

Edward Thomas, War Poet

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English Association First World War Bookmarks
No. 1

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Unlike both Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, the former of whom trained alongside Thomas in Essex in November 1915, Edward Thomas's poetry was all written before he embarked for the Front in late January 1917. As opposed to the recording of the horrors of war from first-hand experience Thomas's quiet tone registers the effects of the war upon those whose routines at home continued out of the earshot of the guns and in this sense his poems share some of the qualities of Thomas Hardy's, 'In Time of "The Breaking of Nations"'. This poem was published in the concluding section, 'Poems of War and Patriotism' of the 1917 volume, *Moments of Vision*, and Hardy juxtaposes a young man and his girl who whisper their secret love to each other against a rural background of ploughing and land-clearing. The poem's title was taken from *The Book of the Prophet Jeremiah*, 51 (20), with its reference to the Lord's words 'for with thee will I break in pieces the nations, and with thee will I destroy kingdoms'. This holocaustic assertion is followed in verse 22 with the promise that 'with thee will I break in pieces the young man and the maid' and it would seem that it is this particular thought that prompts Hardy's contradictory belief in the enduring quality of the young lovers leading him to conclude that

War's annals will cloud into night
Ere their story die.

This Bookmark will look in close detail at 'As the team's head-brass' and then some poems from 1915 leading up to 'The sun used to shine', trying to place them in the context in which they came to be written. I shall also, by reference to other Thomas poems, try to provide a sense of the poet's overall awareness of the effects of the war on the England that he so loved.

'As the team's head-brass' 27th May 1916

The morbid and yet compulsive nature of the nympholept's Orphic glance was well-known to Edward Thomas, that walker of the southern counties whose restlessness drove him to seek out places that had, by virtue of being placed in his own past, become talismanic. Recognition of the untouchable nature of a world that is gone may well have prompted his own suicidal thoughts as recorded both by Helen Thomas's recollections of their life at Berryfield Cottage near Petersfield and his own fictionalised account of 'The Attempt' in *Light and Twilight*. Helen Thomas recorded the 'terrible days when I did not know where he was' and vividly recalled the 'days of silence and brooding despair' which culminated in his storming out of the house armed with an old revolver that he kept in a drawer. When Thomas fictionalised the incident in 'The Attempt' he focussed upon both the act of suicide and what it might mean to embrace death:

Death he had never feared or understood; he feared very much the pain and the fear that would awake with it. He had never in his life seen a dead human body or come in any way near death. Death was an idea tinged with poetry in his mind—a kingly thing which was once only at any man's call. After it came annihilation.

The attraction of this death-wish was connected to a world of the past in which Morgan Traheron, the protagonist of the short story, could contemplate his own lost childhood in which 'he hid himself in the folds of his mother's dress or her warm bosom, where he could shut out everything save the bright patterns floating on the gloom under his closed eyelids.'

Thomas's life before the outbreak of war was obsessively bound to a sense of time as he struggled to write the reviews which provided the mainstay of his income whilst keeping at bay the alluring air of 'a time / Long past and irrecoverable' ('Sedge-Warblers'). To exist in a timeless moment, to allow the sensations of the present to radiate outwards from a sharply perceived sense of the 'here' and 'now', held in stasis, was an image to which Thomas returned throughout his two years of writing poetry. Most famously, of course, in the much-anthologised 'Adlestrop', written in January 1915, the clarity of the blackbird's song, contextualised by juxtaposition with the hissing of the steam and the clearing of

a man's throat, acts as a pebble in a still pond leaving the poet at the centre of a widening circle of sound:

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

Thomas's obsession with movement and stasis, the 'Fixed and free' ('Words'), led not only to the immense walking tours and the five house-moves between 1900 and 1906 but also to the compulsive concern for note-books, as if every small moment must be firmly recorded so as to be retrievably available. Some fortnight after writing 'Adlestrop' Thomas wrote 'Ambition' in which a train's movement is preceded by the noise of both woodpecker and owl and there 'was Elysium in that happy hour'. It is as though time stands still for a moment:

A train that roared along raised after it
And carried with it a motionless white bower
Of purest cloud, from end to end close-knit,
So fair it touched the roar with silence.

The association of railways with troop-movements gives to this image a particular force and the suspended sense of time in 'motionless' is worth comparing with Thomas's contemplation of movement and stillness in the later poem from May 1916, 'As the team's head-brass'.

Having enlisted with the Artists' Rifles in July 1915 Thomas was based at High Beech in Essex before being moved to Hare Hall camp where he acted as a map-reading instructor. The poem was composed a few weeks before he applied for a commission in the Royal Artillery, acceptance into which would lead him to France in the early months of the following year and his death in April 1917. Introducing a focus upon both place and time's movement the opening line is dramatic:

As the team's head-brass flashed out on the turn

We are caught for a moment in mid-action with 'As' and the flashing of sunlight on the brass commands attention although the heralding nature of this call is immediately thrown into relief by the lovers who 'disappeared into the wood.' From here the poem moves with a steady rhythm reflecting the careful and measured ploughing up of the field of charlock:

Every time the horses turned
Instead of treading me down, the ploughman leaned
Upon the handles to say or ask a word,
About the weather, next about the war.

The emphasis upon 'leaned' at the end of the second line adds a pausing moment which allows for a desultory conversation and it is significant that the weather should come before the war since this, after all, is what is of most importance to the ploughman now. The picture the poet then constructs for us is one in which he sits, as though trapped, while the ploughman narrows the field of charlock with unstoppable purpose ('One minute and an interval of ten, / A minute more and the same interval.'). The air of menace, time running out for the still man in a changing landscape, is emphasised as the horses turn and, 'Instead of treading me down', the ploughman leans over him, clearly recognising his army uniform, to ask the question uppermost in Thomas's mind, 'Have you been out?' The talk between the two is quiet, reflective and punctuated by the need for the plough to go the length of the field before it is resumed. The elm tree on which the poet sits was felled not by artillery fire but by a blizzard and it becomes the most obvious first topic of conversation. The ploughman's question about going out to France strikes immediately to the heart of the matter concerning the responsibilities and anxieties of joining up. Matthew Hollis writes about this poem in terms of Thomas's own decision:

The speaker idling on his elm tree had appeared unmoved by the war when the poem began. He had been flip when the ploughman had asked if he had been out to France, adopting a tone of Shakespearean foolery over the loss of limbs. But in the ellipsis he had understood something invaluable, and realised what was wrong with the scene in which he sat: that the world he enjoyed was contingent upon those who were willing to fight for it.

This accords entirely with Eleanor Farjeon's account of Thomas's reply when she asked him what he was fighting for after he had joined The Artists' Rifles in July 1915. Thomas stopped, picked up a pinch of earth and crumbled it between finger and thumb before letting it fall. He then replied 'Literally, for this.'

In the poem the stillness of the moment, words poured into a seemingly halted present, centres upon the most important question of all concerning life and death. The ironic stance of the poet who thinks that he could 'spare an arm', whilst recognising that for the compulsive walker the loss of a leg would be a forced retirement into an elm-tree bower my prison, is brought abruptly to a sobering awareness of the blank face of death: irony is left behind as the poet realises that with the loss of his head 'I should want nothing more'.

In *The Artists' Rifles* Thomas was involved with training in Essex and became a Lance-Corporal teaching map-reading. The difficulty entailed in making a clear-cut decision about going further to seek Front-Line action can be heard in the closing lines of the poem's conversation when Thomas realises that if the ploughman's mate hadn't already been killed in France then the tree in which he is sitting would have been removed:

'And I should not have sat here. Everything
Would have been different. For it would have been
Another world.' 'Ay, and a better, though
If we could see all all might seem good.'

This refusal to adopt a simply jingoistic attitude towards the war is endorsed by the poem's closing image of those clods which 'crumble and topple over': they may recall men going 'over-the-top' but they are also part of the life-giving process of the farm, ploughing. In this context it is worth comparing Thomas's poem with Hardy's 'During Wind and Rain' written in 1916 and published in *Moments of Vision*. Standing in a churchyard Hardy looks at the graves of people he used to know and recalls the brightness of past days. His memory is stirred by the names carved on the gravestones and

Down their chiselled names the rain-drop ploughs.

The use of that word 'ploughs', as with Thomas's poem, prompts us to look forward as well as back as we recognise that without ploughing there would be no new world. However, that refusal to play the jingoistic card has also an air of the platitude, an ordinariness that fits entirely with the movement that begins again as the lovers reappear and the field is travelled one more time by the 'ploughshare and the stumbling team'.

Two weeks after writing the poem Thomas wrote to Eleanor Farjeon that he had been trying for that commission with the Royal Artillery referred to earlier 'but without military influence it looks as if I might have a long wait'. By mid-August he was writing to Robert Frost that 'This waiting troubles me. I really want to be out' and the propulsion forward to the Front was set in progress. Going back to 'Ambition' that poem's conclusion breaks the spell-bound gaze as 'the end fell like a bell' and

The bower was scattered; far off the train roared.

'The sun used to shine', 22nd May 1916 and some poems from 1915

Thomas's reflective record of the small moments that cling together to sum up his understanding of life is delicately woven into this poem in which he refers to one of the many walks he took with Robert Frost whilst they both lived at Dymock on the Gloucestershire-Herefordshire border. In the late article, 'This England', Thomas noted the importance of the ordinariness of these moments of walking:

How easy it was to spend a morning or afternoon in walking over to this house, stopping to talk to whoever was about for a few minutes, and then strolling with my friend, nearly regardless of footpaths, in a long loop, so as to end either at his house or my lodging.

In 'The sun used to shine' this leisurely and ruminative movement is caught in the rhythms of the verse structure and Thomas concentrates upon those particularities which serve as the back-drop to war:

The sun used to shine while we two walked
Slowly together, paused and started
Again, and sometimes mused, sometimes talked
As either pleased, and cheerfully parted

Each night. We never disagreed
Which gate to rest on. The to be
And the late past we gave small heed.
We turned from men or poetry

To rumours of war remote
Only till both stood disinclined
For aught but the yellow flavoured coat
Of an apple wasps had undermined

The hesitant quietness of those opening lines sets the scene and as the second line opens with 'Slowly', followed by a comma and the two verbs 'paused and started', the enjambment takes us to 'Again' with its emphasis upon activity repeated with ease and shared delight. As if to put 'rumours' of war into a real perspective, the focus moves to the apple being slowly devoured by wasps. It is almost as if Thomas sees the larger scope of the world *through* the minutiae of details allowing them to carry a hint of the larger picture and the wasps *undermine* the apple and the betony flowers are perceived in terms of 'a sentry'.

This awareness of how the particular qualities of the present moment act as a window into the larger framework of war is also central to 'The Owl'(February 1915) where the delight of an inn, food and rest after a long day's walking is qualified by the 'most melancholy cry' which is 'Shaken out long and clear upon the hill.' The owl's cry seems to tell him of what he was escaping that night whilst 'others could not'

And salted was my food, and my repose,
Salted and sobered, too, by the bird's voice
Speaking for all who lay under the stars,
Soldiers and poor, unable to rejoice.

As William Cooke made clear the impact of this poem lies in that repeated word 'salted':

Firstly, the bird's voice 'salts' (i.e. flavours) his refuge at the inn by making him aware of his privileged position over others less fortunate. But almost immediately less comfortable connotations surface when the word is repeated...It certainly means

'flavoured' or 'spiced', but it also evokes the harshness of salt, the salt in the wound, the taste of bitterness, and of tears.

Thomas's eight-line elusive memorial to those lost in the war, 'A Private' (January 1915), again links the world of rural commonplaces with the alien distances of battle. The wry humour of the drunken ploughman's cold bed underneath 'Mrs Greenland's Hawthorn Bush' just above and beyond the local inn, 'The Drover', is juxtaposed with what Edna Longley calls his new 'privacy' which is not the same as his old 'secrecy'. The ploughman's connection with the earth in his job as well as in his temporary resting place after the pub has closed seems far away from the poem's uncompromising first line:

This ploughman dead in battle slept out of doors

However, that line reveals a timelessness which was not there in the poem's opening line in its first draft

A labouring man lies hid in that bright coffin

The later poem, 'Digging' (July 1915), presents us with a historical canvas that stretches from the prehistoric to individually named battles of the War of the Spanish Succession, reading about which had dominated Thomas's last few weeks whilst he wrote a biography of the Duke of Marlborough to be published by Chapman & Hall in the same year. From the early eighteenth-century to the trenches of Northern France the clay pipes smoked by the soldier, the common man, act as a thread which serves to remind us that throughout time people 'Once laughed, or wept, in this same light of day.'

Thomas's decision-making process concerning his role in the war had been long-drawn out and his angry denouncement of the cheap words and snap decisions of the Jingoists took its most forceful form in December 1915 with 'This is no case of petty right or wrong' in which the poet's fierce assertion that he does not hate Germans, 'nor grow hot/With love of Englishmen, to please newspapers' may well reflect his attitude towards his father as outlined in a letter to Robert Frost:

People get fined occasionally for speaking well of the Germans at private parties—under the Defence of the Realm Act. I don't wonder. My father is so rampant in his cheery patriotism that I become pro German every evening.

In a review of a 1914 war poetry anthology Thomas had already made clear his contempt for what he saw as the demand for the crude, 'for what everybody is saying or thinking'. Most of the poetry being published at the outbreak of war he saw as 'bombastic, hypocritical, or senseless', work which goes 'straight to the heart of the great public which does not read poetry'. 'This is no case of petty right or wrong' requires the reader to make genuine decisions about the role of patriotism and when placed alongside those evocations of character in the poems already discussed it is difficult to ignore the simplicity of emotion that places the individual within the context of both history and landscape:

The ages made her that made us from the dust:
She is all we know and live by, and we trust
She is good and must endure, loving her so:
And as we love ourselves we hate her foe.

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English Association First World War Bookmarks No. 1

Edward Thomas, War Poet by Ian Brinton is Number 1 in the First World War Bookmark series, published by

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