985), p. 80.

35 Edward Thomas, 'Home' ('Not the end'), in Edna Longley (ed.), *Edward Thomas: The Annotated Collected Poems* (Tarset, Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2008), p. 64.

36 Gwili, 'Edward Eastaway', from *Poems*, published privately in 1920.

37 Edward Thomas, 'Tears', in *The Annotated Collected Poems*, p. 52.

38 Jenkins, 'Edward Thomas: Some of his Welsh Friends'.

39 See Webb, 'Edward Thomas and Welsh Culture', 280.

Wales and the world – global contexts

At university in Oxford, Thomas was able to broaden his horizons in literature, preferring this to the history he was meant to be studying. In particular, he took an interest in literature associated with the Aesthetic and Decadent movements that had been sweeping Britain and Europe in the late 1800s, as associated with figures such as Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde, and collected in Aubrey Beardsley's journal *The Yellow Book*. Although he was eventually to shy away from what he saw as the artificiality of this kind of writing, he took with him into his poetry a sense of the beauty of decay inherited from Decadence, and Wilde's liking of masks and doubles. In the symbolic, visual dimensions of his poetry can be seen the impact on Thomas, not just of American Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell's pared-down Imagism, but also of the rebellious French Symbolist poets, writers such as Arthur Rimbaud and Paul Verlaine; 'Up in the Wind' refers to Verlaine's famous imperative: 'Prends l'éloquence et tors-lui son cou!' ('Wring the necks of rhetoric!'). Edna Longley suggests that Thomas shares significant literary, cultural and political contexts with Irish poet W.B. Yeats. As Longley notes, both Yeats and Thomas 'dramatise the self' and 'associate poetic rhythm with the body.'[40] One of the most important global contexts in which to consider Thomas's work is in his relationship with Robert Frost. Critics generally agree on the mutual importance of their friendship to the development of their respective oeuvres; through Frost, Thomas gained access to new approaches to poetry, influenced by the American tradition of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, who reacted against conformity and sought 'an original relation to the universe' through nature.[41] On a deeper level, there is a sense in which what Longley calls the 'foreignness' of Frost's work helped to release Thomas's 'own distinctive poetic accent'.[42] For Andrew Webb, Frost's and Thomas's dream of a shared, freer existence as writers and friends in New England (what they called 'New Hampshire') shows how Wales, America, and other spaces came together in Thomas's imaginative attempts to break free from the emblems – army, family, journalism – of a constrictive Britishness.[43]

Critical Contexts

Thomas is often seen as a 'poet's poet'; a generation of poets, from W.H. Auden to Alun Lewis, Ted Hughes to Seamus Heaney, have named Thomas as a key influence (Ted Hughes memorably called him 'the father of us all').[44] But scholars have often failed to recognise the full extent of Thomas's importance, finding his poetry difficult to place – perhaps because his verse 'consistently defies classification'.[45] Like the 'Georgian poets' who were his

40   Longley, Introduction to *Edward Thomas: the Annotated Collected Poems,* pp. 19–20.

41   Richard Poirier (ed.), *Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 3.

42   Longley, Introduction to *Edward Thomas: the Annotated Collected Poems*, p. 16

43   Andrew Webb, 'Not friends / But fellows in a union that ends': Association of Welshness and Non-heteronormativity in Edward Thomas', in Huw Osborne (ed.), *Queer Wales: The History, Culture and Politics of Queer Life in Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2016), p. 125.

44   Ted Hughes, quoted in Moorecroft Wilson, *From Adlestrop to Arras*, p. 1.

45   Poetry Foundation, Edward Thomas. Available at: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/edward-thomas [accessed 25 August 2020]

contemporaries, his work shows a deep appreciation of the natural world, as well as a keen interest in country life and people. But his poetry was deliberately excluded from the Georgian Poetry anthologies by their editor, Edward Marsh, and as Edna Longley notes, its range and thematic complexities disrupt the category of 'Nature poet'.[46] Thomas's depictions of nature can be celebratory – even euphoric – but unlike the Georgians, are not idealising, tending instead to see in the natural world a space for thinking through the darker, more difficult aspects of human society and selfhood. Thomas has often been painted as a soldier-poet – a writer, like Wilfred Owen or Rupert Brooke, of the First World War; as already noted, his writing of poetry more or less coincided with his decision, in July 1915, to enlist as a soldier, and the conflict certainly 'had a crucial role in its genesis.'[47] Yet he wrote no 'trench poems'; most of his poetry instead records the war obliquely, by exploring its harmful effects on nature and the all-pervasive, if subtle, shadow it casts on the 'home front'. Thomas's work is also in dialogue with an emerging 'modernism' in British and Irish literature, a development with which Thomas as critic was familiar: he wrote a favourable review of Ezra Pound and knew Joseph Conrad and D.H. Lawrence. But in contrast to the bold statements and visual experiments of the modernists, his work has often been read as 'quiet', 'understated', even 'diffident'.[48] It takes the reader down trails of thoughts and arrives at profound realisations apparently artlessly, almost before one realises. Edna Longley, a long-time champion of Thomas and editor of his work, has shown that it is in its questioning self-reflectiveness, its rejection of Victorian pomp in favour of 'increasing complexity of thought and emotion', that his poetry bears out F.R. Leavis's claim that Thomas was 'a very original poet who devoted great technical subtlety to the expression of a distinctively modern sensibility.'[49]

In more recent years, the forward-looking nature of Thomas's work has been revealed by its amenability to the new critical perspectives generated by developments of the twenty-first century. Critics such as Elizabeth Black and Edna Longley have recently identified Thomas as an early 'ecocritical' writer, whose inclusive ecological vision acts to challenge traditional ideas around the position of human beings in relation to the natural world.[50] Andrew Webb has called attention to important representations of 'non-heteronormative' male desire in Thomas's work, teasing out the links in his poetry between 'inexpressible' queerness, Welshness, and poetry. New attention has been given to Thomas's representations of fatherhood, an aspect that tends to be overlooked in male writers, and his wife Helen Thomas is being slowly revaluated as an author and significant cultural figure in her own right (she wrote memoirs about her life with Thomas in *As it Was* (1926) and *World Without End* (1931)), although more still needs to be done in this regard.

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46 Longley, Introduction to *Edward Thomas: the Annotated Collected Poems*, p. 11.

47 Longley, Introduction to *Edward Thomas: the Annotated Collected Poems*, p. 11.

48 Longley, Introduction to *Edward Thomas: the Annotated Collected Poems*, p. 11.

49 Edward Thomas, Review of new verse, *Daily Chronicle*, 27 August 1901; F.R. Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry* (London: Penguin, 1967; original ed. 1932), p. 61.

50 Longley, Introduction to *Edward Thomas: the Annotated Collected Poems*, p. 22. See also Elizabeth Black, ' "Literally, for this": Edward Thomas's Ecocentric War Poetry', *Green Letters*, 21.1 (2017), 1–13.

Language and Form

Edward Thomas is a poet who makes full use of the possibility of the lyric, his work encompassing different kinds of couplet, quatrain, sonnet and blank verse. The lyric is a short, non-narrative form of poetry, used to express personal emotions or thoughts. The term originated from the Greek 'lyre', and lyrical poetry is traditionally 'pleasing to the ear, and…easily put to music.'[51] Thomas's poetry constantly exploits this musicality; as Edna Longley puts it, 'thinking is absorbed into a mixture of song and saying'.[52] He is skilful at adapting the lyric to a modern, more conversational idiom, feeling as he did that what he called the 'myriad-minded' form was well suited to exploring the fluidity and multiplicity of modern identity.[53]

Like Robert Frost, Thomas was drawn to the rhythms of common speech as a way of getting away from what he saw as the fussy literariness of Victorian poetry. Many of his poems, similar to those of Thomas Hardy or Welsh poets Lynette Roberts and Idris Davies, make use of local dialect. Thomas is interested in the particular human histories carried by these forms of language; as Edna Longley suggests, he shows 'a reluctance to use words which have not embedded themselves culturally'.[54] Thomas's poetry is also marked by its use of a relatively simple – at times almost a folk – diction. This speaks of his commitment to authenticity: the desire to use 'the most authentic language possible to produce a detailed and accurate picture of the British countryside during the war.'[55]

It is Thomas's skilful use of sound, rhythm and syntax that helps to lend his poetry its distinctive and often unsettling quality. As Edna Longley notes, '[t]he relation of syntax to line (and both to rhyme) is notable for inversion, reversion and other quirks of sequence',[56] which can be linked to his attempts to trace the irregular twists and turns of thought and memory. Thomas's tendency to set rhythms of everyday speech and the rhythms of poetic metre against one another in the same poem speaks to the clashes and discordances of modernity.[57]

Even as his poems explore the self, Thomas valued a certain humility and self-effacement in his presentation of the lyric 'I'. His tone is often elusive, undecidable: we learn about his speakers only through negation and contrast. His descriptions, like that of his nature books, are precise yet shimmering; words melt, recur, tremble and shiver, as if dissolving in the air. In their almost mystical dimensions, their reaching after new meanings, his poems often hover 'on the verge of what is probably inexpressible'.[58] There is an openness and

51 Literary Devices, 'Lyric', https://literarydevices.net/lyric/ [accessed 28 September 2020]

52 Edna Longley, 'Edward Thomas as Poet-Critic', paper delivered at the Edward Thomas Centenary Conference, Cardiff University, 19 April 2017.

53 Edward Thomas, Review of new verse.

54 Edna Longley, 'Edward Thomas as Poet-Critic'.

55 Elizabeth Black, '"Literally, for this": Edward Thomas's Ecocentric War Poetry', paper delivered at the Edward Thomas Centenary Conference, Cardiff University, 20 April 2017.

56 Longley, Introduction to *Edward Thomas: the Annotated Collected Poems*, p. 23.

57 Edna Longley, 'An Atlantic Chasm? Edward Thomas and the English Lyric', *Literary Imagination*, 16/2 (2014), 233–247 (239).

58 Letters from Edward Thomas to Gordon Bottomley, ed. R.G. Thomas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 41.

unexpectedness to Thomas's style, a sense of poetry not as something controlled, but as something that mysteriously *happens*.

Key themes

The restless flights of Thomas's poems speak to the fact his was a creative spirit endlessly 'in pursuit' of meaning. Following critics such as Katie Gramich, we might summarise the central concerns of his work in terms of the quest: the quest for psychological wholeness; the quest for an adequate language; and the 'quest for home – or at least a sense of belonging to a place'.[59] In this section, we will examine these ideas in relation to a series of key themes, as they appear in specific examples of Thomas's poetry.

Nature / War

In his engagement with nature, Thomas can be linked to the Neo Romantic tradition that developed in the 1890s, associated with an appreciation of William Blake's mystical, visionary writing, and a desire to bridge the gap between the self and the natural world. Although overtly Thomas dismissed Wordsworth as too egotistical, his influence can be felt in Thomas's work, evident in their shared concern with aspects such as the weather, songs, and rural figures on the margins of society. In his close observation skills, Thomas was inspired by nature writers such as Richard Jefferies, whom he praised for his 'frank and brave impressionism'.[60] Tied intimately to a number of places (mostly southern and western English counties such as Wiltshire, Kent and Hampshire), nature becomes a space for exploring absence and encounter, whether that be with other humans, or non-human figures such as trees or birds. He explores the tangled links between the earth and the human body, but also stresses nature's indifference, distance and unknowability to humans. Take, for instance, his poem 'The Unknown Bird':

> 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 but four years
> Ago? Or five? He never came again.[61]

Rowan Middleton has suggested that many of Thomas's poems 'concern both the physical aspects of nature and a quiet search for something beyond the physical that is felt to be there, even if access to it is uncertain or unachieved'. This search for deeper meanings beyond everyday appearances he sees indicated in the 'recurring references to "languages" of nature' in Thomas's work, which we here find attributed to the bird's haunting song.'[62] His poetry strives for a way of listening to, and speaking of, the strangeness of nature, beyond the systems laid down by Romantic poetry and science

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59 Katie Gramich, Lecture on Edward Thomas, Cardiff University, 10 March 2017.

60 *Edward Thomas, Prose Writings*, ed. Guy Cuthbertson and Lucy Newlyn, 5 vols (Oxford, 2011–2017), vol. ii: England and Wales, p. 235.

61 Edward Thomas, 'The Unknown Bird', in *The Annotated Collected Poems*, p. 55.

62 Rowan Middleton, 'Edward Thomas, Poetry, and the Languages of Nature', *English: Journal of the English Association*, 65/251 (2016), 310–329 (310).

(as represented in 'The Unknown Bird' by [t]he naturalists' who had never 'heard / Anything like the notes that did so haunt me').

The ambiguity of this poem lies in whether this bird, a classic emblem of poetic inspiration, is part of the speaker's self – a fantasy, generated by the mind – or whether it has its own, seperate existence. Modulating the idealism of poets such as Thomas Hardy, Thomas infuses his portrayals of nature with negativity and doubt: remembering the bird, he reflects, 'I cannot tell / If truly never anything but fair / The days were when he sang, as now they seem.'

Having imbibed the implications of Charles Darwin's theories of evolution, which showed that humans were an animal related to other animals, Thomas refused to seperate the human from the natural, and argued that the ideal nature study would show us 'our position, responsibilities and debts among other inhabitants of the earth'.[63] In fact, a number of critics have suggested that Thomas's work pioneers a new form of ecological poetry: we might say that in its empathic attentiveness and self-effacing qualities, his work takes on an ecocentric, rather anthropocentric (human-centred) focus.

Elizabeth Black has suggested that Thomas creates a new, ecocentric form of war poetry – one that 'foregrounds the complex relationship between humans and nature and makes connections between the impact of violence abroad and its... consequences at home.'[64] This technique is exemplified by 'As the Team's Head-Brass'. In this poem, a solitary speaker sits at the edge of a wood to watch a team of horses pull a plough, before entering into a brief conversation with the ploughman:

As the team's head-brass flashed out on the turn
The lovers disappeared into the wood.
I sat among the boughs of the fallen elm
That strewed the angle of the fallow, and
Watched the plough narrowing a yellow square
Of charlock (141).

The poem begins, as do many of Thomas's works, almost casually, as if in the middle of a thought (or in this case, action). This mirrors and emphasises the conversational tone of the poem, its reliance on the spoken word. Etymologically verse is derived from the Latin *versus*, denoting both a line of writing, a furrow, and the ploughman's turn in a field, a fact used by Thomas to draw a link between poetry, social change (turning) and agricultural labour.

In using a form – blank verse – usually associated with heroic exploits or Shakespearean drama to describe a humble rural scene, Thomas develops a new idiom for war poetry – one that focuses on the shadows cast by war on everyday life, behind the scenes of violence; Seamus Heaney admired in Thomas's poetry an 'apparent dailiness' that disguises 'a big wheel of danger' turning behind it.[65] Talk of war interrupts and destabilises the regular iambic rhythm of the verse, lending emphasis to the speaker's half-flippant, half-prophetic images of dismembered bodies: '"Have you been out?" "No." "And don't want to, perhaps?"/ "If I could only come back again, I should. / I could spare an arm. I shouldn't want to lose / A leg. If I should lose my head, why, so, / I should want nothing more..."' (141) But enjambment also effects a sense of continuity between the voices, merging the seemingly very different identities of the lonely watcher and the rooted rural man. We find that the

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63 Edward Thomas, *The South Country*, p. 144.

64 Elizabeth Black, '"Literally, for this": Edward Thomas's Ecocentric War Poetry'.

65 Seamus Heaney, quoted in *The Guardian*, October 25 2013.

'fallen elm' was knocked over the same night as the ploughman's mate was killed on active service. It therefore offers a 'double' for an unseen soldier, who is also the 'double' for the speaker (the latter is, we presume, in army uniform due to the questions directed at him by the ploughman). The fact that it is 'strewed' suggests chaos, waste and loss, conjuring the dispersal of tight-knit rural communities by the war. Thomas saw the elm as a quintessentially English tree, sometimes presenting it as an emblem of England itself (in this he was perhaps inspired by John Clare's poem 'To a Fallen Elm'). It could thus also refer to the destruction of English culture, as well as the processes of deforestation that were ushered in during World War I, since timber was needed for the war effort. Although the (torn) roots of the elm point to deeper layers of time, Longley notes that Thomas's poems 'are set in fast-moving history, written against a ticking clock.' [66] The whole poem occurs in the time it takes for the lovers to enter and leave the wood, suggesting the fleetingness of time in the context of impending destruction, as well as pointing to war as a pause or interval in social life in which brief freedoms become possible. As in the poetry of Alun Lewis, the figures of the lovers conjure a sense of timelessness, a human desire for love and regeneration that persists in face of war. Their act of love could be an act of resistance to war's destruction, yet this remains unknown to the speaker, hidden as they are in a wood that holds suggestions of dark, 'primal' impulses, and a mysterious 'heart' of England. We are left asking: is this continuation, or finality?

The Divided Self

Compared with the work of Robert Frost, Thomas's poetry is less narrative-based and more 'intensely interior in its psychodrama'.[67] In a technique derived from Symbolism, natural and manmade objects (fields, gate, hut, brook, rain, apples, flowers, sun, moon, etc.) take on an additional symbolic aspect; as early twentieth-century critic F.R. Leavis noticed, 'the unobtrusive signs accumulate, and finally one is aware that the outward scene is accessory to an inner theatre.'[68] Thomas's interest in the inner workings of the mind can be considered in light of a time when the psychoanalytical ideas of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung were beginning to gain a foothold in Britain. Freud's idea of the unconscious – the concept that people possessed buried fears, desires, and memories that, while not readily summonable to consciousness, were crucial to how they behaved as well as to the formation of identity – would forever change how we understand the self. Thomas struggled with acute depression all his life, and underwent psychoanalysis on several occasions. Poetry was in some ways an extension or surrogate for this therapy; Edna Longley suggests the perspective in his work constantly 'switches between patient and analyst', an idea that accounts for the feeling of 'looking in' and 'looking out' at the same time that is often conveyed by his poems.[69] The exploration of a split psyche is evident in many of his poems. This can be seen in 'The Other', in which a speaker is in perpetual pursuit of a mysterious twin or 'doppelgänger', who is also in pursuit of him. Here a sudden sensation of fear and self-estrangement – the sense that

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66 Longley, 'An Atlantic Chasm?', 247.

67 Longley, 'An Atlantic Chasm?', 239.

68 Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry*, p. 61.

69 Longley, 'An Atlantic Chasm?', 242.

the self might actually be another, a stranger – segues into obsession and paranoia:

> ...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 (55).

The questions are banal, almost innocuous, but belie a deeper disturbance that introduces a sense of the unfamiliar within the familiar social world of the village 'road and inn'. The interrogations have an urgency and intrusive insistence, full stops introducing a silence fraught with tension. The idea of 'pass[ing]', emphasised here by its place at the line ending, is here linked, possibly, to the transgression of fixed sexuality and gender codes, passing being the term used – albeit in widespread popular usage a little later than Thomas's poetry – to describe a person from one identity group or social category who is able to be regarded as a person from another group. 'Passing' involves giving up one community to join another; it can allow a person to attain certain privileges that would otherwise not be available, but it can also provoke feelings of separation from the identity left behind.[70] Andrew Webb sees the speaker's thwarted search for a longed-for male other in this poem in terms of a queer desire that is repressed, since homosexuality was then outlawed in British society. Reunion with the missing half of the self and fulfilment of 'Desire's self beyond control' (56) are never realised in this poem, but are instead deferred, 'Held on an everlasting lease'. (57)

'Rain' is a poem that explores the fragmentation of self in a Hamlet-like soliloquy. The poem's pointed, off-beat use of rhythm and sound imbues it with a strangeness that migrates the meanings of the poem to new territory:

> Rain, midnight rain, nothing but the wild rain
> On this bleak hut, and solitude, and me
> Remembering again that I shall die
> And neither hear the rain nor give it thanks
> For washing me cleaner that I have been
> Since I was born into this solitude. (110)

There is a nod in the poem's form toward aspects of the sonnet (its eighteen lines are divided into two sentences with the first twice as long the second, mirroring the sonnet's octave/sestet division), which allows for the concentration of thought, music and image in this poem. The first line is conspicuous for a lack of an active verb; the 'me' – we might suppose, a lonely soldier, isolated in his training hut – is only introduced at the very end of line two, as if as an afterthought. The falling of the rain seems to accompany the speaker's thoughts, while also interrupting and drowning out his reflections. This is what Edna Longley has described as poetry as 'un/thinking'[71]: we can see elements here of Romantic poet John Keats's 'negative capability', an idea that associated poetic creativity with a certain passivity, an ability to dwell in and with the mysterious without trying to work it all out.

The syntactical inversion ('me / Remembering' rather than 'I remember') emphasises that remembrance is central to the speaker's identity. However, rather than defining a positive sense of selfhood, his memories loop back again to a sense of non-being ('Remembering again that I shall die'). The physical isolation of the hut embodies a deeper psychological isolation; as William

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70 As Jessa Lingel notes in the context of bisexuality, 'because the ability to pass is so arbitrary, it can lead to an uneasy sense of separation even from one's closest relations.' 'Adjusting the Borders: Bisexual Passing and Queer Theory', *Journal of Bisexuality*, 9 (2009): 381–405 (390).

71 Longley, 'Edward Thomas as Poet-Critic'.

Cooke suggests, Thomas 'seems to have had enormous difficulty in experiencing himself "together with" others'.[72] His speaker seems cut adrift in time as well as space, at once very young ('born into this solitude') and very old; the use of the past tense ('But here I pray that none whom once I loved / Is dying tonight or lying still awake') implies that he has already passed from life to death, and is speaking to us from an unknown place beyond the grave.

A sense of dispersal and betweenness is reinforced in the wish that his loved ones are not lying 'Helpless among the living and the dead, / Like a cold water among broken reeds'. Inner fragmentation becomes outer fragmentation, with the 'Myriads of broken reeds all still and stiff' alluding to the dead soldiers lying on the Western Front. The rain is both indifferent and levelling, falling equally on the living and the dead, on the solitary soldier and the loved ones from whom the speaker is estranged; like the poet's own consciousness, it flows between everything, 'dissolv[ing]' differences. Yet it also hints at a more religious sense of pity and redemption, captured in the sonorous phrase, 'Blessed are the dead <u>that</u> <u>the</u> **rain rains** upon', the pyrrhic and spondee patterns (respectively two unstressed and two stressed syllables together; see indications above) signalling that the poem has moved from private anguish to a more public declamation.

The dark atmosphere of the poem – its setting at 'midnight', its monochrome landscapes – places emphasis on the act of listening. Disturbances to the regular iambic pentameter (five-beat) rhythm mirror ebbs and flow in the rain: for instance, where iambic pentameter usually alternates an unstressed with a stressed syllable, Thomas's poem begins with a stress on 'Rain'; compare too the regular metre of 'And **neith**er **hear** the **rain** nor **give** it **thanks'** (stresses in bold) with the irregularity of the following line: 'For **wash**ing me **clean**er than I have **been**', while a pointed use of alliteration, assonance and internal rhyme ('Rain...rain...rain...Remembering', 'bleak...me...hear...been', 'rain...again') has a 'self-echoic' effect,[73] projecting an idea of the self as an empty room, full of echoes. For Andrew Webb, Thomas's use of these techniques points to his knowledge of the intricate sound correspondences of Welsh cynghanedd; indeed, the first line carries the same sounds across the three parts of the line, just as in Welsh cynghanedd sain. Together with the use of enjambment, the chain of sounds conveys a flow or overflow of thought from line to line; further, as Webb notes, the aural experience of the poem is reordered so that the word 'rain' becomes the governing sound of the poem, decentring the human voice.[74] Rain is set against thought, sound against sense, creating a different kind of English-language war poetry.

Memory

Thomas is a poet of modernity, but also a poet of memory. His poetry asks the question: if memory is central to identity – personal and cultural – then what happens when the ties of memory start to unravel, become lost? In a related sense, he is also a writer preoccupied with origins, which often remain absent or hidden; he is deeply concerned with the origins of poetry itself, its emergence through folk song and sound. His landscapes are haunted landscapes, sites of a forgotten memory. See, for example, this description from his review of a book called *Highways and Byways in Hampshire:*

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72 Cooke, *Edward Thomas*, p. 39.

73 Longley, 'An Atlantic Chasm?', 239.

74 Webb, 'Edward Thomas and Welsh Culture', 281–2.

Perhaps the wooded combes are most characteristic of all. They are steep-sided bays running and narrowing far into and up the sides of the chalk hills...All the year round the watery combes, dripping, green and still, are magical cauldrons for the making and unmaking of mists. They breed whole families, perfect genealogical trees of echoes, which the child delights to call up; so, too do fox and owl at night, and the cow on some calm evening; and as to the horn and the cry of hounds, the beechen hangers entangle and repeat them as if they would imprison them for ever, so that the phantom exceeds the true.[75]

The 'combe', a space of ancient history where 'the phantom exceeds the true', appears in his eponymous poem:

> The Combe was ever dark, ancient and dark.
> Its mouth was stopped with bramble, thorn,
>   and briar;
> And no one scrambles over the sliding chalk
> By beech and yew and perishing juniper
> Down the half precipices of its sides...(64)

The combe (a deep, narrow valley) represents an 'ancient' and obscure aspect of the past, which has been forcibly silenced: '[i]ts mouth was stopped'. It is also a defensively secret place: 'all the singing birds / Except the missel-thrush that loves juniper, /Are quite shut out.' The 'I' may be observing from behind the scenes, but the repetition of 'dark' and run-on lines between lines 2 and 6 evoke the act of 'scramb[ling]' and entering deeper into the valley. This space is magical, a kind of creative matrix. But an ominous tone is emphasised by the repetition of 'ancient and dark':

> But far more ancient and dark
> The Combe looks since they killed the
>   badger there,
> Dug him out and gave him to the hounds,
> That most ancient Briton of English beasts.

A note of violence and conflict is introduced into this vision of the ancient English countryside, reminding us, perhaps, of R.S. Thomas's statement, in his poem 'Welsh Landscape': 'To live in Wales is to be conscious /At dusk of the spilled blood / That went to the making of the wild sky'.[76] The word 'combe' is similar to the Welsh word *cwm*, valley; indeed the Old English root, '*cumb*' is thought to have origins in the Welsh (Brythonic) word. We might suppose, then, that the dignified badger, '[t]hat most ancient Briton of English beasts', represents a Celtic past that has been routed out and sacrificed to a dominant British/English culture. There is ambiguity, though; given the syntax, we do not quite know whether it is the badger or the hounds who are the 'most ancient Briton of English beasts'; hunter and hunted are here part of the same conflicted identity.

Edna Longley has observed that in Thomas's poetry, the 'music of words' also carries 'an enduring echo of we know not what in the past and in the abyss'.[77] He shows particular interest in how names – of places, of plants – can be embedded in culture and the past, presenting a kind of living history. Take for instance, his famous poem 'Old Man', in which the smell of the plant evokes a memory that the speaker cannot quite recall:

75 Edward Thomas, 'Happy Hampshire', *The Daily Chronicle*, 1 May 1908, p. 3.

76 R.S. Thomas, 'Welsh Landscape', in *Poetry 1900-2000*: Meic Stephens (ed.), (Cardigan: Parthian, 2007), p. 140.

77 Longley, Introduction to *Edward Thomas: the Annotated Collected Poems*, p. 17, quoting Edward Thomas, *Walter Pater: a Critical Study* (London: Martin Secker, 1913), p. 219.

Old Man, or Lad's-love, – in the name
   there's nothing
To one that knows not Lad's-love, or Old Man,
The hoar-green feathery herb, almost a tree,
Growing with rosemary and lavender.
Even to one that knows it well, the names
Half decorate, half perplex, the thing it is:
At least, what that is clings not to the names
In spite of time. And yet I like the names. (51)

Sensory experience pushes against the barriers of time here, as the speaker 'shrivel[s] the grey shreds, / Sniff them and think and sniff again and try / Once more to think what it is I am remembering' (52), even as he fears that the memory is irretrievable, 'shrivel[led]', like the plant, in 'grey shreds'. Characteristically, this speaker is in the dark as to whether anything will be handed on of his memory, and therefore himself, in the future: his young daughter also '[shrivels] / The shreds' (51) as she goes past, but he does not know whether this action is meaningful to her: 'Not a word she says; /And I can only wonder how much hereafter / She will remember, with that bitter scent' (51). Names, the speaker reflects, can be deceiving, more 'perplex[ing]' than revealing: 'what that is clings not to the names'. Although the speaker despairs that 'I have mislaid the key' (52), texts such as 'Old Man' emphasise poetry's roots as a mnemonic – that which helps people remember.[78]

The much-anthologised 'Adlestrop' offers a different, more optimistic take on memory and names. Adlestrop is a village in Gloucestershire; the Great Western Railway from Oxford to Gloucester used to pass through it but the station is now closed down. The poem describes an encounter with its beauty one summer afternoon, at the brief meeting-point of nature and technological modernity:

Yes. I remember Adlestrop –
The name, because one afternoon
Of heat the express-train drew up there
Unwontedly. It was late June. (67)

'Yes' introduces a note of celebration – the joy of finding again something lost – although the solidity of the affirmative is contrasted with the sense of absence and fleetingness that marks the poem as a whole. There is a halting rhythm to the first two quatrains, building up to something more regular and blossoming in the second two, in which enjambment conveys the thread of memory unspooling to recollect the richness of that moment in June. The fullness of the experience is conjured by the name, which becomes what it describes; but the dashes in the first and second stanzas convey the gaps and holes in memory, perhaps signalling the loss of what Adlestrop represented to the speaker in that moment, or the now ghostly emptiness of the remembered terrain, as the space that modernity – like the train – has now left behind. Yet the birdsong and soft alliterative sounds of the plants ('willows, willow-herb, and grass, /And meadowsweet') evoke once more a pleasurable feeling of being centred and incorporated into an environment through the senses, rather than separated and dislocated in time, as one can be on a train. A sense of expansiveness resounds at the poem's ending, that also carefully marks out a particular local terrain:

Close by, and round him, mistier,
Farther and farther, all the birds
Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire.

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78 Longley, Introduction to *Edward Thomas: the Annotated Collected Poems*, p. 23.

Words

Thomas's concern with names and memory takes us to the final theme we will address: his entrancement with words themselves. This is shown most emphatically by his poem, 'Words':

> Out of us all
> That make rhymes,
> Will you choose
> Sometimes –
> As the winds use
> A crack in a wall
> Or a drain,
> Their joy or their pain
> To whistle through –
> Choose me,
> You English words? (97)

The speaker's invocation suggests a fragile, sensitive humanity – a consciousness formed by words, rather than fully in control of them. Again, it is the sonorous, musical dimensions of words, their sounds like 'winds' in the 'crack in a wall' or a 'drain' (the tacit comparison of the poet to such a channel is wryly humorous), that appear to free the speaker from the burden of excessive literariness, the imposing 'tall forest towers' (155) of books described in 'Lights Out', the winds signalling here both the breath of speech, and a passageway to elsewhere. Words are both ancient and new, strange and familiar, pointing to the past and future: 'Strange as the races / Of dead and unborn … And familiar, / To the eye, /As the dearest faces / That a man knows, /And as lost homes are' (97–8). As Edna Longley notes, Thomas's use of oxymoron in this poem, epitomised by the declaration that words are 'Worn new /Again and again' (98), espouses a notion of poetic evolution rather than revolution, in which words' shape-shifting facility for new use is what will allow poetry to survive adversity.[79] There is a connection, here too, with the sense of a 'lost home' that haunts Thomas's poetry. Andrew Webb has noted that Thomas often uses the adjectives 'delicious' and 'sweet' to describe Wales;[80] here too, Wales is associated with a sensory, bodily connection to the earthy beauty of language: 'Make me content / With some sweetness / From Wales / Whose nightingales / Have no wings' (98); the English language is beautiful because it contains multiple languages. The speaker's longing to 'stand perchance / In ecstasy, / Fixed and free / In a rhyme' (98) speaks to their sense that tracking back to old traditions could also be a route to new freedoms in language.

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79 Longley, 'An Atlantic Chasm?', 236.

80 Andrew Webb, ' "I am slowly growing into a conscious Englishman": Edward Thomas, Wales and England', paper delivered at the Edward Thomas Centenary Conference, Cardiff University, 20 April 2017.

Comments on Edward Thomas's Poetry as a Whole

Old roads are another important motif in Thomas's work, linked to his sense of the interrelation of walking and poetry. 'I love roads', declares the speaker of his eponymous poem: 'Roads go on / While we forget, and are / Forgotten like a star / That shoots and is gone.' (112) They appealed to Thomas in an almost spiritual dimension, as a representation of time and endlessness that speaks of continuance and human connection beyond death and war. Roads, of course, also connect different countries, different places. What Andrew Webb describes as Edward Thomas's 'unrealised Welshness' throws light on Thomas's sense of the role of the poet, and the feelings of alienation and loss that haunt his work.[81] His dual English-Welsh identity can also help us understand the uncertainty and 'inner strangeness' that characterise his poetry. It is, among other things, in his capacity to question the idea of national identity as something that is only ever fixed and undivided, absolute, that lies his continued relevance to our modern world: there is something distinctly 'non-binary' about his poetry.

81 Webb, 'Welshness and Non-heteronomativity in Edward Thomas', p. 120.

Suggestions for exercises and questions to encourage creative analysis

For each of the following locations, suggest which poem by Thomas they could be connected to. How are they depicted and what associations are given to them in his poetry? (Teachers may encourage students to investigate the locations provided either independently or in class via Google Maps and Google Earth).

[Links active 11 September 2020]

Adlestrop
Link to Google Maps: [**https://goo.gl/maps/1PwNtRSGN6WRTs386**]

Sarn Helen
Link to Google Maps: **https://goo.gl/maps/SQ1gM7eZTYCUWeFn9**

Beaurains, near Arras, France
Link to Google Maps: [**https://goo.gl/maps/xgU4zZwVGt7hcx8k9**]

Dymock, Gloucestershire
Link to Google Maps: [**https://goo.gl/maps/LCbL4mw3oDbTE1EY9**]

Steep, Hampshire
Link to Google Maps: [**https://goo.gl/maps/oGL4Hnm4Hqw3Cxrj7**]

For each of the following images, suggest which poem(s) by Edward Thomas they could be connected to, and why.

Soldiers of an Australian 4th Division field artillery brigade near Hooge in the Ypres salient, 29 October 1917. Australian War Memorial collection, E01220.

Link to photograph: [**https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military_history_of_Australia_during_World_War_I#/media/File:Chateauwood.jpg**]

A team of horses pull the plough of
William Goodiron, U.S. National Archives
and Records Administration.

Link to photograph: **[https://upload.
wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/
thumb/c/c3/Team_of_white_horses_
pull_plow_of_William_Goodiron_-_
NARA_-_285843.jpg/800px-Team_of_
white_horses_pull_plow_of_William_
Goodiron_-_NARA_-_285843.jpg]**

A combe (Eastern Quantocks, Somerset)
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    Link to photograph: **[https://www.
geograph.org.uk/photo/231152]**

Further Discussion Questions

Is Edward Thomas's poetry pro- or
anti-war, in your opinion?

Do you think Wales is important to his poetry?

Describe a landscape or location that is
important to you personally. Why does
it have meaning for you in this way?

Further Reading

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The Edward Thomas archive at Cardiff University: **https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/special-collections/explore/collection/edward-thomas-archive**