

‘I should want nothing more’: Edward Thomas and simplicity

Chatterton Lecture on Poetry
read 1 November 2018

GUY CUTHBERTSON

Abstract: In the years before the First World War, the ‘Simple Life’ became somewhat fashionable, and Edward Thomas (1878–1917) was one of those Edwardians who were attracted to simplicity, both as a way of life and as a way of writing. As a book reviewer and biographer, he greatly admired simplicity in literature (as seen in, among others, William Cobbett, W. H. Davies, J. M. Synge and Robert Frost). His prose moved towards plainness, and his poetry is beautifully simple. This simplicity has been problematic, however. His poetry is unsuited to the decoding and exegesis (which might be suited to Modernism) that universities seek to conduct. Academics studying his poetry have allowed themselves to believe that they have found complexity, hidden beneath superficial simplicity, whereas in fact Thomas is a poet of genuine bareness, clear-as-glass honesty, magical brevity and childlike simplicity. His simplicity has been popular, and seems to suit some 21st-century fashions.

Keywords: the Simple Life, simplicity, complexity, Edwardians, universities, First World War, Modernism, Robert Frost, William Cobbett, J. M. Synge

In the decade or so before the First World War, simplicity became somewhat fashionable—indeed it was a religion for some. This craze is captured rather wonderfully in the Edwardian hit musical *The Arcadians* (1909), where the central character is given the name ‘Simplicitas’, idyllic Arcady is recreated in London at a successful new health food restaurant and men are ‘keen as a knife / On the simple life’.¹ Although some might want it otherwise, Edward Thomas was part of this atmosphere. He sought simplicity as a way of life and a way of writing. Edmund Blunden referred to him as ‘the interesting literary labourer, the simple-lifer, Edward Thomas’.²

¹ Wimperis (1909: 147).

² Blunden (1958).

As a critic, Thomas greatly admired simplicity; and his own poetry is simple. And his simplicity is popular today. But this simplicity is challenging, especially to universities, where complexity tends to be preferred; and there have been efforts to dig up some difficulty, to portray Thomas's work as more complex than it really is, seeing the simplicity as merely superficial. Great poetry does not have to be difficult. And simplicity isn't easily achieved. To quote Apple's Steve Jobs (someone who contributed to a recent reawakened interest in simplicity), 'Simple can be harder than complex: You have to work hard to get your thinking clean to make it simple.'³ C. F. G. Masterman observed in *The Condition of England* (1909) that 'Simplicity in writing, or in character, is as difficult of attainment as it is worth the attaining.'⁴ Thomas's life is the story of that struggle and its achievement is his poetry.

THE SIMPLE LIFE

By 1914, Holbrook Jackson could speak of 'the Renaissance of Simplicity'.⁵ Reviewing *Georgian Poetry* in 1912, Edward Thomas said the volume 'brings out with great cleverness many sides of the modern love of the simple and primitive, as seen in children, peasants, savages, early men, animals, and Nature in general'.⁶ There was a radical and socialist dimension—so Robert Blatchford's popular rustic-socialist text *Merrie England* (1893) opens with the quotation 'We are lovers of the beautiful, yet simple in our tastes, and we cultivate the mind without loss of manliness'⁷—but, for many Edwardians, the rejection of modern urban life in favour of the simple life meant health foods, fresh air, innocence, country dancing, country walks and country cottages. Thomas certainly saw some of the foolishness in this fashion, especially when the simple life acquired capital letters and attracted a certain kind of crank, an eccentric bourgeois faddist—the kind of Simple Lifer one would have found in Letchworth, a place 'like so many wounds on the earth and so much sticking-plaster', a place Thomas is unimpressed by,⁸ and tries to avoid, in his book *The Icknield Way* (1913):

³ Isaacson (2012).

⁴ Masterman (1909: 77).

⁵ Jackson (1914: 464).

⁶ Thomas (1913), a review of *Georgian Poetry, 1911–1912*, *The Daily Chronicle*, 14 January. Cardiff scrap-book 6.

⁷ Thucydides, cited by Blatchford (1893: 11).

⁸ Thomas (1913a: 125).

On the right two paths went off to some of the new houses of the Letchworth Garden City, and to a building gigantically labelled 'IDRIS.' This was, I suppose, the temple of this city's god, though the name, except as the Welsh equivalent for Arthur, was unknown to me. They say now that Arthur was a solar hero, and when in doubt men might do worse than to worship the sun, if they could discover how. At Letchworth they were endeavouring to do so. The sun was not benign or even merciful in return for these efforts. He responded by telling the truth with his most brilliant beams, so that the city resembled a caravan of bathing machines, except that there was no sea and the machines could not conveniently be moved.⁹

'Idris & co' were in fact 'mineral water manufacturers'. Thomas hurries through the forlorn roads of Letchworth. This was a place of mineral water and sun-worship, and educated gentlemen in monastic smocks and sandals. He disliked the sandal-wearers' conscious, contrived return to nature and their idea of the countryside: sensing the market, he wryly proposed a book to his agent as 'an impression of rural England, leaving out red brick, murals, advertisements & liver pills & real life generally, but making much of maypoles & woad costumes & the like'.¹⁰ In Letchworth, the song on his mind was 'She's off with the wraggle-taggle gypsies, oh!', a song about a rich woman running away with the gypsies, which is a comically inappropriate song for Letchworth, even though it might represent one of the fantasies of its residents:¹¹

What care I for a goose-feather bed?
With the sheet turned down so bravely, O!
For to-night I shall sleep in a cold open field
Along with the raggle-taggle gypsies, O!

Nonetheless, it is also true that some of those arty hygienic middle-class types were his friends: at times, he was practically one of them, a dabbler in vegetarianism for some time, unafraid of nut cutlets and spinach sprinkled with plasmon powder, a frequenter of a 'simple life' restaurant like the one in *The Arcadians*, an admirer of Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement, a worshipper of the open air, and a lover of folk-songs, sea shanties and the wraggle-taggle gypsies. His contemporary and fellow poet, T. Sturge Moore, saw him as a prose writer who was marching behind a banner that had the 'heraldic picture of *Simple Life Returning*' blazoned on it;¹² a prose writer who was enthusiastic for deep country ancientness:

⁹Thomas (1913a: 124).

¹⁰Durham, Durham University Library, Abbott Literary Manuscripts, MS ABL 307 (letter to Cazenove), f. 1r.

¹¹Thomas (1913a: 126).

¹²Moore (1920: 79).

in a general sense one would imagine that his birth vexed him because it had not befallen in a pastoral age, in Arcady, in Ireland when Cuchulain was about or in the Middle Ages when the oldest of existing barns was building. This soul, we say as we read, must have chafed against modern circumstance. Union with nature, between man and the most essential conditions of his life, such as that supposed to have been achieved in far-off times and places, has a true ideal value; it does correspond to a profound and rational aspiration.¹³

Like Kenneth Grahame in *The Wind in the Willows* (published the year before *The Arcadians*), while lyrically singing simplicity's praises he also laughs a little at the cultish pursuit of it, represented for Grahame by Toad's gypsy caravan—Toad is 'by no means so rapturous about the simplicity of the primitive life' once he learns how much work is involved.¹⁴ A review by Thomas in 1905 moaning about simple-lifers and the escape to the country—'a cunning search for simplicity' in 'an age that is not at all simple'—is a characteristic piece of self-criticism.¹⁵

Thomas's simplicity is, we might say, simpler, more down to earth, more unaffected than the capitalised Simple Life. Thomas knew that it wasn't about how you dress: even though he wore the countryman's tweeds, he said that 'a man with a hard hat, black clothes and a malacca cane may be a good deal simpler and more at home with natural things than a hairy hygienic gentleman'.¹⁶ But simplicity was a fundamental part of his life. From London, the city where he was born in 1878 (what he called his accidental cockney nativity), Thomas escaped to the countryside to live simply—not as a tramp, but without some of the bourgeois aspirations that his father had had for him. He would not take up the lucrative professional career in London that a man of St Paul's and Lincoln College, Oxford, could expect. As for many, simplicity was a choice, a form of escape.

In 1897, as a 19-year-old, he told his future wife, Helen, that his ideal was 'ingenuousness': he said that in his young years 'in spite of everything, I was purer because really ingenuous and not as now only contriving ingenuousness and recognising it as an ideal'.¹⁷ The first line of R. George Thomas's little book on Thomas in 1972 was the statement that 'Edward Thomas was a writer of unusual complexity and innate simplicity',¹⁸ which, as a description of the man (rather than his writing), is probably accurate enough. Simplicity didn't necessarily always come naturally; but he

¹³ Moore (1920: 80).

¹⁴ Grahame (2010: 22).

¹⁵ Thomas (1905), a review of five books, including *Ellan Vannin* by Harrold Johnson, *The Daily Chronicle*, 30 August. Cardiff scrapbook 2.

¹⁶ Thomas (1912a: 247).

¹⁷ Thomas (2000: 3).

¹⁸ R. George Thomas (1972: 1).

loved those to whom it did. Thus when, as a married man, he briefly fell for a teenager, he was attracted to her simplicity, her innocence, her 'animal kindness & rudeness of extraordinary beauty'.¹⁹ In the story 'The Fountain' he praised that girl's purity and 'dark simplicity'.²⁰

Thomas sent his children to the progressive Bedales School, and his wife worked there—the country pursuits and practicality of bourgeois Bedales was an antidote to the usual bookish artificiality of education.²¹ They chose to live in Steep, a Hampshire village of Simple Lifers. Helen described these folk: they read *The Guardian*, were 'moderate in all things', they were teetotal vegetarians, 'Their simple oak furniture was made by skilled craftsmen, and their curtains were hand-woven.'²² Edward and Helen lived like that, even though, according to Helen, 'the genuine simplicity of our life' contrasted with 'the thought-out simplicity of the school people'.²³ He had learnt carpentry, making 'the simpler sorts of things'.²⁴ We find him writing that:

I don't like London. ... I am elated at the prospect of getting back, especially as in the Spring a friend who has bought 20 or 30 acres at the top of the hill (and built himself a house & a workshop—he is an old Bedales boy & makes furniture) is going to build us a house up there.²⁵

Like the Arcadians, he didn't care for 'London's hubbubs, / And the seething of the subbubs',²⁶ or for very much of modern life. He was happier with the simple life, and was excited by his Arts and Crafts house (although its newness and location ultimately proved disappointing). Suffering from depression, and from what he identified as self-consciousness ('that way will always lie misery, dissatisfaction, imperfection, perhaps "tragedy" or tragic farce rather'),²⁷ the pursuit of simplicity was in part a response to his anxieties and restlessness, as it was for others, although for him simplicity was more than just a fad or the latest cure. He associated simplicity with purity, beauty, dignity, peace, naturalness, honesty, strength, feeling, liberty, fairness and goodness.

The word 'simple' is almost a refrain in *The South Country* (1909) and *The Heart of England* (1906). In *The South Country* he also declares that 'I prefer any country

¹⁹ New York, Berg Collection of the New York Public Library, MS 'Field Notes' (80 holograph notebooks 1895–1915), notebook 22, 'Ashford vi–vii.08', p. 32r.

²⁰ Thomas (1910a: 140).

²¹ Badley (1923).

²² Helen Thomas (1990: 111).

²³ Helen Thomas (1990: 125).

²⁴ Helen Thomas (1990: 100).

²⁵ Thomas (1968: 170). The Bedales old boy was Geoffrey Lupton.

²⁶ Wimperis (1909: 113).

²⁷ Thomas (1968: 90).

church or chapel to Winchester or Chichester or Canterbury Cathedral, just as I prefer “All around my hat,” or “Somer is icumen in,” to Beethoven²⁸—a statement that is in fact a rather powerful and radical rejection of high culture in favour of the popular and vernacular, a rejection of the metropolitan in favour of the parochial, a rejection of the German in favour of the English, and a rejection of complexity (orchestral and architectural) in favour of simplicity. A review by Walter de la Mare of Thomas’s *Rest and Unrest* in *The Times Literary Supplement* in 1910 noted ‘the love of all things simple and pure and childlike’, and how ‘in every one of these stories it is simplicity, whether of innocence or of wisdom, that most attracts him’.²⁹ The writers he most admired, from Thomas Traherne to W. H. Davies, were writers he associated with simple living and a simple outlook. Davies, finding in nature his ‘thoughts as pure and simple as the large eyes of cows’,³⁰ lived ‘a life so quiet, full and simple’³¹ – ‘the man himself is extraordinary, for he is so simple’.³² William Morris, one of Thomas’s true heroes, had called for ‘Simplicity of life, begetting simplicity of taste’, and wanted ‘simplicity everywhere, in the palace as well as in the cottage’.³³ Henry David Thoreau was another hero—in 1896, Thomas described Thoreau as his favourite author (with a question mark). Thoreau was the prophet of simplicity, who in *Walden* (1854) told us to simplify because our life is frittered away by detail. We get a distorted sense of Thomas’s literary interests from the books that he wrote, which were the books that he could get a book deal for: he didn’t write a book on Thoreau, but more than once he proposed one to his agent, C. F. Cazenove. Thoreau, John Ruskin, George Borrow and Richard Jefferies, those writers who encouraged E. M. Forster’s Leonard Bast to escape out of London into the countryside, were also Thomas’s writers.³⁴

What Thomas wanted was the relationship with simplicity that he describes in his book on George Borrow: Borrow is at home with ‘the fortunate simple yeomen, or careless poor men, or noble savages, or untradesmanlike fishermen, or unromanized *Germani*, or animals who do not fret about their souls’; Borrow ‘mingles with them as one almost on an equality with them, though his melancholy or his book knowledge is at times something of a foil’.³⁵ Thomas was at times concerned that the simple life might be out of reach. Reviewing W. H. Hudson’s *A Shepherd’s Life* (1910), Thomas noted that ‘in addition to the sympathy with old simple things he has the contrasting power of feeling them poignantly from without and interpreting them for those who

²⁸ Thomas (1909b: 4).

²⁹ de la Mare (1910: 82).

³⁰ Thomas (1914), a review of *Nature* by W. H. Davies, publication unknown, May. Cardiff scrapbook 6.

³¹ Thomas (1981a: 92).

³² Thomas (2004: 84).

³³ Morris (2008: 83).

³⁴ Cuthbertson (2005a: 87–9).

³⁵ Thomas (1912a: 319).

must always remain without'.³⁶ Thomas's own writing includes a number of men who have tried to flee modernity, book knowledge and the middle-classes, but they can't become simple peasants even if they quit a London office for the life of the fields. His character called Hawthornden, a self-portrait of a kind, lives in the countryside, loves Borrow, admires tramps and wants gypsy adventures. Hawthornden despises literary criticism too: 'it seemed to him absurd that the writing class should not only produce books, but circulate its opinion of them' and he wants 'no middleman between art and himself as a human being'.³⁷ But he can't escape his middle-class existence. Hawthornden had 'continued to sigh for the simple antique attitudes of the emotions in their liberty',³⁸ and 'tried simplicity for a while, but this also meant a new outlay, and he was soon unfaithful'.³⁹ He is always home for tea. Hawthornden achieves simplicity in the end, unwittingly, when he dies in his attempt to find the gypsy life. That death gives him that final release from his bookish bourgeois propriety—if it isn't a simple life that he attains, then it is a simple death.

A SIMPLE WRITING STYLE

Thomas also made efforts to simplify his writing style. He had written that 'just as, in thinking about life, we cry out for a return to Nature and her beneficent simplicity, so we are apt to cry out for a return to simplicity in literature'.⁴⁰ As a book reviewer and biographer he often praised simple prose. Yet, despite his own love of simplicity, his younger self had developed a prose style that was artificial and elaborate. Violet Scott-James thought so, writing in *The Yorkshire Post* in 1932 that 'He is an Oxford scholar too lately "down"': describing *The Heart of England*, she highlighted that 'In the enveloping warmth of an August afternoon, the only two satisfying places to him are a willowy pool in a deep shade, and—the Bodleian Library'.⁴¹ In 1905, he told Gordon Bottomley that:

Short things are all I have energy both to conceive & to extrude. Here, e.g. is a suburban one. It is at least simple—a virtue so unusual in me that perhaps I exaggerate its merit here.⁴²

³⁶ Thomas (1910), a review of *A Shepherd's Life: Impressions of the South Wiltshire Downs* by W. H. Hudson, *The Morning Post*, 26 September. Cardiff scrapbook 5.

³⁷ Thomas (1911a: 119).

³⁸ Thomas (1911a: 121).

³⁹ Thomas (1911a: 125).

⁴⁰ Thomas (1905), a review of five books, including *Ellan Vannin* by Harrold Johnson, *The Daily Chronicle*, 30 August. Cardiff scrapbook 2.

⁴¹ Scott-James (1932).

⁴² Thomas (1968: 94).

And to Edward Garnett, Thomas said in 1909 that:

You are unjust in your view of what you call 'literary' phrases that 'smell of the lamp'. Such phrases however bad come to me without thinking or seeking. It is your 'simple & direct' phrases that I have to seek for.⁴³

But the review of *Rest and Unrest* by Walter de la Mare in 1910 saw 'a pure delicate prose'—'set down as directly and simply as words allow'.⁴⁴ That year, Thomas remarked of another writer that 'he may very likely write much better when he gives up trying to write well'.⁴⁵ Violet Scott-James observed that Thomas 'became simpler, more mellow, less fastidious, less conscious of himself as a man of letters striving to interpret natural scenes'.⁴⁶

In his book on Borrow in 1912, Thomas said that Borrow could not resist William Cobbett's 'plain living and plain thinking, or his sentences that are like acts—like blows or strides'.⁴⁷ He sought plainness. The word 'plain' became important—it was a word at the heart of the Arts and Crafts Movement and hygienic simple living, but Thomas became devoted to it as he worked on Pater, Cobbett and Borrow after 1910. Plain living, plain thinking, plain style. It was a word that expressed sincerity, a lack of humbug, and a vernacular clarity. Cobbett's sentences 'express a plain thought or feeling as clearly and swiftly as the flash of an eye or a bang of the fist on a table'.⁴⁸ He admired how Borrow and Cobbett believed in writing without thinking about words, putting down thoughts just as they come—the clarity of their writing reflected their 'plain thinking', their lack of self-consciousness. This was at a time when Thomas's self-consciousness was being treated by Godwin Baynes, an extreme example of the simple lifer, a back-to-the-land neo-pagan and folk-singer. In Thomas's book on Walter Pater in 1913, Thomas contrasts 'inspired simplicity and crystal clearness' with the 'over-consciousness of culture': 'It is not clear how perfect culture can ever equal the genius of simplicity.' Pater was not advancing towards 'this direct simplicity', Thomas says; but we sense that Thomas was.⁴⁹

A review of Thomas's prose in 1948 noticed that 'on the whole, Thomas's development in prose was towards a more simple style'.⁵⁰ The posthumously published

⁴³ Thomas (1981b: 12).

⁴⁴ de la Mare (1910: 82).

⁴⁵ Thomas (1910), a review of *An Outdoor Breviary* by M. Jourdain, *The Daily Chronicle*, 1 August. Cardiff scrapbook 6.

⁴⁶ Scott-James (1932).

⁴⁷ Thomas (1912a: 8).

⁴⁸ Thomas (1912b: ix).

⁴⁹ Thomas (1913b: 73–4).

⁵⁰ Anon (1948).

The Childhood of Edward Thomas (1938) and its close relation, the unfinished 'Fiction', which describes itself as 'this plain record',⁵¹ would be evidence of this. One of Thomas's responses to his self-consciousness had been a decision to focus not on his present but on his past: in *The Happy-go-lucky Morgans* (1913),⁵² *The Childhood of Edward Thomas* and 'Fiction' he turned from a self-conscious present to the easier world of his childhood. A plain style went with a less self-conscious time, as it did in Thomas's book for children, *Four-and-twenty Blackbirds* (1915).⁵³ Rhetoric was the beast, as he put it, and he was intent on killing it, by wringing the beast's neck. On 22 May 1914, he stated that 'now I am again working hard, mostly at uncalled for little Welsh pictures, of a plain perhaps lucid kind, in my later manner, if it is a manner'.⁵⁴ And on 14 August 1914 he was considering, he said, 'turning plain reporter and giving unvarnished reports'.⁵⁵

PLAIN POETRY

When Edward Thomas became friends with Robert Frost he found in his work a kind of simplicity that he could understand and love. Thomas had said in *Walter Pater* that 'It is the last thing that many writers would think of, to write as they speak',⁵⁶ but when Thomas reviewed *North of Boston* in *The New Weekly* in August 1914, he admired 'all its tame common words, straightforward constructions, and innumerable perfectly normal lines'.⁵⁷ 'Common', 'straightforward', 'normal'. This was ordinary language, often colloquial and idiomatic, brought onto the page as great poetry. Thomas said of Frost's poetry that 'Extraordinary things have not been sought for'.⁵⁸ In another review of *North of Boston*, in August 1914, he said that 'The language ranges from a never vulgar colloquialism to brief moments of heightened and intense simplicity'.⁵⁹ A year later, when he was sent the poem 'The Road Not Taken', Thomas noted 'the simple words and unemphatic rhythms'.⁶⁰

⁵¹ Thomas (2011a: 303).

⁵² Thomas (1913c).

⁵³ Thomas (1915a).

⁵⁴ Thomas (1968: 232).

⁵⁵ Farjeon (1958: 83).

⁵⁶ Thomas (1913b: 206).

⁵⁷ Frost & Thomas (2003: 20).

⁵⁸ Frost & Thomas (2003: 21).

⁵⁹ Frost and Thomas (2003: 24).

⁶⁰ Letter to Frost, 13 June 15 (Frost & Thomas 2003: 61).

As one reviewer noted in 1915, ‘The best poetry of the present day is simple poetry.’⁶¹ Thomas too had repeatedly, as a reviewer, applauded simplicity in poetry. W. H. Davies’s is ‘simple and passionate’;⁶² it is poetry of simple and familiar words; he ‘will often attain simplicity unawares’.⁶³ ‘Blake did not go beyond Mr. Davies in radical purity and simplicity’;⁶⁴ and ‘where else today shall we find simplicity like this?’⁶⁵ Ernest Dowson had a ‘beauty and simplicity which no contemporary equalled’—‘simple rhythms’ and ‘simple diction’.⁶⁶ Thomas also admired W. B. Yeats’s simplicity, including ‘the beautiful simplicity of language’.⁶⁷ In 1909, Thomas had even enjoyed the early poetry of Ezra Pound precisely because of its simplicity—‘the chief part of his power is directness and simplicity’⁶⁸ (W. H. Davies achieved ‘simplicity and directness’ as well);⁶⁹ and he praised ‘a chaste and simple vocabulary’.⁷⁰ Pound’s *Personae* (1909) had a ‘simple’ method:

No remarkable melody; no golden words shot with meaning; a temperate use of images, and none far-fetched; no flattering of modern fashions, in descriptions of Nature, for example; no apostrophe, no rhetoric, nothing ‘Celtic.’⁷¹

In his third review of *Personae*, in *The Bookman*, Thomas observed that again and again ‘you come upon some lyric that is beautifully simple in form and utterance, that orbs itself easily and naturally’. Significantly, Thomas went beyond commenting on Pound to comment on poetry in general: ‘No eccentricities go to the making of great poetry; when Browning rose to his highest he was neither eccentric nor obscure.’⁷²

Some of his praise for other poets would serve as a description of the poetry that Thomas started writing towards the end of 1914. In J. M. Synge’s *Poems and Translations* (1909), ‘the constant quality is simplicity’—Synge’s poems are ‘small’, ‘spare’, ‘poetry shrunk almost to its bones’, ‘exact and lucid’, ‘they overstate nothing’;⁷³

⁶¹ Anon (1915).

⁶² Thomas (1981a: 89).

⁶³ Thomas (1968: 130).

⁶⁴ Thomas (2004: 82).

⁶⁵ Thomas (1981a: 89).

⁶⁶ Thomas (1981a: 61).

⁶⁷ Thomas (1981a: 86).

⁶⁸ Thomas (1909c: 628).

⁶⁹ See Thomas (1981a: 90). That ‘directness and simplicity’ were Georgian characteristics: ‘They seem to us, too, to show a wholesome revolt against poetic clichés, a desire for directness and simplicity both of feeling and expression’, a reviewer of *Georgian Poetry, 1911–1912* observed in *The Spectator* (Anon 1913).

⁷⁰ Thomas (1909), a review of *Personae of Ezra Pound*, *The Daily Chronicle*, 7 June. Cardiff scrapbook 4.

⁷¹ Thomas (1909), a review of *Personae of Ezra Pound*, *The Daily Chronicle*, 7 June. Cardiff scrapbook 4.

⁷² Thomas (1909), ‘A New Poet’, a review of *Personae of Ezra Pound*, *The Bookman*, July. Cardiff scrapbook 8.

⁷³ Thomas (1909), a review of *Poems and Translations* by John M. Synge, *The Daily Chronicle*, 26 July. Cardiff scrapbook 4.

they are 'wonderfully lean & bare'.⁷⁴ A review of Christina Rossetti's poetry appeared in *The Daily News* in March 1914, only a few months before Thomas started writing poetry: 'By a simple vocabulary, remarkably frugal of adjectives, and by lucid rhythms', with 'little words and common things', Christina Rossetti 'produces many different effects, always of equal firmness and fragility':

She refines things into their essences. Her poems are the unearthly essences, echoes, or reflections, of earthly tragedy. It is not short lines and little words only that make 'The Wind' seem a translation out of one of our poets by an elf

'She speaks, and it is music';⁷⁵ while Thomas said of Frost's verse that 'It speaks and it is poetry.'⁷⁶

In March 1915, Thomas told John Freeman of 'my growing imperviousness to anything not as plain as pen & ink & bread & butter',⁷⁷ by which he meant his aversion to the kind of ornate, abstract and fairly obscure poetry that Freeman had written. 'I can't learn the language', he told Freeman.⁷⁸ The word 'plain' features prominently in Thomas's poems, as does 'clear'. The ideal is to be like the owl's 'clear' cry in 'The Owl', 'telling me plain', or the bird in 'The Word' 'saying it clear'. He refers to 'Clean and clear' in the poem 'November'. 'And what you meant is plain', he says in 'After you Speak'. He used the word 'plain' again when describing his poetry to Gordon Bottomley in June 1915: 'although it has a plain look it does so far, I think, represent a culmination as a rule, & does not ask or get much correction on paper'.⁷⁹ The uncorrected text, a belief that first thoughts are best, is something he had admired in Borrow and Cobbett. He saw in Synge's drama 'a poetry that has nothing to do with invention, but falls naturally out of the life of the speakers, as apples fall in a still night'.⁸⁰ Simplicity comes from confidence, a sure sense of one's own voice, not self-consciousness but self-belief, and a belief in instinct. He isn't trying to be Robert Frost—as he said, his poems 'haven't been Frosty very much or so I imagine'.⁸¹ One early review said Thomas was worth 'fifty Frosts'.⁸² Walter de la Mare felt that Thomas 'had unlearned all literary influences'.⁸³

⁷⁴ 1 September 1909 (Thomas 1968: 191).

⁷⁵ Thomas (1914), a review of *Goblin Market, The Prince's Progress, and other Poems* by Christina Rossetti, *The Daily News*, 26 March. Cardiff scrapbook 6.

⁷⁶ Thomas (1981a: 125).

⁷⁷ Kendall (2007: 105).

⁷⁸ Kendall (2007: 147).

⁷⁹ Thomas (1968: 251).

⁸⁰ Thomas (1981a: 144).

⁸¹ To John Freeman (Thomas 1995: 106).

⁸² 'Solomon Eagle' (J. C. Squire), review of *An Annual of New Poetry, The New Statesman* (31 March 1917) (Rogers 1977: 180).

⁸³ Walter de la Mare, 'Foreword', in Thomas, *Collected Poems* (1936: 11).

We see a poet who is not anxious about what he should be, coming to poetry from the inside as an expert and from the outside as the innocent newcomer. In the very best sense he is an amateur poet—writing from a desire rather than financial necessity, uncommissioned (and soon anonymised as ‘Edward Eastaway’), unafraid of the simplicity and naivety of amateur art. Thomas contrasted the ‘subtlety’ of ‘great literature by known authors’ with the simplicity of folk songs and ballads, but he himself was moving from the subtlety of literature towards the ‘simplicity’ of folk songs and ballads.⁸⁴ Folk music ‘is transparently pure and truthful, simple and direct in its utterance’, according to its saviour, Cecil Sharp.⁸⁵ Thomas, too, loved the simplicity, commenting that ‘of all music, the old ballads and folk songs and their airs are richest in the plain, immortal symbols’.⁸⁶ In a review of *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1905) Thomas praised ballads for their extraordinary simplicity: ‘Their simplicity may remind us of statuary or of a green hill shining in sun after rain.’⁸⁷ A ballad ‘relieves us of all the effort of thought and fancy which modern poetry often demands’.⁸⁸ His own poetry refers to folk songs and popular songs on a number of occasions, and, more often, echoes and resembles them.⁸⁹ There is a poem that adapts ‘The Lincolnshire Poacher’, for example, and another that adapts the sea shanty ‘Amsterdam’; and the poem beginning ‘If I should ever by chance grow rich’ rhymes that line with ‘Childerditch’, echoing the old rhyme ‘Oranges and Lemons’, where ‘When I grow rich, / Say the bells at Shoreditch’.

Simple, down-to-earth, avoiding rhetoric, his poetry prefers short words rather than long. In some cases, the poems are remarkably monosyllabic: in the poem ‘Words’, the first eighteen lines contain only five words that are longer than one syllable and those five have only two syllables. Many of the poems are also very short. It is the sweetness of brevity: we often get a feeling that the poem ends abruptly, surprising us with its refusal to go any further. ‘A Private’, started on 6 January 1915, his first war poem, is eight lines long:

⁸⁴ See Thomas (1905), ‘English and Scottish Popular Ballads’, a review of *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, edited from the collection of Francis James Child by Helen Child Sargent & George Lyman Kittredge (Boston, MA, Houghton, Mifflin), in *The Speaker*, 28 October. Cardiff scrapbook 7. See also *The Heart of England* (1906: 198).

⁸⁵ Cited by Marsh (1982: 79).

⁸⁶ Thomas (1906: 197).

⁸⁷ Thomas, Edward (1905), ‘English and Scottish Popular Ballads’, a review of *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, edited from the collection of Francis James Child by Helen Child Sargent & George Lyman Kittredge (Boston, MA, Houghton, Mifflin), in *The Speaker*, 28 October. Cardiff scrapbook 7.

⁸⁸ ‘English and Scottish Popular Ballads’, a review of *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, edited from the collection of Francis James Child by Helen Child Sargent and George Lyman Kittredge (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1905), in *The Speaker* (28 October 1905). Cardiff scrapbook 7.

⁸⁹ See Barker (1987).

This ploughman dead in battle slept out of doors
Many a frosty night, and merrily
Answered staid drinkers, good bedmen, and all bores:
'At Mrs Greenland's Hawthorn Bush,' said he,
'I slept.' None knew which bush. Above the town,
Beyond 'The Drover', a hundred spot the down
In Wiltshire. And where now at last he sleeps
More sound in France—that, too, he secret keeps.

Beginning with an emphasis on 'This' as if the lines are on a non-existent grave, this is a parochial epitaph, such a local poem that only the ploughman knew which bush was 'Mrs Greenland's Hawthorn Bush'. Thomas allows us to believe that perhaps he met his ploughman when drinking in 'The Drover'. Only the word 'merrily' has more than two syllables, and it is to the poet's credit that 'A Private' is a poem that a Wiltshire ploughman could have written. War poets might express a desire to speak for others, to use a common language, to give voice to the uneducated, but rarely is that achieved as plainly as it is here. Not surprisingly, in *The Country* Thomas agreed with the man who said that "When a poet writes he is often putting into words what some little old countryman puzzled out among the sheep and the corn in a long lifetime".⁹⁰ By contrast, a Georgian poem, Gordon Bottomley's 'The Ploughman' (1917), emphasises the poet's detachment from ploughmen in a way that Thomas's does not. In Bottomley's poem, 'the unknowing ploughman climbs / Slowly and inveterately'.⁹¹

The poems don't just have a 'plain look', as Thomas put it, but also focus on simplicity as their subject. Ploughmen and ploughing represent simplicity—the plough, he said, is ancient simplicity. His ploughman even sleeps out of doors, as many Simple Lifers did (Lord Leverhulme and Robert Baden-Powell among them), and like the lady with the wraggle-taggle gypsies: 'For to-night I shall sleep in a cold open field'. In his first poem, 'Up in the Wind', he plays with the idea of escaping London to retreat into the wilds of the countryside:

Her cockney accent
Made her and the house seem wilder by calling up—
Only to be subdued at once by wildness—
The idea of London there in that forest parlour

The poem 'For these' is reminiscent of Thoreau's *Walden* and Yeats's 'Lake Isle of Innisfree'. 'The Sheiling', meanwhile, portrays a bourgeois home as if it is a cottage, or a shepherd's hut. And 'Rain' could be by a Thoreau and sounds like some descriptions in *Walden*: 'Rain, midnight rain, nothing but the wild rain / On this bleak hut, and solitude, and me'.

⁹⁰ Thomas (1913d: 48).

⁹¹ Bottomley (1917: 181).

The characters familiar from his prose populate his poems—the tramps or wanderers, the gypsies, those people Thomas called ‘careless poor men’,⁹² and children. There are a number of poems about children, written almost in a child’s voice. He had written that ‘children often make phrases that are poetry, though they still more often produce it in their acts and half-suggested thoughts’.⁹³ ‘Snow’, for instance, is a poem that was inspired by his daughter Myfanwy and her words are nearly half of the poem. And in another poem for Myfanwy, ‘What Shall I Give?’, Thomas suggests that she would be happier without wealth: ‘I shall not give her anything’.

Similarly, ‘The Huxter’ is a simple little piece about simple, happy lives. There is ‘not a plainer thing on the earth’. Only ‘plentiful’ has more than two syllables:

He has a hump like an ape on his back;
 He has of money a plentiful lack;
 And but for a gay coat of double his girth
 There is not a plainer thing on the earth
 This fine May morning.

But the huxter has a bottle of beer;
 He drives a cart and his wife sits near
 Who does not heed his lack or his hump;
 And they laugh as down the lane they bump
 This fine May morning.

In this poem about ‘lack’ and plainness, happiness can be had despite that lack, or, more likely, because of it. In ‘November’ he had observed how ‘earth is silent as it is black, / Yet not unhappy for its lack’.

The most famous of these simple, country characters though is his ‘Lob’, not only a traveller but a creator of simple verse, who ‘made up weather rhymes / Which others spoil’. Two gypsy poems assert the limitations of poetry when compared with simple, demotic music. In one ‘The Penny Whistle’, a gypsy playing ‘an old nursery melody’ says ‘far more than I am saying’. In the other, ‘The Gypsy’, he says:

I paid nothing then,
 As I pay nothing now with the dipping of my pen
 For her brother’s music when he drummed the tambourine
 And stamped his feet, which made the workmen passing grin
 While his mouth-organ changed to a rascally Bacchanal dance
 ‘Over the hills and far away.’

⁹² Thomas (1912a: 319).

⁹³ Thomas (1910b: 85).

That poem then describes the December fair in the simplest way possible, using a list: 'farmer, and auctioneer, / Cheap-jack, balloon-man, drover with crooked stick, and steer, / Pig, turkey, goose, and duck'. 'Adlestrop' also uses a list to sketch the scene in its third stanza—in fact, based on notes Thomas had taken in June 1914, the whole of 'Adlestrop' is distinctly list-like.

'ADLESTROP'

Sturge Moore argued that Thomas moved from prose to poetry in order to avoid a fashion for 'remote places with quaint names',⁹⁴ but 'Adlestrop' is his most popular poem, and its simplicity has been key to its popularity. The poem offers a picture of the simple life, described simply, with a rhythm that is conversational, natural:

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

The steam hissed. Someone cleared his throat.
No one left and no one came
On the bare platform. What I saw
Was Adlestrop—only the name

And willows, willow-herb, and grass,
And meadowsweet, and haycocks dry,
No whit less still and lonely fair
Than the high cloudlets in the sky.

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

The poem's heart, the name Adlestrop, is unusual (most of us would only know it through this poem) but for Thomas it represented simplicity. In *A Literary Pilgrim in England* (1917), one of Thomas's last books, he discussed the role of place-names in Thomas Hardy's poetry, arguing that 'The general effect of using local names with no significance for the stranger, and no special private value of sound or association for the poet ... is to aid reality by suggestions of gross and humble simplicity.'⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Moore (1920: 79).

⁹⁵ Thomas (1917: 150–1).

Arguably, place-names are the simplest words because they have no meaning. Attempts to find hidden meaning in the name 'Adlestrop' rather miss the point.⁹⁶ And if Hardy was an inspiration, so too was A. E. Housman. Housman's 'Bredon Hill', for instance, is certainly similar to 'Adlestrop' (the two locations are about twenty-five miles apart).⁹⁷

Housman's poem uses simple language, repeating the word 'and' so that ten of the thirty-five lines begin with that word. In 'Adlestrop', 'and' occurs ten times in a poem of less than a hundred words. 'The' occurs eight times. The poem is built around repetition. A dozen different words are used more than once. The second stanza alone uses 'Someone', 'no one' twice, 'on' and 'only'. Words echo each other quite straightforwardly: when 'hissed' is used it is followed by 'his' three words later. 'Minute a' is echoed by 'mistier'. 'Willow' is used twice in one line then echoed by 'meadow' in the next line, the 'owe' sound then occurring in 'lonely' in the next line. The last syllable of 'Oxfordshire' is repeated, 'only' is repeated in 'lonely' and so on. The word 'only' is key, as is the feeling of absence—expressed by 'no one', and 'bare'. This is a poem about simplicity, a poem pared back to essentials, a poem no longer than it needs to be. And emptiness, bareness or absence, recur as a subject in Thomas's work. His poems are filled with holes and absences and abandoned spaces. The poem 'Old Man' closes with an emptiness that offers no closure: 'Neither father nor mother, nor any playmate; / Only an avenue, dark, nameless, without end.' In 1913, when undertaking the journeys described in *In Pursuit of Spring*, Thomas took a series of photographs that, like Adlestrop, show an empty, bare countryside—as if the war has already happened, as if everyone is already dead. There are a number of simple, unpeopled roads. As he says in *The Heart of England* 'the road ahead was a simple white line'.⁹⁸ The photos' ordinariness is striking and memorable, revealing Thomas's eye for what is least extraordinary.

'THE WASP TRAP'

In *The Speaker*, in October 1898, Thomas's story 'The Coming of Autumn' described 'a certain favoured cottage-girl' in Caermarthen, who finds 'inexplicable value' in 'simple words', and 'began to find how interesting and even intoxicating the simplest things in life may become':

⁹⁶ See, for instance, Paulin (1981: 59). Grigson's response appeared a fortnight later: 'I hope this silly deduction from a false premise is not going to be embedded in commentaries on the poems of Edward Thomas' (Grigson 1981).

⁹⁷ See Cuthbertson (2004).

⁹⁸ Thomas (1906: 11).

Indoors, for example, she could not fail to note the exorbitant, spiritual value of single moments on the staircase of the darkened house in long summer twilights, when passing speeches on small matters—to her mother perhaps—were so pregnant, as if they were the foam on the surface of a great deep, beaming with some of the significance of the deep. Or, again, she found the pious melodies heard afar from a little band ere the world awakens on Sunday morning tumultuously impressive.⁹⁹

In the brilliant little poem 'The Wasp Trap', Thomas focuses on the most insignificant object, a wasp trap made from a jar—a jam jar presumably (in his notebook he recorded seeing a bottle used in this way). There is moonlight too, but this is a poem about a jar, not the moon—he is, as Thomas said in his *Keats* (1916), 'though a lover of the moon, a most sublunary poet, earthly'.¹⁰⁰ Thomas sees beauty in the simple sublunary jar that is now a star:

This moonlight makes
The lovely lovelier
Than ever before lakes
And meadows were.

And yet they are not,
Though this their hour is, more
Lovely than things that were not
Lovely before.

Nothing on earth,
And in the heavens no star,
For pure brightness is worth
More than that jar,

For wasps meant, now
A star—long may it swing
From the dead apple-bough,
So glistening.

'Anything, however small, may make a poem', he wrote.¹⁰¹ Contentment and meaning are given to him by this littlest of things. It is a small, simple, beautiful poem, and as clear as glass—a poetic equivalent of the jam jar. And Thomas has the ability to create what look like lines from an old song, but which are in fact original lines of his own. Again, the poem is almost childlike; he sees and speaks as a child would. The word 'lovely' appears three times and 'lovelier' is used too. As he said of folk songs, 'Their

⁹⁹Thomas (1898), 'The Coming of Autumn', *The Speaker*, 22 October. Cardiff scrapbook 7.

¹⁰⁰Thomas (1916: 39).

¹⁰¹Thomas (1911b: 28).

alphabet is small.’¹⁰² All of the words in Thomas’s ‘The Wasp Trap’ are simple and familiar. What an amazing last line it has—it is just two words. That word ‘glistening’ and the word ‘lovelier’ are the only words of more than two syllables. (Thomas had said of Christopher Marlowe that ‘his characteristic word is “lovely”’—but here it is very much Thomas’s word.¹⁰³)

As a critic, Thomas used the term ‘magic reality’ and even ‘magic realism’ to describe Hardy and Yeats,¹⁰⁴ and ‘The Wasp Trap’ too creates that magic reality. Reading it, one might be reminded of Samuel Palmer’s Shoreham pictures, or of one of Thomas’s favourite passages of prose, in Thomas Traherne’s *Centuries of Meditations*, which begins:

The corn was orient and immortal wheat, which never should be reaped, nor was ever sown. I thought it had stood from everlasting to everlasting. The dust and stones of the street were as precious as gold: the gates were at first the end of the world. The green trees when I saw them first through one of the gates transported and ravished me, their sweetness and unusual beauty made my heart to leap, and almost mad with ecstasy, they were such strange and wonderful things. The Men! O what venerable and reverend creatures did the aged seem! Immortal Cherubims! And young men glittering and sparkling Angels, and maids strange seraphic pieces of life and beauty!¹⁰⁵

Like Palmer, Traherne gives us, Thomas said, ‘the appearance of the world to his childish eyes’.¹⁰⁶ For Thomas, the passage shows Traherne’s ‘characteristic ecstasy at the sight of common things’.¹⁰⁷ Compare Thomas’s poem with a similar and admirable poem by the Georgian John Drinkwater, ‘Moonlit Apples’ (1917), and Thomas’s poem is altogether freer and more alive, and more able to embody and convey that wonder. Comparing Thomas with Georgianism one often sees a greater naturalness in Thomas: as he said of Synge, the words fall naturally from him ‘as apples fall in a still night’¹⁰⁸—and one could also say that the words move as naturally as the jar swinging from the dead apple-bough. When Thomas is at his simplest, he is at his best—‘The Wasp Trap’ is often ignored,¹⁰⁹ but, arguably, it is his greatest poem.

¹⁰² Thomas (1906: 197).

¹⁰³ Thomas (1909b: xii). ‘Lovely’ is now a word we might also associate with G. M. Hopkins.

¹⁰⁴ Discussing Hardy’s poetry, Thomas noted ‘a kind of magic reality’ (Thomas 1917: 151). In a review of Yeats’s *Deirdre* in 1907, Thomas said that ‘As a play, it stands alone in its magic realism’ (Thomas 1907).

¹⁰⁵ Traherne (1908: 157–8). Quoted by Thomas (1903: 56–7). First quoted in Traherne (1903: xxiii–xxiv).

¹⁰⁶ Thomas (1908), a review of *Centuries of Meditations* by Thomas Traherne, *The Morning Post*, 31 August 1908. Cardiff scrapbook 5. Thomas took ‘precious as gold’ from Traherne and used the simile in his poem ‘Words’. (See Cuthbertson 2005b.)

¹⁰⁷ Thomas (1903: 56).

¹⁰⁸ Thomas (1981a: 144).

¹⁰⁹ For instance, it is overlooked in Motion (1980) and Hollis (2011), and it is given only the briefest passing mention in Wilson (2015).

THOMAS AND THE CRITICS

Early praise for Thomas's poetry focussed on this bareness, this ordinariness and on his simplicity generally. In 1920, Walter de la Mare stated that Thomas's poetry 'ennobles by simplification'.¹¹⁰ In *On the Margin* (1923), Aldous Huxley highlighted Thomas's 'bare precision':¹¹¹ 'He devised a curiously bare and candid verse to express with all possible simplicity and clarity his clear sensations and emotions.'¹¹² The bare verse was simple but 'devoid of any affectation, whether of cleverness or a too great simplicity'.¹¹³ An article in 1924, in *The Gloucester Journal*, quoted Thomas's remarks about the simplicity of folk songs, and said that:

These qualities he praised in folk-song are, with a difference (the difference between the inarticulate unconscious music of the untrained artist, and the deliberate and subtle skill of the trained artist), the qualities of his own verse. 'The quintessential' and 'simplicity'—these are the notes of the two thin posthumous volumes of his lyrics.

Thomas's poetry has, we are told, 'the perfect and unaffected simplicity of which Dante, the greatest of all poets, is the greatest of all exemplars. Thomas's has that unforced order and phrasing, in its kind, that Dante's has'.¹¹⁴

Nonetheless, one of the first reviews Thomas's poetry received, in *The Scotsman* in March 1917, a gloriously grumpy review of *An Annual of New Poetry* (which contained poems by Thomas, Frost and six Georgians, including Bottomley's 'The Ploughman'), expressed dislike of 'the modern school of realistic poetry', sarcastically declaring it better than Shelley and Wordsworth, and sarcastically associating Thomas with difficulty—'Difficult, however, as Mr Eastaway's art is, it can be imitated, and Mr Robert Frost does it not unsuccessfully.'¹¹⁵ Thomas's simplicity clashed with some Victorian ideas of poetry. In 1928, 'Adlestrop' was dismissed as a failure because 'the words are commonplace except the name of the station'.¹¹⁶ And, with the arrival of Modernism, with the arrival of difficulty, with T. S. Eliot announcing that poets must be difficult,¹¹⁷ from that new perspective Thomas's work was also seen as

¹¹⁰ Walter de la Mare, 'Foreword', in Thomas, *Collected Poems* (1936: 10).

¹¹¹ Huxley, 'Edward Thomas', in Huxley (1923: 154).

¹¹² Huxley (1923: 153).

¹¹³ Huxley (1923: 153).

¹¹⁴ Kerr (1924: 13).

¹¹⁵ 'One can imagine how Marvell or Cowper would have envied the sweet simplicity and tender grace' (Anon 1917).

¹¹⁶ E. A. Greening Lamborn's *Poetic Values* (cited by Pinion 1990: 294).

¹¹⁷ For Eliot on difficulty see 'The Metaphysical Poets' (1921), and *The Use of Poetry and Use of Criticism* (1932).

unsophisticated. Simplicity (of a kind) is an important characteristic of Modernism—it's there in imagism, minimalism, primitivism, Cubism, Bauhaus and so on, albeit without Thomas's naturalness or warmth—but Modernism's emphasis on difficulty, in poetry in particular, was one reason why Thomas was an underrated poet. There has also been an unfortunate tendency to associate difficulty with diversity, progressiveness or liberty, despite the political opinions of Modernists like Ezra Pound, and Thomas's simplicity therefore made him conservative, unenlightened; even though it was Thomas's simplicity that, for him, went hand-in-hand with democracy, equality, freedom, fairness and honesty (in 1912, Edmund Gosse described Thomas as a 'youngish Socialist journalist' who worked on 'radical' newspapers).¹¹⁸

There has been then, among Thomas's greatest advocates, a refusal to accept his simplicity. Early on, F. R. Leavis's *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932) saw hidden value in Thomas, and in *Scrutiny* (where he described Thomas's poetry as 'decidedly limited'), Leavis refused to accept that Thomas really did like the writers he claimed to like.¹¹⁹ Simplicity became surface simplicity, a disguise that supposedly hid the complexity beneath it. We have repeatedly been told that, although the poems might look simple, they are in fact not at all. Under the influence of Leavis, Harry Coombes, in his book on Thomas in 1956, expressed his unhappiness that Thomas 'has been seen mainly as a simple poet writing of simple things and of simple joys and sorrows';¹²⁰ so Coombes set out to expose 'depth' and complexities,¹²¹ but his book failed to defeat its enemy, 'the simplicity-lovers',¹²² and, even after reading the book carefully, one could still easily believe in Thomas's 'simple charm'.¹²³ Similar approaches followed from other critics, arguing, for instance, that 'Thomas can be read as a Georgian, a poet of nature, melancholy, and the transfixed lyrical moment, but he is more complex than this suggests';¹²⁴ or 'it is not as a simple rural poet that Thomas, any more than Frost, should be valued',¹²⁵ or 'infinitely complex beneath its surface transparency'.¹²⁶ It has been argued that the poems carry 'much cultural and metaphysical freight' but do so lightly: 'Their difficulty is never of the surface.'¹²⁷

¹¹⁸ Edmund Gosse to [Thomas] Wise, 30 November 1912. London, British Library, MS Ashley A4474, fo. 85v. See Thomas (2011b: xxxvii).

¹¹⁹ Leavis (1939: 442).

¹²⁰ Coombes (1956: 12).

¹²¹ Coombes (1956: 15).

¹²² Coombes (1956: 16).

¹²³ Coombes (1956: 12).

¹²⁴ Danby (1959: 308). Danby, a Professor at Bangor, unearthed 'the Thomas complexity'.

¹²⁵ Thwaite (1978: 36).

¹²⁶ Longley, "'Worn New": Edward Thomas and English Tradition' (1986: 48).

¹²⁷ Longley (2008).

Even if Thomas isn't called a Modernist, or is seen as an alternative to Modernism, there is evidence of Modernism's tyranny in universities here—poems have to be judged and justified in terms of how complex they are, or, really, how Eliotic they are. Thomas should, though, be valued because he is good, not because he has been rebranded as a bit Modernist. Indeed, we should value the work for its simplicity rather than its complexity. Pushing Thomas towards Modernism and complexity is not only a misreading of his work and his intentions, but it will always make him seem a failure, a producer of watered-down 'English' Modernism. He praised the simplicity of Pound's *Personae*, but he also complained that 'Again and again his verse strikes you as too artificial, too tricky; the frequent use of old words and eccentricities of phrasing give it an air of affectation.'¹²⁸ Later, reviewing *Des Imagistes: An Anthology* (1914), having admired the austerity of Pound's writing 'under the restraint imposed by Chinese originals or models', Thomas said of an 'impressive-looking' Pound poem that 'I do not see the meaning' and 'I even doubt whether the words mean anything.'¹²⁹ Yet English Literature departments have been conditioned to create and celebrate complexity. Edward de Bono has complained that academics love a complex book 'because obviously the book needs the special skill of the academic for its interpretation to ordinary people' and simultaneously 'the complexity encourages any interpretation.'¹³⁰ And where complexity doesn't exist, it will be created. As Thomas said of folk songs, 'The best of them seem to be written in a language that should be universal, if only simplicity were truly simple to mankind'.¹³¹

There have been attempts to argue that, when inspected closely, Thomas's poems express thoughts and feelings that are more complex than they might at first seem, but even with 'Old Man', which is the poem that is usually mentioned by critics in this context,¹³² the ultimate feeling we have is of clarity. 'Old Man' is remarkable and unique; it is perceptive, even modern, and it is about the avenues of memory; it is not a typical Thomas poem; but it would be an exaggeration to call it complex. The poem is simpler than the mind it explores.

There's also a kind of wordplay, which comes perhaps from literary theory—from New Historicism in particular—but more accurately might be seen as a kind of extreme close reading, speculative and creative. This is a fun game, a jump down the rabbit hole, a kind of highbrow wordsearch puzzle, a hunt for hidden meanings,

¹²⁸ Thomas (1909), 'A New Poet', a review of *Personae of Ezra Pound*, *The Bookman*, July 1909. Cardiff scrapbook 8.

¹²⁹ Thomas (1914), a review of *Des Imagistes: An Anthology*, *The New Weekly*, 9 May. Cardiff scrapbook 6.

¹³⁰ de Bono (1998: 65).

¹³¹ Thomas (1906: 197).

¹³² See, for instance, Thwaite (1978: 36), or Maxwell (2016: 97).

displaying ingenuity or madness; and sometimes the game is played with real flare—as it is, for example, when Tom Paulin conducts a fanciful dissection of ‘The Owl’ in *The Secret Life of Poems* (2008). But that supposed secret life doesn’t improve the poem and could well kill it. Looking at the opening line, ‘Downhill I came, hungry, and yet not starved’, Paulin says it is a simple line and yet there are, he says, ‘the subliminal flickers, the tiny signals, which the opening line sends out’.¹³³ So, for example, the ‘Hun’ (a word that is not actually used in the poem) is there in the word ‘hungry’; and the word ‘unable’ in the last line of the poem ‘takes us back to the middle of the first line’ to ‘hungry’ and to ‘Hun’, the word Thomas ‘wanted to infiltrate his poem’.¹³⁴ Reading Thomas’s intentions based on no evidence and plenty to the contrary is particularly dangerous.

This kind of investigation sometimes emanates from a desire to see Thomas as a war poet. So ‘Hun’ is in ‘hungry’. Reeds likened to ‘criss-cross bayonets’ in ‘Bright Clouds’ became some kind of coded reference, even though the simile predated the war (Edna Longley notes that Thomas first used it back in 1895).¹³⁵ A swift is like a bow and arrow, but that martial image too had already been used by Thomas in peacetime.¹³⁶ In the case of Wilfred Owen the critics or admirers’ focus on the First World War has simplified the poetry, reducing it to slogans and cliché, whereas in the case of Edward Thomas that same focus has done the opposite, complicating the work unnecessarily. Edward Thomas has been a lot more fortunate than Owen though (Owen is very nearly a lost cause in that regard).

ALLUSIVENESS

Much of the argument for complexity comes down to allusiveness, ‘Thomas’s echoing allusiveness’ as it has been called,¹³⁷ which in recent years has frequently been stressed. The poetry did emerge out of a wide range of reading, and out of a brilliant associative mind; indeed, we can detect the influence of some of his favourite examples of simplicity, such as Shakespeare’s ‘When Icicles Hang by the Wall’,¹³⁸ the poetry of

¹³³ Paulin (2008: 147).

¹³⁴ Paulin (2008: 149).

¹³⁵ Edna Longley (in Thomas 2008: 303).

¹³⁶ In ‘Haymaking’, Thomas describes ‘The swift with wings and tail as sharp and narrow / As if the bow had flown off with the arrow’, and in his prose piece called ‘The Artist’, in *Light and Twilight* in 1911, he refers to ‘the flight of the swift which was as if the arrow and bow had flown away together’ (Thomas 1911a: 133).

¹³⁷ Edna Longley, ‘Going Back to Edward Thomas’ (in Cuthbertson and Newlyn 2007: 37).

¹³⁸ There are references to this song from *Love’s Labour’s Lost* in ‘Lob’ and ‘The Owl’.

W. H. Davies,¹³⁹ and the prose of Thomas Traherne.¹⁴⁰ A few writers are mentioned by name. Cobbett, for instance, is named in the early drafts of 'Lob',¹⁴¹ and he is mentioned, in simple company, in 'Haymaking', where the scene is 'Older than Clare and Cobbett, Morland and Crome'. But we should also note Thomas's dislike of bookishness (at times, of books themselves), and how he seemed to be avoiding his learning rather than deploying it. 'I am sick of books', he had written in 1904, sounding a little like the Lady of Shalott,¹⁴² and a decade later, in 1914, he declared:

I should like to have 5 years free from reading or writing about books. The occupation turns country into town.¹⁴³

When Philip Larkin says books are a load of crap one feels he's only joking, but in Edward Thomas's writing the similar confessions are more sincere. He had learnt to hate books and the literary world and complained about being trapped in bookishness. Indeed, books were killing him just as much as they destroyed Leonard Bast, who ends up dead beneath a heap of them. Thomas recognised that books were something to escape from. He displayed plenty of weary disregard for books and bookishness, and took some pleasure in burning books at home.

In W. H. Hudson, Thomas admired how 'As he mentions and uses no books, so he seems a character as free from literary influence as his shepherds.'¹⁴⁴ He approvingly said of 'unbookish' Synge's poems that 'most of them seem to have been written without remembering any poetry'.¹⁴⁵ It's remarkable how little bookishness there is in the poetry of a poet who spent a career reading and writing about books. Most of the so-called allusions in Thomas's work are nothing of the sort. At best what we could say is that if there are allusions sometimes (rather than echoes and evidence of Thomas's thought processes),¹⁴⁶ then, like any allusion, those in Thomas are not

¹³⁹ In 'Roads', 'all the clouds like sheep' (l.22) suggests Davies's poem 'The Likeness', a poem Thomas admired, which was in *New Poems* (1913), a collection dedicated 'To Helen and Edward Thomas'.

¹⁴⁰ Written as Thomas travelled through Gloucestershire and especially the area where it meets Herefordshire, 'Words' says 'Tough as oak' (line 14), influenced by Thomas Fuller's description of Gloucestershire, and, the next line, 'Precious as gold' (line 15), from Thomas Traherne's description of Herefordshire (a county named in the poem).

¹⁴¹ London, British Library, MS 44990, f.53r.

¹⁴² Thomas to Jesse Berridge, 16 September 1904 (Thomas 1983: 45).

¹⁴³ Edward Thomas to R. C. Trevelyan, 3 April 1914. Cambridge, Trinity College Library, MS RCT 17 (122), f.1v.

¹⁴⁴ Thomas (1910), a review of *A Shepherd's Life: Impressions of the South Wiltshire Downs* by W. H. Hudson, *The Morning Post*, 26 September. Cardiff scrapbook 5.

¹⁴⁵ Thomas (1909), a review of *Poems and Translations* by John M. Synge, *The Daily Chronicle*, 26 July. Cardiff scrapbook 4.

¹⁴⁶ Jan Marsh says that in Thomas's verse 'echoes and allusions to virtually the whole past of English poetry may be found', and that other poets 'lurk' behind his poems (Marsh 1978: 199).

necessary to the poem, we do not need to identify them and Thomas did not want them to complicate the poem. It would be a mistake to see that any allusion is an important characteristic of the poem. It has been said that they are ‘unobtrusive’ allusions but many so-called allusions are so unobtrusive that they probably aren’t allusions at all.¹⁴⁷

In the anthology *This England*, compiled by Thomas in 1915, he provides a passage from the ‘Preface’ to *Lyrical Ballads*:

The Poet writes under one restriction only, namely, the necessity of giving immediate pleasure to a human Being possessed of that information which may be expected from him, not as a lawyer, a physician, a mariner, an astronomer, or a natural philosopher, but as a Man.¹⁴⁸

This is the extent of the passage, specifically given to us as evidence of Wordsworth’s greatness. Earlier, in *Maurice Maeterlinck* in 1911, discussing symbolism, Thomas had noted that poems used to have ‘a simple fundamental meaning which every sane reader can agree upon; above and beyond this each one builds as he can or must’.¹⁴⁹ And he says that ‘Whatever be the subject, the poem must not depend for its main effect upon anything outside itself except the humanity of the reader’ because ‘sooner or later, it will be left naked and solitary, and will so be judged, and if it does not create about itself a world of its own it is condemned to endure the death which is its element’.¹⁵⁰

Thomas said of the simple words of folk songs that they ‘lend themselves to infinite interpretations, according to the listener’s heart’.¹⁵¹ ‘By its simplicity and remoteness from life’, a song that he hears ‘set going the potent logic of fancy which would lead many men to diverse conclusions’.¹⁵² A ballad ‘comes to us so nakedly that we can clothe it as we will and interpret it *en la perfectissime partie*, so that we make it bear meanings of which the early chanters of it never dreamed’. In ballads, ‘the reader may perhaps be excused if he finds about them something which they have not of

¹⁴⁷ ‘This allusiveness is unobtrusive and natural in Thomas’s verse, as if he were conscious of no division between his and earlier uses of language: all inhabit the same world’ Marsh (1978: 199). Edna Longley also used that word ‘unobtrusive’: ‘Steeped in English poetry, whose living trail can be glimpsed in unobtrusive allusions throughout his work, Thomas certainly knew (as much as T. S. Eliot) just “how derivative he was being”’. Longley, “‘Worn New’: Edward Thomas and English Tradition’ (1986: 71).

¹⁴⁸ Thomas (1915b: 152–3).

¹⁴⁹ Thomas (1911b: 21).

¹⁵⁰ Thomas (1911b: 28).

¹⁵¹ Thomas (1906: 198).

¹⁵² Thomas (1906: 199).

themselves'.¹⁵³ The reader of Thomas's poetry likewise finds a variety of meanings and echoes. But the complexity is somewhere other than in the poetry. It has been argued that 'There is always more to decode in Edward Thomas'¹⁵⁴—and in 2013 a book called *The Secret Code of Edward Thomas* was published¹⁵⁵—but that decoding must be an investigation of Edward Thomas's mind or, more likely, the mind of one of his readers. We have been told that in Thomas's poem 'Two Pewits', 'Clarity or apparent simplicity conceals complex art',¹⁵⁶ which is in a sense true, but Thomas himself said that that poem 'had to be as clear as glass' and it is.¹⁵⁷

Commentary has not been so clear or so simple. Reviewing an edition of Thomas's poetry in 2004, P. J. Kavanagh described Thomas's poems as 'so bare, so perfect' but contrasted their simplicity with Peter Sacks's 'surprisingly wordy' introduction to the book, which Kavanagh identified as 'Proof, maybe, that simplicity, and Thomas was far from being a simple man, is of all things the most difficult to attain.'¹⁵⁸ Writing about Thomas—often as unclear as Thomas's is clear, as complex as Thomas's is simple—can get in the way and obscure or choke the poetry. Kavanagh picks out 'The Watchers' as quintessentially simple, but this is a poem that has had all sorts of complexity given to it by others:

By the ford at the town's edge
Horse and carter rest:
The carter smokes on the bridge
Watching the water press in swathes about his horse's chest.

From the inn one watches, too,
In the room for visitors
That has no fire but a view
And many cases of stuffed fish, vermin, and kingfishers.

An article in *A Review of English Literature* in 1964 discussed how the fish are common symbols of fertility, and that the water may have some general symbolic value, as might the fire of the smoking carter. That 1964 article concluded that, although 'The poem makes its points simply', there's much intricacy to explore.¹⁵⁹ Nonetheless, looking at this little inn poem one might think of Thomas's description of Synge's simple

¹⁵³ Thomas, Edward (1905), 'English and Scottish Popular Ballads', a review of *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, edited from the collection of Francis James Child by Helen Child Sargent & George Lyman Kittredge (Boston, MA, Houghton, Mifflin), in *The Speaker*, 28 October. Cardiff scrapbook 7.

¹⁵⁴ Edna Longley, 'Going Back to Edward Thomas', in Guy Cuthbertson and Lucy Newlyn (2007: 31).

¹⁵⁵ Smithers (2013).

¹⁵⁶ Edna Longley (in Thomas 2008: 205).

¹⁵⁷ Thomas (2008: 205).

¹⁵⁸ Kavanagh (2004).

¹⁵⁹ Emslie (1964: 68).

verse: ‘They are notes such as a man sitting alone might scratch on a window at an inn.’¹⁶⁰ And every visitor to the inn can interpret them differently, and wrap them up in their own thoughts and reading. What matters is that the poem is, in Kavanagh’s words, ‘so bare, so perfect’.¹⁶¹ ‘Perfect’ is a word Thomas deserves—discussing ‘The Long Small Room’, Peter Levi said that the poem ‘seems to me perfect’: ‘It hardly needs even this amount of simplistic exegesis’.¹⁶² That surely is a feeling we have with many of his poems—exegesis is redundant. Like Walter de la Mare’s ‘The Listeners’, a poem it resembles, ‘The Long Small Room’ achieves both mystery and clarity.¹⁶³ It is a poem to be read again and again, but not necessarily in order to understand the poem better or to find yet another interpretation of it. Within the poem, as in others, Thomas closes down any pursuit of hidden meanings: ‘When I look back I am like moon, sparrow, and mouse / That witnessed what they could never understand’. The poem is simply what it is, and anything else is brought by the reader. As with ‘Adlestrop’, there might be unanswered questions, but Thomas isn’t hiding any answers.

THOMAS TODAY

Ultimately, simplicity is a significant reason for Thomas’s unpopularity in some quarters, and, at the same time for his relevance, appeal and survival today. Thomas’s popularity has risen sharply since the millennium and especially following Matthew Hollis’s book on Thomas in 2011 (Hollis caught a mood, even though as it happens that successful book says almost nothing about simplicity specifically);¹⁶⁴ and one could seriously speculate that Thomas’s popularity is connected to the recent return to simplicity. As Thomas knew, simplicity isn’t always popular with everyone, and he wasn’t aiming to write best-selling verse; but, for various reasons, including the economy and the environment, we have gone back to ‘nuts, bananas, and truth, and simplicity and all that sort of thing’. We have experienced a 21st-century version of the ‘return to simplicity’ cult, but it has had an identity, a lifestyle, of its own: pure food, clean eating, detoxing, decluttering, knitting, baking, wellness, Scandinavian homes, normcore, the White Company, A.P.C., FRAME, a million motivational memes, minimalism, being more with less, and Apple (a company that aimed not at

¹⁶⁰ Edward Thomas, a review of *Poems and Translations* by John M. Synge, *The Daily Chronicle* (26 July 1909). Cardiff scrapbook 4.

¹⁶¹ Kavanagh (2004: 36).

¹⁶² Peter Levi, ‘Notes on Edward Thomas’ (in Barker 1987: 29).

¹⁶³ Thomas (1912), a review of *The Listeners and Other Poems* by Walter de la Mare, *The Bookman*, August 1912. Cardiff scrapbook 6.

¹⁶⁴ Hollis (2011).

surface simplicity but at something deeper, and 'built an ecosystem of Simplicity').¹⁶⁵ In an age of austerity, we saw a return to the celebration of simplicity—an austerity government arrived the year before Edward Thomas's big year of 2011. But even so, there was money to be made. *Deliciously Ella* began in 2012; decluttering became a global craze with Marie Kondo's book *The Life-changing Magic of Tidying* in 2014 and the television series *Organise the World* (Netflix). There was Danish Hygge—*The Little Book of Hygge* (2016)¹⁶⁶ was an international bestseller—and Swedish Lagom, the philosophy of just enough and not too much. A *Forbes* report in 2016 was entitled 'Millennials Go Minimal'.¹⁶⁷ Articles on millennials and the yearning for simplicity are legion. The relationship between mental health and the countryside and physical activity is now much discussed. And lifestyle simplicity has overlapped with the incredible explosion of nature writing in the last few years (thoroughly bookish though that writing often is)—these books in turn overlap with Edward Thomas. We can at least see why Edward Thomas should be popular now, and in the future.

Edmund Blunden, writing in 1958, foresaw this popularity: 'we may count on Edward Thomas for a benefaction as the need for a renewal of simple life and natural piety increases'.¹⁶⁸ Back in 1919, Walter de la Mare had commented that Thomas offers simplicity to those whose minds are not at rest—'the desire of many of us now is for the simple, lonely, and solitary things which circumstance may in part deny us, but, far more, our own troubled and divided hearts, busy and restless minds'. And de la Mare added that we should approach Thomas's work with a mind that is open to simplicity: 'His work, then, can give its best only to a reader who will give in his turn the attention of his imagination, that simplicity and receptivity of consciousness not easy to achieve or to maintain'.¹⁶⁹ Thomas's earliest readers were right to see the simplicity and not go hankering after something else ('Thomas studies' might require a kind of archaeology, not for unearthing hidden meanings but scraping away years of accretion to get back to the poetry that has become buried in criticism). To take five words from 'As the Team's Head-Brass', the reader's approach could be summed up as 'I should want nothing more', just as that was also in effect Thomas's own attitude, in pursuit of plainness. Universities might not always be the best places for that mindset. They tend to prefer Beethoven rather than 'All Around my Hat'. Note that Thomas wrote poetry about the Lincolnshire Poacher and all the birds of Oxfordshire but not Lincoln College or Oxford University. The Oxford scholar was trying to shed his education. Even in his book on Oxford in 1903, he was unusually uninterested in the

¹⁶⁵ Segall (2013: 158). Also see Isaacson (2012).

¹⁶⁶ Wiking (2016).

¹⁶⁷ Weinswig (2016).

¹⁶⁸ Blunden (1958).

¹⁶⁹ de la Mare (1919).

teaching and learning. In 1909, he said he had forgotten everything he learnt for his degree. His greatness lies in his ability to look beyond learning, books, ‘culture’ and reading.

When war arrived he considered lecturing and teaching, but he said he would rather ‘plough & hoe & reap & sow & be a farmer’s boy’.¹⁷⁰ And then he volunteered for the army, where he did have a teaching job but it was a return to nature, teaching map-reading. In 1916, at the end of his time at Hare Hall camp in Essex, Thomas wrote to Robert Frost, ‘I don’t believe I often had as good times as I have had, one way and another, these past 13 months.’¹⁷¹ There was a greater simplicity about his life and thought by then. He told Frost, ‘You can’t imagine the degree of my disinclination for books.’¹⁷² When Thomas went to France, he wrote no poetry: his career as a poet reached ‘the clean white page’ of ‘The Long Small Room’. His war diary was the beautiful triumph of plain prose, offering, too, images of simplicity. On a slip of paper loose inside the diary he had written notes that ended with the line ‘Roads shining like river up hill after rain’,¹⁷³ and he had once offered ‘a green hill shining in sun after rain’ as an image of quintessential simplicity.¹⁷⁴ His life and journeys were no longer book fodder. Happy to lose a writing hand, he had written in ‘As the Team’s Head-Brass’ that:

‘If I could only come back again, I should.
I could spare an arm. I shouldn’t want to lose
A leg. If I should lose my head, why, so,
I should want nothing more ...’

Writing about a version of his young self, Thomas described how he was pleased by ‘The monotony and simplicity of death’.¹⁷⁵ In the story ‘The Attempt’, Thomas provides another self-portrait, suicidal Morgan Traheron, who intends to shoot himself: ‘Recalling the repulsiveness of the weapon, the idea of a rope crossed his mind, not because it was preferable, but because it was something else, something apart from his

¹⁷⁰ 22 July 1915 (Frost & Thomas 2003: 82).

¹⁷¹ Cited by R. George Thomas (1985: 272).

¹⁷² 9 September 1916 (Frost & Thomas 2003: 148).

¹⁷³ Thomas (1981c: 194).

¹⁷⁴ In his review of *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, Thomas praised ballads for their extraordinary simplicity: ‘Their simplicity may remind us of statuary or of a green hill shining in sun after rain. Thomas (1905), ‘English and Scottish Popular Ballads’, a review of *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, edited from the collection of Francis James Child by Helen Child Sargent & George Lyman Kittredge (Boston, MA, Houghton, Mifflin), in *The Speaker*, 28 October. Cardiff scrapbook 7.

¹⁷⁵ Thomas (2011a: 309).

plans which now had a painful air of simplicity.¹⁷⁶ Suicide can be a very simple solution to the mind's complexities:

To escape from the difficulty of life, from the need of deliberating on it, from the hopeless search for something that would make it possible for him to go on living like anybody else without questioning, he was eager to hide himself away in annihilation, just as, when a child, he hid himself in the folds of his mother's dress or her warm bosom, where he could shut out everything save the bright patterns floating on the gloom under his closed eyelids.¹⁷⁷

Attempts to achieve simplicity can be forms of self-denial, and from there self-annihilation might be the natural next step. As he wrote in 'Lights Out':

There is not any book
Or face of dearest look
That I would not turn from now
To go into the unknown

Morgan Traheron doesn't shoot himself and is home for tea; but eventually at Arras in April 1917 Thomas did achieve an unassailable simplicity, that monotony and simplicity of death.

Acknowledgements: In this lecture, Edward Thomas's poems are taken from Edward Thomas, *The Annotated Collected Poems*, edited by Edna Longley (Hexham, Bloodaxe, 2008). For images used in the lecture on 1 November 2018, I would like to thank Richard Emeny, the Edward Thomas Fellowship, and Cardiff University's Special Collections and Archives. I am grateful to various libraries and archives, and I would also like to thank the British Academy for inviting me to give the lecture, and Robert Crawford for acting as Chair.

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Note on the author: Guy Cuthbertson is Associate Professor and Head of the School of Humanities at Liverpool Hope University. He studied at St Andrews and Oxford. He is the author of two books for Yale University Press, *Wilfred Owen* (2014) and *Peace at Last* (2018), and he is a General Editor of Edward Thomas's Selected Prose for Oxford University Press. He edited Edward Thomas's *Autobiographies* (Oxford, 2011), and co-edited Thomas's *England and Wales* (with Lucy Newlyn, Oxford, 2011). He also co-edited *Branch-lines: Edward Thomas and Contemporary Poetry* (with Lucy Newlyn, Enitharmon, 2007).

cuthbeg@hope.ac.uk

To cite the article: Guy Cuthbertson (2019), “‘I should want nothing more’: Edward Thomas and simplicity”, *Journal of the British Academy*, 7: 89–121.
DOI <https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/007.089>

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Journal of the British Academy (ISSN 2052–7217) is published by



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