

Edward Thomas's Other Self

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I N the current view of Edward Thomas the crucial observation is F. R. Leavis's in *New Bearings in English Poetry*. Speaking of the poems' accumulation of descriptive detail, he says: "finally one is aware that the outward scene is accessory to an inner theatre." Thomas's distinguishing mark in this view is an unusual degree of self-awareness; precise registering and analysis of sensory impressions serves as a technique for recovering perceptions from "the edge of consciousness." With this estimate H. Coombes, Thomas's most sensitive critic, and, I believe, most readers are in agreement. As far as it goes it is indisputable. But it is not the whole truth, and to concentrate on the introspective element in Thomas's work can lead to a distorted picture of his achievement, one that does him less than justice. William Cooke, in his recent critical biography, has drawn attention to the non-personal content in the poems, noting their concern with English tradition and the fate of England; but in presenting that concern almost exclusively as an expression of Thomas's response to the war he has given his thesis the appearance of special pleading and produced another kind of distortion.

One consequence of the accepted view has been an account of his limitations which, I think, is mistaken. The self-awareness — so the argument goes — does not amount to "complete self-knowledge." Coombes, whose phrase this is, explains that Thomas was "a poet who never satisfied himself as to the cause of his most characteristic mood" (the famous "melancholy"). This characterization receives support not only from Leavis but also from D. W.

Harding. In his discussion of "Old Man," Leavis points to one phrase — "listening, lying in wait for what I should, yet never can, remember" — and offers it as a description of "Thomas's characteristic manner," implying that it also describes the central *experience* in the poems. Harding's opinion, complementary to Leavis's, is quoted by Coombes from "A Note on Nostalgia" (*Scrutiny* I, 1932). "In most of the poems there is no recognition of any underlying social cause for his feelings." Precisely the contrary is true. The poets's diagnosis of his "case" is, in fact, precisely Harding's when the latter writes: "it is hard not to suppose that the unadmitted craving for an adequate social group was behind his most characteristic moods." In the poems the craving is admitted and understood; his self-knowledge was exceptionally clear and penetrating. The core of it, moreover, is in the large number of poems concerned with the solitary's need, and his inability to satisfy his need, for social connection. One of these is "The Other."¹ In some ways, it is true, "The Other" is unusual among Thomas's poems. Instead of coming at its personal theme obliquely, by analogies never overtly metaphorical, half-hinted in the descriptive detail, it is organized as an allegorical narrative and this alone might seem to make it unrepresentative of Thomas's achievement. Yet in the sensibility displayed, in the personal theme itself, the poem is essentially characteristic; the approach is more direct, the treatment of his experience fuller than usual, that is all the difference. For this very reason indeed it offers itself, more than any other single poem, as a key to Thomas's poetic world — to the situation the poet finds himself in and to the complex of feelings and attitudes with which he responds to it.

The poem begins with the poet's emergence from the "dark wood" of his solitude and melancholy into the light and sounds and sweet smells of a sunny day. The "happy mood" of release is sealed by his arrival at an inn, where, however, he first learns of the existence of someone like him in appearance who passed that way only the day be-

fore. Knowledge that he has a double, another self, breeds a restless desire to know him and he sets off in pursuit. The restlessness destroys his new-found happiness. It is plain nevertheless that in some way the news of the other's existence was engendered by, as it coincided with, the time of well-being that started when the journeying poet reached the "end of the forest." The other, then, is the poet's contented self made potentially present, whose promise was felt by the poet the moment he escaped from the dark world of his isolation.

The happy mood, and therefore the other self, is associated with the companionship of "road and inn" (which are here specified as "the sum/Of what's not forest"). Accordingly the poet looks for him in both places, but for a long time without success. Evidently the other is not, as Coombes believes, and as at first he seems to be to the questing poet, the poet's "real self" but an as yet unknown social self and one complementary to the solitary who roams the forest. But the questing self, it proves, is mistaken in supposing that the casual encounters of "road and inn" are indeed "the sum/Of what's not forest," that they constitute all the possibilities of social being. The brevity of the "happy mood" is one indication of the poet's awareness of this. Although the satisfaction of companionship with strangers hinted at the potential existence of this other than solitary self, as one part of social being implies the existence of the rest, the other's total reality cannot be contained within that kind of relationship. Pursuit of him, in fact, develops in the pursuer a dissatisfaction with the people he meets at inns — "but never-foamless shores/Make better friends than those dull boors": solitude even, which he had escaped, is preferable. (Though a critical awareness of the speaker's, the solitary's, arrogance, in this comic dramatization of petulance, is not to be missed.) The idea of social relationship must include friendship, love, community; the absence of them, we are left to infer, accounts for the failure of the quest.

In a moment of impatience the speaker returns sulkily to his solitude. I says "returns," but this is different from the forest: in some ways it is a continuation of the original search, only deflected from its human-social goal. "I sought then in solitude": the logic of the statement points to the continuity, but in what sense can this be the same search merely redirected? We deduce that the speaker is trying to repeat the "happy mood" which had first prompted the quest. It is happiness, the experience of being at peace with himself, that he is pursuing. What, in fact, he finds, as we shall see, is "not happiness," but something he was not looking for. Night falls and Thomas devotes three stanzas to the description of an experience presented many times in his poetry, a "moment of everlastingness." Darkness brings what light could never bring, a reconciliation of the antinomies of existence, of the actual and the ideal.

Had there been ever any feud
 'Twixt earth and sky, one mighty will
 Closed it.

Briefly he enjoys a sense of harmony, of connection with the universe:

I stood serene
 And with a solemn quiet mirth,
An old inhabitant of earth. (my italics)

The thread of common motivation that joins the two quests and makes them one is this need to "belong": to feel part, in the first case, of the human community, in the second, of the natural universe. But the core of insight — what makes the poem such a fine demonstration of self-knowledge, inherent in the experience as presented — is where the poet *distinguishes between* the two directions of his search:

Once the name I gave to hours
 Like this was melancholy, when
 It was not happiness and powers
 Coming like exiles home again,
 And weaknesses quitting their bowers,
 Smiled and enjoyed far off from men,
 Moments of everlastingness.

The word "inhabitant" performs the same service as "Coming like exiles *home* again": in reminding us that home and habitation imply forms of connection with other people, it calls attention to their absence ("far off from men") from this scene — and makes us aware of this as a paradox. The sense of harmony is purchased at a price — the obliteration of life, in an act like murder:

A dog barked on a hidden rise;
 A marshbird whistled high unseen;
 The latest waking blackbird's *cries*
 Perished upon the silence *keen*. (my italics)

The "solemn quiet mirth" with which the speaker greets the accomplishment of this moment acquires a grimness appropriate to the mood of one who is aligning himself with the forces of night and death.

The experience has contradictory aspects: "moments of everlastingness" are enjoyed but the enjoyment of them is melancholy — or rather, these moments occur in moods which in the past the poet had thought of as melancholy. The key to this contradiction is the poet's awareness that these sporadic apprehensions of a non-human eternity are, as it were, compensation for the lack of that purely human permanence which is the gift of belonging to a stable and continuous community. The experience is melancholy, from one point of view, precisely because it can only take place "far off from men," because it *confirms* his solitude.

And so the poet seeks company again. Social fulfilment is desirable, but this development in the story does not set a higher value on the pursuit of it than on the momentary experience of harmony enjoyed in solitude. The quest fails, and there is nothing in the poem to suggest that it might succeed or bring the poet any nearer to the self-completion he is seeking. The quest and its goal have, in fact, only a secondary contingent importance; the primary theme, one might say, is the *pathology* of questing — the malady of discontent that makes pursuit of an "unseen moving goal" a compulsion in the pursuer ("He goes — I follow — no release").

We are directed to this view of the matter by the consistently ironic rendering of the narrator's progress from inn to inn. The irony can be seen at work, for example, in the sixth stanza:

I was more eager than before
To find him out and to confess,
To bore him and to let him bore.
I could not wait. . . .

This, in its context, captures a quality of incontinence in the speaker's emotion, a childish, desperate excess of need, that suggests he will not find what he is looking for, and that this is because something in the circumstances of pursuit precludes it. (The same touch of ridicule modifies what might otherwise have sounded as pathos in the last stanza.) The narrator, the poet as quester, is seeking completion of himself. The tone of desire in this stanza and elsewhere in the poem — a pathetic (hopeless) eagerness — tells us that this is out of the question; the element of self-mockery in the tone tells us that knowledge of its impossibility controls the poem's complex attitude. The solitary, whose *sickness* is impoverishment of the social instinct, cannot (by definition) know inwardly the social disposition he is seeking — only that he lacks that disposition and suffers for it. The tone of the reference to the "dull boors," given a petulance that rebounds mockingly on the speaker, betrays the very condition — isolation and estrangement — he is trying to escape.

The first person narrative, which maintains a delicate balance of involvement and detachment in the poet's relation to his questing self, presents us, then with what amounts to an unromantic interpretation of romantic *sehnsucht*. The separation of poet from speaker which makes possible something like a case-study of the speaker's attitudes, is helped by a series of literary allusions each of which contributes to a psychological and historical placing of his romanticism. The lines already quoted — "but never-foamless shores/Make better friends than those dull boors" — call up the solitudes of "Ode to a Nightingale,"

the "magic casements, opening on the foam/Of perilous seas." And the lines that follow, those beginning the fourth stanza, refer to Tennyson's "Ulysses":

Many and many a day like this
Aimed at the unseen moving goal
And nothing found but remedies
For all desire. These made not whole;
They sowed a new desire, to kiss
Desire's self beyond control,
Desire of desire. . . .

The manner of allusion to Keats produces a joke — the incongruous juxtaposition of "dull boors" with the large, vaguely resonant "never-foamless shores" makes it precisely that — against romantic withdrawal, displaying it as merely the sulkiness of a frustrated social instinct. The second passage strips romantic aspiration of the heroic pretensions with which Tennyson had endowed it ("nothing found but. . ."), and then proceeds to diagnose its illness, (as Eliot was to say a few years later, "the only way to cure romanticism is to analyze it"). Romantic desire is as intense as it is vague; the combination indicates its prime characteristic, inordinancy. Lack of an attainable goal that would satisfy all his needs generates in the romantic a contempt for partial satisfaction, the limited but possible, and an ambition obsessively preoccupied with an unknown ("unseen") and unknowable ("moving") wholeness of being.

Thomas thus exposes to critical analysis romantic habits of mind to which he knew himself to be intermittently addicted. There is point in remembering that he was a younger contemporary of Hardy; like him he was accustomed to view life with a more compelling sense of human limits than was normally exhibited by the poets of the early nineteenth century. Neither Hardy's nor Thomas's work is the worse for this sceptical realism, anticipating as it does a tone characteristic of a later period. But comparison with the best romantic poetry in other respects works to their disadvantage. The image of human potentiality presented by Hardy, as Donald Davie has

recently argued (*Thomas Hardy and British Poetry*), is in comparison with Wordsworth's a diminished one. Thomas was himself sharply conscious of the gulf dividing his perspective from a Wordsworthian unitary vision, and this consciousness reveals itself in the speculative presence of "a mighty will" composing the differences between "earth and sky," reality and dream, which recalls (if I am not mistaken) "On Westminster Bridge." We are meant to reflect that the time for such confident statements has passed. The affirmation is immediately compromised, as it has to be for Thomas, by what follows:

the crocketed dark trees,
A dark house, dark impossible
Cloud-towers, one star, one lamp, one peace
Held on an everlasting lease.

The unified scene is presented as the self-conscious creation of an archaizing Gothic imagination, "impossible" even sinister production of the poet's fancy, rather than as a genuine revelation.

With one more literary echo, a reference in the penultimate stanza to Herbert's "Redemption," Thomas completes his limiting definition of (what the comparison helps us to see as) his spiritual condition. Diagnosing in himself a sensibility enfeebled by a negative romanticism, this critical percipience is not counterbalanced by any positive expectations of commitment. He has declared his incapacity for the affirmations of positive romanticism. The reference through Herbert's poem to the Christian revelation now introduces not only the historical source and model of romantic values but what is for the Western world historically the ultimate measure of the narrator's uncertainties. Christ, who was *banished* from the world by man's sin, forgave and forgives him. "Seek and ye shall find": hunted by "thieves and murderers" (Herbert's words), he is at the same time the object of the opposite kind of pursuit, opening himself to those who seek redemption. These paradoxes are at the centre of Her-

bert's poem. In all respects the quest narrated by Thomas is antithetical.

That time was brief: once more at inn
 And upon road I sought my man
 Till once amid a tap-room's din
 Loudly he asked for me, began
 To speak, as if it had been a sin,
 Of how I thought and dreamed and ran
 After him thus, day after day:
 He lived as one under a ban
 For this: what had I got to say?
 I said nothing. I slipped away.

Thomas's "man," while he speaks of the narrator's pursuit "as if it had been a *sin*" (in this more like the "thieves and murderers" than the speaker of Herbert's poem), is an accuser not a saviour. Pursuit only ensures loss; the other lives "as under a ban": seeking is not finding.

The solitary in Thomas's poem has set his sights lower than Herbert's Christian: he aims at relationship with another part of himself, not with something beyond self. This is one reason for the quest's predestined failure: the person who needs saving is not saved out of his own inadequate resources. The second reason brings into sharper focus the disabling modesty of the speaker's ambition. Because his escape from the prison of solitude is connected in his mind with the gregarious pleasures of "road and inn," his most intense experience of relationship with others, he is under the illusion that "road and inn" are "the sum of what's not forest"; in pathetic gratitude for the moment of release described in the first stanza he seeks to restore the "happy mood" of that kind of association to the exclusion of other kinds. Ignorance of more demanding forms of social communion condemns him to seek his social identity precisely in those places where he, an inveterate solitary, will not find it—in the taprooms of roadside inns. He has indeed *nothing to say* to one who speaks "loudly" amidst the "din" of such gatherings.

As I have set out the poem, there are two modes of action, inwardly and outwardly directed, each viewed with

severely critical reservations, and with no final choice made between them, by the poet: the first, a social quest conducted in a spirit of romantic desperation and bound to fail, the second, an introspective search which leads to a state of mind, a sense of identity with nature, of questionable value. I have depicted a condition of arid stalemate; but in doing so I have slightly misrepresented the second experience. Descriptions of it are frequent both in the poetry and the earlier prose. It was supremely important to Thomas; evidently many of the poems originated in some such mood. The two stanzas in which it is again presented may, in fact, be said to constitute a representative Thomas poem or at least an account of how such a poem arrives. In the following stanza, however, stanza nine, from which I quoted earlier ("Once the name I gave to hours/Like this was melancholy . . .") he makes a crucial distinction, between his poetic present and his non-poetic past. *Once* he thought of such hours as "melancholy," but, it follows, he thinks so no longer; and this is clearly because now, as not before, they have borne fruit. The restored powers, "Coming like exiles home again," are poetic and the broken reticences, "weaknesses quitting their bowers," are poems, and with poems comes insight. "Melancholy" is now felt to be not the word for this mood, but neither is "happiness." The poems help him to see that the "moments of everlastingness" are, as I have suggested, surrogates for a sense of community; they do not enable him to make good the loss of that sense. The hovering definition — not melancholy, not happy — gives us Thomas's balanced evaluation of the moments and the poems recording them. They testify, both, to the potentiality of a full social existence, of a "belonging" to nature that is also, does not exclude, a "belonging" to human settlements. That is their value and their limitation. On the one hand, social fulfilment is only negatively present, an implied norm not an experience actualized in the poem. On the other, these glimpses of a non-human eternity

occur under conditions the absence of which explains the speaker's failure to discover an analogous human permanence: they therefore provide an insight into the nature of the less ephemeral social relationships. I have not yet quoted the last three lines of stanza nine:

And fortunate my search was then
While what I sought, nevertheless,
That I was seeking, I did not guess.

These lines are the core of the poem. By this standard the quest cannot but fail. Belonging precludes seeking; it happens without personal effort, or personal effort can only confirm what has already come about.

This analysis of "The Other" — in its genre of allegorical narrative untypical it is true, of Thomas's poetry — suggests, however, if the poem is characteristic in other respects, and I believe it is, that the usual critical account of the poetry needs to be modified and supplemented. In depth and objectivity the self-understanding revealed is, it seems to me, exceptional. Thomas is far from showing uncertainty as to "the cause of his most characteristic mood" (Coombes). His melancholy is confidently given the social context tentatively offered as an explanation by D. W. Harding: the poem at once dramatizes and comments upon his supposedly "*unadmitted* craving for an adequate social group." While undeniably the focus, the instance, is personal, the kind of attention the poet turns upon his experience gives it a wider bearing. We derive from concrete and specific detail a general understanding of social deprivation and social need; the personal case — casting it in the form of fable ensures this — is made to seem representative.

A sense of loss, it is well known, pervades Thomas's writing. It is not so widely acknowledged that, whatever evasions he practised in his earlier prose, by the time he came to write his poems he knew *what* had been lost. As presented in "The Other," it is at once the capacity for firmly based, lastingly satisfying relationships and the sort of social group where such relationships could be

formed — two aspects of the same situation. He is without illusions: recognizes equally the inescapable compulsion to search for social gratification and the impossibility of success. The poet's relationships to the speaker in the poem is either one of self-mocking identification or one of ironic detachment. Whichever way it is read, this kind of tough scepticism is not what critics normally find in Thomas, and yet it is characteristic and a part of what is to be appreciated in his poetry. The poet remains critically alert as he evokes that moment of peace and apparent harmony, the experience "far off from men" of what is evidently felt as an epiphany. But however equivocal its message, however tenuous the fulfilment, many of Thomas's poems attend upon, owe their existence (as stanza nine tells us) to moments like this. The core of self-knowledge and self-acceptance has been reached in the recognition that his scope is limited to what can be accomplished by withdrawal from, rather than co-operation with, society. The narrative tacitly assumes the unavailability to the poet of all but the shallowest and most transient of social experiences.

I have been emphasizing Thomas's introspective penetration and especially, in his understanding of himself, his consciousness of limits. But there is more to the poem than self-knowledge. What seems to be promised in that moment of emergence from the forest into the world of men is fulfilment of the poet's social needs; what he in fact experiences is the shallow sociability of a tavern-haunter: this is what he knows, and that he has to live with the presumption of failure. But this disparity between expectation and outcome and the dissatisfaction which prevents him from abandoning the search imply the possibility of other, as yet unexplored, kinds of relationship. This is confirmed by Thomas's refusal to endorse the *misanthropy* of those hours, conducive to no matter what revelations, spent in sullen retreat from the frustrations of his social adventure. The poem's complex achievement is, while registering admissions of personal in-

adequacy and sparseness of social opportunity, to *affirm* nevertheless the human values by which he himself is judged to be a failure. He sees himself always in relation to the potential self still being pursued in the last stanza: "I try to keep in sight/Dreading his power but worse his laughter." The laughter, though contemptuous, speaks eloquently of the once glimpsed carefree existence from which he is exiled, but the prospect of which governs his actions.

NOTE

¹*Collected Poems of Edward Thomas* (London: Faber, 1949).