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Edward Thomas: Time and Modern Sensibility

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Edward Thomas lived from 1878 to 1917. He is generally Considered as a member of the generation of "Georgian Poets". His poetry deals with the themes of nature, in which he searches for a Golden Age of happiness and perfection; love, which all too often remains unfulfilled; and war, which is experienced as a constant threat. Several contemporary critics have pointed out that there is a line of continuity either in theme or style running from Thomas Hardy, over Edward Thomas, to one of today's most outstanding British poets, Philip Larkin; therefore, I have included in this essay a few comparisons which link Edward Thomas with Hardy and Larkin.

In his *New Bearings in English Poetry*, F. R. Leavis stated that, as opposed to Thomas Hardy's Victorian solidity, Edward Thomas records the 'modern disintegration, the sense of directionlessness'.¹⁾ To refer to Thomas's representative 'modern sensibility', Leavis quoted a passage from "The Glory" — 'How dreary-swift, with naught to travel to / Is Time'.²⁾ If we wish to discuss Thomas's modernity, however, we must look not only at his awareness of time passing, but also at his consciousness of the continuity of the past into the present; since the past is never simply "past", but remains present, the future already being contained in the present.

Since the comfortable concept of time which was dominant before the nineteenth century was completely upset by revolutionary geological and astronomical discoveries, which took place at the turn of the century, people became more concerned with private time in order to define the nature of subjective existence. In 1903 Henri Bergson published *An Introduction to Metaphysics* and presented the idea that absolute knowledge comes only from intuition:

'There is one reality, at least, which we all seize from within, by

intuition and not by simple analysis. It is our personality in its flowing through time — our self which endures’.

The influence, on imaginative writing, of Bergson’s theory of capturing the real nature of time by intuition was most important in the first decade of the twentieth century. There appeared a number of novelists and poets who raised

‘the tormenting question of how to recapture the immediacy of past experience in language that in ordinary usage could produce no more than the fragmentized reality of an existence that the logical memory had already stored away in a neat compartment’.³⁾

In contrast with “time” which conventionally meant only a succession of discrete units of moments or a series of events, the new vision to search for what abides and endures through time brought in a new awareness of past, history and memory. The most famous statement of the matter is T. S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” of 1919. Poets must have ‘historical sense’, which, Eliot said, ‘involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence’.

By the concept of the interpenetration of the past to the present, by the mythical method of creating a timeless point in time, Eliot achieved a new mental construction of religious faith as well as new theories and discoveries of time, which undermined the romantic concept of time that only searched for ecstatic joy in a timeless moment in order to escape from time. What is emphasised by Eliot is not only the continuation of the past into the present but also the evaluation of the present by the past.

It must be admitted that reading Edward Thomas often reminds us of Romantic poets, especially Keats. Both poets have in common a devoted search for Beauty, a yearning for escape from time, a tendency to look for an eternal moment in the spiritual, intensified, intimate intercourse with nature. But compared with the eloquent, rich expressions about the ecstatic moment of the romantic poets, what we read in Thomas’s poetry is a carefully woven representation of his inner struggle to be reconciled with time, not simply escaping from it, as well as a characteristic sensitive, delicate, sometimes scrupulous attitude towards putting his experience in words.

Marrie A. Quinn, in her essay "The Personal Past in the Poetry of Thomas Hardy and Edward Thomas", says that Thomas 'looks to the present and future as much as to the past', comparing Thomas's attitude with Hardy's strong attachment to his past.⁴⁾ It seems more appropriate to say that Thomas is very much concerned with the tense moment which transcends the distinction between past, present and future, the moment when the three aspects of time melt, even briefly, into one dynamic organic whole.

What Thomas did in his poetry was not merely to lament over the pastness of the past, but also to penetrate into the mythical region of time in order to recapture the 'immediacy of past experience' in its recovery in the present moment. Although compared with those writers who distinctly raised a 'revolt against time',⁵⁾ Edward Thomas fought a rather personal, anonymous battle against it, the awareness of the mysterious operation of the past upon the present marks his work as essentially representative of modern times.

"The Bridge", for example, offers us a striking metaphor for the concept of "time". The poet's consciousness stands outside of time, as if the poet were totally isolated from it, but at the same time he is immersed in a brief, tense communion with the flow of time:

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

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

No traveller has rest more blest
Than this moment brief between
Two lives, when the Night's first lights

And shades hide what has never been,
 Things goodlier, lovelier, dearer, than will be or have been.

The bridge is a symbol of the present moment precariously poised between the two lives, the past and the future. The river seems to be a river of oblivion, which drowns memories, desires in its dark stream, but it is also 'lit' by some light of revelation. The fragments of memories do not have any meaning: 'All are behind' and 'no more ... Than a dream'. But in the fusion of the three aspects of time represented by the movement of the river, Thomas's consciousness is tuned to the Truth revealed in the river's organic movement.

Quinn has stated that Thomas makes a 'consecration' of 'a present divorced from the past and future' in the poem, comparing the poem with Hardy's 'impregnation of the present with the past'.⁶⁾ But it is a condition of duration rather than divination which the movement of the river suggests. In the moment when all past, present, future become intertwined, Thomas assumes the power of a clairvoyant. All his senses become more acute than usual and he feels what is hidden in the darkness. The ambiguous lines 'the Night's first *lights* / And shades *hide* what has never been' (Italics mine) convey the subtlety of the enigmatic moment when the hidden value of time and life is perceived only in the darkness. Here is described the higher reality Thomas wanted to search for: the past is not only past, the future is not only coming time: they are all present in the present moment, enhancing it into a timeless moment.

Thomas is usually believed to be obsessed with past and memory. But it is interesting to notice that for him the past is nothing but a disembodied, unreal, dead land, as is described in "Parting":

The Past is a strange land, most strange,
 Wind blows not there, nor does rain fall:
 If they do, they cannot hurt at all.
 Men of all kinds as equals range

The soundless fields and streets of it.

In Thomas's poetry, wind and rain are representative of the triumphant,

eternal aspect of nature, the organic agency which awakens the poet to the presentness of the present moment and its value in the discourse of time. The Past, the poet says, lacks wind and rain and is 'in shadow-land a shade'. It offers only a deceptive relief, a 'kind of bliss':

For there spiritualized it lay
In the perpetual yesterday
That naught can stir or stain, like this.

The 'spiritualization' of the past, the poet's attitude of looking at it as something detached from the present, might remind us of "Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album" by Philip Larkin, which ends as follows:

In short, a past that no one now can share,
No matter whose your future; calm and dry,
It holds you like a heaven, and you lie
Unvariably lovely there,
Smaller and clearer as the years go by.

Here Larkin also looks at the past as something unrecoverable, something which is beyond reach, 'calm and dry'. Although the two poets seem to share a sense of isolation from the past, the difference between them is that in Larkin's poem the pastness of the past is more valued because of the unredeemed gap between the past and the present consciousness of the poet, whereas in Thomas's, the present moment is more important, so those terms like 'spiritualized' or 'perpetual' paradoxically indicate the unrealness and deadness of the past.

As Thomas confessed that he was not interested in history, which he called a mere 'accumulation of information', a 'mass of insignificant names',⁷⁾ he did not show any interest in the past as a mere fact. The past is a heap of forgotten names and facts which have nothing to do with his present moment, and he confesses

There are so many things I have forgot,
That once were much to me, or that were not,
All lost, as is a childless woman's child
And its child's children, in the undefiled

Abyss of what can never be again.

(“The Word”)

These distorted expressions, like ‘as is a childless woman’s child’, show us how confusingly memories are lost. The double, or even triple, negative logic and the image of ‘the children of the child of childless woman’ give us the impression that Thomas’s memories are in such an ‘undefiled abyss’ that it seems as if nothing had ever happened. He has even forgotten that he has forgotten some things.

Facts recorded by names ‘of the mighty men / That fought and lost or won in the old wars, / Of kings and fiends and gods, and most of the stars’ do not come back to Thomas’s mind. Yet, Thomas says, ‘lesser things there are, remembered yet’, things which are personal and domestic, but have an important meaning from the existential point of view. ‘One name’ he has not forgotten.

In normal usage, a ‘name’ identifies what things are. But Thomas uses the word in the poem as a symbol of what is indefinable, a ‘pure thrush word’ which means the unchangeable, eternal element of nature beyond time.

What Thomas valued most were those moments which spontaneously emerge from the dark abyss of oblivion. As F. R. Leavis says, making a comparison with Mr. Blunden’s ‘composed’ poetry, Thomas’s poetry seems to just ‘happen’:⁸⁾ some of Thomas’s memories come back arbitrarily and in a striking way when Thomas is in a moment of relaxed, undirected consciousness. It is characteristic of Thomas that when he tries to remember what must be remembered, the recall is in vain. The more he tries, the more impenetrable, impassable the past becomes. What Thomas was trying to find and to touch seems very subtle and elusive and he could only feel it with his intuition, because it would disappear ‘if looked at directly’.

To Thomas memory is not something to be recalled: what should be, felt is the immediacy of memory by which the present moment is extended into a longer perspective in time. Without being expected, the moment of ecstasy happens involuntarily. It is remarkable that the moment is set off by scents of nature or songs of birds. Since birds’ song

functions in Thomas's poetry almost as an alternative, purer kind of language, the scents of nature not only evoke past memories but also suggestively hint at the continuity of time, something unchangeable beyond the human civilization.

"Digging" is a simple poem which starts with a clear statement: 'Today I think / Only with scents'. The scents of dead leaves, bracken, wild carrot's seed, etc. turn 'the dead' into immortals, 'the waste' becomes something valuable, and fear turns into hope. The scents of nature have the power to confuse the ordinary mental condition, and the poet's whole existence is in harmony with the eternal tenderness and reliability of the ancient earth.

As the scent of the earth transforms the dead to immortals, it immediately evokes a memory which, otherwise, is forgotten, and Thomas re-experiences it vividly and sensuously. "Old Man" is a good example which shows how scents function in the poet's mind and dig up lost memories to the surface of the poet's consciousness, however obscure they may still be. The poem starts with the poet's typical problem of identifying things:

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.

Names do not convey what the thing is. They not only are simple decorations, but they also deceive us, perplexing the identity of the things themselves. Those two different names, 'Old Man' and 'Lad's-love' certainly give totally different impressions. Although they refer to the thing, what is most important does not cling to the name. The truth beneath it can be hinted only by the scent.

In the poem the passage of time is subtly and variously suggested, by the 'child and the grown-up' in the poem and the two names of the plant.

Not only the passage of time, but also the past, present and future coexist in the images of the child and the poet. The child who 'plucks a feather from the door-side bush / Whenever she goes in or out of the house', or who snips 'the tips' and shrivells 'the shreds at last on to the path, perhaps / Thinking, perhaps of nothing, till she sniffs / Her fingers and runs off', suggests what the 'I' in the poem was like in his past. The man himself who cannot recall 'where first I met the bitter scent' and who 'cannot like the scent, / Yet I would rather give up others more sweet, / With no meaning, than this one' predicts what the child would be like in future.

We cannot fail to be struck by the emptiness of what is remembered in the poet's mind after all the struggle and effort to capture something evoked by the scent of the plant: 'No garden', 'no path, no hoar-green bush', 'no child' 'Neither father nor mother, nor any playmates; only an avenue, dark, nameless, without end'. The emptiness of his memory somehow resembles what Larkin sees in the process of time in his poem "I Remember, I Remember".

What makes Thomas different, however, is his honest struggle to grasp what is suggested by the scent. He does not show any cynical acceptance of the fact like Larkin who says 'nothing, like something, happens anywhere'. Even though Thomas cannot see any clear, concrete images of the past, he certainly is touching a mythical truth, the feeling of continuity of the past to the present and also to the future. As he becomes attuned to the perplexing meaning of the biological attributes of the plants, the poet's existence is also sliding into the past and the future as well, as is suggested by the present progressive form in the lines below:

I have mislaid the key. I sniff the spray
And think of nothing; I see and I hear nothing;
Yet seem, too, to be listening, lying in wait
For what I should, yet never can, remember:

In order to touch the elusive meaning of memory, Thomas needs to empty himself. As long as he feels that he is remembering, he cannot be liberated from the tie with time. 'Remembering' is a wrong key. He therefore thinks of 'nothing', denies all his senses. In the selfless 'waiting'

for what he should remember, he paradoxically gains what he searched for. He is at once in the darkness of oblivion and the illumined moment of revelation.

The way the past slides into the present is always poignant in Thomas's poetry. The moment is precarious and unstable, because it is captured only in the high tension between the ideal and the reality, the eternal and the transient. But because of the precariousness and the intangibility, the moment, once touched, shows a mythical beauty, briefly melting all concepts of time, giving the poet a feeling of everlasting restfulness.

In "It Rains", for example, the atmosphere is depicted at once tender, fragile, and tense, like 'the great diamonds of rain on the grassblades'.⁹⁾ The past is intertwined with the present in the restoring power of rain. In the suspended stillness, the poet feels the past stealing into the present in a ghostly form:

... .. When I turn away, on its fine stalk
Twilight has fined to naught, the parsley flower
Figures, suspended still and ghostly white,
The past hovering as it revisits the light.

The parsley flower suspended in the air, white on unseen stalks, represents all the undescrivable old dread, formless awe and fascination of the unknown world behind reality. The word 'fine' is used twice in an effective way to generate the subtleness of the atmosphere in which both stalks and twilight are melted into one unity of darkness. It is a segment of the past time which comes back to the poet's mind and he re-experiences it in a most sensuous, immediate way. In "Celandine", the ghost assumes a more concrete image. This poem, with its spectre of a dead woman, may be compared with Hardy's "The Voice". In both of them the poets see the past memory coming back in a shape of a woman.

In Hardy's "The Voice", the distance between the poet's consciousness and what is recalled is larger than in "Celandine". The scene Hardy is recalling is 40 years ago. Inevitably, therefore, he becomes retrospective and he has to go through a series of adjustments, asking himself, 'Can it be you that I hear?' and 'Or is it only the breeze?'. In "Celandine", Thomas

immediately sees the woman standing up 'like a flame, / A living thing' from the beginning. The way the woman appears in the scene in Thomas's poem is more sudden and more spontaneous. Thomas is convinced that 'now immediately / For a short swift eternity back she came'.

Both poems share the feeling that what is recalled is more real and more valuable than the present. In "The Voice", the happy, youthful colour of 'the original air-blue gown' illumines the desolate, autumnal present scene. In "Celandine", too, the colour of the brightest bloom of celandine with the image of the woman brightens up the wintery hue of the scene. The happy past, wistful hope and illusion are introduced into the gloomy, depressive present moment, overwhelming it.

The difference between the two poems lies in their final stanzas. In "The Voice", the distance which existed between the woman and the poet disappears and there is a strange shift between the unreal and the real; the poet becomes like a ghost, the woman's voice becomes more real:

Thus I, faltering forward,
Leaves around me falling,
Wind oozing thin through the thorn from norward,
And the woman calling.

"Celandine" also ends with disillusion:

But this was a dream: the flowers were not true,
Until I stopped to pluck from the grass there
One of five petals and I smelt the juice
Which made me sigh, remembering she was no more,
Gone like a never perfectly recalled air.

The elevated feeling of trance lasted only for a fraction of a moment. She is no more, 'gone like a never perfectly recalled air'. Compared with Hardy's last line which shows us the real existence of the woman (even if it still is Hardy's illusion), the ending of Thomas's poem indicates that Thomas feels the emptiness of the present more keenly after the vision is gone. In the same way, as Thomas rejected the romantic experience of timeless moment as a dream in "Sedge-Warblers", here he also checks himself from being 'poisoned' with the dreamlike trance he just found

himself immersed in.

An attitude of caution preventing complete devotion to singing the joys of ecstatic moments is characteristic of Thomas. He did perfectly recall the woman and grasped the moment 'in and out of time', but he sensibly knows that she came back only for 'short swift eternity'. The past comes back to the present, sliding into it spontaneously, transmuting it into a higher reality, but at the same time Thomas keenly suspects that he cannot possess the timeless moment, and that he cannot deny the inescapability of time.

The notion of 'never perfectly recalled air', in other words, of what is never completely possessed, was what Thomas can never be blind to in his experience with time. Hardy mostly retreats to his own happy memories for ease and security, Thomas's feeling of restfulness is on the verge of being disturbed and intruded upon. He was always aware of the pressure of ever-changing time which forbids him to stay at the same place and time.

Nostalgia towards the past or even its recovery in the present never satisfies Thomas. His sensitive self-consciousness makes him aware that his whole existence is altogether outside the eternal moment, and makes him wonder 'Beauty would still be far off / However many hills I climbed over; / Peace would be still farther'. It is true that Thomas sometimes shows his 'skyward tendency', to escape from reality, but he never deceives himself, or becomes negligent to the pain and misery human beings are chained to.

Attracted to the sky, Edward Thomas becomes more conscious of the existence of the earth. He imagines a perfect 'refuge' in the sky, free from all human complexities, but he knew such a refuge is an illusion, because to him no experience really exists 'without being accompanied in some way by its opposites'¹⁰

There is no 'timeless' moment without time. Thomas's whole sensibility was aimed at where the two opposites meet and become fused into another element. Thomas never belonged to either of them, as he was poised between the two, in the intersection of the timeless moment with time.

NOTES

- 1) F.R. Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry* (Penguin Books, 1932), p.57.
- 2) *Ibid.*, p.57.
- 3) Henri Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*.
- 4) Marie A. Quinn, "The Personal Past in the Poetry of Thomas Hardy and Edward Thomas", in *Critical Quarterly* (1974), p.7.
- 5) Douglas K. Wood, *Men against Time: Nicolas Berdyaev, T.S. Eliot, Aldous Huxley, & C.G. Jung* (Univ. Press of Kansas, 1982), p.16.
- 6) *Ibid.*, p.24.
- 7) Cf. Edward Thomas, "History and the Parish".
- 8) F.R. Leavis, *op. cit.*, p.55.
- 9) "It Rains".
- 10) Martin Scofield, "Edward Thomas: Syntax and Self-Consciousness". *English*, Vol. XXXI, no. 139, Spring 1982, p.29.