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Edward Thomas's Prose of Modern Life

Martin Scofield

I

Can the modern reader find in Edward Thomas's prose anything to equal the interest still aroused by his poetry? Is there any equivalent there of the distinctively modern sensibility, the questioning of self and social tradition, the sceptical awareness of the uncertainties of perception, the search for 'home', and the sense of a changing landscape that critics have found in the verse? Does the medium of the prose bear comparison with the distinctive personal voice of the poetry?

The publication of a new selection of the prose, *The Pilgrim and Other Tales* (Selected and Introduced by R. George Thomas, Everyman paperback, 1991) is very welcome. The selection is an excellent one, and should do much to widen interest in the prose. The original version of the present article was written before Professor Thomas's selection appeared, so it was particularly pleasing to find that of the pieces discussed in it nine are included in the selection.¹ The Thomas who was a distinctive observer of specifically modern life and the changing face of England emerges strikingly in the selection, and Professor Thomas's introduction brings out well the particular period of Thomas's life (1909 to October 1911) in which he wrote two volumes that meant much to him personally, *Rest and Unrest* (1910) and *Light and Twilight* (1911), and from which several of the selected pieces are taken. It also draws attention to that ambiguous social status ('He wasn't a gentleman, he wasn't a bohemian artist, he wasn't a naturalist — he was something in between these recognizable social types') with which, as Professor Thomas says, 'one suspects he was delighted', and which accounts a great deal for the socially questioning prose, and what Professor Thomas calls the 'unquestioned sensitivity to the plight of others' which this article will be discussing. Edward Thomas is also shown to have been, in 1909, dissatisfied with what he had done with 'modern subjects' up until then: 'As to modern subjects I can do little with more than one

character, and that one is sure to be a ghost (of a pretty woman or a nice old man) or else myself' (Letter to Gordon Bottomley, 12 October 1909).

At the same time, Professor Thomas still, to my mind, puts undue emphasis on what one might call the mystical side of Thomas's writing, or what is described as 'a quest for an angle of vision that glimpsed "eternity" in a grain of sand or a shaft of light'. Perhaps the problem is not so much the emphasis on this quest in itself (for I would agree that it is essential to the poetry, though in other terms), but on some of the prose pieces with which Professor Thomas illustrates it, as in the passage from a piece called 'Mighty Harmonies' of 1897 which has a convincing enough *idea* of 'the power of the wood' (of walking in woods), but which in expression ends in an embarrassing whimsy and bathos ('once more we weave the daisy chains, and let our spirits again leap with the song of the lark'). A second passage about infinity and eternity, from the other end of Thomas's career, (*The Stile*, 1911) I have discussed below. These reservations must be made, I think, since the rest of Professor Thomas's Introduction, and even more his selection, does so much to clarify our sense of a different aspect of Thomas.

Before the publication of *The Pilgrim and Other Tales*, the republication and discussion of the prose (with one or two notable exceptions) had tended to focus on his 'country' writing. *Wales* was republished in 1983 and *The South Country* in 1984. Not long before, *Edward Thomas on the Countryside* (ed. Roland Grant) was published in 1977. Edna Longley's selection *A Language Not to Be Betrayed* (1981) gives a broader picture, with selections from the criticism and from autobiographical pieces as well as rural description. And David Wright's *Selected Poetry and Prose* has an interesting variety of short pieces.² But the emphasis in Wright's Introduction is still on Thomas as the 'last of a line of English poets who, beginning with Wordsworth, are not so much 'nature' poets as recorders and elegizers of the slow destruction of rural England and its culture by the industrial revolution and its consequences', and on the whole this emphasis is felt in the selection of prose as well as poetry. It seems only a half truth. The elegiac is only one of Thomas's notes, and where there is elegy it is as much for the transience of life and men's works in general as for the specific ways of life of the countryside. As Hugh Underhill has written: 'It would be pointless to deny that something of [an elegy for rural England] is a brooding presence in Thomas's poetry', and one might add, prose, 'but that, finally, is not what interests us, unless we see the

loss of pre-industrial England as somehow a crucial consideration in the late twentieth century world'.³

One wonders, in fact, if the kind of rural tradition referred to by Wright has ever been as homogeneous as is often suggested. 'Pastoral', in broad terms, has always been a focus for many different kinds of preoccupations. Goldsmith's lament for 'Sweet Auburn' in 'The deserted Village' is indeed (and before Wordsworth) a lament for the passing of the old ways with the coming of enclosure and other pre-industrial changes; but Wordsworth's interest in the natural world is as much psychological as social, and even in its social aspects has little to say of the 'industrial revolution' as such. Shelley finds in Nature a language for the spirit, Keats a rich field for sensation, Tennyson a means of exploring personal loss (*In Memoriam*) or mood and atmosphere (*Mariana*) or the exotic (*Enoch Arden*); Hopkins a way of celebrating religious feeling. In prose too, the Nature of, say, Hardy's Egdon Heath is quite different, and explored for different reasons, from Lawrence's Marsh farm in the opening chapters of *The Rainbow*. The natural world for all these writers is as much a setting as a subject: it becomes a part of their deepest preoccupations with man and the world. To put it another way, it is often a kind of language in which their different visions of life find a body. One of the limitations of much 'Georgian' writing was that the rendering of Nature is motivated more by a kind of limited nostalgia, or dislike for the modern world, than by any more urgent pressures.

Thomas's 'country' prose, particularly as represented, until recently, in current selections, often seems to suffer from similar limitations. There is sometimes a pose of naivety, of the Scholar-gypsy without the scholarship:

And so I travel, armed only with myself, an avaricious and often libertine and fickle eye and ear, in pursuit, not of knowledge, not of wisdom, but one of whom to pursue is never to capture. Politics, the drama, science, racing, reforms and preservations, divorces, book-clubs — nearly everything which the average (oh! mysterious average man, always to be met but never met) and the superior and intelligent man is thinking of, I cannot grasp; my mind refuses to deal with them; and when they are discussed I am given to making answers like 'In Kilve there is no weathercock'. I expect there are others, unfortunate, superfluous men such as the sanitation, improved housing, police, charities, medicine of our wonderful civilization saves from the fate of the cuckoo's foster brothers. These will perhaps follow my meanders and understand.

(*The South Country*, p. 5)

At other times there are touches of a literary and somewhat faded classicism:

I have sometimes thought that a statue, the statue of a human or heroic or divine figure, might more fitly than in many other stand in such a place. A figure it should be, like that proud Demeter in marble now banished in a cold gallery, before which a man of any religion, or class, or race, or time, might bow and lay down something of his burden and take away what makes him other than he was.

(*The South Country*, pp. 12-13)

And as in that last quotation too, there is often an unconvincing kind of religious mysticism, literary and conventional. 'Eternity', 'Infinity' and 'Immortal' are words that occur rather too easily and too often: 'immortal sky', 'immortality', 'infinitely far-off', 'immortal life', 'immortal company', 'citizen of infinity and eternity' — *Light and Twilight* (pp. 104, 105, 51). In the poetry they are almost absent. They doubtless correspond to some experience in Thomas, but one feels that while Wordsworth could write convincingly in this mode Thomas can no longer use it with conviction. Thomas often sensed this himself (it is one of the things that make him interesting). As he wrote to Gordon Bottomly in 1911: 'I am really beginning to see myself. I suppose it is a good thing. Will mystery or the light of common day succeed to the mist that used to seem mystery?'

II

One of the problems with the kind of prose writing illustrated above — perhaps its major problem — is that it seeks so overridingly to present an ideal world, a world of beauty. T. S. Eliot denied that Arnold was right to regret in Burns the absence of a 'beautiful world': a poet should look beneath beauty and ugliness. And ugliness, too, one might add seems to be a necessary subject for the twentieth century writer who is going to be responsive to his age — ugliness not simply as a fact to note and regret, but as an aspect of the modern scene to be explored for new interest, shown in a new light and perhaps revalued, (just as Wordsworth praised Cowper for loving the 'unsightly gorse').⁴ So in reading Thomas's *Wales* one's interest quickens when one comes to a passage like this:

Or you may cross the Severn and then the lower Wye, and taking Tredegar and Caerleon alternately, or Rhigws and Landore, or Cardiff and Lantwit, or the

Rhondda Valley and the Vale of Neath, and thus sharpening the spirit as the epicure may sharpen his palate, by opposites, find true Wales everywhere, whether the rivers be ochre and purple with corruption or still as silver as the fountain dew on the mountain's beard; whether the complexions of the people be as pure as those of the young cockle-women of Penclawdd, or as heavily superscribed as those of tin-platers preparing to wash.⁵

Wales was first published in 1905 when Thomas had not yet exorcised the ghost of Pater, and there is a touch of the Paterian manner even in that passage where the 'connoisseur' is explicitly in evidence: 'ochre and purple with corruption' is an aesthete's view of the corruption. (Thomas said of Pater that when he wrote of Leonardo's illegitimacy 'the dishonour of illegitimacy hangs over his birth', he made of it a distinction of some grandeur, almost a visible ornament.) But the essay of 1914, 'Swansea Village', is, as Professor Thomas says, 'undeniably' a more 'satisfactory guide to pre-1914 Wales', and its sharp-eyed prose catches exactly the lively, mixed quality of the twentieth century urban and suburban landscape:⁶

Everywhere decay and ruin make their boast side by side with growth. Disused workshops are not supplanted but are spared by some form of piety to stand and thin into skeletons, with gaping walls and roofs, to fall gradually in heaps among their successors. The sheds with rafters broken, tiles slipping, bricks dislodged, the derelict and tumbling cottages, the waste places of slag, old masonry, and dust, tufted with feverfew, the yards cumbered with rusty iron implements and rubbish, the red rivulet plunging in black gorges, speak rather of a bloodily conquered and deserted city than of a claimant to be the 'Metropolis of South Wales'. But round the corner a new block of buildings, including a chemist's and a sweet shop, followed by cottages with wooden porches, and then a three-year-old chapel filled by a noble hymn wailing triumphantly, and next a view of twenty hills divided into squares of corn and grass and irregular woods, revive the claim. And yet this chapel is at the foot of a rough quarried slope sprinkled thinly and anyhow with white and whitish cottages among rushes of tufted grass, which is a scene of almost moorland sweetness for those living in the new-old streets of eternal smoke under the mountain opposite, barren and black.

Here the Paterian syntax and rhythms have disappeared, and with them the tone of the 'epicure' or condescending aesthete. There is an anticipatory briskness in the opening sentence of the paragraph, and animation in the anaphora of the second. The deployment of colour ('the red rivulet plunging in black gorges') is terse and vivid as opposed to the more rhetorical expansion of the ochre and purple and silver of the first passage. This is a distinctively modern English landscape, (a

forerunner in some ways of Auden's early landscapes), with the chemist's and the sweetshop; but equally so of course, as well as being a touch of pure Thomas (with also an echo of Pater at his best) is the 'almost moorland sweetness' at the foot of the quarried slope, a note of wildness which keeps the scene in touch with another kind of life.

The quality of this passage is more than a style of landscape description, it comes from a whole quality of mind and reminds one of the Thomas of the poems. It is a mind that does not turn away from difficulty and ugliness or harshness but lets them have their place as a part of the challenge of a new landscape and a new awareness. It does not lose the awareness of an ideal world, but does not let that awareness exclude and distort. The poem 'Sedge-Warblers' begins with a beauty that makes the speaker dream of 'a time/Long past and irrecoverable' where the clear river would bear 'Another beauty, divine and feminine, / ... whose happy soul sustained / Could love all day, and never hate or tire'. Yet in the next paragraph he speaks of the 'poison' of this dream, and only when rid of it does he see real beauty of the scene, with its harsher notes as well as its 'picturesque' ones, the water that 'curdled in one sheet / The flowers fallen from the chestnuts in the park', and the sedgewarblers' song 'Quick, shrill or grating', lacking 'all words, all melody / All sweetness almost'. In other poems, touches of more exclusively modern life enliven the pastoral with glimpses of other worlds: in 'Bob's Lane' there is the stormcock 'That travellers hear from the slow-climbing train': in 'Tonight', a contemporary love song, the birds are deceived into singing by the electric light (a touch of irony at a kind of benign deception here, as often in Thomas). These things enliven the poems with brief, sometimes wry, reminders that the poet does not inhabit an idyllic pastoral world but modern England. This flexible, alert awareness is also part of a larger attitude of mind in Thomas, that which is recurrently conscious of the mixed nature of life, the necessary coexistence of good and evil (not always in the expected places) beauty and ugliness, happiness and unhappiness: the awareness that 'clouds would have, without / Earth to shadow, far less worth' ('The clouds that are so light') and of 'this moon that leaves me dark within the door'.

A final more contemporary point about Thomas as a writer of the landscape of modern England: the essays on Swansea and Glamorgan and other essays from *The Last Sheaf*, parts of *The Heart of England* and here and there elsewhere, point forward to a generally changing

awareness of English landscape that we can see in the novels of Lawrence and Forster (though the former is more darkly prophetic and the latter more fastidious), in Auden to some extent, in Betjeman and above all in Larkin (where there is the same irony and fondness towards the mingling of urban and rural). But (though I am not speaking of influence) a parallel that strikes me writing in the 1990s is with some of the photography of the last thirty years. The work of Bill Brandt seems to have a similar critical eclecticism, moving from an image of the white line of a path through a field ('The Pilgrim's Way') to scenes from London pubs. Fay Godwin's work is perhaps more exclusively rural; but an image like 'Meall Mòr, Glencoe, from her collection *Our Forbidden Land* (a picture of mountain scenery bisected in the foreground by a black modern A-road with large white directional arrows pointing forward towards the mountains) she captures something of that contrast of natural and man-made, sublime and mundane, wild and measured out, which is both ironic and (whatever her conscious intention) exhilarating.⁷

More recently, the work of John Davies has gone further in giving back to us a quickened sense of what modern English landscape is like. The photographs in his collection *A Green and Pleasant Land* present images of mining country in Glamorgan, Durham, Lancashire, Yorkshire, Sunderland and Tyne and Wear.⁸ They are traditionally unbeautiful scenes, beautifully (it seems the right word) rendered in panoramic, wide-angle vistas from high vantage points in finely developed prints of extraordinary clarity and purity of tone and detail, (with something of the quality of fine engravings), catching the exact textures of sky and grass and brick and stone. As Michael Wood points out in his Introduction the pictures tell a story of the rise and fall of industries, the immense labour of past generations and their 'skill in brick and stone and cast iron'. But there is also an implicit irony as Rob Powell points out in his essay (though it is a quiet and dispassionate and not, I think, a satiric irony) which sets the structure of cloud against that of a housing estate or catches a jet's vapour trail bisecting a flawless sky above rural hills (which are themselves reclaimed slag-heaps). The irony, Powell writes,

is part of a more penetrating one, which involves the setting up of an opposition between the viewer's expectations and the actual subject matter in hand ... We are ... enticed into an anticipation of the beautiful/sublime and simultaneously drawn up short by its inferred location in the very landscape that is meant to be its

antithesis, indeed its destroyer ... these are beautiful pictures which subvert the tradition of beauty, and also, more prosaically but just as importantly, interesting pictures which subvert traditional ideas of what is of interest.

In the best of Thomas's prose too (even more than in his poetry), there is this new subversion of traditional notions about landscape and the proper subjects of aesthetic interest.

III

Together with this kind of revisionist attitude towards landscape in Thomas, goes a similar attitude towards class. Thomas was never a socialist, but his great interest and respect for labouring men and women comes out in much of his writing. In his biography of Richard Jefferies, for example, he devotes considerable space to Jefferies involvement with farm-labourers' Union movement. The working class is never idealized by Thomas — rather he has a kind of amused scepticism about *all* classes and class differences. His upbringing as the son of a staff clerk at the Board of Trade, whose own father had (in the words Thomas records of the Swindon-Welsh friends of his grandfather) 'only been a fitter', gave him a certain insight into middle or lower-middle class respectabilities and class-attitudes. At the same time his attitude towards aristocracy was always sceptical and critical. He wrote of Nietzsche: '*The Genealogy of Morals* is a very great book, but I kick at his too completely aristocratic view'.¹⁰

The scepticism about class differences comes out particularly in essays like 'Mothers and Sons' (in *Rest and Unrest*, 1910) or 'In the Crowd at Goodwood' or 'A Third-Class Carriage'. In 'Mothers and Sons' the narrator (who is almost Thomas, though not quite, as I shall discuss below) visits a Welsh town to see an old friend who is a poet. The journey to the town takes on something of a symbolic quality, tracing a movement of mind akin to that in the poem 'Sedge-warblers' described above. The narrator goes to sleep in the middle of his journey on foot and dreams he is caught up into the ideal world of sky and cloud which he was gazing at before sleep came. But the dream turns to one filled with anger and dismay and a sense of persecution. (The movement is reminiscent of the change of mood in Wordsworth's 'Resolution and Independence'.) He wakes up and sees the real landscape with a crimson sun, grey clouds turning to crimson and gold

and a valley with chimneys 'black and sinister, plumed with smoke as black'.

The earth itself was pleasant to see, especially where the moss was golden in the soft light of the old oak woods, but to my eyes it looked invalid, pathetic, and bereaved as if that glory in the sky had been taken away from it or were indeed the reflection of something now withdrawn into the hollows of the hills. I therefore walked rapidly on towards the village dominated by those chimneys, my destination.

The sequence as a whole enacts the movement from one kind of world to another, from the world of literary dream and ideal nature to the world of industry. The rapid walk, and the more rapid movement of the last sentence, has a feeling of urgency and purpose; and in the syntax, it is almost as if the chimneys themselves are the destination.

In the village (more of a town than a village, like 'Swansea Village') the narrator meets his friend the poet and the latter's mother, Mrs. Morgan. The poet is boyish and rustically dressed and has 'a deep melodious voice that turned prose into epic poetry as he read it': it becomes clear that he is more than a little a kind of *alter ego* for Thomas himself. But 'in spite of the ferns and the fireplace, the room was cold with a moral and spiritual chill.' The narrator and poet talk together about Virgil and Alexander Smith and the taxation of land-values, and complain 'in raptures of regret about the growth of the village'. But 'I was sick of such talk as I was of the poet's apple-green tie'. And the poet's mother takes a different kind of view. She welcomes a new mine, hoping it will bring the men of the village much needed work: 'I am sorry the fern will have to go, but, dear me, the poor of us must have food and bread and a pasty now and then and the rich must have their carriages and money to buy the poetry books, Willy.' And later the narrator chooses to go with Mrs. Morgan to visit her cousins rather than stay with Willy, and notes this as the beginning of the cooling of their friendship. 'The mother was worth twenty of him': and her attitude and what the narrator finds important in this is summed up in a powerful passage:

She welcomed the new without forgetting the old and gave both their due because she felt — she would never have said it, for she would have considered such high thinking arrogant — that the new and the old, the institutions, the reforms, the shops, the drainage system, were froth made by the deep tides of men's inexpressible perverse desires.

The passage strongly suggests that these inexpressible perverse desires are stirring in the narrator and Thomas too. There is a movement away from the Edwardian idyll, or the rustic-suited Georgianism of so many of Thomas's friends and contemporaries, towards a fuller, more vital and less comfortable awareness of modern life.

I have said there is no idealization of the working class: perhaps there is a little in the portrait of Mrs. Morgan's cousins, the Owens, with the stalwart wife, the mild good-natured husband, the nobly beautiful eldest daughter, the youngest boy fierce, 'laughingly truculent' or 'grumbling aimiably over some task' (always aimiably?). But there is something real beneath the idealization even in the lyrical description of the harmony of the family's talk. One feels that Thomas is moved by a real quality and a new perception, though his expression of it is still not wholly free of the poeticism he was beginning to deplore.

There is little direct political implication in this, though much indirect. But one should perhaps be careful not to assimilate Thomas too readily under the banner of any kind of revolution, even a cultural one, if only because he seems as yet uncertain of his final direction as a writer. There is a direct political colouring to the passage, as Stan Smith points out:¹¹

I was disturbed, as Mrs. Morgan could not be, at all this gaiety in the heart of the village darkness, partly because I was unable to see why it should exist, and as foolishly sure there would never be an end to the darkness unless it eclipsed this gaiety in a revolution of some kind — impious thought and unpardonable if it had not been vain.

But it is overstating the case to say that the implication here and in the passage about the family's talk is that 'Any renovation of poetic language requires a cultural revolution.'¹² The poetic renovation may come first (which came first in the case of Chaucer, or Donne, or Wordsworth?) And Thomas's syntax is ambiguous (unless there is a textual error here): it seems to be the 'revolution' that might lead to the darkness eclipsing the gaiety, and if so Thomas seems to be remarkably prophetic of the ambiguity of 20th century revolutions. Thomas's awareness of social division and changing class-awareness is richly suggestive, but it never leads him to take up a distinct political position; nor does it quite ever revolutionize his own style and subject matter. The pointers are there in the even-handed pleasure and criticism of the attitude to the crowd in 'In a Crowd at Goodwood; (1913), and the

subtle comedy of the portrait of the Colonel in 'A Third-Class Carriage'. One of the great losses of Thomas's tragic death in 1917 was the loss of the writer of this newly developing prose and vision.

IV

Perhaps the most complex and interesting element in Thomas's maturest prose is a tendency towards fiction, a use of narrative and of different voices which releases the imagination and leads towards a dialogue of different parts of the self. The tendency can be seen in poems like the dialogues of one in 'The Signpost', 'The Chalk-Pit' and of course 'The Other'; and inclining even more towards dramatization; 'Up in the Wind' and 'New Year's Day' where the different voices run sometimes counter to Thomas's own. And the essays often aspire towards the condition of short stories.

We have already seen how in 'Mothers and Sons' the narrator becomes 'Mr. Phillips', the sceptical plain man as opposed to the faintly mannered poet William Morgan. There is also, right at the beginning of the story, the curious detail of a kind of framing device (though it is not matched at the end), a narrator behind Phillips, who appears only here: 'Years ago, continued my bald fellow-passenger, lifting up his fez, I used to think I had discovered youth.' The device (particularly the fez!) is scarcely explicable, and does not contribute to the rest of the story (especially not to the plain-man persona of Phillips). It is as if Thomas is experimenting with and then abandoning a device from Kipling or Conrad, and a possible unconscious influence of the latter (whom Thomas also met several times)¹³ is oddly reinforced by the phrase 'the heart of the village darkness' in a passage already quoted. Then there is the distinctive voice of Mrs. Morgan, plainspoken but touched with ironies of her own. The essay does not quite become a story since we forget about the 'fellow-traveller', easily read Phillips as a newly emerging Thomas and Morgan as a younger version, and can identify the village as being very close to 'Swansea Village'. But the tendency is there, and would have been so more strongly if Thomas had tried to dramatize as well as describe the play of voices among the Owen family, in which he finds such vitality and harmony.

Other essays, though virtually lacking narrative, show a kind of eye for character and detail which suggest the powers of a potential novelist. 'In the Crowd at Goodwood' is mainly descriptive, but at one point the

writer's eye focuses on a 'beautiful fair tall woman' with her eleven-year-old daughter, watching four minstrels, 'The Bonny Batchelors' in an enclosure of the race grounds, 'smilingly, with her head thrown in a sort of kindly haughtiness back under her yellow parasol'. As the first singer comes forward with his cap, unlike most of the crowd

The beautiful lady did not move away, but even came a little nearer, right to the railings, and smiled and said a few words which gave her happiness, while she and her daughter put something into the college cap. Everyone else on the course as well as in the enclosure had escaped the appeal. Nevertheless, after an interval spent in silence while the bone-man was away, up again went the purple cuffs to the banjos, up went the heels of the cricket shoes, and the tune was repeated. Still the lady smiled, either at the minstrels or at her daughter. Only after the third verse, and without any sign of weariness, but smiling gently and giving a bow, which the bone-man returned with a prodigious courtesy, she moved away with the sunshine.

The lady and her daughter appear, disappear and reappear in the essay in a way that is beautifully judged, and they evoke a kind of interest reminiscent of a scene in a novel of Hardy where one is introduced to a new character. And after the passage just quoted the essay ends with the minstrels, rounding off the detached, quietly amused, sympathetic observation:

When the eldest of them appeared to be about to consult a bookmaker, someone in the crowd flung a jeer: 'Think of your wife and family'; but he joined in silence as before the jauntily bobbing row of the 'Bonny Batchelors' playing the old tune.

There is also here the even-handed amusement at class awareness: the lady suggests a more refined world and a genuine graciousness, but there is also a mild irony towards her (for example in 'a few words which gave her happiness') and a judicious balance in 'gently giving a bow, which the bone-man returned with prodigious courtesy.' The whole essay, like others in this volume, often asks for the kind of attention which we give to a poem by Thomas. They also may recall the poetic touch of sketches by Turgenev, whom Thomas admired.

The comedy of 'A Third Class Carriage' is even more finely judged. The colonel and his pipe are there before us with a vividness not outdone by any novelist, and an insight into character similarly light and penetrating: 'As he filled his pipe he allowed his eyes to alight on it with a kindliness well on this side of discretion, yet unmistakable once

the narrow but subtle range of his emotion displays had been gauged.' The pipe itself is at once expertly and exquisitely relished (Thomas himself has a fine looking pipe in a photograph of him with his baby son on his lap in 1900)¹⁴ and its fetishistic value subtly placed. The whole portrait of the very English type of the colonel, deeply self-satisfied, conventional, and oblivious to the others in the carriage, says as much as pages of sociological analysis. And the colonel's acute embarrassment at the child, his 'indescribable joyless gesture' evokes a whole aetiology of class, convention and the loss of innocence.

Another brief piece, 'The Listener' is about the practice of an author reading aloud to a group of friends, and targets with extraordinary comedy a whole literary world and the late Victorian/Edwardian convention and pose of the 'great writer' of the kind exposed by Jean-Paul Sartre in *Les Mots*. The piece is doubtless ironic partly at Thomas's own expense, and written in 1914 it also begins by setting the practice of literary readings against people reading aloud to each other from newspapers, about the war, where 'the reader and his merits were lost in the greatness of his message.'

It is a very different thing to sit opposite a man reading his own work. The brave, the fair, hardly know how to use their courage in such a posture. After a few ill-chosen words of compliment and gratitude they run away out to the trees or the streets and hope not to live to fight another day.

Even here a deeper note than the comedy of social embarrassment is struck, with the light but serious irony of the hint of a deeper debilitation caused by the social insincerity. We feel we are getting a glimpse of an Edwardian malaise of gentility which the Great War may have partly cured (or replaced by other diseases); but of course the predicament is perennial, as any modern attender of poetry readings or informal academic papers will know. At any rate who can fail to recognize the accuracy of this account of the authors' inevitable 'callosity' and loss of innocence, and of the terrible efforts of the listeners?

That they the authors are taken in by 'I like that awfully' or 'I do like that', which they slowly and not painlessly extract from us, sometimes with a kind of sham cheery accent as of a sleepy man answering the call to get up, — this is incredible.

'The Listener' and several other pieces are essays in something like the Lamb tradition but without the preciousness, and it makes one wonder if

the essay genre is not due for a revival. But much of the effort, again, comes from a writer with a novelistic eye for detail and drama.

Two particularly fine fictional achievements — autobiography transmuted into fiction — are the short stories ‘Hawthornden’ and ‘The Attempt’. Both are tragic and comic at once, but the former is closer to comedy and the latter to tragedy. ‘Hawthornden’ is a deeply, at times almost hilariously funny portrait of a persona of Thomas himself which goes to the heart of Thomas’s own self-irony and self-dissatisfaction. He is a would-be poet (others, who do not know him, see him as an eccentric, even a genius) trapped in his own conventionality (there are shades of Turgenev’s superfluous man here, a figure ubiquitous, as Stan Smith points out, in Thomas’s work). He tries to talk with tramps:

He dressed negligently and carried a crooked stick, and when he complained of his failure to get at the heart of the wayfaring man, his wife flattered him by saying that anyone could see what he really was, whatever his disguise; he liked the flattery and remained discontented.

He thinks of himself as a wanderer and ‘buys many maps, special walking clothes and boots, compact outfits, several kinds of knapsack, rucksacks, satchels, uncounted walking sticks.’ But however far he wanders he is ‘always home to tea.’ This is not quite Thomas; Hawthornden could not have written the story and there is one significant difference from Thomas: Hawthornden despises the critical spirit. But there are many parallels, the ambition for distinction, the domestic habituation and imprisonment, the tendency to strike a pose, the melancholy, the distraction by trivia. In this way he is a kind of tweed-suited, Georgian Prufrock. Like Eliot, Thomas escapes the predicament by parodying it. This too shows a great potential for development, tragically destroyed by Thomas’s early death.

‘The Attempt’ is more sombre but equally incisive. It seems that it exactly reflects an incident in Thomas’s own life, an attempt at suicide not carried through. It is extraordinarily convincing psychologically. It parallels very closely Helen Thomas’s account of the same incident in her autobiography, *World Without End* (published forty-five years later in 1956), so much so that one feels that the strong structure of Thomas’s story, particularly its ending, must have shaped his wife’s narration. Indeed, her moving account, in its warmth and helpless sympathy, complements exactly the cold detachment of Thomas’s, the detached ‘coldness’ of the artist, as Hawthorne called it, which enabled him to

master and to render his experience, seeing through his own self-deceptions. By creating a persona, he sees through his own mask

He opened the door. The table was spread for tea. His wife, divining all, said:

'Shall I make tea?'

'Please,' he said, thinking himself impenetrably masked.

(*'The Attempt'* *Light and Twilight*, 1911)

'Hello,' I called, though the word came out like a croak. He was safe. When I could control my voice and face I went to the study. He was taking off his shoes by the fire, and I saw they were coated with mud and leaves. He did not look up.

'Shall I make tea?' I said.

'Please,' he answered, and in his voice I was aware of all that he had suffered and overcome, and all that he asked of me.

(*World Without End*, 1956)

The longer and more completely fictional stories here, 'The First of Spring', 'Sunday Afternoon' and 'Great Possessions' do not perhaps achieve the perfect touch and shaping of the shorter pieces like 'The Attempt', 'Hawthornden' and 'A Third Class Carriage'. But they show Thomas experimenting more widely with the new genre, developing in a new direction which one cannot help but feel might have born richer fruit had time been given. 'The First of Spring' is a story of the making of a young old maid, one of Shakespeare's 'pale primroses/Who die unmarried ere they can behold/Bright Phoebus in his strength'. Perhaps the tale is a little too etiolated itself, although the irony of the paternal decisiveness at the end is nicely done. 'Sunday Afternoon' is a sharp portrait of a family group with a dreamy child and a despotically religious grandmother. Thomas said of the collection of stories in which these (with 'Mothers and Sons') appear: 'Most are unfit for the papers & magazines by being too unpleasant, or too fanciful, or too quiet.' The best are perhaps the 'unpleasant' ones: we get a sense of what Thomas is aiming at from a remark made later in the same year (1909): 'Another anthology by E.V. Lucas. I get sick of geniality & odd charming characters all extracted from their context as if you should spread jam over toffee & eat it with honey.'¹⁵

One other genre, which might be called that of parable, should also be included in any reconsideration of what is most modern in Thomas's prose. In *Four-and-Twenty Blackbirds* where Thomas invents little tales as supposed origins of English proverbs. 'People Who Live In Glass Houses Shouldn't Throw Stones' can be given a 'class' interpretation

(Archie lives in 'a big, dark house', and dreams of living in a palace), but like any good parable it cannot be circumscribed to one meaning. Another interpretation is more psychological and relates to Thomas's sense of the precariousness of his life and social isolation, and his dangerous dream of perfection. It is clearly a cousin of the fine epigrammatic poem 'I Built Myself a House of Glass' which begins:

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

'East West Home Is Best' is a charming, playful treatment of the theme of home and homelessness which continually preoccupied Thomas. A mariner is marooned on a desert island and carves on the walls of his hut "East, west, home's best" while he sings "we're bound for the Rio Grande".

Whether he meant that the hut, though a poor one in the forest in a foreign land, was his home and was better than all the rest of the forest; or whether he was thinking of the cottage looking over the water at Fowey, they did not know. Nor perhaps did Stephen Trelawny know; for he was a cheerful man who loved not only Fowey, but Ormuz and India also, and the unknown forest of apes and peacocks.

Thomas has three poems entitled 'Home' (one of them "'Home'" — the word), and the parable has something in it particularly of the first and second, but rendered more lightly and humorously — the feelings of estrangement from home, uncertainty where home *is*, and the blessed moments when it may suddenly seem to be here, now. There is much in Thomas of Kafka's beautiful aphorism: 'This feeling: "here I shall not anchor" — and instantly to feel the billowing, supporting swell around me!'¹⁷

V

Thomas's prose on the eve of the Great War is also marked by the ambiguous notes of his modernity. Thomas's poems on the war seem to me among the finest of the period, and their quiet intensity of regret and wonder, their scrupulous rendering of 'rumours of the war remote'

prompt thought and feeling more than many better-known and more strident war-poems. The prose pieces from *The Last Sheaf* constitute a prolonged and varied meditation on what love of country means and what it is worth. In 'England' he talks to a friend (perhaps a projection of another alter ego), asking him, though not in so many words, why he loves his country. The friend's first reponse is 'What a quaint idea is this? Reasons why I love England? do I love England? If I *prefer* England I expect it is merely that I am accustomed to it ...' But in the course of his reply his discomfort with the phrase does not preclude a number of reasons adding up to a bond of feeling: the sensations associated with England's scenery and people, a slightly ironically confessed 'love of myself', a self-solicitude. This friend is contemptuous of the prosperous middle-aged man bullying a booking-clerk over the lateness of the train probably caused by troop and ammunition transport, while at the same time possessing an 'ignorant, blatant jingoism' and contempt of England's enemies; but he also has some quaint, though milder, prejudices of his own, like his being shocked by foreigners' table manners and (though not a squeamish man) condemning the French use of a gross word (he doesn't say what it is) as a technical term for a machine. Thomas is not critical of these latter points commenting simply 'he prefers English and English ways when it comes to a comparison.' In the end for Thomas, a 'love of England' is made up of a sense of liberty ('in spite of gamekeepers') of security, and a host of local, literary and historical associations: the 'stunted hawthorne' on the site of the battle of Ashdown, the writings of Langland and Walton, both 'half-Londoner, half countryman'. And he ends with an idyllic but real scene from *The Compleat Angler*, and the sense that

all ideas of England are developed, spun out, from such a centre into something large or infinite, solid or aery, according to each man's nature and capacity; that England is a system of vast circumferences circling around the minute neighbouring points of home.

One might stress here the act of creation involved in this sense of England: neither the country nor the idea is given, but has to be made or earned. And this would seem to be a matter for optimism rather than fears about the workings of 'ideology': if the idea of England, and indeed the place itself is, in modern parlance, 'constructed' rather than given, it becomes more responsive to aspirations, able to change with

those rather than be a confining fixed ideal.

In an age like our own when the whole idea of 'England' and 'love of country' is subject to more critical scrutiny than perhaps ever before, Thomas's essays are worth pondering as deeply felt and critical explorations of the idea. It is notable for instance that Thomas has no unease about including a quotation from Giraldus Cambrensis about his birthplace in Pembroke: the separate identity of Wales is acknowledged but not raised to an anxious political issue (just as in the poem 'The Combe' the badger can be described as 'That most ancient Briton of English beasts', allowing for the co-existence of different identities). The underlying point is, surely, that people do love 'home' — or an idea of home which they may or may not realize into substance, (as Thomas himself does only fleetingly), and that locality and country are only the necessary expansions of and conditions for this. 'The common man,' says Thomas, meaning everybody 'is like a maggot snug in the core of an apple: without apples there are no cores he knew well, nor cores without apples'. The mild irony of this does not 'undermine' the idea of the necessity of locality and country but is merely an amused, deprecatory gesture, an avoidance of heroics customary in Thomas.

In 'Tipperary' and 'It's a Long, Long Way' Thomas travels round the country like a reporter, noting the reactions of ordinary people to the war. There are rich glimpses here for the social historian, like the exchange between the recruit and an old artilleryman at the end of the latter essay, with its play of attitudes to country, class and state legislation:

'We're not fighting for Lord Kitchener,' the artilleryman said slowly.

'We're not fighting for King George. We're fighting for our country.'

'Quite right,' said somebody.

'Who is Lord Kitchener?' asked the artilleryman, swelling.

'He's a good man,' retorted the recruit.

'So he is,' the other had to say, 'but why does he stop a man from having a pint of beer?'

'It's the twenty-fifth pint he's against.'

There are also some interesting general observations (like the fact that townspeople were more bellicose and anti-German than country people) and some novelistic insights into the workings of ordinary people's minds — like the woman in Brecon who at first believes propaganda about the German cutting off conquered people's hands, and then, prompted to think, reflecting 'Now, last summer, I had some Germans in

this house, and they were nice, polite people, you couldn't wish for better.' (Thomas comments 'She was trying hard to retain the idea that there were Germans and Germans'). In these pieces, Thomas is even something like a modern documentarist, a Studs Terkel, letting different voices come through.

Finally, in 'This England', Thomas discovers his own deepest commitment to his country, but there is no easy 'patriotic' moral. He records a period spent living in 'a part of the country I had never known before, and I had no connections with ...'. This puts the feeling for place somehow on a deeper level than that of merely personal or domestic associations. It is partly the name itself, Hereford, which, as so often with names in Thomas (Adlestrop, Bob's Lane) seems to give it its distinct meaning: 'It stood out from among country names as the most delicately rustic of them all, with a touch of nobility given it long ago, I think, by Shakespeare's "Harry of Hereford, Lancaster, and Derby"'. Names are important for Thomas because they embody that human intervention and creation which place alone does not have. The same interaction or joint creation of man and nature, and also community and solitude, is here in the pair of Lombardy poplars encountered on the walks taken with a friend (in life Robert Frost) in the circle of country near their two houses, in whose presence they encountered 'austere inhuman solitude as a luxury. Yet a man had planted the trees fifty or sixty years back.'

The essay records the same period and set of experiences as the poem 'The sun used to shine'. The poem, finely and appropriately for its genre, ends with a sense of abstraction from the particular (those walks in summer weather and the moonlit night that makes him think of the soldiers in France):

Everything
To faintness like those rumours fades —
Like the brook's water glittering

Under the moonlight — like those walks
Now — like us two that took them, and
The fallen apples, all the talks
And silences — like memory's sand

When the tide covers it late or soon
And other men through other flowers
In those fields under the same moon
Go talking and have easy hours.

But the essay ends with the thought that comes to him immediately after seeing the moon and thinking of it shining on the soldiers east of the Meuse, a present and more urgent commitment:

All I can tell is, it seemed to me that either I had never loved England, or I had loved it foolishly, aesthetically, like a slave, not having realized that it was not mine unless I were willing and prepared to die rather than leave it as Belgian women and old men and children had left their country. Something I had omitted. Something I felt had to be done before I could look again composedly at English landscape, at the elms and poplars about the houses, at the purple-headed wood betony with two pairs of dark leaves on a stiff stem, who stood sentinel among the grasses or bracken by hedge-side or wood's edge. What he stood sentinel for I did not know, any more than what I had got to do.

A true love of landscape and country demands in the end this human and social commitment and solidarity. But perhaps the last sentence is the most important. A conventionally patriotic writer would have ended with talk of fighting and dying. But Thomas ends with ignorance — of the reason for the wood-betony's stirring sentinelship and of his own decisions and action: they had in the end to be taken (as they were when Thomas enlisted in July 1915, some eleven months after the experiences recorded in the essay), not talked about. It is Thomas's final decision, action and death at Arras that rounds off this essay, rather as in the second poem entitled 'Home' 'The sound of sawing rounded all / That silence said.'

VI

Finally, the notion of 'modern life' needs some discussion. Factories and chimneys and aeroplanes are more exclusively 'modern' than betonies, combs and thrushes, but the latter are no less a part of modern English life and landscape: they are merely less often seen or noticed, or they suffer an eclipse when writers or photographers or film-makers aim at the merely contemporary. We are quickened by the fast pace of city life and the raw energy of masses of people thrown together, or else we are wearied and deadened by them. We are also quickened by the sound of a blackbird's song on a spring evening, or deadened by the monotony of unpeopled woods and fields and ready to say with Mrs. Millamant in *The Way of the World*: 'I nauseate walking; 'tis a country diversion, I loathe the country'. Pure pastoral would be as impossible to live in as pure urbanity, and country drudgery is as dreary as city drudgery. The

country and the city represent the two poles of men and women's life in society, the pole of simplicity and naturalness and the pole of artifice and civilization. A writer who commands our broadcast sympathies may focus on one more than the other but he will in some way move between both, just as he will move between solitude and society. We have come to give the term 'modern', as a kind of evaluation, to those writers who seem to catch the accent of the age, the tang of the moment, in whatever setting: and this cannot be done without the element of surprise, surprise in style and in subject matter. 'Modern' life, and ancient or perennial life, are to be found in the oddest places, separate or mingled. And it is usually the writer who can respond to the promptings of the first who can also find what is alive in the second.

Perhaps I might close with an anecdote. It happened in 1989 but might well have happened, *mutatis mutandis*, in 1909, and it took place in the South Country, though the tramp was not an umbrella-man.¹⁸

The writer of the present essay was walking on the Pilgrims' Way between Alton and Farnham and then Farnham and Guildford on a hot day in early April. The Pilgrims' Way, or what the experts think is the line of such, is at this point not rich in old association, being mainly the A31 main road, and hot and weary to the feet and head and back. But passing a wooden bus shelter in a lay-by, I saw an old tramp sitting on the wooden bench, mending his bicycle. He greeted me with a cheery remark and a word about the weather. A mile further on he passed me on his bicycle, heavily laden with rucksack and kettle and overcoat and other less determinate objects; as fast, loud, cars roared past, glittering metal. 'You need one of these' he shouted, indicating his bike. 'There's one in the ditch there, could be done up.' 'No thanks, I prefer to walk.' He grinned and pedalled on. I met him again before Farnham, sitting just inside a gate into a field. 'Over there,' he said, pointing over the fields, 'you'll find a quieter road to Farnham. Used to go that way myself. Cup of tea?' He held up an enamel mug that had once been white but was now grey, and encrusted inside — so it seemed — with green mould. I thanked him and declined and set off again. The other side of Farnham he passed me again and stopped for the hill. 'Difficult cycling on the Hog's Back,' he said, 'always windy, and a long slow hill.' I asked him where he was heading for. 'Oh, Leatherhead,' he said, 'Croydon ...' 'Live up there?' I asked. 'In the winter, sometimes,' he said. 'No, I'll get some gardening up there....But the place to go,' he

said after a while, is S — in Dorset. That's where you want to go. They've got a monastery there; the monks'll always give you a bed. Marvellous place Got everything there,' he added, 'Snooker, videos marvellous place.' He sat down on another bench of the 'rustic' picnic variety, kindly provided by the local council, and started to tinker with his bike again. I bade him good-bye and set off again, with aching feet, and wishing the Hog's Back wasn't a long slow hill, and windy. 'You want to go to S —', he shouted after me, 'Everything there. And if you're ever up near Berwick-on-Tweed ...' But I was getting out of earshot. I soon gave up on the Hog's Back, and took the bus almost to Compton, where I failed to find a bed-and-breakfast for the night. Not long after it started to snow. I caught the bus to Guildford and the train to London and Canterbury.

Notes

¹These are: 'Mothers and Sons', 'Sunday Afternoon', 'The First of Spring' (first published in *Rest and Unrest*, London, 1910); 'Hawthornden' and 'The Attempt' (first published in *Light and Twilight*, London, 1911); 'In the Crowd at Goodwood', 'Tipperary', 'A Third-Class Carriage' and 'The Pilgrim' (pieces written between January 1913 and April 1915, and first published posthumously in *The Last Sheaf*, (London, 1928).

²Edward Thomas, *Wales*, Oxford University Press, 1983 (first published 1905); *The South Country*, Everyman, 1984, (first published 1909); *Edward Thomas on the Countryside*, ed. Roland Gant, Faber, 1977; *A Language Not to be Betrayed*, ed. Edna Longley, Carcanet, 1981; *Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. David Wright, Penguin, 1981.

³Hugh Underhill, 'Edward Thomas: A Special Case?' (review of Wright), *Meridian*, 1982, p. 28.

⁴See Wordsworth's letter to John Wilson, 1802.

⁵*Wales*, OUP, 1983, pp. 28-9 (first published 1905).

⁶R. George Thomas, *Edward Thomas: a Portrait*, Oxford, 1985, p. 122. Professor Thomas also quotes Thomas writing to his literary agent in 1913: 'What about ... sending me to a Welsh coalfield or an English pottery district and letting me suffer to the tune of 80,000 words? That I should in some ways very much like to do. You once spoke of Tonypanyd' (a reference to the long coal strike in the Rhondda in 1910), (p. 182). It seems that Thomas's interests were turning more and more to urban subjects.

⁷Fay Godwin, *Our Forbidden Land*, Cape, London, 1990.

⁸John Davies, *A Green and Pleasant Land*, Cornerhouse Publications, Manchester, 1987.

⁹*Richard Jefferies*, Faber, London, 1978 (first published 1909), Chapter V.

¹⁰Letter to Gordon Bottomley, 15 January, 1908 (*Letters to Gordon Bottomley*, ed. R. George Thomas, OUP, London, 1968, p. 154).

¹¹Stan Smith, *Edward Thomas*, Faber, London, 1986. I am indebted to Smith's book for prompting some of the selections in this edition and lines of enquiry in this introduction, as well as some disagreements.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 183.

¹³See *Letters to Gordon Bottomley*, op. cit., especially pp. 205-7. Thomas particularly admired Conrad's *Youth* (p. 92).

¹⁴In *Edward Thomas: a Portrait*, op. cit., facing p. 118.

¹⁵*Rest and Unrest*, London, 1911. See *Letters to Gordon Bottomley*, p. 178 (13 February, 1909).

¹⁶*Letters to Gordon Bottomley*, p. 195 (12 October 1909).

¹⁷Franz Kafka, *Wedding Preparations in the Country*, translated by Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins, Secker and Warburg, London, 1973 (first published 1954), p. 46.

¹⁸See *The South Country* (Everyman, 1984) pp. 194-220; and *Selected Prose and Poems*, ed. D. Wright, Penguin Books, 1981, pp. 74-79.