‘A system of vast circumferences circling round the minute neighbouring points of home’
– An Ecocritical Approach to Edward Thomas’ England

Je, Chris Pesch, déclare avoir réalisé ce travail par mes propres moyens.

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis consists in reading the poetry of Edward Thomas from an ecocritical perspective. As a lover of nature who died in World War I, his views on England, the country he felt he had to defend, are of particular interest when approaching his poetry.

The thesis is divided into six chapters, each looking at different aspects related to an ecocritical study of his poetry about England: the history of the pastoral mode and the English countryside in the first two chapters, the relations between the non-human and human in the third and fourth, and ultimately the roles of place, dwelling and home in the final two. In all of these chapters, close readings of Thomas' poems are complemented by references to relevant ecocritical theories and related poets' writings.

The conclusion will illustrate whether Edward Thomas' poetry presents a uniform vision of England as a place of dwelling and existence, and consider to what extent his ideas may still be relevant today.

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Introduction

A poet who never was

Before he became a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, Robert Frost had long struggled to find a footing in the literary world of the American North East and London.[1] One of his earliest champions was a literary critic who would later be known as his best friend: Edward Thomas. In a review of Frost's *North of Boston*, Thomas noted that it was 'one of the most revolutionary books of modern times.'[2] On their long walks together Thomas and Frost would exchange their theories on the art of writing, only to discover that each on their own had come up with what amounts to the same idea, namely that poetry should be guided by the sounds of speech, and that it should be representative of and relatable to people who lead a common life.[3] It was Thomas who first praised Frost to the world, and it was Frost who pushed Thomas to try his hand at poetry. When Thomas began to compose his poems, it was this set of rules formulated together with Frost, which would form the basis for his writing.

Thomas' poetry had a considerable effect on the generations of poets that followed his own. W.H. Auden and Cecil Day-Lewis claimed that they had 'little or no hope of ever equalling' him, while Dylan Thomas praised him as a voice that echoed the inner thoughts of many of his readers: 'It is as though we had always known his poems, and were only waiting for him to write them.'[4] According to Edna Longley, Edward

[1] Mattew Hollis, *Now All the Roads Lead to France: The Last Years of Edward Thomas.* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), p. 7
[2] Andrew Motion, *The Poetry of Edward Thomas*. (London : Hogarth, 1991), p. 9
[3] Hollis, 2011, p. 126
[4] Hollis, 2011, p. 338

Thomas was one of the poets who 'remade English poetry.'[5] Andrew Motion calls him 'one of the first, and most subtle, colonisers of the fruitful middle ground on which many subsequent poets have established themselves.'[6] This so-called middle ground occupies the space between a historically rich English poetical landscape of traditions that have been handed down through the centuries from Langland to Shakespeare and from Wordsworth to Hardy, and a modernity exemplified by writers such as Ezra Pound or Rupert Brooke, whose aim it was to upset said traditions. Unlike the latter, Thomas was 'evolutionary rather than revolutionary.'[7] He established his own sensibilities, while recognizing his debt towards those that had come before him. Hence, he clearly veered away from the more pompous style preferred by many Victorian and Augustan poets and favoured a more intimate rapport with the object of his verse. So if Jonathan Bate says about Ted Hughes that 'the Poet is a seer who, alone in our Iron Age, is still capable of listening deeply and keeping faith with the source,'[8] then the same applies to the man whom Hughes dubbed a 'father'[9] to his poetic gift. Hughes' proclivity to write 'of pike, crow and fox in a style which sought to keep faith with nature's own cycle of creation and destruction'[10] can be traced back to Thomas' writing. Thomas' appeal to the modern reader lies in his ability to look closely at the natural world, and to describe it in terms that are both inherently understandable, and yet piercingly insightful. For

[5] Edna Longley (ed.), *Edward Thomas: The Annotated Collected Poems*. (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2008), p. 11
[6] Motion, 1991, p. 11
[7] Ibid.
[8] Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth*. (London : Picador, 2001). p. 28
[9] Hollis, 2011, p. 338
[10] Ibid.

Matthew Hollis it is this ability that gave his best poems 'that eerie feeling of having been written in the present while living in the future of the earth.'[11]

Despite the praise Thomas has been getting in recent years, Longley still contends that 'the academy has not always recognised Thomas's centrality to modern poetry.'[12] Indeed when early twentieth-century poetry is discussed, Thomas is often omitted in favour of the likes of Yeats, D.H. Lawrence, or T.S. Eliot. Of the war poets among whom he is often classified, Wilfried Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg and Rupert Brooke have arguably had more attention devoted to their work than Thomas. Even among the Thomases, his namesake Dylan Thomas can claim a larger following. The particulars of his life may explain Thomas' subsequent reception to some degree. To his contemporaries at least, Thomas was never a poet. 'When Thomas died, he was chiefly known as the author of two kinds of prose: country books […] and literary criticism.'[13] Struggling to make ends meet in his private life, Thomas simply did not feel he could afford to dedicate his time to poetry, instead driving himself to the verge of insanity and indeed suicide, constantly working on often uninspired and rushed prose pieces to earn an income which could barely sustain his family of five.[14] At the time of his death during the battle of Arras, Thomas had only written 142 poems, all of which he had composed during the final two years of his life, and the vast majority of which were published posthumously. Matthew Hollis explains what is remarkable about this sudden output, namely that: 'In [his] first week of poetry, Thomas had established most of the themes that would

[11] Hollis, 2011, p. 98
[12] Longley, 2008, p. 11
[13] Ibid.
[14] Hollis, 2011, p. 20; Hollis, 2011, p. 17

characterise his verse in the two years ahead.'[15] In other words, it took Thomas only a week to find his style and focus for the next two years. Both would circle around a main concept: the general conditions of living in England.

A lover of English nature

When looking for shorthand definitions of who Edward Thomas, the poet, was, people often rush to call him a war poet. This seems only natural, as he wrote all his poems while Europe was being torn asunder by a merciless and senseless conflict. Also, many of his poems, whether explicitly or implicitly, allude to the war in one way or another. Yet, unlike Owen or Sassoon's writing, Thomas' poetry never entered the battlefields – instead, he wrote of the country they were fighting to protect: England and its countryside. Thomas' love of England should not be misconstrued as an appeal to base patriotic feelings of superiority, though. Although best described as a kind of pastoral, his poetry never falls prey to the tendency which Garrard associates with English pastoral of 'exhorting men to go and fight in the trenches in the First World War on the pretext that they are saving threatened habitats.'[16] Thomas himself criticized this kind of writing in *This England*: 'It is for an audience: there is more in it of the shouting of rhetorician, reciter or politician than of the talk of friends and lovers.'[17] Thomas' interest in England was not of a jingoistic nature, but solely focused on its effects on everyday people like himself.

Eleanor Farjeon's probably apocryphal account that when she had asked Thomas why he wanted to fight in the war, he picked up a handful of earth, saying: 'Literally,

[15] Hollis, 2011, p. 196
[16] Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism.* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), p. 53
[17] Motion, 1991, p. 97

for this.'[18] cannot be seen as a warmonger's efforts to rationalize base sentiments of patriotism. A poem like 'This is No Case of Petty Right or Wrong' makes this abundantly clear, when he writes of 'an England beautiful' (14) whose 'mother died yesterday' (15). England is not a fatherland, it is a mother always birthing a new version of itself. It is thus contrasted with the 'fat patriot[s]' (5) he distances himself from in the opening lines. As the war begins, the England he knew disappears, but is poised to return when 'historians / Can rake out of the ashes' (17-18) what is left of the former incarnation of the country. Thomas was not concerned about a possible downfall of England *per se*, neither did he ever care to give highly-strung speeches about the nation's grandeur. Some things would last, others disappear, and others return: 'The phoenix broods serene' (19). So when Thomas writes a line like, 'God save England' (21), it is not just the territory he wants to be blessed, but the country's soul, since the 'ages made her', England, and 'that made us' (23). Since being English is the only thing they know, they also must wish to protect it. For otherwise, they would negate their own existence. A sensation like the following described by Brooke in 'The Soldier' would have been entirely unrecognizable to Thomas:

> If I should die, think only this of me:
> That there's some corner of a foreign field
> That is for ever England …

For Thomas, England is England, and nothing else ever could be. It is not the person who carries England with him – instead the person is part of England, the country he or she hails from.

[18] Motion, 1991, p. 26

Thomas' love of England is then no love of the nation, which he perceives as a collection of the 'best and meanest of Englishmen' (20) – it is a love for the place, as it has been shaped throughout history. In that sense, Thomas is a topophil, he loves England as a location which gives shelter to a variety of different species.[19] He does not merely love the countryside, but sees the culture in it and loves it for that reason. Thomas, to borrow the phrase from Hauser, sees landscape as 'History' as well as 'Place', making his an ecology which sees the importance of culture in nature and which would later influence poets such as Ted Hughes or Seamus Heaney.[20] This connection, I will argue, provides Thomas' poetry with what he perceives as home: his love of England being love of the cultural history of the countrysides. Hence, Thomas' 'eco-historical'[21] love of England foreshadows elements of what would later be known as deep ecology, as he foregrounds what Garrard calls a 'return to a monistic, primal identification of humans and the ecosphere.'[22] To Thomas, England was more than the sum of its parts. It was 'a system of vast circumferences circling round the minute neighbouring points of home,'[23] thus a land of connections and combinations between men, women and the nature which surrounds them. In a letter to Walter de la Mare he defined nature as such:

> 'You ask me to define Nature. I used it vulgarly for all that is not man, perhaps because man contemplates it so, as outside himself, & has a sort of belief that Nature is only a house, furniture &c round about him. It is not my belief, & I don't opposed [sic] Nature to man. Quite the contrary

[19] Bate, 2001, p. 154
[20] Kitty Hauser, *Shadow Sites: photography, archaeology, and the British landscape, 1927-1955.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 2
[21] Longley, 2008, p. 22
[22] Garrard, 2012, p. 24
[23] Edward Thomas, 'England' (1815). Quoted in Jonathan Bate, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the environmental tradition*. (Abingdon: Routledge, 1991), p. 112

> Man seems to me a very little part of Nature & the part I enjoy least. But civilisation has estranged us superficially from Nature […]'[24]

To Thomas, nature is not just everything that is not manmade, since it encompasses human creation. Instead, all of existence is necessarily connected and working together in 'systems' we nowadays call 'eco-' or 'biospheres'. Reading his criticism of the common use of the word 'nature', one might even think that Thomas himself would have preferred the latter term, since the prefix 'eco-' derives from the Greek *oikos*, meaning house. To talk of an 'ecosphere' is thus no different from talking of the environment, a largely anthropocentric view. But as 'the entire emphasis of his work is directed away from artifice,'[25] Thomas is always keen to see and portray things as they really are, and therefore it would have been impossible for him to see nature as merely representing the 'non-human'.

Instead, poems such as 'Health' or 'Beauty' show his appreciation of nature to be more than an aesthetic appraisal. In 'Health' his human restrictions make him ponder what it means to look at nature, which is 'beautiful' (11) and 'promises all and fails in nothing' (12), and yet 'could not satisfy the desire of my heart' (9). This is not an acknowledgment of nature's imperfection. On the contrary, it is his fallibility that creates a discord between 'eye' (3) and 'body' (4), which separates him from entering into perfect communion with the non-human. His failure to be 'As little as the bird' (42) and thus without the need for thought, or 'as mighty as the sun' (42) and beyond all consideration is purely his, and makes him an imperfect part of an otherwise perfect whole. Yet, he is 'almost proud' (45), which constitutes a qualified happiness about his state. Although he cannot rejoice, he still apprehends that being

[24] Judy Kendall (ed.), *Poet to Poet : Edward Thomas's Letters to Walter de la Mare.* (Bridgend: Seren Books, 2012), p. 51
[25] Motion, 1991, p. 80

human and able to see some of the non-human phenomena is a reason to be content. What is more, this recognition puts him squarely inside nature's stratum, as he perceives man to neither be a meaningless bystander, nor a god-like spectator who hovers above earthly goings on. In 'Beauty', it is this encounter on the same level that finally allows him to find happiness. Whereas immersion in human interactions, finds him 'Tired, angry, and ill at ease' (1) and no 'man, woman, or child' (2) could please him, he 'happily / Floats' (11-12) 'like a dove' (15) once he returns to nature. The accumulative misery heaped upon him in threes in the opening lines, which morbidly makes him 'frame an epitath' (4), is blown away by his venture into nature, because 'Beauty is there' and where beauty is, he proclaims 'I find my rest' (17). Although his appreciation of nature checks aesthetic considerations, it is more than just that. His encounters with nature renege his singular separateness from it, and turn it into a place for 'home and love' (16). This is meaningful, because a home surpasses the simple aspects of a house, as it enables pure Being rather than mere existence. For Heidegger, 'Man is not the lord of beings, Man is the shepherd of Being.'[26] And this idea clearly rings true in Thomas' verse, because Thomas resigns mastery over nature to take on the role of a caretaker for whom everything else exists on an equal footing. Thus Thomas' love of nature is a love of home, a love of England for letting him be human.

[26] Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*. (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 245. Quoted in Garrard, 2012, p. 35

Reading Edward Thomas ecocritically

Edna Longley comments that Thomas 'could never write about the countryside purely as a naturalist or topographer or folklorist or social historian.'[27] History, nature, culture and place all combine in his poetry to form a unique vision of England. Therefore no critical theory lends itself better to the challenge of analyzing Thomas' poetry than ecocriticism. For Greg Garrard 'the widest definition of the subject of ecocriticism is the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human, throughout history.'[28] Thus, reading a poem ecocritically means looking at it through the prism of how it represents nature in relation to culture. Although Thomas refused the classical dichotomy which opposes humans and culture to the non-human and nature, an ecocritical analysis of his poetry would be impossible if they were not treated as somewhat separate entities which have an impact on one another.[29] Additionally, 'the point [of ecocriticism] is not to speak *about* nature but also to speak *for* nature'[30] – in other words, ecocritical study is an openly political field. Although he never shows an inclination for political activism, Edward Thomas nevertheless uses his writing to come out in support of a natural world he knows to be in decline. 'The ecocritic has no choice but to speak on behalf of the Other. The ecocritical project always involves speaking for its subject rather than speaking as its subject.'[31] As such, one cannot read Thomas' poetry without acknowledging his deep commitment to the cause of preserving the world he knows. This is not to say that

[27] Longley, 2008, p. 12
[28] Garrard, 2012, p. 5
[29] Throughout this thesis the words 'non-human' or 'nature' will be used interchangeably, unless otherwise stated. 'Culture' and 'human' shall similarly refer to the same concept, namely anything which is human-made and related to society and civilization.
[30] L. Coupe, *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*. (Abingdon : Routledge, 2000), p. 4
[31] Bate, 2001, p. 72

Thomas was a conservative writer *per se*, since he embraced change in many instances, but that he was a staunch opponent of any wilful destruction of biosystems he had come to love.

There are different types of ecocriticism – the more moderate type being known as social environmentalism, which has an unashamedly anthropocentric hue. Those taking a stronger stance may refer to its adherents as 'shallow' environmentalists for the 'compromises it makes with the ruling socio-economic order.'[32] In fact, its proponents argue that one should show greater consideration to the non-human, albeit only as far as this does not impinge on human progress. The word 'environmentalism' itself already hints at the theory's view of man at the centre of life on Earth. Deep ecologists, on the other hand, desire a 'shift from a human-centred to a nature-centred system of values.'[33] They take a nature first approach and underline its 'inherent worth' regardless of its effect on the human. Although this is often viewed as misanthropic, because some deep ecologists view 'population reduction' or even the end of human life on Earth as viable options, most adherents to its philosophy easily reconcile human existence with a need for a greater respect towards the non-human.[34] Edward Thomas, as already mentioned above, might have viewed himself as a deep ecologist, although his poetry can sometimes also take on definite traits of a more human-centric, thus social environmentalism. Both theories will therefore be useful in the analysis of his poetry.

A third strand of ecocriticism that will come in useful in this discussion is what Garrard calls Heideggerian ecophilosophy: 'Heidegger's thought […] combines a

[32] Garrard. 2012, p. 22
[33] Garrard. 2012, p. 24
[34] Garrard, 2012, p. 25

poetic awe before the Earth's being with a savage deconstruction of the death-denying project of world mastery.'[35] Akin to the deep ecologists, Heidegger opposes anthropocentric perspectives and argues for a greater respect for the non-human. But where they see humans as being only one part of the greater construct of nature, in Heidegger's writing 'the problem of dualism is not so much displaced, as being only 'is' through this clearing, and human being is in turn properly realised in the letting be of beings in its 'space' of consciousness.'[36] Thus, being human means letting nature reveal itself to the beholder. Heidegger writes that 'responsible humans have an implicit duty to let things disclose themselves in their own inimitable way, rather than forcing them into meanings and identities that suit their own instrumental values.'[37] Hence, he staunchly supports the view of many an ecocritic that the poet has to speak '*for* nature' because 'poetic language, rightly understood discloses to us the act of disclosure itself.'[38] Although Heidegger may have spoken of the German language only, his words can easily be applied to English poetry as well. Heidegger therefore becomes important in this discussion of Edward Thomas, because he, like no other, manages to build a bridge between the more scientific and political fields of ecological thought and the necessity for poetry about human interactions and intersections with the non-human.

These three different approaches to the relation of the human and the non-human lie at the heart of the following thesis, in which Edward Thomas' poetic depictions of England are studied ecocritically. The thesis is organised into six chapters, each focusing on a different aspect of what according to Thomas constitutes England. The

[35] Garrard, 2012, p. 34
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid.

first chapter is thus a comparative analysis of the degree to which Thomas' poetry can be viewed as pastoral. The history of the pastoral mode is traced from its beginnings in Ancient Greece to Thomas Hardy's Wessex, and Thomas' place in the pastoral tradition is examined by establishing the similarities and differences between his poetry and the most prominent contributors to the genre. It is argued that pastoral not only reflects his understanding of the English countryside, but also informs it through its links between poetry and country. The second chapter looks at the extent to which Thomas regards history to be incremental to his understanding of England. The chapter contains an analysis of how classical influences, as well as the myths of Old England have marked his writing. From there I try to establish how Thomas views the changes England has gone and is going through, and what effects these have on contemporary England.

The third and fourth chapters look at Thomas' perspectives on nature and culture, the non-human and human, respectively. Chapter 3 focuses on nature by having a closer look at his depictions of seasonal change, plants and animals, as well as the weather. These natural phenomena and non-human participants in life on Earth are then viewed with regards to the effect they have on humans, and vice versa. Chapter 4 concentrates on culture, namely the people living in and with nature: farmers, gypsies, innkeepers, etc. The relationship between nature and culture is analyzed with a look at their differences and discord on the one hand, and similarities and intersections on the other. Finally this chapter also offers an analysis of Thomas' prosody and rhythms as inspired by the speech of people, and the contents and sounds of ballads and poetry.

The final two chapters revolve around Thomas' ideas of place and home. Chapter 5 concentrates on place and travel. It looks at roads and how they may contribute to the establishment of a whole called England by connecting various distinct places. In addition to connexions, it also considers regional variations that become apparent by travelling from one place to another, and what these mean in the context of a unified vision of England. Finally, this chapter contains an analysis of the war and its effects at home and abroad, and how the distancing from the island may have an impact on the understanding of the nations which reside in it. The last chapter ties together elements from all previous chapters to offer insight into the extent to which Thomas' England may represent a home. It zooms in on Thomas' definition of what constitutes a home, and compares this to the state of birds, which seem to be perpetually at home. It also considers the difficulty of finding a home, and the distress caused by being away from one's home, while finally ending with a discussion of dwelling, and the extent to which the latter can be accomplished in England.

‘A great age untold’ – Thomas and the pastoral tradition

Pastoral defined – the origins of a poetical genre

Most of Edward Thomas’ poetry neatly fits into the poetical genre of pastoral, with Andrew Motion even claiming that his writing conveys a ‘usually orthodox pastoral mode’[39] – which means it mostly conforms to the mode’s main criteria. But what are these? What is pastoral? Pastoral is generally accepted to have begun with the poetry of Theocritus, whose *Idylls* inspired numerous Classical writers, chief among whom the Roman poet Virgil. The latter, in his own set of pastoral poems, *Eclogues*, called Theocritus his ‘Sicilian muse’.[40] Thereby Virgil acknowledged a first element of pastoral poetry, namely its realization that our present is reliant on the past, and thus the importance of history to shaping the lives we live now. In ‘Idyll XIV’, Theocritus writes of the passage of time and its effect on people:

> ‘None of us is getting younger, and
> Whitening time creeps steadily from temple to cheek.
> We should make our mark while there’s still spring in our knees.’[41]

He suggests that as people age, opportunities to act meaningfully dwindle. But the author’s insistence on our ability and need to ‘make our mark’ equally implies that although the prospect of doing so is not eternally available to us, there yet remains the distinct notion that our actions matter, possibly well into the future. As times change, what has come before remains important, and we have the power to influence the passage of time. In ‘Idyll XVI’, he notes that ‘Heaven / Is not yet weary

[39] Motion, 1991, p. 32
[40] Virgil, *The Eclogues and The Georgics*, translated by Cecil Day Lewis. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), *Eclogue* IV.1
[41] Theocritus, *Idylls*, translated by Anthony Verity (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2002), Idyll XIV.68-70

of bringing round the months and years.'[42] Despite his belief in a possible end to our stay on Earth, he sees that we still have time we can use to influence the future, as in 'Idyll XVIII', when he leaves a message to posterity in a tree-trunk: 'In its bark we shall cut these words […] "Respect me; I am Helen's tree."'[43] His message for those to follow is that nature – especially as it is beautiful – needs to be respected. His means of communication is to carve words into a tree, which is a shape of poetry, since it is meant to preserve words spoken in the past. Memory of the past is then integral to the pastoral mode, as also evidenced by Virgil, who in 'Eclogue IX' claims about the countryside that 'all this had been saved by Menalcas' poetry.'[44] Similarly, the Welsh *Four Branches of the Mabinogi*, which Thomas refers to in 'Roads', create myriad links between Welsh places and their history. Thomas sees that the 'mountain ways of Wales / And the Mabinogian tales' (34-35) are one and the same, their history kept alive in prose. For Thomas as for Virgil, storytelling is a powerful tool to conserve a place. Poetry is a chronicler of place and time. It saves things to our memory, even as they disappear. But this makes pastoral poetry a fragile business, as Virgil admits that 'poems / stand no more chance, where the claims of soldiers are involved.'[45] While poetry can protect the meaning of a place, the place itself remains in danger of change no matter how beautiful the verse about it. Edward Thomas understood these considerations, as shown in the poems he addressed to his children, 'If I Should Ever by Chance' and 'What Shall I Give?', in which he discusses the mark he is making on a very personal level. In them, he considers what heritage he may leave his offspring and how these choices may affect

[42] Theocritus, 2002, Idyll XVI.70-72
[43] Theocritus, 2002, Idyll XVIII.47-48
[44] Virgil, 1999, Eclogue IX.10
[45] Virgil, 1999, Eclogue IX.11-12

their future lives. The effects of history on place and poetry take on a prominent role in Thomas' poetry, and are further discussed in chapter 2.

Aside from history, pastoral is generally regarded to be interested in current settings of rural labour. Crudely defined, it is poetry about shepherds herding their flock while whistling a tune in unison with the sounds and sights of the perfect natural surroundings they find themselves in. The poetry is assumed to be idyllic, and thus to 'idealize rural labourers'.[46] Theocritus' and Virgil's poetry indeed present a host of characters associated with the country: shepherds, farmers, milkwomen, etc. It is full of advice as to how these working people should proceed, as when Theocritus explains that 'Reapers should start with the walking lark.'[47] The poetry responds to the needs and actual lives of the working men and women. Another set of Virgil's pastoral verse, his *Georgics,* consists of a series of recommendations for agri- and viticulturists. But the common image of idle men lazing around cannot be confirmed by the poetry. Although the singers are rarely seen doing any work, they are aware of the exterior circumstances which may favour or disfavour their labour, as when Theocritus calls to the gods: 'Demeter, generous giver of fruit and grain, may this / Harvest be easily gathered and abound in fruit.'[48] Failure and loss are real dangers in these lines. This peril is stressed furthermore in another of his Idylls, where he mourns that 'Many were the peasants who drew their rationed dole / Mouth by mouth.'[49] The people are in no way pleasantly idling away in fields of abundance. Instead, pastoral poetry is aware of the hardships the common folk have to endure. Despite all this trouble the singers are still devoted to their local homestead. The

[46] Rhian Williams, *The Poetry Toolkit*. (London : Continuum, 2009), p. 55
[47] Theocritus, 2002, Idyll X.50
[48] Theocritus, 2002, Idyll X.42-43
[49] Theocritus, 2002, Idyll XVI.34-35

people are connected to their country, and feel solidarity with each other. To be from a same place means they share a common bond and have to look out for each other: 'I would not send you to a lazy or neglectful woman's house, / For you come from my land.'[50] In Thomas' 'The Other' and many other of his poems, he also finds himself welcomed by strangers simply because he is a fellow countryman. Equally, despite the deterioration in their circumstances, these men and women feel a sense of local pride and want to stay where they are: 'the best rule is to / Stick to your own kind.'[51] Yet Thomas would not agree with all of these notions, as his kinship with his fellow Englishmen is always somewhat strained. In *The South Country* he complains about the working people of Southern England: 'The people are not hospitable, but the land is.'[52] His opinion of his fellow countrymen is ambivalent in all of his writing, whether in his less than flattering observations in essays like 'Tipperary' or 'It's a Long, Long Way' or in poems like 'The Combe' or 'The Gallows', which refuse to whitewash the wanton violence running through the history of the British people.

So, looking more closely at the origins of the genre, namely Theocritus and Virgil, a different picture of pastoral emerges than what most more cynical definitions suggest about it. 'There is sweet music in that pine tree's whisper'[53] begins Theocritus' first Idyll, thus stressing that poetry and nature are inherently intertwined. Incidentally, Theocritus sets out a mission statement, as he will seek to replicate the sounds and sights of nature. Similarly, the representations of nature in the shepherds' music and poetry are equally perfected images of what is actually in front of them. Virgil thus writes of a lover who wants to 'pick sweet-scented

[50] Theocritus, 2002, Idyll XXVIII.16-17
[51] Theocritus, 2002, Idyll XXIX.21-22
[52] Edward Thomas, *The South Country*. (Kindle edition, 1906), loc111
[53] Theocritus, 2002, Idyll I.1

garlands, full of / Memories of you, as suckling lambs long for their mother's teats.'[54] Humans do not only make use of nature to express their emotions, they can also compare themselves to it, because their experience of existence is a similar one. But this appreciation of natural surroundings often also surpasses what is in front of them. 'In the idealized pastoral setting […] nature is often hyper-real.'[55] When Theocritus notes that 'Jay versus nightingale, hoopoe challenging swan – / It's against nature,'[56] he uses exaggerated imagery to complain about the differences between humans and the non-human world. Nevertheless, he remains loyal to nature and cannot let himself drift too far into the realms of culture and civilization: 'Let Athene dwell in the cities she's founded. For me, the woodlands.'[57] Thomas' innkeeper in 'Up in the Wind' echoes this sentiment. What matters is neither wisdom nor philosophy. It is the place one finds oneself in.

In pastoral poetry, this place is generally one in which there is music. The characters stress the importance of their poetry, and the necessity to create it while on Earth since 'everyone knows you cannot / Take your song to Hades, place of oblivion, and save it there.'[58] What must be sung, must be sung while on this planet, since reality is concomitant with the state of being attached to the physical world. Place is thus incremental to the creation of music or poetry, and for one of Virgil's singers, it is 'in the woodlands, you'd rival Pan for music.'[59] In Thomas' 'The Gypsy', the natural and spiritual equally collide when music is played in a forest, as the eponymous protagonist plays a 'rascally Bacchanal dance' (17). In nature, the poet can reach

[54] Theocritus, 2002, Idyll XVIII.40-41
[55] Williams, 2009, p. 59
[56] Theocritus, 2002, Idyll V.136-137
[57] Virgil, 1999, Eclogue II.62
[58] Theocritus, 2002, Idyll I.62-63
[59] Virgil, 1999, Eclogue II.31

godlike spheres. That is partly because 'the woods echo [his] singing,'[60] which means that there is a reciprocal connexion between natural sounds, and man-made music. Man needs nature to create his music, but nature in turn amplifies his sounds, both metaphorically and literally. In Thomas' 'The Manor Farm', the cottager's sawing echoes through the countryside and, helped by waning birdsong, rounds off his pastoral scene. When Theocritus observes 'the boy's hands round the boxwood lyre,'[61] he notices how musical objects, which are meant to echo nature and be echoed by nature, have to spring from nature itself. So to play tunes on a flute or lyre you need to literally destroy nature first, which is why Bate stressed that 'poetry may […] be dependent on certain enslavements of its own.'[62] More precisely, humans 'create culture by enslaving nature.'[63] But at the same time, '[art] is an attempt to recover the very thing which has been destroyed so that art can be made.'[64] Thus at the core of pastoral poetry, there is an understanding that writing poetry in order to celebrate nature, oxymoronically means initially negating said nature before it can be liberated by words and rhythms.

At the start of 'Idyll XVI', Theocritus explains that his job is to write poetry about those who are elided by the tales of epic conquest told by Homer, for example:

> 'The constant task of the daughters of Zeus, and of poets,
> Is to celebrate in song the immortals and their glorious
> Deeds of heroes. […]
> We on earth are mortal, so let us sing of mortal men'[65]

[60] Virgil, 1999, Eclogue X.8
[61] Theocritus, 2002, Idyll XXIV.109
[62] Bate, 2001, p. 91
[63] Bate, 2001, p. 92
[64] Ibid.
[65] Theocritus, 2002,Idyll XVI.1-4

'Pastoral poetry idealizes rural labourers, but it only occurs when such labourers are not working.'[66] In both Theocritus and Virgil, we never actually see any of the shepherds tend to their flock. Instead, they sing about the hardships of their work, as well as about their appreciation of the natural order which surrounds them. The same can be said about Edward Thomas, who in 'Digging' seems to appraise his rural endeavours, but in reality does not do anything at all. The same happens again in 'As the Team's Head-Brass', where the bulk of the poem, and the actual pastoral discourse between farmer and traveller, is earmarked by field labour, but the labour is visibly absent from the actual goings-on of the poem.

Yet at the same time, Theocritus is acutely aware of the tensions within the labouring community and deplores the divorce of men from agricultural labour. The people who work the fields have little of their toil. In 'Idyll XVI' he notes that 'Prize sheep in their thousands were grazed by shepherds', but that they were 'owned by the hospitable house of Creon', while 'none of these gained enjoyed from their wealth.'[67] However, all this wealth does not bring the men 'corrupted by greed' the happiness they seek as it is 'wasted by their heirs when they are dead.'[68] This is the same way of looking at agricultural labour as the one Raymond Williams recognizes when referring to the Romantic poet Crabbe: 'health is the "fair child" of labour; it "languishes" with wealth.'[69] In a similar vein, the agricultural labourer is always at peril in Virgil's *Eclogues*. Where Theocritus' verse began with a reference to the natural beauty of the countryside, the Roman identifies displacement as his starting

[66] Williams, 2009*,* p. 55
[67] Theocritus, 2002, Idyll XVI.37-39
[68] Theocritus, 2002, Idyll XVI.59; Theocritus, 2002, Idyll XVI.58
[69] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City.* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973), p. 92

point: 'I am driven from my home place.'[70] The singer in his first eclogue mourns the same dispossession, which his Theocritan antecedents knew. While Theocritus' farming folk were divided from the spoils of their labour, this loss in Virgil becomes the loss of home entirely: 'Ah, when shall I see my native land again? […] the turf-dressed roof of my simple cottage.'[71] When driven from his homestead the singer takes a drastic decision: 'No more singing for me.'[72] Poetry can only appear as a consequence of this necessary communion of man with the natural place he lives in. In 'Eclogue II' it is a 'beech plantation,'[73] while in the fifth the singers 'sit down together in this grove of elm and hazel.'[74] This sense of alienation also becomes a topic of Edward Thomas' poetry and will be discussed in chapters 5 and 6.

Leo Marx rightly points out that true pastoral then has very little to do with the perceived notion of what constitutes pastoral:

> 'In one way or another, if only by virtue of unmistakable sophistication with which they are composed, these works manage to qualify, or call into question, or bring irony to bear against the illusion of peace and harmony in a green pasture.'[75]

From Theocritus to Thomas, there has been a tradition of writing, which looks critically at man's presence in and relationship to nature. In fact, these writers do not observe this rapport with the naïve eyes of vapid admiration typically associated with the genre. The poet should not, as Virgil puts it, 'dally with lightweight pastoral verse.'[76] Instead his verse ought to focus on its 'rural subject'[77] with a certain seriousness, while also ignoring poetic flourish as 'a countryman should be /

[70] Virgil, 1999, Eclogue I.4
[71] Virgil, 1999, Eclogue I.67-8
[72] Virgil, 1999, Eclogue I.77
[73] Virgil, 1999, Eclogue II.3
[74] Virgil, 1999, Eclogue V.3
[75] Leo Marx, 'The Machine in the Garden' in Coupe, 2000, p. 105
[76] Virgil, 1999, Eclogue VI.2
[77] Virgil, 1999, Eclogue VI.8

Concerned to put flesh on his sheep and keep his poetry spare.'[78] Thomas would not have wanted to put it any other way. True pastoral then is counter-pastoral – it admits the ruptures in the relationship between the human and non-human, if only by acknowledging the fragility any perceived notion of perfection must inevitably hold.

English pastoral and its influence on Edward Thomas

Thomas' writing is a clear descendant from these earliest examples of pastoral writing. Like Virgil and Theocritus, he is interested in history, place, nature and culture, but more importantly, he uses the same methods to discuss them. Thomas spins his poetry around a common thread that incorporates the Classic writers' stress on poetry and music being linked to place and history. The focus on rural folk and their relation to the natural world in which they live, however, does not pass from Theocritus to Thomas in a straight line. Despite Thomas' reliance on a didactic style, he has not found his inspiration solely in Virgil, whose work he actually did not enjoy studying at school.[79] Instead the pre-Romantic and Romantic poets of 18th and 19th-century English literature have brought the Classics' pastoral ideals to Thomas in a diluted and changed fashion.

As already mentioned above, one of the prime interests of pastoral poetry lies in its treatment of history. Goldsmith's 'The Deserted Village' picks up on this theme by contrasting two visions of the same village before and after enclosure. The first image shows an idyllic place of virtue, in which generations of people live in prelapsarian harmony with each other and within nature. The second part follows

[78] Virgil, 1999, Eclogue VI.4-5
[79] Hollis, 2011, p. 46

this with images of disarray that indicate the complete fall from grace of a place that was formerly perfect. This harks back to Virgil's 'Eclogue IX', in which the 'old tenants' are told that '[they've] got to go,'[80] and on the other hand foreshadows Rachel Carson's seminal ecocritical work *Silent Spring*, whose opening chapter 'A Fable for Tomorrow' echoes the rhythms and beats of Goldsmith's progression from idyll to chaos. Goldsmith grounds Virgil's concerns in a typically English setting, and thereby adds a layer to the pastoral tradition that is taken up in Thomas' poems, such as 'The Mountain Chapel' or 'The Barn', which are steeped in nostalgia and prelapsarian ambitions.

The loss of virtue and innocence is exemplified in both Goldsmith's and Thomas's writing through the imagery of children at play. In Thomas' 'April', the child asks for forgiveness for she cannot even remember what, while the child narrator of 'The Child in the Orchard' innocently revels in his ignorance, stating repeatedly: 'There are millions of things for me to learn.' (24) Equally, it is the harmonious atmosphere of childhood, love and play that makes William Blake's 'The Ecchoing Green' stand out as a prime example of the cyclical aspects of human life within nature. The domestic life, or the *oikeion*, that is signified by the 'merry bells' (3) and the 'sports' (9) is at full bloom throughout the poem and not just complemented, but actually enhanced by the 'birds of the bush' (6) that sing in tune with the society's sounds. In this, the church bells are a soothing entity – they are joyful and innocent. It is this harmony to which Jean-François Lyotard alludes, when he says that 'we have to be children if we are to be capable of the most minimal creative activity'.[81] It is thus a very anthropocentric view of nature that both Blake and Lyotard have, in which the

[80] Theocritus, 2002, Eclogue IX.4
[81] Jean-François Lyotard, 'Ecology as Discourse of the Secluded' in Coupe, 2000, p. 138

domestic life of village people is what sparks life itself, and is the source for art, as when the birds '[s]ing louder around' (7), motivated by the church bells ringing. The 'question of birth, the question of childhood'[82] is always a main concern in Blake, but most notably in this poem, in which he acts to combine the young and the old, and the actual 'echoes' of the joys come to represent the ever-repeating cycles of life in this rural society. 'When we all, girls & boys, / In our youth-time were seen,/ On the Ecchoing Green' (18-20), Old John remembers and it is this repetition of what is past and what was good that is so compelling to Blake, and which plays an important role in Thomas' poetry, too. In 'Old Man', for example, he investigates his memory for his first encounter with the shrub, while observing his child play with it.

In 'A Rainbow', William Wordsworth takes up this idea, when he writes that '[the] Child is father of the Man.' (7) John F. Danby explains that 'Wordsworth is thinking […] of how one lived experience interacts with all the others, and how the unified mind is ideally one in which youth, maturity, and age continue to reflect and regenerate each other.'[83] To Wordsworth past, present and future selves converge at all times to create a fuller experience of existence. Thus memory of previous events in life is incremental to a meaningful being now. His reverence of memory is first made clear in his 'Preface to the Lyrical Ballads', when he explains his theory of 'emotion recollected in tranquillity', which returns to the forefront of one's thought to recreate feelings felt once before.[84] These 'spots of time' (208), as he calls them in book 12 of 'The Prelude' keep returning throughout his work, as in 'I Wandered

[82] Lyotard, 2000, p. 137
[83] John F. Danby, 'William Wordsworth: Poetry, Chemistry, Nature' in Coupe, 2000, p. 46
[84] William Wordsworth, 'Preface to Lyrical Ballads, with Pastoral and Other Poems (1802)' in W. Wordsworth, *The Major Works*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 611

Lonely as a Cloud' ('For oft when on my couch I lie / In vacant or in pensive mood' (13-14)) or 'Tintern Abbey':

> But oft, in lonely rooms, and mid the din
> Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,
> In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
> Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart,
> And passing even into my purer mind
> With tranquil restoration. […] (27-32)

This remembering is also prevalent among Edward Thomas' poems, as in 'Adlestrop', which famously begins with an affirmation, 'Yes. I remember Adlestrop' (1). 'Adlestrop' continues to be about a stop on a journey, from which Thomas recalls to mind the most striking sights, sounds and sensations. The same idea also reoccurs, for example, in both poems entitled 'An Old Song', wherein Thomas recollects walks he has been on, as well as the cognitive and emotional effects they had on him. Similarly, Raymond Williams summarizes characteristically Wordsworthian poems to follow a 'lonely wanderer who "passes", and what he sees is a "still life".'[85] This still life is based on 'the recognition, even the idealisation, of "humble" characters, in sympathy, in charity and in community.'[86] The figure of the 'lonely wanderer' is perhaps most prominently recognized in 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud'. Here Wordsworth sees himself taken back to imagery, or a memory of a momentous image, from earlier in his life and subsumes himself into it. This imagery evokes in him an emotion of bliss, which he also identifies in the 'host of dancing Daffodils' (4), which 'Outdid the sparkling waves' of the adjacent lake 'in glee' (14). Wordsworth does not just record what he saw. He comments on how this spectacle made him feel, and reads an emotional state into the natural world. 'Wordsworth's 'mature

[85] Williams, 1973, p. 137
[86] Ibid.

habit was to suppress or ignore the visual'[87] and rely on what he calls his 'inward eye' (21) in this poem. Thereby he succumbs to the pathetic fallacy, turning the emotion he feels into a theorizable, recognizable aspect naturally associated with the daffodils. Wordsworth is 'far more interested in the relationship of non-human nature to the human mind than he is in nature in and for itself.'[88] This type of pastoral theorization, which turns confrontation with nature into a rational undertaking, can be found in Thomas' poems as well. In 'An Old Song (I Was Not Apprenticed)', he 'sought for nests, wild flowers, oak sticks, and moles' (6) and this searching has made him feel 'joy and sorrow' (11). Thus Thomas can at times follow Wordsworth's lead and view the non-human solely with an eye on how it may impact him.

In these instances the human / non-human dichotomy is epitomized. At best, Wordsworth can be called a social environmentalist, who would like to preserve nature as it is for the benefit of his pleasure. An example of this comes in his poem 'Nutting', where Wordsworth falls into a silent awe when he perceives what he calls a 'virgin scene' (19). But the wanderer is an impostor; his attire is a 'proud disguise' of 'Motley accoutrements' (10). He does not truly belong in this place, and knows it. But as in a mockery of traditional pastoral, he lays himself down 'on one of those green stones' (33) to become part of the picturesque landscape, only to drag 'to earth both branch and bough, with crash / And merciless ravage.' (41-42) He destroys the primal scene he so enjoyed because he interacts with it. In the wanderer's mind, nature and humans are quite distinct, the latter being there but to take in the former from a distance. This contrasts with the glee with which Thomas

[87] Danby, 2000, p. 47
[88] Garrard, 2012, p. 47

rumbles through nature. In 'Birds' Nests' he goes looking for the titular nests everywhere, and is disappointed once the leaves have been blown off the trees, not because it might make the natural sight less attractive, but because it makes his task of finding the nests so much easier. Gaston Bachelard explains this feeling by saying that the discovery of nests takes us back to our childhood.[89] Thomas, as seen above, still seeks to be in touch with this younger version of himself. Meanwhile, Wordsworth derives his own 'glee' from standing back and merely looking at a scene of flowers as in 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud'.

Moreover, Wordsworth and Thomas are separated through their opposition on the grounds of rural labour. For Thomas the rural labourer is at one with nature and connects the human and non-human spheres. For Wordsworth, as evidenced in 'Michael', the labourer is part of the picture. Wordsworth thus writes of 'Shepherds, dwellers in the valleys, men / Whom I already loved, not verily / For their own sakes, but for the fields and hills / Where was their occupation and abode.' (23-26) He admittedly cares less about the people and their lives than for the picture which they adorn. He claims that the fields and hills are Michael's 'living Being, even more / Than his own Blood' (75-76), and praises the shepherd's 'endless industry' (97). This is a change from Virgil and Theocritus, for whom the labourers were rarely seen at work. But what they share is their satisfaction at having very little. The only thing they truly possess is family and the history of having lived in these English lands for a long time, as when Michael tells his departing son Luke to 'let this Sheep-fold be / Thy anchor and thy shield.' (417-418) Their poverty runs throughout history, but that bothers neither the shepherds themselves nor the poet. 'A little pleasing peasant

[89] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places*. (Boston: Beacon, 1994), p. 93

poverty is a necessary prerequisite for the picturesque. If your scene is to be peopled, it should be with beggars, or better still, colourful gypsies. They are the human equivalent of rundown buildings.'[90] Wordsworth rarely expresses any kind of kinship with the folk, they almost seem like a quaint diversion. So when Michael's prodigal son Luke begins a life of 'ignominy and shame' (454), this is recorded as a mere afterthought, just as Michael's eventual death is. Thomas, on the other hand, draws closer connexions between himself and the working people he writes about. In 'Man and Dog', Thomas converses with an elderly man whose sons have gone to war. While Wordsworth merely sees the hardships of a man like Michael, Thomas actually talks to the man. Thomas thinks himself one of them as he is well acquainted with their hardships as shown in 'Wind and Mist' and knows what it means to toil himself, as witnessed in 'Digging (Today I think)'. Where Wordsworth and Thomas agree though, is the language they want to use to convey these ideas, which is, in Wordsworth's own words, the 'real language of men in a state of vivid sensation.'[91] So when Michael tells his son to leave his side, he says, ''twill do thee good / When thou art from me' (347-348), while the innkeeper in Thomas' 'Up in the Wind' exclaims: 'I could wring the old thing's neck that put it here!' (1) Similarly in 'A Gentleman', an agitated stranger shouts about a murderer: 'The scoundrel! Look at his photograph! / A lady-killer! Hanging's too good by half / For such as he.' (3-5) Although thematically unrelated, these instances of direct speech from their poetry are shed of all pomp and solely focus on speech that may actually be uttered by rural people. These speech patterns command Thomas' and Wordsworth's entire poetical works, as they turn their backs on the necessities of rhetoric. It can therefore be said

[90] Bate, 2001, p. 128
[91] Wordsworth, 2000, p. 595

that Wordsworth influenced Thomas' choice of poetical devices if not his convictions.

A closer match for his ideological convictions can be found in John Clare, the peasant poet. Unlike Wordsworth and Keats, John Clare is often viewed as 'a true-nature poet,'[92] someone for whom nature is more than just a 'location or […] reflection of human predicaments.'[93] Clare's pastoral poetry shows clear signs of deep ecology. He was born in the countryside and felt a real connexion with it, so much so that Middleton Murry characterizes him as having had an 'intimate and self-forgetful knowledge of the ways of birds and beasts and flowers.'[94] In 'The Nightingale' for example, Clare writes of the 'clod-brown' (1) bird's song, but unlike many other poets, refuses to give it any further significance and describes it with the 'barest minimum of metaphor'.[95] In 'The Wren' he even criticizes many poets' penchant for the nightingales' song: 'Is there no other bird / Of nature's minstrelsy that oft hath raised / One's heart to ecstasy and mirth as well?' (3-5) He thereby references Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, in which Portia rightly observes that: 'The nightingale, if she should sing by day, / When every goose is cackling, would be thought / No better musician than the wren.'[96] Other birds, like wrens or the 'wood Robin' (9) can equally tell him 'happy stories of the Past' (14), thus evoke memories in him, which directly link him to the birds and the place in which he hears them. Their music is pastoral, and he the poet records and imitates it and thus 'is one more

[92] John Middleton Murry, 'John Clare, Love Poet of Nature' in Coupe, 2000, p. 41
[93] Garrard, 2012, p. 39
[94] Middleton Murry, 2000, p. 41
[95] Leonard Lutwack, *Birds in Literature*. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994), p. 21
[96] William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* (1596-8), in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 2006), V.1.104-106

of Nature's voices.'[97] Thomas is clearly inspired by Clare's example, as shown by the ever-recurring thrushes, larks and other birds' voices in his poems. Both poets avoid seeing the birds as symbols or metaphors so as not to deny their subjectivity. To Thomas, as to Clare, poetry is an aural art, which should be close to the sounds of nature, and become an echoing chamber for these sounds. The 'pure thrush word' (22) he hears in 'The Word' is not only pleasant but also inspirational to him.

Clare 'viewed the "rights of man" and the "rights of nature" as co-extensive and co-dependent.'[98] In 'The Fallen Elm', Clare mourns the removal of one of his favourite trees. To him this symbolizes the loss of nature and a further progression of the disparity between humans and the non-human. The tree was many things, from a protector and friend ('We felt thy kind protection like a friend' (12)) and a keeper of memories ('thou'st seen time's changes' (15)) to a playing companion for children. His lashing out at what he ironically calls 'freedom' (42) – probably the capitalist freedom of markets, here identified by enclosure – is an expression of Clare's 'occasional hopeless rage,'[99] which he feels whenever he senses a violation of nature's rights. He experiences the disregard of the rights of nature on a personal level, since he is part of nature.

> Such was thy ruin, music-making Elm.
> The rights of freedom was to injure thine.
> As thou wert served, so would they overwhelm
> In freedom's name the little that is mine. (67-70)

Thomas does not feel the urgency of loss like Clare, because Clare is a 'native' unlike Thomas, the townsman.[100] When Thomas picks up the image of the fallen elm in 'As

[97] Middleton Murry, 2000, p. 42
[98] Bate, 1991, p. 164
[99] Garrard, 2012, p. 53
[100] Williams, 1973, p. 138

the Team's Head-Brass', it therefore takes on a slightly different meaning. Like Clare's deep ecologist perspective, the tree's decay becomes a symptom for an ill that has infected humans and, in turn, has repercussions on nature. That ill is war. Yet Thomas does not use the imagery of nature's decay then to solely single out a loss of a bond between human and non-human, but anthropocentrically characterizes nature to be the scene of human tragedy. Although he shares Clare's deep ecologist view of the connectedness of human and non-human, he cannot find this rage in himself, because Thomas accepts change as inevitable, as will be discussed in chapters 2 and 3. Clare only allows for change, if it comes naturally, thus without human input, as evidenced by his chronicling of the cycle of seasons in 'The Shepherd's Calendar'. In 'December', Clare writes of the waning season's attributes as something customary and repetitive, both from a cultural as well as from a natural perspective. He praises the 'Old customs' (41) associated with Christmas because 'Whate'er wi' time has sanction found / Is welcome and is dear to me' (43-44). Clare does not mind cycles if they are recognizable to him, but he does not want these patterns to be interrupted by what is called progress. In 'Emmonsales Heath', he thus comments on a heath untouched by man as a place where 'blooms that love what man neglects / Find peaceful homes' (19-20). He contrasts the 'poor hare' (15) with the 'savage man' (16) and stresses the destructive force of humans. What matters to him is that 'Things seem the same in such retreats / As when the world began.' (27-28) And that sameness is strengthened by the passing of time, and the cyclical return of seasons, of 'Winter's wind' (60) and later 'sunny hours' (69). Bate is therefore right to say that 'Clare's poems are round. […] Through the rounding of the

poem, the landscape is rounded and completed.'[101] His poems rarely seem to be linear, or to have a beginning or end, but could go on endlessly, taking a fresh start from where they had begun. This is why he can be classified as what Garrard calls a 'naïve poet,'[102] since his biocentrism shines through a poem like 'Emmonsales Heath'.

Where change is involved, Thomas does not align with Clare's views, but is much closer to Thomas Hardy. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Hardy marries Wordsworth's optimism in the possibility of progress with Clare's understanding of the true plight of the rural working people. The competition between Henchard and Farfrae is one between two world views, the former looking back, the latter forward. Farfrae's different approach to life appeals to the people of Casterbridge, who quickly fall for him. 'He was to them like the poet of a new school who takes his contemporaries by storm; who is not really new, but is the first to articulate what all his listeners have felt, though but dumbly till then.'[103] Although Henchard is the protagonist, Hardy does not paint Farfrae as the villain of the story, because he understands that the possibility for change and improvement is real, and at times necessary. In Thomas' 'Haymaking', the labourers are immortalized in 'a picture of an old grange' (42) and 'out of the reach of change' (41), because Thomas knows that only the mental image of their work will survive, while their actual work will become obsolete within a few generations. Hardy country is a 'border country […] between work and ideas,'[104] between an appreciation of the way things have always been and a prophetic confidence in man's future. Thomas' poetry is much closer to this attitude than to

[101] Bate, 2001, p. 156
[102] Garrard, 2012, p. 49
[103] Thomas Hardy, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1886), p. 41
[104] Williams, 1973, p. 197

Clare's fear of change. This is not to say that Hardy does not '[value] a world – for him vanishing, for us long vanished – in which people *live in rhythm with nature*.'[105] But Hardy understands that nature's rhythm can change and is not stable, and that men need to be able to adapt to new circumstances. When Gabriel Oak's flock in *Far From the Madding Crowd* runs off a cliff, it is quite literally the death of the common pastoral ideal.[106] Oak has to live with a change of fortune dictated to him by nature – for to live in rhythm with nature is meaningless unless one can complement this with a certain compliance with societal needs. A similar issue occurs in Thomas' 'Wind and Mist', where his contact with nature makes his living almost impossible. Although he is immersed in nature, living in a house exposed to constant bursts of wind, it cannot be said that he is in rhythm with it. Hardy knows about these complications, while Clare, on a very personal level, was driven into madness due to his inability to face this truth.[107]

What Hardy then gives to Thomas is a blend of two inseparable totem poles of his work, namely its unabashed contemporariness in addition to a constant evaluation of how history is reflected in the present, which will be discussed primarily in chapters 2 and 4. In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, the protagonist's struggles begin when her family's noble past comes back to haunt her – only for her to bring to life the particulars of a gruesome myth that has long been told about her family, when she kills the man who ought to be her rightful husband.[108] Despite the novel's interest in history, it remains fascinatingly modern, when facing subjects such as alcoholism,

[105] Bate, 2001, p. 3
[106] Thomas Hardy, *Far From the Madding Crowd*. (Ware : Wordsworth Editions, 1874), p. 30
[107] Stephen Greenblatt (ed.), *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, *vol. 2 (8th edition)*. (New York: Norton, 2006), p. 851
[108] Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. (Kindle edition, 1891), p. 8; Hardy, 1891, p.386

religious uncertainty, unwanted pregnancies resulting from rape or even a journey to Brazil to start a new life abroad.[109] Edna Longley notes that 'Thomas's prophetic environmentalism was conditioned by his London upbringing and by rural England 'dying' as London grew.'[110] Thomas shares with Hardy the realization that although the wheels of time are in motion to take us to an unknown future, that destination will probably not be too dissimilar from the past and present we are familiar with.

A poet defined by the pastoral tradition

Greg Garrard asserts that at 'the root of pastoral is the idea of nature as a stable, enduring counterpoint to the disruptive energy and change of human societies.'[111] Greg Garrard is right about this, when referring to men like Wordsworth or Clare, but certainly not Thomas Hardy or Edward Thomas. Both men appreciate nature's stability, but represent a strand of the pastoral tradition which acknowledges the value of changes in nature that accompany changes in society. The changes in the successive authors' purpose, conviction and style are proof that Garrard is definitely right to claim, though, that 'pastoral has shown itself to be infinitely malleable.'[112] Therefore to say that Edward Thomas writes in an 'orthodox pastoral mode', as Andrew Motion does, means very little. What is evident though is that 'pastoral has decisively shaped our constructions of nature'[113] and culture, and Edward Thomas' perceptions of both have been irrevocably changed by various pastoral ideals. Thomas openly acknowledged this, as when he defined W.B. Yeats' verse as 'Speech delighted with its own music', a characteristic inherited from Wordsworth, which

[109] Hardy, 1891, p. 71
[110] Longley, 2008, p. 23
[111] Garrard, 2012, p. 63
[112] Garrard, 2012, p. 37
[113] Ibid.

Thomas again would strive to replicate himself.[114] Matthew Hollis perfectly sums up what the other pastoral themes, inherited from the English canon, are that 'characterise his verse':

> 'the rhythms of speech and thought and song, the variable blank verse form, the use of country characters who would conduct his narratives, the elemental conditions of the weather and the seasons, the spaces in which the human and the natural worlds intersect, the power of memory and of childhood, the hesitation and doubt that he found so disabling in his own life.'[115]

Thus, Thomas' poetry has to be viewed as a palimpsestic construct, which amasses different influences.

Thomas, the London-raised man, primarily came to nature through poetry. It is therefore more than likely that the pastoral mode did not only inform his writing, but equally influenced his thinking about nature. The relationship between Thomas' views of England and poetry is reciprocal. English poets like Wordsworth and Clare have given him the means to write about England – means, however, which to him at least are not only optional but necessary to write about the country in the first place, because neither poetry nor our idea of the place can exist without the other. Adorno believes that as 'pure antitheses, however, each refers to the other: nature to the experience of a mediated and objectified world, the artwork to nature as the mediated plenipotentiary of immediacy.'[116] Poetry and place, art and nature, shape each other, as they are mediated through each other. Although wholly distinct, they are inseparable.

The writing of pastoral poetry therefore presupposes an attitude to both poetry and place, which sees them as dependent on each other. As a consequence, pastoral is

[114] Hollis, 2011, p. 53
[115] Hollis, 2011, p. 196
[116] Adorno, 'Nature as "Not Yet"' in Coupe, 2000, p. 81

more than just a mode in which Thomas writes, it defines him as a poet. This is only natural, since pastoral poetry is a kind of poetry that, as we have seen, is primarily about creating poetry. The poet who writes about poetry refers back to an entire history of poetical endeavour that has preceded his – and thus becomes a palimpsestic intertext, mirroring legions of previous writings. Pastoral, even in its least inspired forms, is therefore always challenging, because by definition the genre seeks to explain a place as demarcated by its versions of human / non-human intersections throughout history. As Middleton Murry says about Clare, the pastoral poet ought to be 'one more of Nature's voices'. The poet's role to write nature and to define place leads Bate to open up the possibility of the poet being 'a keystone sub-species of *Homo sapiens*', 'an apparently useless creature, but potentially the saviour of ecosystems.'[117]

Heidegger suggests that 'dwelling rests on the poetic.'[118] Thus pastoral poetry may be key to our ability to make a home for ourselves. In 'For these', Thomas lists the aspects of England that make him decide to fight in France, these things being all the usually appreciated natural and cultural components of pastoral poetry. His choice to enlist grows out of a desire to defend his dwelling place, which in turn has taken shape because of his pastoral view of the landscape. In 'Lob', the hermit admits this pastoral heritage that has shaped his view of his English home, when it is explained how he has given the plants personalized names, like Adam did in Genesis. The countryside becomes what it is in people's minds, because of the prior naming and philosophizing about what it ought to be. In 'Haymaking', the haymakers are resting under the willows near a water source in a scene that is strikingly pastoral in its

[117] Bate, 2001, p. 231
[118] Heidegger, '… Poetically Man Dwells…' in Coupe, 2000, p. 89

idyllic beauty. Thomas mentions the sounds and smells that are produced in nature. He elicits the weather and takes stock of both people and animals that litter the countryside. The poem's imagery reminds the reader of an impressionistic landscape painting. Time in the poem is relative, as the 'holly's Autumn falls in June' (8), and the collaboration of humans and nature is absolute, as the smells of 'woodbine and hay' (19) lie in the air. 'A white house crouched at the foot of a great tree' (37), with the tree standing like a cross behind the homestead altar built by men in its honour. There is admiration for nature, and an awareness of a debt humans have towards it in all of these lines, and Thomas renders the history of rural settlements into a poetic ode to its natural roots. The pastoral poetry of appreciation that guides through this poem is ingrained in the haymakers' respect for their countryside.

> The men leaned on their rakes, about to begin,
> But still. And all were silent. All was old,
> This morning time, with a great age untold,
> Older than Clare and Cobbett, Morland and Crome,
> Than at the field's far edge, the farmers' home,
> A white house crouched at the foot of a great tree. (32-37)

The men are standing there waiting to begin as if they are praying to the gods of history. Their actions are poetic, because they are truthful, and they show reverence to their English land that has been there since times that precede even the great pastoral writers Cobbett and Clare, and painters Morland and Crome. But finally the men become 'Immortal' (42), because through their respectful dwelling they have entered history and will endure even when their physical lives are over.

‘England, Old already’ – Change and stasis in Thomas’ England

Thomas, the historian

In the previous chapter I discussed the ways in which Edward Thomas was inspired by the pastoral tradition of poetry. A particular stress was put on the pastoral interest in history and the ways in which it helps to shape our understanding of the present and future. Early twentieth-century Britain was the result of the historical developments of its countryside, and Thomas – a man born and raised in the city, but drawn to the country – was acutely aware of the changes it had gone through. That Edward Thomas would turn to history as one of his main themes is hardly a surprise. Being of Anglo-Welsh descent, he might have felt more compelled to study his roots than others. At Oxford University, he then studied History, a subject he might even have chosen to continue to pursue academically if his life had not taken a different turn.[119] In ‘This is no Case of Petty Right or Wrong’, he bitterly comments that ‘historians / Can rake out of the ashes’ (16-17) the leftovers of a British past, which no longer exists. This betrays a certain tiredness with being a historian, but the poem, like all of his poems, shows no tiredness with the study of history in itself. On the contrary, he says ‘I read no more’ (10) – it is the present he is uninterested in. His mind has long been made up, because there is an England to protect that is older than the current question of ‘justice and injustice’ (9). This England is exemplified by his references to Shakespeare, and made to contain Scotland as well, as he focuses on *Macbeth*. He can say ‘I have not to choose’ (8) because his loyalty to his

[119] Hollis, 2011, p. 24

homeland is assured through historical and poetical ties. 'Two witches cauldrons roar.' (12) Unlike in *Macbeth*, Thomas reduces the number of witches to focus on the two main opponents he sees: Britain and Germany. But as witches they are on an even footing, cooking up prophecies for a bleak-looking future. Yet despite their similarities, he will support the one the 'ages made' and which in turn 'made us from dust' (23), because he has to respect his historical duties.

England's history is more than a list of heroic feats; it is its literature, its countryside, its people. By referencing Shakespeare, Thomas underlines that he sees the country as a place of poetry that needs protecting, but also intends to say that we ought to learn from history. In 'When We Two Walked', he discusses the possibility for happiness with reference to a walk he went on with his wife, Helen.[120] But again, his mind is cast back to poetry, specifically to the tale of Ceyx and Alcyone, which can be found in Hesiod's *Catalogue of Women* as well as Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.[121] Ovid's version in turn inspired Chaucer's *The Book of the Duchess*.[122] The rich literary history at the source of this poem serves to underline the universality of the feeling expressed. The love between Thomas and his wife is thus nothing new or revelatory, so 'happy were we to hide / Our happiness' (5-6). From literature and history, they have learned humility, because the 'wise live free' (11). The people have taken their lessons from the past and though the repetition of 'something' (3-4) indicates uncertainty about exactly how to feel, at least the lessons allow for knowledge of how not to feel.

[120] Longley, 2008, p. 289
[121] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, translated by A.D. Melville. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 262-271
[122] Geoffrey Chaucer, 'The Book of the Duchess' in Larry D. Benson (ed.), *The Riverside Chaucer*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 329

In ‘Swedes’, Thomas writes of his unearthing of a bunch of vegetables and links this mundane action to a host of historical considerations. The mental connexion is compelling as, just like in Seamus Heaney’s bog poems, the soil in ‘Swedes’ has a story to tell of centuries of degradation and regrowth. The sight of the ‘white-gold-purple’ (3) roots reminds him of the splendour of the recently discovered tombs of ancient Egyptian kings, like ‘Amen-hotep’ (11). Remarkably the swedes represent ‘a sight more tender-gorgeous’ (4) than ‘the Valley of the Tombs of Kings’ (6) can offer. The capitalisation in the latter line gives it a veneer of officially recognized greatness, which is rivalled by the swedes’ unassuming presence. But the swedes make him become ‘a boy’ (7) again and instil in him the sort of childlike wonder, which is usually associated with more prestigious sights. The poem links the sight to the ‘first of Christian men’ (8), and thus makes it span the entirety of English history. But it also promises a future, because unlike the pharaoh in his tomb, the swedes are still in touch with life. ‘This is a dream of Winter, as sweet as spring.’ (12) The swedes are dug up, again and again, year after year, and promise subsistence while the grandeur of Ancient Egypt has long vanished. ‘Swedes’ tells us that historical greatness is to be mistrusted – it is quite meaningless in the face of everyday life. History can inform us of where the place we live in has come from, but it does not define that place’s present state.

‘Roads’ takes a similar approach to how history defines modern England as well as Wales in particular. The poem begins with an unwitting and naïve statement, ‘I love roads’ (1). But as the lines progress, the poem becomes a meditation on the history of the British Isles, and the particular role that roads have played in connecting humans with the non-human and godlike. ‘Helen of the roads’ (33), Thomas says, is

'one of the true gods' (36). And of course, the first point of reference here is Helen of Troy, the face that launched a thousand ships. Here the Trojan myth comes to represent the countryside that is currently being protected by legions of soldiers, who in 'larger companies' (39) lie 'by the roadside' (40) on their way to France to fight for the honour of their Helen, which is Britain. Helen is associated with Britain through the Trojan founding myth of Britain which traces a line from Ancient Troy and Aeneas' legendary descendant Brutus to modern England.[123] The defence of Britain is thus more than the mere defence of a land, but also the defence of a history that comes with this land. But there is more to the 'Helen of the roads' than this primary reading. Secondly Thomas' wife was called Helen, establishing a personal connexion for his involvement in the war. But thirdly, and possibly most interestingly, there is the Welsh medieval tale, 'The Dream of the Emperor Maxen', which is part of the *Mabinogion* and contains a reference to a 'Romano-British Helen, who gave her name to all the Roman roads of Wales.'[124] Hence, the name, Helen, is not only metaphorically but quite literally associated with the roads and the land. It is ingrained in Welsh and British development, and shows how myth and history reverberate in our understandings of the land as we see it. The same applies to the 'Mabinogian tales' (35), which are a set of medieval Welsh tales, which still bear a considerable importance in modern Welsh literature. When Thomas writes that 'The next turn may reveal / Heaven' (25-26), he echoes the landscape of the *Mabinogi*, in which the lines between our world and the Otherworld are not clearly

[123] Geoffrey of Monmouth, 'From The History of the Kings of Britain' in Greenblatt (ed.), 2006, p. 119
[124] Sioned Davis (tr.), The Mabinogion. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 103-110; Gwyn A. Williams*, Madoc: The Making of a Myth*. (London: Eyre Methuen, 1979), p. 67

drawn.[125] In Thomas' poems, the lines between history, myth and the present are equally less than certain.

Myths of 'Old England'

Thomas is interested in myth, but not in its connexion to supernatural powers. The myth he is concerned with is that of England as an old country, and a place of historical value. In 'The Combe', Thomas embraces this 'eco-historical' view of England, by merging the natural countryside with a vision of its changes through history.[126] The combe of the poem is a place shut off from the frantic changes that occur around it. It has built its own defences against intruders through 'bramble, thorn, and briar' (2). The place kept inside is thus 'ever dark, ancient and dark' (1). It represents both the history of the nature trapped inside, as well as a particularly English past, as the repetition and amplification of the darkness stresses the hidden, but deeply rooted truths about an England, in which not everything has always been perfect. As it has shut itself off, the combe has become an uninhabited home, which uses 'roots / And rabbit holes for steps' (5-6) but does not show many traces of the products of these life-giving facets of nature. On the other hand, it clarifies the powers of symbiotic nature, where things can serve more than one purpose. That this is a place of uncertainty is further stressed by the unexpected reversal of 'The sun of Winter, / The moon of Summer' (7-8), which intensifies the rupture between natural realities and human anticipations. 'The Combe' presents a version of English natural history, which shows humans in discord with nature, on the outside looking in without the ability to understand what they see, while nature progresses and

[125] See John Carey, 'Otherworld' in John T. Koch (ed.), *Celtic Culture: a historical encyclopedia*, vol. 4. (Oxford: ABC-CLIO, 2006), pp. 1403-1406, 1403
[126] Longley, 2008, p. 22

evolves on its own. The troubled relationship between the human and non-human is brought to a tipping-point in the final lines:

> But far more ancient and dark
> The Combe looks since they killed the badger there,
> Dug him out and gave him to the hounds,
> That most ancient Briton of English beasts. (9-12)

These lines stress the dark side of human interactions with the non-human, repeated throughout the history of human existence. The senseless killing of the badger makes the combe look 'far more ancient and dark', because it casts a shadow over the idea of the nobility of the English race. The badger is the 'most ancient Briton of English beasts', thus a fellow countryman that more than just inhabits the same space as humans. Its merciless killing foregrounds a flaw in the mythical idea that the 'Old England was the England of the organic community'.[127] Because no matter how organic this community may have been, its non-human participants have too often been spectators on the outside looking in, surviving thanks to the whims of an apersonal 'they' (10). Despite its damning of human behaviour, the poem nevertheless is an example of Thomas' willingness 'to convey a sense of responsibility and indebtedness to the native English past'.[128] The symbiotic images of nature suggest that humans must play a better role in strengthening the bonds between the human and the non-human.

Thomas counteracts this bleaker view of England's mythical past in 'The Manor Farm', where he presents a country village, which 'exemplified traditional, ancient aspects of England'.[129] In the final line he refers to 'This England, Old Already' (24) and it is obvious that he believes there is more than one 'England'. The one he is

[127] F.R. Leavis and Denys Thompson, 'The Organic Community' in Coupe, 2000, p.73
[128] Motion, 1991, p. 7
[129] Motion, 1991, p. 46

referring to, is its rural side and Thomas evidently perceives its elevated state. The poem begins with a peaceful winter scene, which accentuates the human to non-human interconnectedness through the flow of natural features in it. As the narrator approaches 'the old Manor Farm' (7), the rock-like mud unfroze a little and rills / Ran and sparkled down each side of the road' (1-2). Everything is in motion, from man to nature and yet at peace: 'earth would have her sleep out, spite of the sun' (4). Despite the wintery cold, he is struck by a 'season of bliss unchangeable' (21) – the season not being a meteorological phenomenon, but rather a sense of sufficiency inherently attached to the local grounds. The postpositive adjective in 'bliss unchangeable' gives it the firm stronghold of a manifesto that has been established long ago. This view is underlined by Thomas' way of connecting culture and nature in this harmonious 'Sunday silentness' (10). A perfect balance exists between the 'equals' of 'church and yew-tree opposite', both standing erect like phalli, combining the two leading and complementary principles of culture and nature. It is a nearly symbiotic state in which the manor farm is presented: 'up and down the roof / White pigeons nestled.' (13-14) Just as much as culture might be imposing on nature, nature may benefit from the changes brought along by culture. This harmony, as we have seen, is an old one and finally Thomas concludes that it is 'Merry' (24). The capitalisations of 'Old' and 'Merry' conform to a naming of the place and turn the connectedness between humans and nature into a historical fact. Fittingly Bate believes that: 'We lament our alienation and tell ourselves that once there was a time when all of humankind lived in their happy state'.[130] 'The Combe' and 'The

[130] Bate, 2001, p. 74

Manor Farm' show a poet who struggles to decide whether this alienation actually exists, or whether we might actually still find ourselves in that happy state.

Fittingly, Raymond Williams asks: 'Is it anything more than a well-known habit of using the past, the "good, old days", as a stick to beat the present?'[131] Neither 'The Combe' nor 'The Manor Farm' fall into the trap of this habit. It would therefore be inaccurate to assume Thomas much of a nostalgist, who wishes these 'good, old days' to return, as instead he offers a vision of England in which these past days perpetually reverberate. 'The Manor Farm' is only one example showing this oldness to be ever-present in contemporary England. 'Haymaking', as discussed in the previous chapter, is another. 'Up in the Wind', Thomas' first completed poem, also falls under the same category. The poem begins violently:

> 'I could wring the old thing's neck that put it here!
> A public house! it may be public for birds,
> Squirrels, and such-like, ghosts of charcoal-burners
> And highwaymen.' The wild girld laughed. 'But I
> Hate it since I came back from Kennington.
> I gave up a good place.' (1-6)

The poem sets up numerous dichotomies, between the country and the city, the private and the public, the old and the new, right in those opening lines. The 'forest parlour' (9) hidden among 'towering beeches' (10) mirrors a London scene by creating a visual link to the tall buildings of England's capital, and thereby distances itself from London life. Contemporary England is split in two – its country and its city versions, the former being in danger of being made redundant by the power of the latter. As progress continues, there are more men like the 'motorist' who slow down 'from a distance […] / To taste whatever luxury they can' (21-22). To them, this

[131] Williams, 1973, p. 12

specific place is of no importance, as it represents just a step on their journey. History is making away with the countryside, and as the travelling becomes more pronounced, the places in between destinations only become less special and less specific. The mention of railroads brings to mind Ruskin's observation that they are 'only a device for making the world smaller'.[132] The houses, which are there, are barely 'visible' (27); they are slowly being integrated into the disappearing countryside, and are being relegated to history.

Yet, the countryside seems to be putting up a fight as 'there's a spirit of wildness / Much older' (28-29) in it, which ensures that the memory of times past remains vital to the current countryside. The 'stone-curlew' (29), a bird, which is not exclusive to the British Isles, 'nests in fields where still the gorse is free as / When all was open and common.' (31-32) The bird's rootlessness and the country's openness combine to give a sense of a combat against contemporary forces, which work to constrict what was once free. As city life impinges on the countryside, the latter's future seems in danger, which nevertheless puts a spotlight on its history. The public house, similarly, used to be a connector: 'On all sides then, as now, paths ran to the inn' (38). But now it lies outside the otherwise connected circumferences of modern life, as there is 'a gate' (39). 'The White Horse' (35) as the inn is called is a reminder of a time when travelling through the countryside was an arduous task – in times of railways and cars, it has served its purpose and survives mostly as a memorandum of the past. It unites in itself the 'clay pipes, inn names and weathercocks – all subjects which Thomas associates throughout his work with an old order of Englishness'.[133]

''T would have been different,' the wild girl shrieked, 'suppose

[132] John Ruskin, 'Landscape, Mimesis and Morality' in Coupe, 2000, p. 30
[133] Motion, 1991, p. 36

That widow had married another blacksmith and
Kept on the business. This parlour was the smithy.
If she had done, there might never have been an inn;
And I, in that case, might never have been born. (47-51)

But Thomas' 'wild girl' also offers an alternative history – what if just one part of history had transpired differently? What would either of their lives be like now? The 'wild girl''s hypotheticals equally suggest an awareness of the importance of history to the present and an understanding of the flimsiness of future endeavours. It is thus that they turn to discussing the signboard:

'[…] Did you ever see
Our signboard?' No. The post and empty frame
I knew. Without them I should not have guessed
That low grey house and its one stack under trees
Was a public house and not a hermitage.
'But can that empty frame be any use?' (75-80)

The woman's preoccupation with the signboard stems from the question whether knowledge is possible without certain reference points. Instead of a signboard announcing the inn to the world, there is but an empty frame. There is thus a breakdown in communication between the public house and the outside world, between the natural world and culture, between history and the present. For how is the present supposed to understand history if it rids itself of any markers of the latter's value? As the wild spaces become less prevalent, they also become less meaningful, and thereby history might be in danger of vanishing. It is thus that her interlocutor objects that 'if you had the sign / You might draw company' (96-97). If the link to the present were held upright, her historical place might prosper. But the wild woman disagrees, as 'no one's moved the wood from off the hill' yet (91). Humans might be powerful, but in the face of nature, they cannot accomplish everything and fully eradicate history. For history will always endure in the natural

landscape, whether humans want it to or not. The poem's final line clarifies this in the most simple terms: 'Look at those calves. Hark at the trees again.' (115) Nature does not philosophize, it simply persists and keeps on regenerating. Thus history is neither something to long for nor to be afraid of losing. It is ever-present in the constantly renewed versions of the present.

The past's influence on the present is also felt in 'Lob', a poem, admittedly about an 'old man' (3). As in 'Up in the Wind', modern times impinge on ancient England and again it is 'the road', thus the connector between different places, which plays a pivotal role. 'Ages ago the road / Approached' (22-23), Lob remarks – the changes are something he has lived with his entire life, and he does not seem to care any more. Neither do his fellow countrymen: 'The people stood and looked and turned away.' (23) They are weary of this change and are done getting as riled up about it as John Clare would have been. And yet, the villagers feel attached to their local homesteads, not caring about 'all men's dust' (24), which represents the squalor of city life. For as much as they see change coming, and as indistinguishable as the 'three Morningfords' and the 'two Altons' may be to the casual traveller, to Lob and the villagers they are each clearly recognizable – the men and women are ingrained in the fibre of this land and intricately linked to the history of the land. As such Bate argues that 'we may regard the supposed simplicity and naturalness of the old ways as an allegory that is necessary to our psychological and social health'.[134]

When the narrator goes looking for Lob, three different men are suggested to him – each place seems to have its own old man who represents the village history, and 'has been in England as long as dove and daw' (58). Lob has not only been in England

[134] Bate, 2001, p. 36

forever, he is one of the country's defining factors. Like Biblical Adam, he names birds and plants. He thus becomes a continuation of the first Anglo-Saxons who settled on the English shores and symbolizes something for the longest time uniquely associated with England: the English language. Thus he knows 'thirteen hundred names for a fool' (83), encompassing low-level language and cunning. Lob is then more than just a single person, just like England has been made up of many component parts. Raymond Williams says about Lob that 'All countrymen, of all conditions and periods, are merged into a singular legendary figure.'[135] He goes by many names, such as 'Jack the Giant-killer' (128), which is reminiscent of both 'Jack and the Beanstalk', as well as the English fleet's maritime successes while sailing under the Union Jack. He is not 'a mere clown, or squire, or lord' (133), but both all and none of these. Likewise, England is neither just the industrial cities of the North, nor the hustle and bustle of London, nor the rural peacefulness of the West Country. Tellingly, Lob calls himself 'one of the lords of No Man's Land' (139), which can carry multiple meanings. First of all it makes the reader think of war and embattled spaces, which no combatant has been able to claim yet. But also, No Man's Land is a land that belongs to no one, thus to all and constitutes a common ground. England, as a common ground has historically often been a field of battle, but English unity has always subsisted. It 'lives yet' (142). The country's battle scars are part of its living fibre and define the country. Andrew Motion stresses that: 'It is the ancient features of England which command Thomas' deepest admiration, although he admits that benefits traditionally associated with them may be illusory'.[136] 'Lob' is a perfect example of his appreciation of these ancient features, and just like 'Up in the

[135] Williams, 1973, p. 257
[136] Motion, 1991, p. 94

Wind' and 'The Combe', the poem finds room to criticize those aspects, which Thomas believes have been detrimental to the country.

Nostalgia for a better or unreal past

As Thomas stresses the negative sides of the past, he strikes an odd, often just as confusing as confused balance between nostalgia and an indictment of the past. In 'Liberty', Thomas takes this uncertainty to eerie heights on a very personal level. The poem begins in almost complete darkness, as the 'last light has gone out of the world, except / This moonlight lying on the grass' (1-2). Very little can be seen, although he knows that it exists, as with 'the tall elm's shadow' (3). The elm is there, it has always been, but he cannot see it, only a mirror image of it that has been created by light.

> It is as if everything else had slept
> Many an age, unforgotten and lost –
> The men that were, the things done, long ago,
> All I have thought; […] (4-7)

Time is of the essence in this poem, as Thomas acknowledges all the people, things and thoughts that have long gone. But interestingly these considerations are both 'unforgotten and lost'. Thus the things themselves have, like the elm tree, become invisible and possibly unattainable, but their memories persist and are 'unforgotten'. 'Unforgotten' is a strong word, because it adds effort to the fact of remembering – it is a conscious choice not to forget. This is literally nostalgia, as it consists in the pain of conceding the loss of something. Once the 'I' and nostalgia set in, the rhyme scheme of the poem becomes jumbled and loses structure. Standing over a grave, he finds himself on the precipice to death, which is both an integral part of as well as the end of history. The grave is a symbol of past lives lived to the fullest, but also a

warning of future dangers. Yet Thomas seems to have understood what Bate's belief that 'the danger lies in what we do with the nostalgia'[137] means. Next to this grave he finds a curious ally in the moon, as they both 'stand idle' (8). The moon and the narrator share traits of being passive and reflective and have no luminescence of themselves. For Thomas the knowledge of all the things lost engenders a realization that his struggles to make choices – whether to enlist or not – are predetermined by said things. His conundrum is but a result of foregone events.

This scene of idle standing is akin to what Thomas calls 'this moment brief between / Two lives' (12-13) in 'The Bridge', a poem that is a spiritual companion piece to 'Liberty'. Hence, Andrew Motion's comment about 'The Bridge' that the 'simultaneous recognition and acceptance of opposite elements in a single moment is frequently complemented by a twilight setting' is equally true for 'Liberty', only that there the night has further advanced already.[138] Instead of standing in front of a grave, the narrator now finds himself on a bridge, a structure that symbolizes a place stuck between past and present, from where one can observe time flow by: 'The dark-lit stream has drowned the Future and the Past.' (10) The remembrance of his friends in the first stanza does not move him, nor do the memories of him move his friends. 'All are behind' (6) and he again recognizes the impossibility of changing the past, but despite the slight pangs of nostalgia and the common undertone of possible suicide, the poem ends on a positive note. The 'moment brief between / Two lives' (12-13) seems to forecast impending death, but truly represents any moment – any experience changes life, and thus generates a new life, as 'No traveller has rest more blest' (11) at this moment. There is no agitation, for future

[137] Bate, 2001, p. 36
[138] Motion, 1991, p. 55

and past are not erased through death, but by imaginations of 'what has never been' (14), namely an alternative history of dreams and wishes that have not come true, but exist in the mind.

Change and stability in current visions of England

It seems only logical to say then that Thomas both rued and celebrated the loss of past features of England, while also feeling pangs about all those things that did not come to be which could have. The aforementioned poems, 'Up in the Wind', 'Lob', 'Liberty' and 'The Bridge' all record a wavering between changes and stability to the fabric of England, while being either reduced to a personal level, or made to encompass the entire nation. Change and stability are also on his mind in 'Tall Nettles', which presents a farmyard scene almost unchanged for 'many springs' (2). The 'dust on the nettles' (7), which had positive and negative connotations in 'This Is No Case of Petty Right and Wrong' and 'Lob' respectively, here comes to stand for permanence that can only be altered to 'prove the sweetness of a shower' (8), thus to show the grandeur of nature. Likewise, 'the rusty harrow' (2) and the other farming tools are covered by the nettles. This rust is no mere sign of decay though, because the instruments are reintegrated into nature. The scene is shielded by an 'elm' (4), a tree we have seen associated with homeliness in Clare and Thomas' own poetry. Raymond Williams observed in many poets' work a 'myth of modern England in which the transition from a rural to an industrial society is seen as a kind of fall'.[139] But for Thomas this is not the case, as the deterioration of the farmer's tools is not observed with any kind of bitterness, but matter-of-factly and almost admiringly.

[139] Williams, 1973, p. 96

The societal change only stresses the natural stability, which accompanies it. Nevertheless in 'The Cherry Trees', a different kind of industry is at the helm of said fall: war. The power of nature to endure is again shown when the 'cherry trees bend over and are shedding […] Their petals' (1-3). This is no sign of loss, but of seasonal change. Yet the change is unaccompanied by its typical human imagery of joy and marriage, as 'there is none to wed' (4). Andrew Motion sees the bleak message this poem sends in 'an absence of any humans at all – only the motifs of peace sinisterly unused'.[140] Edward Thomas is not cynical about change *per se*, but he sees that humans have the means to destroy themselves – but knows that nature will always prevail somehow.

In 'Tears', the fragility of human existence in the face of war is continued through the analogy between 'twenty hounds […] not yet combed out' (3) and the 'young English countrymen, / Fair-haired and ruddy, in white tunics' (13-14), who are both innocently led into a senseless killing. The hounds' fervour to hunt recalls the killing of the badger in 'The Combe', which had signified a dark chapter in English history. Similarly, the analogy between hounds and the angelically clad soldiers indicates a case of a history lesson that has not been adequately processed. Instead the 'double-shadowed tower' (8) represents a structure that takes away the light in two directions, past and future. Because these angels of men are 'possessed' (12) by a 'mightier charm' (11), they are as if put under a spell that lacks all rationality. That spell is the romanticized ideal of British valour epitomized by a song like 'The British Grenadiers' (15). The 'fifes' (15) the song is played on call to mind the pastoral tradition of playing songs while tending sheep. Only here the innocent virtue of rural

[140] Motion, 1991, p. 119

life is in danger of being wiped out by an altogether scarier proposition. 'The visual shock of their red faces […] prefigures the bloodstains which will shortly blot out the values of Lob's England which they represent'.[141] The tears' ghosts suggest that this threat is not new, but that the correct conclusions have never been drawn.

The changes that accompany war are then a serious consideration for Thomas. He sees what devastating impact they can have on England. But in 'February Afternoon', a Petrarchan sonnet, he relativizes these fears by putting them into a wider context. The soldiers are this time allegorized by the 'roar of parleying starlings' (1) and the 'Black rooks with white gulls following the plough' (3) and more importantly following 'Commands' (5). Thomas anthropomorphizes the birds' behaviour to make a point about human existence, as 'A thousand years ago even as now' (2) the birds already behaved in the same way, when humans went about their farming and warring just as they do today. 'Time swims before' him (9). Present and past become difficult to differentiate, as they resemble each other too much. War has been part of us for millennia, and we have come to learn to live its consequences for just as long as: 'men strike and bear the stroke / Of war as ever, audacious or resigned' (11-12). And again it is the non-human that accompanies our reckless and senseless deeds without much fuss: 'the broad ploughland oak / Roars mill-like' (10-11). The rooks sitting in it make a monotonous sound, while the image of the mill resembles the steady motion of a clock's hands signalling the constant passage of time. Motion believes the poem suggests 'that cycles of destruction are capable of outlasting individuals'.[142] Perhaps what Thomas is saying is that all the changes that occur are offset by the stasis of the violence that exists at the core of English history. There are

[141] Motion, 1991, p. 121
[142] Motion, 1991, p. 99

principles of Englishness untouched by individual effort and input, which outlast any personal deliberation.

In ‘How at Once’ he addresses this issue, as he wonders about how he is supposed to know whether he will see the swift once more before it migrates South ‘until next May’ (6). The answer is, he cannot know it. And yet he is sure that the cycle of departure and return will continue, because nature works that way. It is cyclical and therefore stable. But his fear is not abated:

> With other things I but fear
> That they will be over and done
> Suddenly
> And I only see
> Them to know them gone. (8-12)

The steadfastness of nature is not present in personal relations, as any number of things – his life or that of family and friends – might cease at any moment without caution. Personal change can come at any time, and thus puts the concept of existence in doubt. It causes the poet to wonder what his responsibilities could possibly be. In ‘Liberty’, Thomas further addresses these insecurities. ‘There’s none less free than who / Does nothing and has nothing else to do’ (12-13). Faced with choices that could have massive personal consequences, the author finds himself at a loss, because freedom to think can be the opposite of freedom, as liberty of choice can be overbearing and no action will ultimately result of it. If it were possible to get rid of these thoughts borne down by the weight of memory and history, Thomas believes, he ‘would be rich to be so poor’ (23).

> And yet I still am half in love with pain,
> With what is imperfect, with both tears and mirth,
> With things that have an end, with life and earth,
> And this moon that leaves me dark within the door. (24-27)

Ultimately Thomas dismisses his doubting criticism of liberty, because he affirms that these struggles to find answers to life's questions truly make him feel alive. Thomas alludes to Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale', wherein the poet declares himself 'half in love with easeful Death' (52) and equally questions his attempts to find meaning in a romantic endeavour that might not actually bear any. Life, Thomas says, is 'imperfect' and therein lies its all-encompassing greatness. He admires 'things that have an end', like life, the planet he lives on and of course, England. As a consequence, change and stability are both necessary conditions of England and work together to create a place that is unique, since no other land can claim to combine the same landscape with the same historical background.

The palimpsestic nature of England – England as an intertext

The plaintive beginning of 'Gone, Gone Again' reminisces about the past summer months, which have 'Again gone by' (4). These months were 'Not memorable / Save that I saw them go' (5-6). They convey the feeling that even when the past has no discernible impact on our present state, it is still felt due to the mere fact of its having been. Memory therefore plays a difficult role in our understanding of history, because even when we cannot associate anything particular with a time, that does not negate its existence and consecutive effects. Like Isaac Rosenberg's 'Break of Day in the Trenches' sees a 'same old druid Time as ever' (2) in current conflicts, Thomas' war poetry shows his awareness of history as a non-linear, but cyclical procedure. Andrew Motion believes that: 'Thomas's distinction as a war poet is his ability to interpret the conflict of 1914-18 as the particularly horrendous

manifestation of a more general historical process.'[143] What 'Gone, Gone Again' suggests is that this historical process must not necessarily be a conscious one. History has a habit of divorcing itself from memory. Thus it becomes difficult to take any particular lessons from it. To underline this, Thomas creates an analogy between the 'Blenheim oranges' (11), which 'Fall grubby from the trees' (12) and the young men who are turned 'to dung' (16). Like in 'Tears', the analogy reinforces the gruesome imagery of senseless destruction. But 'dung' is not a word with a solely negative connotation. As in Seamus Heaney's bogs, dead matter survives to initiate new growth. It is just as much excrement, as it is life-giving. Death, which is painful and anything but heroic, becomes the soil from which England can grow.[144]

This series of poems about the war shows that Thomas understood the recurring patterns of history very well. It is, to quote Raymond Williams, 'a version of history which succeeds in cancelling history'.[145] His contemporary vision of England relies on an understanding of these processes whereby the land becomes a mirror image of the various Englands of the past. In Thomas' poems, England is presented as a palimpsest. Its most contemporary version is the transparent top layer of a series of different and separate images, which recognizably shine through to alter the perception of the main image. In 'The Green Roads', Thomas highlights England's palimpsestic structure by underscoring the different 'green' paths, which seem pure

[143] Motion, 1991, p. 138

[144] Because of such imagery, there is a tendency among some critics of associating Edward Thomas with a politically conservative tradition of writing possibly linked to Hitler's *Blut und Boden* ideology. To counter this, Jonathan Bate writes that: 'The quiet voice of Edward Thomas does not elicit political shivers [like] Heidegger's,' while he admits that 'nagging doubts remain' (2001, 276). Whilst I cannot assuage Bate's doubts, it nevertheless seems historically revisionist to entertain them. Thomas did not know that a mere decade after his death, sentiments similar to his own would be propagated to justify mass murder and forceful land acquisition. In light of poems like 'This Is No Case of Petty Right or Wrong', it seems only fair to assume though that Thomas would have abhorred the jingoistic rationale that was added to his theory of how civilizations are formed.

[145] Williams, 1973, p. 257

and untrod, and all lead to the same place in the forest. In all of Thomas' poems, the forest conveys a certain amount of mystery and confusion. But the repetition of 'forest' as the final word of every second line as well as the internal rhyme scheme produce an accumulative effect of stacking layer upon layer. The forest 'is old, but the trees are young in the forest' (11). The forest subsists, even though its component parts keep changing. D.H. Lawrence argued against a palimpsestic view of history when he said that: 'One England blots out another.'[146] But Thomas clearly disagrees with this view in 'The Green Roads'. There remains one oak 'in the middle deep' (12), which 'saw the ages pass' (13), which suggests an essence to the forest that has not changed even though the ages' 'memories are lost' (14). As in 'Gone, Gone Again', memory is not important to history, because the two are quite distinct. The tree, which 'is dead' (15), is not a keeper of memories, but a reminder. And again, it is the poet whose responsibility it is to become the mouthpiece for said memories as 'all things forget the forest / Excepting perhaps me' (15-16). In chapter 1, it was stressed that the poet's role is to be a chronicler of place, and here again this attribute of his is taken up. Only through poetry can England's palimpsest be deciphered, because the poem's 'old man' and 'child' (17) are conspicuously distant from each other – the communication between them, which might bridge the information gap that causes history to repeat itself is pointedly absent.

The role of history is brought to a head in 'Digging (What matter makes my spade)'. The digging is not an agricultural act to get something out of the ground, but instead a burial of 'two clay pipes' (2), which as mentioned above are symbols of Old

[146] Leavis and Thompson, 2000, p. 75

England. They 'testify to the greater durability of objects than individuals.'[147] The hovering between 'tears or mirth' (1) in this situation is typical of Thomas' uncertainty about life. Should he celebrate the dead man's life or mourn his passing? Should he reminisce about the England that is gone, or rejoice about its potential future?

> The dead man's immortality
> Lies represented lightly with my own,
> A yard or two nearer the living air
> Than bones of ancients who, amazed to see
> Almighty God erect the mastodon,
> Once laughed, or wept, in the same light. (5-10)

The palimpsestic structure reaches back from the soldier fallen in World War I to the beginning of times. The uncertainty of sentiments the first men felt, whether they 'laughed, or wept' is echoed by Thomas' feelings. And still it 'is the same light of day', thus the same natural conditions they find each other in. Thus, Thomas can paradoxically refer to the 'dead man's immortality' because he realizes that we all must perish, but that some bit of us enters the grain of our earth from which all life is derived. 'For Thomas, "word" and "thing" are neither identical nor distinct but marked by their association through time.'[148] Meaning is not universal, it is contingent on time. Consequently, Edward Thomas' England relies on its history and its various iterations throughout history to develop its sense.

[147] Motion, 1991, p. 102
[148] Longley, 2008, p. 23

''Tis my Delight' – Thomas and the non-human

Seasonal change

In the previous chapter, Edward Thomas' interest in observing historical changes was discussed in depth. At times with fear, but mostly with a keen attentiveness, Thomas presents the changes that have occurred in English society throughout the centuries. While society is in motion, nature remains firm and only records gradual changes. So despite his wishes to the contrary, Thomas, like most writers, often supports the duality of nature / culture, or human / non-human, which often dominates nature writing. Nature represents a stable counterweight to the commotion of human endeavour that threatens to irreversibly alter the England of old. The only change nature knows, is cyclical. It is the seasons that come back annually, and regulate the life of country and town people alike. The arguably most famous depiction of seasonal change in English literature comes in John Keats' 'To Autumn'. In Bate's view, Keats 'embraces the immanence of nature's time, the cycle of seasons.'[149] In 'To Autumn', the dichotomy between nature's cyclical time and the supposedly linear human time, leaves the latter in a position of undeniably lessened significance. Similarly while Thomas reflected on larger-scale historical developments much of the time, the immediacy of the visible alteration in his natural surroundings occupied an equally important space in his mind.

The opening stanza of 'The Thrush' plays with the expectations humans associate with the seasons through its chiasmic structure. The question of what we can 'read in November / That you read in April' (2-3) brings to mind the adapting we make

[149] Bate, 2001, p. 109

according to each season. But while humans adapt, the bird is 'Singing continuously' (8) and does not change. Thomas wonders:

> Is it more that you know
> Than that, even as in April,
> So in November,
> Winter is gone that must go? (9-12)

His question is whether the thrush, unlike humans, realizes that emotional responses to seasonal change are futile, because of the cycle's inevitability. Or perhaps its 'lore' (13) is but a sign of its unawareness of time's passing. Either way, for the bird seasonal change seems much easier to take, because it is not visibly plagued by it. In 'March the Third', the birds' 'twelve hours' singing' (2) is greeted by a shout of 'Here again' (1), which further reinforces the birds' mindlessness in opposition to human contemplation. The reading in the first paragraph of 'The Thrush' therefore also indicates a human proclivity for cognitive activity that reoccurs when Thomas writes 'I know the months all' (17), 'I must remember' (21) and 'consider' (23). Thomas' approach to nature is repeatedly hampered by his inability to view it just like the birds, which 'call and call' (20). In 'March the Third', the birds' singing 'may shift and long delay' (10) but 'never fails' (12). Meanwhile, Thomas has to sit and wait for the day to arrive. The birds are part of the cycle and the stability, while Thomas fears himself an outsider looking in.

Thomas is aware of the distance humans have put between themselves and the non-human, by judging seasons differently and showing a preference for the warmer months of the year. If the birds can sing at all times, why can't humans? The winter months are ostensibly linked to their weather in 'November', and the impact the cold temperatures and rain have on nature result in 'all that men scorn' (14). 'Few

care' (12) for the cold seasons while it is typical of Thomas to underline that the soil people walk on is 'Condemned as mud' (16). Thomas does not share this view, and he could not make it any clearer that he views this attitude as completely risible. In his eyes, a change of perception is all that is needed in order to find something worth praising in winter. Because no month 'has clean skies that are cleaner' (18) than November's. The shift in perspective allows for a reappraisal of man's responses to seasonal change. The same occurs in 'The Thrush', when the birth and death symbolism of the first stanza is reversed to announce 'what will be born / Of a fair November' (23-24). It is through passages like these that Thomas can escape his separateness from nature and become part of its cycle, as he perceives a melting together of the seasons, which finally amounts to 'a season of bliss unchangeable' (21) in 'The Manor Farm'.

The impact the different seasons have on the human and non-human, respectively, can be quite different. Nature's relaxedness in 'October' stands in opposition to the human response of preparation for tough months to come outlined in 'November'. It seems like nature is tenderly surrendering to sleep when the elm 'Lets leaves into the grass slip, one by one' (2) and nature's agency is stressed as 'The gossamers wander at their own will' (8). Only the squirrels' scolding indicates that the peaceful scene may be a little treacherous, and that even nature can find it hard to adapt to the seasons (9). The same can be seen in 'March', when the thrushes 'had but an hour to sing' (18). 'Rain, snow, sleet, hail, / Had kept them quiet as primroses.' (16-17) But now that they can sing again they do their best to cram their singing into the day to 'keep off silence / And night' (24-25). Even though they are part of nature, the cold does not leave them unaffected. Spring is presented as a confusing season,

which combines hail and sunshine in an oxymoronic 'cold burning' (4). The same confusion returns in 'But These Things Also', when Thomas concludes that 'Spring's here, Winter's not gone.' (16) So in 'March', Thomas, just as in 'The Thrush', wonders again: 'What did the thrushes know?' (16) This time though, his question involves the birds in his confusion, as he is actually unsure whether the seasonal change goes unfelt, or whether they feel it like man does. The birds are given more than just a 'utilitarian role as season makers', as they are turned into subjects operating outside of human understanding's purview.[150]

What complicates matters for man is that he often fails to recognize that the lines between different seasons are not clearly cut. Shakespeare's 'Sonnet 18' already indicated that there can be 'Rough winds' (3) in May, while 'summer's lease hath all too short a date' (4). In 'But These Things Also', Thomas points out that in early spring there is 'On banks by the roadside the grass / Long-dead that is greyer now / Than all the Winter it was' (2-4). Winter has taken its toll on nature, which has been depleted and left behind its 'ruins' (11). But while the starlings 'Keep their spirits up' (15) waiting for things to change, man seeks 'Something to pay winter's debts' (12) and thereby 'mistakes / For earliest violets' everything white he sees (9-10). While the non-human goes through the cycle of seasons accepting its changes, humans demand to be compensated for what they have missed due to their inability to adjust to nature's rotation. Evidently people feel nature's changes differently. In 'April', Thomas writes that:

> The sweetest thing, I thought
> At one time, between earth and heaven
> Was the first smile

[150] Lutwack, 1994, p. 24

When mist has been forgiven
And the sun has stolen out (1-5)

It is not the human that is smiling, but the sun. Yet with the sun's child-like smile, happiness is restored to humans too. The return of spring in full thrall, with the growth of new flowers and birds' singing restored, has a massive effect on man's mood. 'To say "God bless it" was all that I could do.' (12) The person is as grateful for the physical and mental recovery associated with this seasonal change as the people are despondent about the approach of winter in 'November'. Its opening lines, with its clumsily earnest, Blakean rhymes of 'thirty' and 'dirty' leave no doubt that winter is not welcomed by most people. Conversely in the opening lines of 'March', Thomas underscores the relief spring brings to men: 'Now I know that Spring will come again, / Perhaps to-morrow: however late I've patience' (1-2). Humans, and Thomas as well, prefer the warmer seasons to the colder ones, because they have been habituated to prefer their sights and sounds, and the comforting ease of living they suggest. The problem for man to acknowledge his position within the natural scheme is then closely linked to his inability to go along with the seasons. In 'October', Thomas says he could be happy,

Were I some other or with earth could turn
In alternation of violet and rose,
Harebell and snowdrop, at their season due,
And gorse that has no time not to be gay. (14-17)

If he were able to go along with the cycles of earth and change along with the seasons, he could see himself being happy at all times. But as a human he cannot, because his reflective mind gets in the way and instils him with 'this mood by the name of melancholy' (20). Nature, while something he admires, is also damaging to

him through its seasonal change. Although he would prefer to lovingly look at it, he cannot escape the feelings of sadness associated with aspects of it.

Observations of nature or theorizing about nature

For Thomas, there is a constant difficulty in how he should perceive and present nature. Should he be observational and descriptive only, or should he let his mind interpret the nature he sees and theorize about its effect on him? Jonathan Bate locates the source of this conundrum in the mere attempt to write poetically:

> Ecopoiesis knows that things have a life, but it also has to recognize that it can only communicate that knowledge in the form of propositions by using the divided Cartesian language of subject ('we see') and object ('the life of things').[151]

The closeness he seeks with nature is never possible as long as he writes about it, because to write about it means to objectify it. Thus in 'The Thrush', there is a clear difference between how humans and birds view the nature they live in. The human's 'love' is always posterior to prior reflexion, while the bird is irrational and loves 'what is kind' (29) without thinking of 'All that's ahead and behind' (32). In other words, he cannot help but theorize about nature to a certain degree. The poem 'Some Eyes Condemn' further illustrates Thomas' dilemma. The titular eyes suggest an experiential response to nature, while the anaphoric repetition of 'Some eyes' sets up different levels of experience. Some 'condemn' (1), others 'wait patiently' (2) and others yet 'laugh at the whole' (3). The decision of how to deal with nature is not taken lightly, and Thomas struggles to find his own stance.

> Others, too, I have seen rest, question, roll,
> Dance, shoot. And many I have loved watching. (9-10)

[151] Bate, 2001, p. 149

He stands observing those who observe, theorize or actually interact with nature, but remains inactive himself. He wants to figure it out, just like the others, but cannot truly get involved. In 'She Dotes', a monomaniacal young woman does get involved when her divide from nature makes her believe the singing birds are her enemies. The birds 'Yet sing and chatter' (11), while she is slowly losing her mind grieving for a lover at war. She fears they might 'mock' (2) her or worse 'hide / A secret' (15-16) from her. The woman is in danger of over-interpreting her perceptions of nature and turning them into a farcical response when she is 'trying to translate / The word the cuckoo cries to his mate / Over and over.' (19-21) Thomas Hardy ridicules human attempts to interpret birdsong in his poem 'The Spring Call' by pointing out the regionally different, and thereby nonsensical, translations of their cries. The young woman in 'She Dotes' is thus but a representative of a common human trait, albeit one taking the rift between humans and the non-human to extreme lengths.

The theorizing about nature, although a constant companion to his poetry, is something Thomas is certainly critical of. When the woman in 'She Dotes', 'laughs at [the birds] for childishness' (8), she creates the same distance as the man who in 'Some Eyes Condemn' saw 'not one thing worth the laugh his soul / Had ready at waking.' (6-7) Constantly theorizing means creating a barrier between oneself and the non-human. It is thus surprising that Raymond Williams' criticism of Edward Thomas focuses on his writing as 'authentic observation overcome by a sub-intellectual fantasy.'[152] Williams clarifies what he means by this fantasy: 'The observation is so often clear and intense, but as the mode forms there is an inrush of

[152] Williams, 1973, p. 257-258

alien imagery: that set of ideas about the "rural" and the "pastoral."'[153] Thomas' place in the pastoral tradition has been discussed in chapter 1, and as was shown there, his relation to the mode was a complicated one. It would be oversimplifying matters to suggest that Thomas' poetry ruins astute observation by stooping it in misguided ideas about pastoral ideals. A poem like 'July' supports Raymond Williams' arguments, though. The scene is one of his sitting in a boat 'content thus still to lie' (12) while 'Naught moves but clouds, and in the glassy lake / Their doubles and the shadow of my boat.' (1-2) The poem proceeds to enumerate his vision, but he cannot help himself from inserting Wordsworthian pastoral ideas via the pathetic fallacy of his question 'if yet the shore woods be awake.' (6)

Interestingly though, it is Williams himself who offers a different view of nature poetry that would contradict his dismissal of Thomas' writing:

> Two principles of Nature can then be seen simultaneously. There is nature as a principle of order, of which the ordering mind is part, and which human activity, by regulating principles may then rearrange and control. But there is also nature as a principle of creation, of which the creative mind is part, and from which we may learn the truths of our own sympathetic nature.[154]

I would argue that of the two principles of nature Williams defines, the latter more closely correlates with Thomas' personal interpretation of the pastoral mode. All of Thomas' theorizing about nature, whether it be linked to nature through history, nature as a cyclical phenomenon, or even nature with regards to its position towards the human, finally reaffirms his admiration of the non-human, which he believes to be stronger and ultimately more meaningful than the human. It is only through nature that he can recognize himself. It is only through nature that he can be,

[153] Williams, 1973, p. 255
[154] Williams, 1973, p. 127

because nature is creative. In 'July', his observation is imperfect when he is unsure 'if what I see be bird or mote' (6). But in 'The Glory', he stops striving to see nature, letting nature reveal itself instead.

> The glory of the beauty of the morning, –
> The cuckoo crying over the untouched dew;
> The blackbird that has found it, and the dove
> That tempts me on to something sweeter than love;
> White clouds ranged even and fair as new-mown hay;
> The heat, the stir, the sublime vacancy
> Of sky and meadow and forest and my own heart: –
> The glory invites me, yet it leaves me scorning,
> All I can ever do, All I can be (1-10)

On the one hand one could see these opening lines as treating nature as 'a reflection of human predicaments.'[155] But the accumulative effect and the precision of the scene setting also indicate true respect for nature. 'The glory invites' him – nature is powerful and lets the human in, but instead, in Wordsworthian fashion, the human keeps his distance because he finds himself lacking and unworthy of it. He is looking for what Williams calls the 'truths of his own sympathetic nature' in the study of things that transcend empirical experience, 'wisdom or strength to match this beauty' (14). But ultimately he can only fall short of such endeavours, because humans cannot hope to master this beauty or to even become equals to it, and must remain 'content with discontent' (19).

What 'The Glory' makes clear is that if given the choice, observation trumps theorizing. Time has 'naught to travel to' and is 'dreary-swift' (27). 'Ecopoetry is not a description of dwelling with the earth, not a disengaged thinking about it, but an experiencing of it.'[156] So instead of wasting one's days thinking about questions one cannot find an answer to, Thomas suggests one should use one's eyes, ears, nose

[155] Garrard, 2012, p. 34
[156] Bate, 2001, p. 42

and touch to experience as much of 'the glory of the beauty' (1) as possible. Similarly, in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, blind Gloucester tells his king that he sees the world 'feelingly'.[157] Lear replies that 'A man may see how this world goes with no eyes. Look with thine ears.'[158] In 'Some Eyes Condemn', it is vision that instigates the discussion about nature's merits, while in 'Like the Touch of Rain' the tactile sensation of rain 'On a man's flesh and hair and eyes' (2) is compared to the touch of a woman. Sight and touch thus evoke feelings that link human thought and human interaction to the non-human. But the sense, Thomas is perhaps most interested in is hearing, as birdsong is the constant companion of his poetry. Andrew Motion notes that in 'over twenty poems birds articulate the communion that he seeks.'[159] This communion, namely the unity between the human and the non-human, points us towards Thomas' true understanding of nature. It is a coming together of human and non-human, in which the latter takes precedent, as the birds express the clarity Thomas never finds. In 'The Glory', the cuckoo and blackbird have found this communion humans are failing to establish. His poetry, which portrays an immense awareness of the non-human revealing itself, can in such instances be called ecocentric, as the interests of the non-human regularly precede those of man, while simultaneously trying to break down the boundaries between them.

Hence Thomas' intimate knowledge of the countryside is a prerequisite for his unifying ecocentrism. Only by showing what he knows can he, like Clare, establish the deep bond he believes to exist between the human and the non-human. Thomas' intimate relation with nature often consists in attempts to challenge the

[157] William Shakespeare, *King Lear* (1606), in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 2006), IV.6.149
[158] Shakespeare, 1606, IV.6.150-151
[159] Motion, 1991, p. 53

aforementioned duality. Part of this is Thomas' avoidance of the word 'animal', instead referring to each by their exact names. He thus aligns with Derrida's objection about the inadequacy of referring to animals using the word 'animal', which creates a false dichotomy.[160] In 'The Combe', the destruction of this bond through the killing of a badger, 'the most ancient Briton', leads to devastating consequences, whereas in 'Adlestrop', the birds are equally considered fellow countrymen. In 'The Thrush', Thomas underlines his familiarity with the bird by referring to it with the personal pronoun 'Him' (6). As birdsong accompanies his poetry, he shows that he can distinguish between various birds' voices. In 'Two Pewits', Andrew Motion says the 'lines float, soar and wheel just as the birds do themselves.'[161] The birds' rising and falling and the poem's play with light assist in breaking the dichotomies that tend to dominate human thinking: 'white' (3) and 'black' (5), 'low' and 'high' (7), 'earth and sky' (13). The birds with their colourful plumage become subliminal figures that reject categorization. They refuse to 'choose 'twixt earth and sky' (13), because they belong to both. Birds, in Thomas' poetry, are the main proponents of nature as an all-encompassing phenomenon.

In 'Sedge-Warblers', the birds' song, which is 'Quick, shrill, or grating' (19) and 'lacks all words, all melody, / All sweetness almost' (24-25), focuses the poets' attention on what truly matters. The birds are 'Wisely reiterating endlessly / What no man learnt yet, in or out of school.' (28-29) This lesson seems to be that humans cannot understand the essence of nature, as long as they try to heighten it by theorizing about it. In wondering about the subjective experience of birds, Thomas rejects Keats' overt symbolism of birds, as shown in his 'Ode to a Nightingale'. Keats

[160] Garrard, 2012, p. 150
[161] Motion, 1991, p. 74

identifies the object of the bird's singing as 'summer' (10) and wishes to 'forget / What thou among the leaves hast never known' (21-22). Thomas does not sympathize with Keats' sensibility to objectify the birds and instead seeks to actually understand what it is the birds are telling each other. As Adorno puts it:

> The pain in the face of beauty, nowhere more visceral than in the experience of nature, is as much the longing for what beauty promises but never unveils as it is the suffering at the inadequacy of the appearance, which fails beauty while wanting to make itself like it.[162]

The birds have understood it but the narrator has to get 'rid of this dream' (11) and its 'poison' (12) before he can come to this revelation. Said poison is his nostalgia for 'a time / Long past and irrecoverable' (1-2), which includes 'a nymph' (8) and imagines a perfect ecosystem that combines the beauty of the nature he sees with his classical aspirations. But he understands the errors of his ways: 'I only looked into the water' (13). Human vanity is dealt a harsh blow as observation once again trumps theorizing. Andrew Motion believes that 'Thomas usually imagines birds as the articulators of a comforting "essentially English" quality.'[163] By showing his knowledge of them, and thus establishing a connection with them, he attempts to propagate this quality of detachedness and ease that makes birds a central part of his vision of the English countryside.

The impact of weather on the non-human and humans

Another central part of this vision, partly associated with the seasonal cycles of nature, is weather. Weather transforms the look of the non-human world – sunshine, rain and snow have an impact on its beauty. The celandines in 'Celandine'

[162] Adorno, 2000, p. 82
[163] Motion, 1991, p. 131

are more beautiful in the sun, because they seem to be mirroring its yellow sheen. 'There's nothing like the sun,' (1) Thomas suggests in the eponymous poem to 'all things that it touches except snow.' (4) The sun makes 'stones and men and beasts and birds and flies' (3) feel better, look better and possibly be better. 'There's nothing like the sun till we are dead.' (20) Nothing comes close to the power the sun has on our surroundings and us. Only rain can rival it. Like the sun, rain shines in the shape of 'great diamonds' (3) in 'It rains'. The rain has the power to create complete silence and peacefulness as 'nothing stirs' (1). This respite from human activity makes tiny things look majestic like the 'untrodden, dense / Forest of parsley' (2-3). Sunshine and rain's struggle for power over nature peaks in 'After Rain'. The 'peering sun' (3), like a father figure looks at 'what has been done' (4) and finds nature altogether changed. The trees are bare, but the ground is 'orange', 'green' and 'grey' (13). What is left on the trees is an invasion of 'Uncountable / Crystals both dark and bright' (24-25) of rain. The rain is precious and shines, but it also represents a destructive force that can ravage through nature as we know it. In 'The Source' earth 'gulps and gulps in choked endeavour vain / To swallow the rain' (5-6) because it cannot withstand the stronghold rain has on it. The rain is presented like a bully as 'only the wild air speaks' (7), but does not ultimately triumph over earth, as nature makes use of the water that has come pouring down to create its own stream, which 'Bellows like a giant bathing in mighty mirth' (11). Nature is resourceful and understands how to respond to precipitations to benefit from them. As it is accustomed to seasonal change, it knows how to make up for its losses again.

Man is not as resistant. In many of Thomas' poems, the author shows that bad weather can play a hefty role in breaking a person's mood. The chief culprit in these

poems tends to be wind, most notably in 'Wind and Mist' and 'The New House', which both deal with the same house Thomas found it particularly hard to make a home in. Shelley, in his 'Ode to the West Wind' called it 'Destroyer and preserver' (14), thereby underlining the wind's overwhelming impact on people's lives. In 'The New House', 'the sun / Shone in vain' (10-11), because the house was so exposed to the wind that it felt like 'Nights of storm, days of mist, without end' (9). The wind's might assumes an apocalyptic scale as 'All was foretold' (13), meaning that he 'learned how the wind would sound / After these things should be.' (15-16) The wind is twice connected to eternity to insist that it will subsist even when he and all mankind have perished. Due to its exposure and the feelings evoked by the wind, the new house is not a pleasant place to live in, even though it does suggest some of the rough and rustic peculiarities of the Romantics' appreciation for the picturesque. In 'Wind and Mist', this picturesque setting is foregrounded by the visiting man who points out the 'view' of 'angled fields' (4) and 'the hills of the horizon' (12). Its position ought to make it a good place to live, but the weather makes this impossible and Thomas cannot take the visitor or anybody else who would suggest otherwise seriously. The repetition of 'mist' and especially 'wind' in the poem reinforces the sensation of approaching insanity caused by the weather. Others are 'free from wind and mist' (68), but he feels like a prisoner. 'The wind, by violently possessing "my past and the past of the world", alienates him from himself and his family; and the mist, by obliterating the earth, exiles him from the natural world.'[164] Wind and mist then take away both the human and non-human connexions Thomas seeks.

[164] Motion, 1991, p. 143

The same is true in ‘Rain’ where the constant ‘wild rain’ (1) combined with his ‘solitude’ (2) make him think of his approaching death. Again the word ‘rain’ is repeated throughout the poem echoing the dripping sound of the water and suggesting a mind encroached by monomaniacal thoughts. ‘Blessed are the dead that the rain rains upon.’ (7) The rain takes on a ritualistic function. As in a church, it makes Thomas reflect on both the beginning and the end of life, but he also sees the ‘cold water among broken reeds’ (13). The rain is thus a connector and a separator at once, it is life and death combined. Ultimately he feels completely empty but for the ‘love of death, / If love it be for what is perfect and / Cannot, the tempest tells me, disappoint.’ (16-18) These lines are among the bleakest, most despaired in all of Thomas’ poems. As much as he is hoping that no one he knows ‘Is dying tonight or lying still awake’ (9), he welcomes death for himself as something in which he is free of the thoughts and sensations caused by the wind and rain.

Yet not all his poems adopt such a bleak view of the weather’s effects on a person. Others show him elated by it. In ‘It Rains’, he is ‘nearly as happy as possible’ (6) as he can walk through the rain on his own. The only sadness he feels is the realization that he could not be this happy if he were not ‘alone’ (11). In ‘There Is Nothing Like the Sun’, he is equally happy that the sun has broken through the cold November temperatures: ‘The south wall warms me’ (6). The destruction of ‘After Rain’ reappears, but here the aftermath of the ‘morning’s storm’ (9) is viewed much more kindly, almost lovingly for the beauty that is revealed by the sunshine. As Thomas is cognizant of climate and seasonal change, he knows that similar weather patterns regularly return, and that therefore weather is indebted to and reliant on the land.

'Weather is a prime means of linking spatiality and temporality.'[165] This awareness may act as a comforting counterpoint to the dreary gloom he expresses in 'Rain'. Any weather he describes is therefore necessarily an English phenomenon, they are English sunshine and rain that he praises, and English wind he despises.

> But I have not forgot
> That there is nothing, too, like March's sun,
> Like April's, or July's, or June's or May's,
> Or January's, or February's, great days:
> August, September, October, and December
> Have equal days, all different from November. (11-16)

In 'There's Nothing Like the Sun', Thomas finds praise for each month and season, because no matter what time of the year it is, the weather is uniquely attuned to its seasonal and regional properties. As that is the case, there are both good and bad days in each month. It is thus not the time of the year that decides whether a day can be good or not. It is weather in accordance with place that decide on the state of Thomas' mind.

The lonely wanderer in nature

What makes the effect weather has on Thomas special is that he never generalizes the emotions caused. Weather affects each person individually, not people as a group. In 'It Rains' and 'The New House' he stresses that he is alone, while even 'Wind and Mist', which ought to contain a reference to his family, only discusses how the constant howling of the wind touches him. Thomas could, of course, not observe as much of nature if he were distracted by company. And this gives him one of his best known motifs, which had already been part of his prose writings before he ever turned to poetry: the lonely wanderer in nature. Thomas was known to take long

[165] Bate, 2001, p. 109

walks through the countryside, often by himself, sometimes accompanied by a friend like Robert Frost.[166] Inspired by Wordsworth's walks and observations, the lonely wanderer records nature and comes in closer contact with it because of his solitude.

> The rain and wind, the rain and wind, raved endlessly.
> On me the Summer storm, and fever, and melancholy
> Wrought magic, so that if I feared the solitude
> Far more I feared all company: too sharp, too rude,
> Had been the wisest or the dearest human voice. (1-5)

In 'Melancholy' Thomas is reconciled with the weather phenomena that had put such a strain on him in 'Rain', because in his solitude he can perceive nature more clearly. Even the most pleasant conversation would be unwelcome because it would draw his attention away from the sensations offered by nature. Uncharacteristically he finds that 'naught did my despair / But sweeten the strange sweetness' (7-8). The 'sounds of near water falling' (10) and the 'cuckoo calling' (9) make it seem like nature is singing a song for him alone and his feeling of melancholy is rounded by nature's conversation with him – he is truly incorporated in it. Song is one of the ways in which humans can emulate nature and immerse themselves in it, so in 'An Old Song (I was not apprenticed)' the same emotion is expressed when he himself does the singing to round off his experience in nature: 'I had no joy or sorrow that could not be expressed / By ''Tis my delight of a shiny night in the season of the year.' (11-12)

But his solitary walks offer more than emotion, as a significant amount of his experience and knowledge derive from his exploration of nature. 'I roamed where nobody had a right but keepers and squires, and there / I sought for nests, wild

[166] Hollis, 2011, p. 126

flowers, oak sticks, and moles, both far and near.' (5-6) Thomas ignores enclosures and other human boundaries, which have been set up in nature, to enter where he is not supposed to be. Learning cannot be successful if it is constrained to the paths built by other men. But later Thomas admits that: 'I less often trespass, and what I see or hear / Is mostly from the road or path by day' (14-15) after a real-life incident in which he and Frost were threatened by a gamekeeper has made him more cautious.[167] It seems like an injustice that the person's wandering should be restricted by other people, but it is a cruel irony that fits well into Thomas' biography. The lonely wanderer's experience may put him in touch with nature but only insofar as civilization allows it. Bate quotes Rousseau as saying that 'to be in touch with instinct – to be in touch with nature – is to be at liberty.'[168] Inversely, losing closeness to nature means losing one's liberty.

This conflict is foregrounded in 'The Other', where 'the forest' is contrasted with 'road and inn, the sum / Of what's not forest' (6-7). The forest is always associated with confusion and uncertainty in Thomas' poetry, but in a reversal of expectations it is in the inn that he exclaims: 'I felt fear.' (10) The problem arises because in the forest, Thomas could literally lose himself and become part of a whole, whereas in civilization he has to assume the role of one person among many. A strange impulse to investigate who he is leads him to seek the 'other', who is truly but a mirror image of himself: 'I pursued / To prove the likeness, and, if true, / To watch until myself I knew.' (18-20) By observing the other, he tries to get to know himself, unaware that his quest through civilization will further remove him from his personhood rather than to bring him closer to it. In addition to teaching him about the world around

[167] Hollis, 2011, p. 175-181
[168] Bate, 2001, p. 31

him, his wanderings through nature teach him who he really is. He discards civilization as he recognizes that 'never foamless shores / make better friends than those dull boors.' (29-30) He realizes that he is 'made not whole' (42) by his rampage through the inns, but remains refracted. He is not one person, but a divided soul. 'For they poured out all. / And that was naught.' (47-48) None of what the people in the inn can tell him helps him understand who either the other or he are. But away from civilization his understanding becomes sharper again as he perceives that 'all was earth's, or all was sky's; No difference endured between / The two.' (71-73) Here he sees that what seems distinct is really one thing; sky and earth, a pairing like the two parts of his soul, are bound to each other like light and dark are. None can exist without the other, and only when seen as complementary do they make sense. In moments like these, where he is alone in nature, he is 'fortunate' (88), because 'far off from men' (86) he becomes an 'old inhabitant of earth' (80) – his wanderings in nature have taught him that his place is with the birds and trees and not in the inns where he can only find confusion. Yet as always, his clarity 'was brief' (91), as he returns to civilization and is finally confronted by the other, who has 'lived as one under a ban' (98). The coming together of people complicates matters, while on their own they can be fine. What Thomas seems to realize is that the unity he seeks with nature is not one that can be enjoyed by all of humanity at once, but only by each person individually at a place at a time. It is a realization that Heidegger would share with him, as he suggested that 'our "authentic" relations with Nature are those in which we have only an immediate, unthinking, sensory or aesthetic responsiveness to it.'[169]

[169] Kate Soper, *What is Nature?: Culture, Politics and the Non-Human*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 48

Nature in crisis: loss of nature

Consequently, the relationship between humans (plural) and the non-human is more complicated than the simple human – non-human bond that is the core of Thomas' writing. Indeed, on numerous occasions, when a group of humans is put in touch with nature, a sense of crisis emerges. In 'The Combe', the distance between the men, referred to as 'they' (12), and the slayed badger is absolute. They 'Dug him out and gave him to the hounds' (13). The killing was completely unnecessary, as the badger is not needed for the humans' own consumption but quickly surrendered to the dogs that have assisted them in the killing. Meanwhile, just as in 'The Thrush', Thomas associates with the badger, referring to it as 'him' to show his allegiance. He cannot side with the men who wilfully destroy nature. This is not an isolated incident though, as 'The Gallows' illustrates. Thomas drenches his poem about endless, senseless killings of animals in sarcasm. The alternating rhyme scheme and the iambic metre allude to nursery rhymes, suggesting that this story is one happily shared with children. Yet, seemingly inspired by Blake, the innocently playful style only functions to underline what is a much bleaker tale. The weasel, crow and magpie and the 'many other beasts / And birds, skin, bone, and feather' (25-26), the gamekeeper kills do not die because there is a need for them. They die simply because the keeper can kill them. The magpie 'could both talk and do – / But what did that avail?' (19-20) It was a harmless creature that was of use to the rest of nature. Similarly the 'weasel lives in the sun / With all his family' (1-2). Although the magpie and weasel have been given rather negative connotations in our lore, Thomas stresses that these birds and beasts exist regardless of our presence, plans and desires. Killing them means upsetting a natural balance. This is shown by the

‘dead oak tree bough’ (8), the hunter hangs the animals on. It is not a tree that is simply associated with death, but a tree that is dead itself. The oak tree, which is often used to represent age and tradition, is chosen carefully. But instead of noticing that nature around him is dying, the hunter kills it some more.

The same lack of respect shown to animals repeats itself towards an elm tree in ‘The Barn’. After erecting a barn in the wrong place, the tree is cut down, while the barn stays where it is. Again Thomas’ response to the men’s logic is entirely cynical: ‘What holds it up? ’Twould not pay to pull it down. / Well, this place has no other antiquity.’ (7-8) Thomas laughs at the false belief that only man’s creation has history. The first line – ‘They should never have built a barn there, at all’ (1) – betrays how little he cares for such antiquity. The barn was ‘built to keep corn for rats and men’ (11), indicating its initial construction flaw that allowed alleged vermin to enter and feed off the people’s harvest. Men thought they were doing something that they would benefit from but which ultimately turned out to be of more use to birds and rats. The poem’s irony is revealed in the final two stanzas: ‘It’s the turn of lesser things, I suppose.’ (23) The lesser things are those that are manmade, but humans care so little even for their own creation that it eventually must lead to decay. Instead it is the greater thing, nature, which claims back the space. ‘Once I fancied ‘twas starlings they built it for,’ (24) Thomas ends his poem. He once believed others cared as much as he did. But he has to accept that they do not. Nevertheless the starlings and other animals, as well as the grass which grows on the roof, have invaded what men made for themselves without caring for the non-human. As in ‘Women He Liked’, all that man is left with is the memories of names, which outlast their remaining creation. But those cannot hide the fact that nature and culture have

grown apart and that a sense of crisis has entered their relationship. Nature and culture have become, in Kate Soper's words, 'both the best of friends and the worst of foes.'[170]

[170] Soper, 1995, p. 71

‘From the inn one watches’ – Thomas’ fellow humans

Two opposites: humans and the non-human

At the end of the previous chapter, Thomas’ non-human world was in crisis – a crisis not of its own making, but one caused by its difficult rapport to humans. Kate Soper submits that one ‘becomes a human (or “cultural”) being only insofar as one is subjected to a social and conventional set of norms and meanings and organizes ones’s [sic] identity in terms of it.’[171] Being a human then means subscribing to the conventions agreed upon by society. In light of this definition, Thomas’ poetry suggests that while it is possible for a single person to create a bond with nature, it is all the more problematic when a group of people or an entire society interact with it. Although Thomas strives to break the dichotomy between humans and the non-human, he cannot truly erase the duality of nature and culture as two opposites, which find themselves at a considerable distance from each other. The shooting of the badger in ‘The Combe’, the killing of animals in ’The Gallows’ and the illogical construction in ‘The Barn’ do but underline Garrard’s view that ‘although humans are supposed to be “part of nature” many of the things humans do are still portrayed as “unnatural”.’[172] The first unnatural act Thomas seems to suggest may have simply been humans’ decision to use language to name things. In ‘Old Man’, Thomas writes about the ‘hoar-green feathery herb’ (3), alternatively called ‘Old Man, or Lad’s-love’ (1), the names of which ‘Half decorate, half perplex’ (6), because they have virtually

[171] Soper, 1995, p. 55
[172] Garrard, 2012, p. 32

no correlation to the thing they describe. Naming and nature are separate and barely even operate in the same logical space. 'The hiatus between the herb's names and "the thing it is" reaffirms Thomas's belief that language cannot adequately re-create the object that it describes.'[173] The child in nature says 'Not a word' (18), while playing with the plant as in a Blake poem, 'snipping the tips and shrivelling /The shreds' (13-14). Jem Poster even goes as far as saying that 'nothingness itself has been revealed as the true focus of his contemplation.'[174] The girl is more at one with nature than the grown man who has separated himself from it by giving the plant a name. And yet the path to separation is already clearly delineated by her wilful destruction of the plant's leaves.

We know from the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that language influences thought, just as much as thought influences language.[175] If that is the case, then the fact that language contains words to differentiate between the human and the non-human presupposes that nature and culture must, at least in our understanding of both, be distinct. In 'The Mill-Water', the sounds of the abandoned mill keeps reminding him of the work which no longer exists here and fills him with 'Gloom infinite' (15). The stream's water, which continues to flow despite the mill's absence, 'mocks / The music of the mill-wheel's busy roar.' (7-8) Nature seems to have its own language, its own sounds, which although similar to the ones created by men carry their own meanings. 'All thoughts begin or end upon this sound,' (28) Thomas concludes. The human feels how the water mocks human labour. Where once humans tended to make use of nature to further their existence, they have now abandoned it to dwell

[173] Motion, 1991, p. 165
[174] Jem Poster, 'I Cannot Tell : Edward Thomas's Uncertainties' in Guy Cuthbertson & Lucy Newlin (eds.), *Branch-Lines: Edward Thomas and Contemporary Poetry*. (London: Enitharmon, 2007), p. 50
[175] Stephen Pinker, *The Language Instinct*. (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 49

in cities far away from nature. In ‘The Watchers’, this gradual loss of a connexion between the two is summarized in two short stanzas. In the first one, a coachman watches his horse drink from a ford. He stands on a bridge, smoking, and thus completing the classically pastoral imagery. The second stanza reverses this bliss:

> 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. (5-8)

The room, secluded from nature, is inhospitable and filled with the remnants of humans’ triumphs over nature – dead animals killed for sport. The watcher keeps at a safe distance from nature and unlike the coachman refuses to get involved in its workings.

The connotations of nature and culture’s opposition are often that they find each other taking on the roles of good and evil. As man’s actions are seen as unnatural, culture perfectly slips into the position of an antagonist. In ‘Old Man’, the immersion in culture, which is associated with growing up, creates a barrier between the person and nature. Although he ‘shrivels’ (26) and ‘sniffs’ (27) the plant as a child would, ‘Where first I met the bitter scent is lost.’ (25) Along with the memory of his first encounter with the plant, he has also lost the part of his connexion to nature, which was expressed by the simplicity of childhood.

> I have mislaid the key. I sniff the spray
> And think of nothing; I see and I hear nothing;
> Yet seem, too, to be listening, lying in wait
> For what I should, yet never can, remember:
> No garden appears, no path, no hoar-green bush
> Of Lad’s-love, or Old Man, no child beside,
> Neither father nor mother, nor any playmate;
> Only an avenue, dark, nameless, without end. (32-39)

He cannot reconnect with his former emotions and thoughts, and the blame for that is to be found in culture, but more precisely the culture of city life and domesticity. Thomas distinguishes between 'garden' and 'path' on the one hand and 'avenue' on the other, plainly to present a distinction between two types of culture: the rural and the urban. Thomas himself grew up in London and his lack of a memory of his first encounter with the plant may be due to the fact that city life did not offer him the freedom to explore nature in such a way as would have been necessary to experience it fully.

The people living in the country: farmers, gypsies, tramps and more

It seems therefore totally congruent to suggest that for Thomas the duality between nature and culture is as malleable as Thomas' understanding of the pastoral tradition. Thomas has little regard for city life, and notices aspects of cultural distancing from nature in country life, which displease him. But overall there is ample evidence to believe that in truth he thought it possible for nature and culture to have mutually beneficial relations. One starting point for a discussion of these can be Thomas' depictions of farmers, the people traditionally linked to the countryside and thought to have the most intimate insight into nature's secrets. In chapter 3 Thomas' sensual experience of nature was one of the focal points, and farming seems to accentuate this. As Jonathan Bate points out, in its original meaning, culture used to refer to various kinds of farming.[176] Etymologically speaking the root of the term culture lies in a gainful human interaction with the non-human, or as

[176] Bate, 2001, p. 3-4

Heidegger puts it: '[Man] cultivates the growing things of the earth and takes care of his increase.'[177] Farming therefore means being immersed in culture, which is intrinsically linked to nature.

In 'Digging (Today I think)', this sensual experience of man's contact with nature is immediately foregrounded as Thomas expostulates: 'Today I think, / Only with scents' (1-2). As he works the ground his senses dominate his mind. His touch helped by 'the spade' (6) and his hearing ('While the robin sings over again / Sad songs of Autumn mirth.' (15-16)) are added to his sensations and round off the image of a man labouring in deep connexion with nature. Imagery of death runs throughout the poem and yet 'All to sweetness turns' (12). Thomas seems aware that his digging, which at times 'wounds the root of tree' (6), could be viewed as harmful and damaging in some regards. Yet it equally has many benefits. This poem stresses 'Thomas's growing belief that moments of happiness must be enjoyed by inclusion, rather than ignorance, of the realities of hardship.'[178] His damaging of nature creates the grounds on which he can live and be happy, while also returning the possibility of future bloom to nature. The two opposites work together as in 'Cock-Crow' when 'two cocks together crow, / Cleaving the darkness with a silver blow' (3-4). The animals give a signal to the farmers that work can begin: 'The milkers lace their boots up at the farms.' (8) A similar interaction appears in 'Sowing' when after a 'perfect day / For sowing' (1-2), Thomas implores his interlocutor to 'hark at the rain' (13). The archaic formulation gives the statement a touch of historical importance, while the rain's 'Half a kiss, half a tear' (15) rounds off the day's perfect cycle instigated by the author's sowing of seeds. The rain gives the seed the power to

[177] Heidegger, 2000, p. 90
[178] Motion, 1991, p. 59

create life and kisses the worker good-night demonstrating a working relationship, in which they are each other well-inclined.

None of these poems glorify farming or farmers to the degree this is done in traditionally pastoral poetry. A shroud of melancholy is attached to each of the poems, whether in the awareness of accompanying death in 'Digging' (Today I think) or the combination of kiss and tear in 'Sowing'. Farm life is not perfect and a mixture of stoicism and melancholy defines the people who work the fields in the English countryside. The farmer encountered in 'As the Team's Head-Brass' encapsulates this in his short, clipped speech interrupted by his work, which could more easily be done if more men were available to help him instead of fighting a war in foreign fields. In 'Haymaking' there are enough men to do the work and the 'scent of woodbine and hay new mown' (19) fills the air. They are interesting smells as they represent weeds that have been purposely dried by men so as to be of use to them. To Jonathan Bate, 'grassland mown for hay is the supreme example of culture working together with nature.'[179] In the pastoral scene marked by their smell, the haymakers 'rested' (22) and 'All were silent' (32). The silence stands in contrast to the naming of the herbs in 'Old Man' and thereby lends a reverential air to the farmers who are attuned to the necessities of both their land as well as their culture. Farming makes these English countrymen feel their country more directly, and their silent communion with the land represents, in Andrew Motion's eyes, 'an invulnerable, ideal manifestation of the England Thomas loved.'[180]

But not just the people, also the land itself is time and time again defined by the farming practices. The farmhouse in 'Two Houses' has been built right next to where

[179] Bate, 2001, p. 6
[180] Motion, 1991, p. 99

there used to be another, showing that there has been a long tradition of agricultural work in even the remotest areas of England. In 'Cock-Crow' Thomas imagines 'bright before my eyes twin trumpeters stand, / Heralds of splendour, one at either hand, / Each facing each as in a coat of arms' (5-7). The cocks which crow in the morning and thereby mark the beginning of the farmers' working day have the same function as a bugle calling soldiers to war. But unlike the warriors, the farmers' work is creative and promises life. The cocks also take over from England's three lions and put farm life at the utmost centre of Englishness. The splendour they promise is not the grandeur of Empire and of battles won, but instead the honest joy of wholesome food that can nourish their community.

So while Thomas notes a rift that runs between nature and culture, as soon as he inspects the relationship between those people living in the countryside and nature he finds many connexions. In 'A Private', the fallen ploughman who is 'dead in battle slept out of doors / Many a frozen night' (1-2). Like a wild animal he spent his nights outside under 'Mrs. Greenland's Hawthorn Bush' (4). The capitalization turns the bush into a specific location that is distinguishable from others, but apart from the ploughman himself 'None knew which bush.' (5) The ploughman's connexion to this local nature is thus underlined, as he knows it more intimately than others and renders himself part of it through his sleep there. The ploughman is part of the farming community, but he also represents a type of countryman completely unbound by the rules of society. In Thomas' poetry, the marauding folk of the countryside, namely tramps, gypsies and vagrants exemplify the connexion between culture and nature just as much as farmers do.

Additionally, this is another example to counter any suspicion of too close an association of Thomas' mind-set with the dark side of Heidegger's ecopoetics. Thomas' admiration of people without a clear home, yet with a sense of community, flies in the face of the *Blut und Boden* rhetoric promoted by Nazis like Heidegger.[181] Thomas shows that his understanding of community is both innocent and inclusive, as in 'Up in the Wind' where the innkeeper defends the 'spirit of wildness' (28) that still lingers in rural communities and longs for the days 'When all was open and common' (32). The innkeeper herself has moved to London and back, showing that one need not spend one's whole life in one locality in order to feel connected with it. Thomas' appreciation of characters like tramps is perhaps best exemplified by the fact that his longest poem, 'Lob', is about such a figure. Lob 'was wild / And wandered. His home was where he was free.' (50-51) On his wanderings, he keeps 'clear old paths no one uses' (53), thus preventing nature from taking back those places where culture has left its mark to establish a connexion. Most importantly Lob is said to be 'English as this gate, these flowers, this mire' (54). And since at least three different people are suggested to be the man when the narrator asks to find him, we can get a sense of how these wandering folk define the English countryside, and thereby give meaning to what England is. Lob 'has been in England as long as dove and daw' (57), he is an integral part of it and is rooted in the place. But that does not mean he is rooted to one specific location. Andrew Motion thinks that 'instead of searching for harmony with a particular place, they enjoy a mobile life which entitles them to feel at home everywhere.'[182] By being at home in all places, Lob and his kind connect the different parts of England and ultimately do turn

[181] Michael Burleigh, *The Third Reich: A New History*. (London: Pan Macmillan, 2001), p. 430
[182] Motion, 1991, p. 142

Yorkshire and Devon into one and the same place: 'while he walked from Exeter to Leeds / One April called all cuckoo-flowers Milkmaids.' (62) He names and thereby personalizes the flowers. Language may thus not only be a divider, but also a connector. By spreading his wisdom across the entire island, he bridges the gaps between the counties of England.

Raymond Williams claims that 'an essential isolation and silence and loneliness have become the only carriers of nature and community against the rigours, the cold abstinence, the selfish ease of ordinary society.'[183] Lob is such a solitary figure as he walks from place to place. And through his isolation he does defend rural values against the encroaching threat of what the innkeeper in 'Up in the Wind' calls the 'idea of London' (9). The same wandering isolation characterizes the peddler in 'The Huxter'. He and his wife are content and 'laugh' (9) although, as Thomas describes in a memorable phrase, they have 'of money a plentiful lack' (2). The man is simple, 'has a hump' (1), 'a gay coat of double his girth' (3) and 'a bottle of beer' (6). His description puts him as remote from genteel society as possible, but still he represents someone valuable to the rural community, who can survive in this culture despite the changing times elsewhere. For these rural places have a different set of values, as again shown by the gypsy woman's comments in 'A Gentleman'. The rules of London society, where justice will prosecute a man who 'has robbed two clubs' (1) do not count to a woman to whom 'he was what I call a gentleman' (8). To her, the robber is a fine specimen of an Englishman because she 'never knew him mean' (12), since he paid for his child conceived out of wedlock, and invited her and her husband over to his home. The rules and expectations of rural England are quite different

[183] Williams, 1973, p. 131

from anything known elsewhere, but nevertheless these 'vagabonds suggest […] stability.'[184] The isolation Williams declared vital to these folk shields them from exterior influences and protects them in a world of their own.

Their isolation can only remain intact though, as long as they keep conversation alive as the foundation their community is built on. Whether 'Up in the Wind' or 'A Gentleman' or 'Lob', many of the poems celebrating these characters who shirk modern society use storytelling and dialogue to purvey their message. 'Lob' begins with a short conversation between the narrator and the old man, and during the narrator's search of the latter continues to go through a series of further conversations with other men and women who each have a story of the old man to tell. They may not all be talking of the same person, but their tales invariably have something to say about the history of their place and community. Another poem which focuses on storytelling in such a way is 'Man and Dog', in which another old man is presented to be the spitting image of an English country gentleman carrying his 'staff' (6) and 'brolly' (7) while wearing an 'old coat' (7) like the peddler in 'The Huxter'. The man tells the narrator of his life in which he has seen all of England. They exchange some trifling remarks about the war, but the really interesting bits of the poem are all concerned with the old man's life. He has been a sailor, a farmworker and a warrior. Like Lob he encompasses much of what makes England the country it is and now, his 'three sons, were fighting' (20). He has given the country all that he has, but there is no bitterness in him, because he likes the land and to work in it: 'the hoe / And reap-hook he liked, or anything to do with trees.' (20-21) His dog is 'not much use, but still she's company' (35), showing that the bitch

[184] Motion, 1991, p. 54

has something to offer to him that may give his life balance and harmony. The old man's stories tell of a rural world where not all may be free of worries, but where life seems altogether possible.

Storytelling is a major part of how communities are built, as it keeps track of a people's real and alleged history through myths, legends and other tales. In chapter 2, I showed that poetry is also a means to chronicle the history of a place and thereby adds to the sense of a longstanding community. Another building block of these communities is storytelling through music and song. In Theocritus' and Virgil's traditional pastoral poetry, much of the poems' action was derived from singing competitions between shepherds who sang about the current and past state of their rural affairs. Theocritus writes about a boy who holds a 'boxwood lyre',[185] and the cultural aspect of music is only made possible by human connexion with nature. In Thomas' 'The Gypsy', the same is true as the mobile, homeless man begins his 'rascally Bacchanal dance' (17) in the forest where his folk have set up their temporary housing. As mentioned before, he recalls Virgil's line that 'in the woodlands, you'd rival Pan for music.'[186] The character of the gypsy is the epitome of a man in isolation and in opposition to common society. Therefore his singing and dancing express an allure to the English soul present in Thomas' poetry. For the gypsy's music can only have an effect on the man because it is close to nature and represents something 'dark and wild' (24). But the gypsies' simultaneous selling of 'pigs, turkey, goose, and duck, Christmas corpses to be' (21) also creates a link between their culture's alleged wildness and the settled folks' tameness. The friction between the people close to nature and those distant from it seems superseded by a

[185] Theocritus, 2002, Idyll XXIV.109
[186] Virgil, 1999, Eclogue II.31

necessity to interact. England needs all its component parts to exist and to cooperate in order to be a place with meaning.

Speech and song

What songs and stories seem able to do is tie together culture and nature, history and place so as to render all of them meaningful. The gypsy's song 'peopled for me the hollow wooded land' (23), which means that it turns the empty forest into an imagined cultural hotspot, in which the dark of the night is lit up by 'the spark / In the gypsy boy's eyes' (26-27). Song and music have the power to energize people and the landscape. As shown in 'The Penny Whistle', music can also do more than mere speech can. After a beautifully observed and composed description of a twilight landscape scene, Thomas concludes by noting a young boy 'who hides apart in a thicket, / Slowly and surely playing / On a whistle an old nursery melody' (17-19). Again the boy is in isolation and immersed in nature when he plays his tune that has been part of the community for a seemingly long time. Thus he continues the tradition, instigated by Lob and the old man travelling with his dog, of carving out a space for himself in nature when he plays this melody so important to his culture. But what is most important about this boy is not revealed until the final line, namely that his tune 'Says far more than I am saying.' (20) His melody seems to incorporate more truth about the place they are in than any of Thomas' descriptions. Music, it seems, has the power to say more about culture and nature than any person can put into words. But even when words are used, as in 'An Old Song (I was not apprenticed)', music and thus song can ground a person. When he sings his song, he is happy even if he is in dire conditions otherwise. 'I am for a moment made a man

that sings out of his heart' (23). It is impossible to define or quantify manliness. Yet seemingly song, by tying him to his roots, has the potential to make Thomas feel manly. The song he sings is a 'Lincolnshire song' (7) and even though he 'was not apprenticed nor ever dwelt in famous Lincolnshire' (1), it has the effect on him of making him feel right in his place when he sings it.

Music and song are markers of a specific place, and thus these songs reflect England or Britain. In 'The Ash Grove', it is a Welsh traditional song that is likened to the experience of tranquillity felt when crossing through the physical space alluded to by the song. Thomas suggests that the actual experience may not be too different from its version recorded in song. Thus the song must carry with it an innate truth about the location it is coupled with. In 'An Old Song (I was not apprenticed)', the same feeling occurs as 'no joy or sorrow could not be expressed' (11) by it. Songs seem to encompass ranges of feeling because they can put a person into closer contact with a place. In 'An Old Song (The sun set)', he begins his song to accompany a robin's singing. Jonathan Bate remarks that 'poets want to sing like nightingales or skylarks because they know that they do not have the freedom of flight and the pure expressive capacity of real birds.'[187] Yet to Thomas, his own music is more than just an ersatz experience. Facing the sea, he is reminded of a 'sailors' song of merry loving' (19) and begins to sing it to fit into the scene. By singing the song, it is as if he becomes one with his landscape and is immersed into the cultural heritage it represents. He does not compete with the birds, but seeks to align himself with them. Singing these songs, whether the Lincolnshire song, the song of the Ash Grove or the lewd sailors' ditty means seeking allegiance with the places and culture they

[187] Bate, 2001, p. 62

represent. To sing these songs may make Thomas 'a man' in his mind. It certainly makes him an Englishman.

Because song is so important to Thomas' version of English culture, the structures of songs and ballads can often be found to guide his poetry writing as well. It makes complete sense that Ivor Gurney would later choose to set some of Thomas' poems to music.[188] The rhyming four-line stanzas of 'The Dark Forest', which alternate between pentametre and trimetre, offer a variation of the typical ballad metre just like 'The Penny Whistle' does, which rotates hendecasyllabic and heptasyllabic lines. The differences are meaningful, as they simultaneously acknowledge Thomas' indebtedness to the cultural impact song has had, while also demonstrating that his poetry is supposed to be something different and more. While embracing the iambic pattern that comes naturally to an English speaker, it effaces the artifice of composing lines to be sung according to a predetermined rhythm. This is necessary to his writing, since besides song and music the speech of the common men is another communicative aspect of English culture which informs Thomas' poetry. His poetry is littered with archaisms like ''tis', ''twill' or the titular valley in 'The Combe' to demonstrate the language's historical ties, while his enumerating of different names for the plant in 'Old Man' shows the local specificities that go along with the spoken language of the rural folk. In a review of Robert Frost's *North of Boston*, he praised his friend for his understanding of the need for such language to be incorporated into poetry while also setting out a blueprint for his own efforts:

> This is one of the most revolutionary books of modern times, but one of the quietest and least aggressive. It speaks, and it is poetry… These poems are revolutionary because they lack the exaggeration of rhetoric,

[188] Hollis, 2011, p.279

> and even at first sight appear to lack the poetic intensity of which rhetoric is an imitation. Their language is free from the poetical words and forms that are the chief material of secondary poets. The metre avoids not only the old-fashioned pomp and sweetness, but the later fashion also of discord and fuss. In fact, the medium is speech and common decasyllables… Many, if not most, of the separate lines and separate sentences are plain, and, in themselves, nothing. But they are bound together and made elements of beauty by a calm eagerness of emotion.[189]

In Frost's poetry Thomas discovered a writer still capable of transposing the beliefs he had long held about what poetry should be onto the page. The realization that poetry should shy away from rhetoric did not suddenly come to him once he had read Frost. In his biography of Walter Pater he had, for instance, already criticized his subject saying that he spoke 'like a collector of the great and beautiful. He collected them from books, and pictures, not from life.'[190] But Thomas is interested in depicting life and thus he continues:

> Literature is further divided in outward seeming from speech by what helps to make it in fact more than ever an equivalent of speech. It has to make words of such a spirit, and arrange them in such a manner, that they will do all that a speaker can do by innumerable gestures and their innumerable shades, by tone and pitch of voice, by speed, by pauses, by all that he is and he will become.[191]

What Thomas is trying to express thereby is that literature needs to incorporate into words all the added meaning that a speaker can convey through the use of his hands and the carefully weighed speed and pitch of delivery. Thomas suggests that the conscious wording that is inherent to literature and seems to separate it from speech is in fact but the collusion of the separate elements that make up speech. In his poetry Thomas attempts to follow this rule to let his words 'speak', as he had so

[189] Longley, 2008, p. 15
[190] Edward Thomas, 'Pater and Style' in David Wright (ed.), *Edward Thomas: Selected Poems and Prose*. (London: Penguin, 2012), p. 102
[191] Edward Thomas, 'Pater and Style' in Wright (ed.), 2012, p. 105

positively noted about Frost's writing. The importance of rural speech patterns is all the more apparent as his very first poem 'Up in the Wind' begins with the innkeeper's monologue:

> 'I could wring the old thing's neck that put it here!
> A public-house! It may be public for birds,
> Squirrels and such-like, ghosts of charcoal-burners
> And highwaymen.' The wild girl laughed. 'But I
> Hate it since I came back from Kennington.
> I gave up a good place.' (1-6)

The pause behind the casual 'such-like' and the ejaculation of 'A public-house!' break the regular rhythm. The wild girl's lines truly speak in the sense that they both sound like they might have been uttered by a real person and carry added meaning, as one can feel the agitation and unrest that her words are steeped in. Speech is also at the forefront of poems such as 'Lob' or 'Wind and Mist', where elongated monologues alternate with instances of dialogue. In 'Man and Dog', the titular character tells his story to a sympathetic listener. The man and his interlocutor exchange some words about the war that do not exceed those spoken in 'As the Team's Head-Brass'. But mostly the man is left to narrate his own tale without interruption, following his own natural rural pattern.

Part of this pattern is a need for simplicity and clarity. Unlike in more rhetorically elaborate poetry, most of Thomas's poems that contain actual speech are guided by shorter clauses that can flow like a stream of consciousness without adopting the often all too free association that can make some writers' verse nearly impenetrable. Instead his poetry embraces the twists and turns as well as repetitions that naturally occur in speech, all while keeping to a mostly iambic metre. In 'Man and Dog', the speaker jumps from topics of his youth to his comments on the war. In 'An Old Song

(I Was not Apprenticed)', the simplicity is underlined by Thomas' merging of the rhythms of speech with those of song. Also his referencing of an existing song, which reoccurs in poems such as 'The Ash Grove' and 'Over the Hills' helps to 'convey a sense of responsibility and indebtedness to the native English past.'[192] His frequent use of blank verse, popularized in English writing since the days of Shakespeare, adds to this effect. By imitating the rhythm of a heartbeat, the often iambic lines synchronize his poetry with the common tempi of his readers' lives. Besides his many ballad-like poems that use alternating rhyme, a vast number of his works do not display any rhyme scheme, relying on alliteration and assonance instead. Often, as Edna Longley puts it: 'Refrain and assonance effect an ominous coherence.'[193] Andrew Motion thus explains:

> Seventy-six of Thomas's 142 poems are written in this variable blank-verse line, and all of them employ patterns of stress and pause which reflect a mind actually engaged in the act of thinking, rather than offering concluded thoughts. His rhythm describes the movement of his mind, as well as the sound of its sense.[194]

In other words, Thomas' reliance on these seemingly more natural patterns and rhythms stem from his desire to let poetry be a reflexion of thought processes rather than of their conclusions. That these speech patterns guide Thomas' metre is hence no mere stylistic choice. They help shape much of what Thomas has to say about England, and indeed are part of the country's fibre. As already mentioned, Virgil suggested that 'a countryman should be / Concerned to put flesh on his sheep and keep his poetry spare.'[195] These lines seem predictive of Thomas' treatment of culture in his poetry. His interest in agricultural labour and rural affairs takes

[192] Motion, 1991, p. 7
[193] Edna Longley, 'Going Back to Edward Thomas' in Cuthbertson and Lewlin, 2007, p. 40
[194] Motion, 1991, p. 82
[195] Virgil, 1999, Eclogue VI.4-5

precedence over the larger-scale concerns of city life, because it is more important to him to think of what it means for an English countryman to subsist. The perceived simplicity of his verse, which has grown out of the need to reflect thought processes, is his way of reconciling the academic act of writing poetry with the relatively lower status of his topics. The patterns and rhythms are inevitable because they express a core message about how he feels about the England of his poetry. His poetry mirrors his description of the wind's sounds in 'I Never Saw that Land Before', where 'the breeze' (14) 'hinted all and nothing spoke' (15). There is a quiet simplicity to both the wind and his poetry that says a lot by saying little, and simply being. He feels a kinship with this land he has never been to, because he recognizes something familiar or an 'acquaintance hoar' (3) in it. The postponed adjective lends the phrase an archaic touch and makes it all the more powerful. There is an unspoken connexion between the man and this land, which is expressed in the equal footing upon which everything from the 'river' (6) to the 'cattle' and the 'ash trees' (7) seems to be. Man, place, nature and culture combine to create an impression that can only be hinted at in his poetry.

The poem's key lines come at the end, as Thomas makes the intended effect of his poetry explicit. He starts by evoking memory and thus taking himself back to his debts to Wordsworth and the English canon. The scene presented in the poem represents a spot of time as described by Wordsworth, which engenders a singularity of feeling and thought in him. He resists the danger of falling into the trap of needless rhetoric and philosophizing. Instead he says that:

> … and if I could sing
> What would not even whisper my soul
> As I went on my journeying,

I should use, as the trees and birds did,
A language not to be betrayed;
And what was hid should still be hid
Excepting from those like me made
Who answer when such whispers bid. (18-25)

The language in his poetry should be clear, precise and most importantly true. Those who respond to nature as he does should be able to perceive this clarity and touch his meaning, as if they had experienced the same scene. In 'Words', Thomas explains this even further suggesting that it is not the poet who chooses his words, but the words which choose him 'As the winds use / A crack in a wall' (5-6) to make music. The poem is addressed to the words themselves and presents itself as an ode to the English language. 'I know you' (12), Thomas tells the words, recognizing their variety and sensing how they can be 'light' (13) and 'tough' (14) and 'precious' (15) and 'sweet' (18). Their etymology is 'Strange as the races / Of dead and unborn' (23-24) and thus hard to pinpoint. As in 'Old Man', there is little reason why we choose to associate certain sounds with corresponding things or ideas. Yet the words' meanings are ingrained in the people's interactions. Although they are 'older far / Than the oldest yew' (32-33), the words are still relevant today. In his *Walter Pater*, Thomas writes that: 'No man can decree the value of one word, unless it is his own invention; the value which it will have in his hands has been decreed by his own past, by the past of his race.'[196] They keep us tied to the past and evolve. Language is, like 'the dearest faces' (29) and 'lost homes' (31), vital to how we define who we are and what we believe in. And through its power to connect man with what he sees, it becomes 'as dear / As the earth which you prove / That we love.' (39-41)

[196] Thomas, 'Pater and Style' in Wright (ed.), 2012, p. 106

Language shows our connectedness with our dwelling places, it ties man and nature together. Edna Longley writes that Thomas 'desires poetry to balance speech and music so that words "support one another", and each word "lives its intensest life."'[197] But the words can only develop such a life, because they have grown on the fertile lands of the English countryside. For Thomas, poetry, if it is written about subjects that touch rural matters, can be what connects nature and culture in a meaningful way.

Intersections between humans and the non-human

What we are left with then is a sense that poetry can manage to overcome the distance between nature and culture. At the beginning of this chapter, nature and culture were first presented as two opposing forces: the eternal yet ever-changing non-human and the often mindless, usurping humans who can only connect with the former on their own but not once they confront it as a whole society. At the end of this chapter it has become apparent that on the contrary such connexions are possible mainly thanks to the intersections between nature and culture that exist in the English countryside, and are foregrounded by language. The individual rapport between the human and the non-human returns subjectivity to each, which in Timothy Morton's eyes means that any talk of reconciliation between opposing principles should become redundant.[198] Yet once more it is not a wholly generalized connexion between nature and culture that has become possible, because humans connect with nature in specific places through history and thus establish a regionalism that is at the heart of Thomas' understanding of England.

[197] Longley, 2008, p. 19
[198] Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 23

In ‘Gone, Gone Again’ Thomas sees the ‘Blenheim oranges / Fall grubby from the trees / As when I was young’ (11-13). The decay mirrors the destruction of the war and seems to suggest a discord between nature’s produce, which is left to rot without ever benefiting humans, and the desire to connect. Yet none of this is new, these things happened in his youth too. The uninhabited house, which is being reclaimed by nature ‘With grass growing instead / Of the footsteps of life’ (20-21), equally suggests an end which is later overturned as the house ‘is not dark’ (28). In all this darkness, there is light, because people do feel connected with their local spaces and recognize the effect their history has had on them. The same is true when we look at Thomas’ birthday poem ‘March the Third’ – it is not a poem of ends or beginnings, but a poem of returns as it starts with a simple ‘Here again’ (1), only to point out the ‘blend’ (6) of birds’ voices and bell sounds. He goes on to explain their unexpected congruence:

> And when it falls on Sunday, bells
> Are a wild natural voice that dwells
> On hillsides; but the birds’ songs have
> The holiness gone from the bells. (13-16)

The boundaries between nature and culture disappear and the two become indistinguishable as they take on each other’s characteristics. In ‘The Barn and the Down’, Thomas describes a night scene in which he cannot tell whether the dark distant shadow he sees is the old village barn or the stony wall of the down. Visibly and aurally nature and culture have merged and the uncritical eye and ear are mistaken in their perceptions.

The English countryside is defined by intersections of the human and non-human, which repeatedly converge to become one and the same thing. England is a place,

which exists and has meaning thanks to this interplay between the two guiding forces of life. Finally it is the poet's job to remind people of this as Thomas demonstrates in 'Aspens', where he likens himself to the tree.

> Aspens must shake their leaves and men may hear
> But need not listen, more than to my rhymes.
>
> Whatever wind blows, while they and I have leaves
> We cannot other than an aspen be
> That ceaselessly, unreasonably grieves,
> Or so men think who like a different tree. (19-24)

Bate quotes Rousseau as saying: 'Man's improvement consists in altering the face of nature but failing to make himself happy.'[199] In 'Aspens', Thomas seems to agree with this. Nonetheless whatever failure there is, it looks unimportant compared with the greater closeness between man and nature that has been achieved despite these alterations. The poet is like the tree, forced to make his song for others, who may or may not be listening. They strive against the noise of human enterprise, but are never 'drowned' (9), instead going on, understood by some, misunderstood by others. In the apparent competition between nature and culture, it is the poet who as a chronicler of place and time reminds them of the virtue of being one and the same. Thomas thus ultimately achieves what Motion calls 'a rejoicing in moments of integration with English landscape.'[200] For finally, the poet clearly knows that it is 'sometimes consoling to remember how much of the pleasantness of the English countryside is due to men, by chance or design', especially in all those places where they 'have obviously co-operated with Nature.'[201]

[199] Bate, 2001, p. 45
[200] Motion, 1991, p. 97
[201] Edward Thomas, 'Chalk Pits' in Wright (ed.), 2012, p. 77

‘The goddesses that dwell’ – Travelling and the meaning of place

Roads into and out of culture

Walking through a landscape means passing through a space that neither nature nor culture can claim to have created by themselves. In ‘The Ash Grove’, Thomas walks along a row of ashes that used to lead up to a house that no longer exists. The ashes are encircled by walls, as they used to be part of the complex that was built around the house to create a home. As in ‘I Never Saw that Land Before’, Thomas is perfectly calm despite the dying of culture and nature around him, because ‘an ash grove far from those hills can bring / The same tranquillity’ (10-11). Thomas is not actually in a place of culture, nor is it truly a natural space. It is a strange hybrid, which has lost its human-intended purpose. What fills Thomas with this tranquillity and makes him walk like ‘a ghost with ghostly gladness’ (12), lifelessly as in a trance, is not the place itself, but the road he finds himself on. Jonathan Bate notes about Thomas that ‘many of his poems are about not-dwelling, about roads rather than homes’,[202] and in ‘The Ash Grove’ the home is not only absent but even a thing of the past. In the previous chapter, I concluded that culture and nature can coexist locally, and with a respect for the places’ history. If this is the case, then roads are one of the means that connect the different localities with one another to create a larger sphere that may be called England.

Both ‘The Ash Grove’ and ‘I Never Saw that Land Before’ share a sense of familiarity in an unknown place. Roads can lead people to places they have not been to before

[202] Bate, 2001, p. 275

and yet divulge something recognizable. Thomas' sonnet 'It Was Upon' tells a similar story of a man walking into a natural scene he does not inhabit, yet he is overcome by a feeling of possessiveness: 'The earth outspread, / Like meadows of the future, I possessed.' (7-8) Uncharacteristically he 'stood at rest' (6) 'looking along a path' (2) rather than walking upon it. A path is a man-made structure that guides humans through nature. It gives them direction and tells them where it is acceptable to walk and where not to – thus it seems limiting and constricting. Yet it is also full of the history of people who have walked that way before, and can thus inspire others. Thomas is 'Flushed with desire' (7), wanting to experience the scene but somehow still outside of it. Later he wonders about a time 'when those fields are by me / Never to be recrossed' (11-12) and he speculates about the mark he may leave on the place. The poem underscores the importance of man's association with place. Thomas' allegiance is to the fields and crops he canvasses, but the 'meadows of the future' he envisions still feel out of his reach.

Roads can thus connect places and people, but they also add to the general sense of displacement that runs through Thomas' works. Thomas is not only looking for a place in the world, he is moreover interested in finding a home where he may be at peace. In 'The Path', this dilemma is generalized, as Thomas presents the adults' and children's differing reactions to a little forest path. The path is set up as the concurrent piece to the road adults travel on. The path instead 'serves / Children' (3-4) – it is a servant to people, but mostly, in true Blakean fashion, it gives children an opportunity to change their perspective from that of the adults. From the path they can crown over the wood that lies down in the valley like kings, while standing 'between the legs of beech and yew' (5), as if protected by a paternalistic nature.

The poem's adults instead stick to the culturally demarcated road to travel on, for they have become slightly distanced from the personal shelter the more nature-attuned path can give them. 'The eye / Has but the road' (17-18). Adults can only superficially perceive the road, the forest and the path, while the children actually experience all of them through immersion. 'By defining a middle-ground between the threatening "precipitous wood" and the familiar normality of the "level road", the path reconciles opposing forces in a stable balance.'[203] The path has the potential for dwelling and for harking back to a distant past, it is a 'legendary / Or fancied' (20-21) place. Thomas underlines the necessity to leave the beaten tracks to explore other places. The danger lies in an otherwise possible distancing from the places the roads combine, with an all too large focus on the road itself.

England is both the places combined by the roads, as well as the roads themselves, but if only children can see beyond the space their feet are on, true dwelling seems impossible. In 'Good-Night', a poem about a walk through town before he goes off to war, it is the 'call of children in the unfamiliar streets' (5) that he finds welcoming. Besides there is little he finds immediately alluring, as nature is cancelled out by constant commotion: 'the noise of man, beast, and machine prevails.' (4) Still there is comfort in these streets' noises as the 'friendless town is friendly'. (11) There is a connexion between the town's elements and the things that he knows – a common strain of Englishness can be felt. Thomas sees that the streets are not just meant to be walked on; they are 'homely' (14). People can dwell along them, even if they are not his own dwelling place. The idea of home is therefore cast in a wider sense; the home is expanded to include all the locations he passes through on his journey to

[203] Motion, 1991, p. 159

experience England. Andrew Motion notes that 'the journey and not the arrival provides him with the wholeness he seeks, because it is there that self-consciousness is at a minimum.'[204] In 'Good-Night' Thomas expresses this by saying that though 'homeless, I am not lost.' (11) Kate Soper says that Heidegger 'comes close to suggesting that we are alienated from the world in the very act of cognitively reflecting upon it.'[205] If self-consciousness is a distancing from natural existence into a pure rationalism, then to avoid self-consciousness means being at home everywhere.

In 'Roads', Thomas opens with an admission of how much the potential for journeys has a draw on him:

> I love roads:
> The goddesses that dwell
> Far along invisible
> Are my favourite gods. (1-4)

Roads are closer to nature than any dwelling places, because we can never fully apprehend or know them. Like arteries, they meander and combine to energize society, and even though they are man-made, their ends and beginnings seem mostly conjectural. They are important to Thomas' understanding of England in their quality of blending in and out of people's consciousness. As in 'The Path', the 'hill road wet with rain' (13) is only a road because humans make use of it. Roads bridge a gap between culture and nature, as in the *Mabinogi* referred to in line 35, where the human world and the Otherworld show no clear boundaries.[206] The potential of journeys is thus to create a connexion between different cultures as well as culture and nature, but also between nature, culture and the beyond. The road 'winds on for

[204] Motion, 1991, p. 51
[205] Soper, 1995, p. 48
[206] See Carey, 2006, p. 1403

ever' (32), it has endless promise of something more attached to it. Roads and journeys have a great effect on the portrayal of England, but equally on the person who travels on said roads. 'Travellers and roads depend on each other for their existence' in both 'Roads' and 'The Path'.[207] In 'The Other' Thomas admits he feels a 'Desire of desire' (37), which sees him exploring to explore, travelling to travel, never truly looking for an end but content to stay on the road for as long as the road is hospitable to him. At every turn he takes, some person is there to converse with him, who can give him new suggestions of where to go next and where he might find his double, which is really just another version of himself.

'Adlestrop' combines all of these considerations. It is a poem about a specific place that is also about a journey, describes a personal effect while harnessing more general ambitions. 'Adlestrop' is a poem about England, which underlines the country's variety, while striving to find unifying elements. It finds a balance between the notions of home and homelessness to show a man at peace in a surrounding he only partially knows. The poem begins as an answer to an unasked question: 'Yes. I remember Adlestrop.' (1) It is an affirmative start that sets the tone for a poem that does not allow for much contrarianism. The specific place of Adlestrop matters – it could not simply be replaced by anything else. The poem tells of a singular event taken place in a specific locale and the repetition of the town's name is relevant, because the name is the *logos* of the *oikos*, or the title given to a homestead where people dwell. The reference to Adlestrop's name is akin to Lob's naming of birds and plants in 'Lob'. Jonathan Bate argues that the naming of places is a sign of unity, and

[207] Motion, 1991, p. 128

thus whoever uses a name creates a connexion between himself and the named.[208] 'In order to write about a place, we have to find a name for it.'[209] The fact Thomas ever knew the name of the place Adlestrop is a coincidence, just like his memory of it is the product of chance. 'What I saw / Was Adlestrop' (7-8) – all he perceived was the station sign telling him where he was. All else (the sounds, the plants, the weather) could be found anywhere else in England, too. The scene is only in his memory connected with the name of the place, when in truth it could easily be pasted onto any other scenery. The final paragraph illuminates this point:

> And for that minute a blackbird sang
> Close by, and round him, mistier
> Farther and farther, all the birds
> Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire. (13-16)

From the specificity of one very brief moment, Thomas branches out to draw circles around the town of Adlestrop. The birdsong travels from this one seemingly insignificant place to be connected to a variety of further places in the more or less near vicinity. 'Adlestrop' is a poem about connexions. As the poet finds himself on a train journey from one place to another, he soaks up the places that lie on his route. Like the fellowship he imagines between birds, he establishes links between the different places. While Ruskin called railroads 'only a device for making the world smaller',[210] in 'Adlestrop' the train has the opposite effect: it makes places more noticeable and allows people to experience them, if only fleetingly. 'Place, then, is potentially endless. Even if it is tiny or intimate, it has an inbuilt questioning quality.'[211] In Thomas' poem, this questioning is realized, as the poem is ostensibly

[208] Bate, 1991, p. 103
[209] Bate, 2001, p. 65
[210] Ruskin, 2000, p. 30
[211] Morton, 2007, p. 173

the answer to a question. What 'Adlestrop' accomplishes, is to draw attention to both the uniqueness of the individual places within England as well as the interconnecting tissue that binds them together as a whole.

Regional variation

In these final lines, which directly allude to two English counties, Thomas introduces the theme of regionalism as important to the notion of England. Shakespeare's allusions to his native Warwickshire, Wordsworth's love of the Lake District and, perhaps most definitively, Hardy's creation of Wessex have all paved the way for Thomas' observation of England as a combination of various distinctive parts. Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire are connected through the birds, yet distinct in more than just their names. According to Edna Longley, Thomas represents England 'with an inwardness' and breaks up the idea of 'Britain'.[212] 'He unpredictably shrinks or enlarges a mental landscape or knowable community.'[213] Regional boundaries become volatile and unstable, yet they remain vividly realized. In 'An Old Song (I Was not Apprenticed)', the fact he is not from Lincolnshire has a bearing on how he perceives the song he is thinking of. Thomas is thus aware of the different experiences of place caused by the differences in one's regional backgrounds. Raymond Williams stresses that 'any study of the literature and history of rural England has always to be aware of region and of place.'[214] From a brief encounter with an old soldier, Thomas records the following thoughts: 'I should like to know what the old soldier meant by "England", if it was anything more than some sort of giant with Gloucestershire for its eyes, its beating heart, for everything that raised it

[212] Longley, 2008, p. 21
[213] Longley, 2008, p. 22
[214] Williams, 1973, p. 91

above a personification.'[215] To equate England with one region is to be at fault, but to recognize its plurality means to get to the heart of the country. Few poets come to mind that revel in depicting England as marked by its regional variety as much as Thomas does. In 'The Lofty Sky', Thomas stresses the importance of taking in different inputs even more as 'nought deters / The desire of the eye' (10-11). Thomas is unequivocal in what his eye desires: 'To-day I want the sky' (1) and lists the hills and otherwise rural sights that he wishes to see. The satisfaction of these aesthetic wishes can never come if the person is constrained to but one place, but England holds all of them within its boundaries. Jonathan Bate explains how these rural specificities have ecological implications: 'Common ecosystems may be thought of as united into bioregions which are bounded by great rivers and mountain ranges.'[216] The larger ecosystem of England combines within itself these subsets of bioregions, which at times can be quite dissimilar. 'I sicken of the woods' (13), Thomas laments, and compares the state of being stuck in one place to that of a 'fish that lives / In weeds and mud and gives / What's above him no thought' (19-21). A fish's horizons are ever less impressive because it cannot get out of its watery limits, and yet the fish 'has days / When he floats up and plays / Among the lily leaves' (25-27). The will to explore is present in the fish, just as much as it marks Thomas' 'Desire of desire' (37) in 'The Other'. To move out of one's usual safe space is part of existence and to 'arise and go far / To where the lilies are' (33-34) becomes Thomas' mantra to explain his own need to explore all the facets of Englishness.

The 'new country' (3) he travelled to in 'Over the Hills' is unlike the one he lives in and toils in when he leans on his spade to let it pass through his mind again. In 'the

[215] Edward Thomas, 'It's a Long, Long Way' in Wright (ed.), 2012, p. 134
[216] Bate, 2001, p. 231

inn where all were kind, / All were strangers' (7-8), he is yet again overcome by the sensation of simultaneous singularity and connexion that runs through most of his conversations with people in unfamiliar territory. There are connexions at every turn, as the constant enjambements let one line spill over into the next, one country spills over into the other over the 'horizon ridge' (2), which is both a frontier as well as a link. But the difference left a mark nonetheless, as mere memory is not enough to bring it back to his mind's eye: 'Recall / Was vain' (14-15). Action and perception are different from memory, as he needs to 'do the same / Again' (13-14) if he wants to truly know that new country once more. Instead its presence in his mind is fortified in an altered state through his absence from it. He feels connected with it while distant from it at the same time.

In 'As the Team's Head-Brass', this hovering between connexion and distance takes on a more acute dimension, as regionalism is evoked during the men's discussion of the war:

> […] Have many gone
> From here?' 'Yes.' 'Many lost? 'Yes, a good few.
> Only two teams work on the farm this year.
> One of my mates is dead. The second day
> In France they killed him. (23-27)

The men from different regions feel the war differently, as the consequences of the boys' dying on the fronts of Belgium and France has direct repercussions on their daily lives. Thomas sympathizes with the labourer, yet cannot truly respond to his sorrows. The men are connected through their knowledge of an English war, yet divided by their different experiences of it. 'In Memoriam (Easter, 1915)', a quatrain which reads like a eulogy for those fallen overseas, addresses the very real local consequences of the war, which become visible at Eastertime, when the flowers are

'left thick' (1) because the men are not there to pick them for 'their sweethearts' (3). 'Instead of mutilated corpses there is an absence of any humans at all – only the motifs of peace sinisterly unused.'[217] One can imagine each locality in England going through a similar time, where the matters of national importance have taken a toll on even the most remote and most rural of places. Thomas' awareness for these local consequences supports the notion that like Wordsworth's patriotism, his is 'no knee-jerk jingoism', but something more reflective and mild.[218]

The war: at home and abroad

'Nowhere does the poem mention war, and yet it is a powerful war poem,' is Matthew Hollis' poignant comment on 'In Memoriam (Easter, 1915)'.[219] Indeed few of Thomas' war poems actually address the war explicitly. His allusions are generally more implicit, and even when he does refer to the war openly, the setting of his poems hardly ever leaves the perimeters of Britain. Thomas' war poetry concerns itself with the home front and with how England and its people respond to what is happening across the Channel. It is an approach that like so much else in Thomas' poetry derives from the pastoral tradition as established by Virgil. Raymond Williams ascertains that 'the contrast within Virgilian pastoral is between the pleasures of rural settlement and the threat of loss.'[220] This sentiment is echoed in Thomas' war poetry, which focuses on the losses felt by the people living in England, rather than the soldiers fighting in France. 'The assumption that war poetry, to be war poetry, must concern itself exclusively with the actual circumstances of battle has blurred

[217] Motion, 1991, p. 119
[218] Bate, 2001, p. 215
[219] Hollis, 2011, p. 221
[220] Williams, 1973, p. 17

the quality of his passionate, but refined, patriotism'.[221] Thomas is interested in the place the English are associated with, but he is not actually concerned with where they might be dying. In 'The Owl', the setting is clearly an inn somewhere in England, but the displaced soldiers suffering in France shine through the entire poem. As in 'Over the Hills', an enjambement between lines 8 and 9 serves to spill one space over into the next. In this case it is the outside that encroaches upon the men in the inn: 'An owl's cry, a most melancholy cry / Shaken out long and clear upon the hill.' (8-9) The hill again serves as a frontier and link, and the owl is the aural reminder of the dangers men are suffering in France. The opening line shows that however bad the men's situation may be, it could be worse, as the narrator is 'hungry, and yet not starved' (1). But when he gets to eat, his food is 'salted' (13). He tastes the tears of those giving their lives in France, whom he is thinking of because of the 'bird's voice' (14). While he is sitting in the warmth of a house, they are lying 'under the stars' (15) unsure whether they might see another day.

The tension in these lines is clear, as Thomas wonders about the displacement of young English men into a space that is unknown for them. While he enjoys travelling around England to fulfil his 'desire of desire', these men have left the English shores to potentially die abroad. The contrast between England as a home, where people can live in relative peace, and the dangerous vicissitudes they may expect in France is starkly drawn. In 'Lights Out', a poem that is ostensibly about Thomas' shipping out to France, he 'summarises his life in scenes connected by the image of a road.'[222] The road, which has finally led him to France, is at an end, and there is ample evidence in the poem that he would much rather be safe in the comforts of his

[221] Motion, 1991, p. 91
[222] Motion, 1991, p. 125

beloved English countryside. But duty has called him to make this final journey, and so he follows. The 'bugle call' (5) in 'No One Cares Less than I' represents this call to action by a country he loves, but it is not to be seen unequivocally. His affirmation that he does not care whether he is 'destined to lie / Under a foreign clod' (1-2) links him with the soldiers in 'Lights Out', as well as with his fellow poet, Rupert Brooke. Only where Brooke was completely sincere in his belief that he may have made England out of part of France by dying there, Thomas seems to be less enthused. The eerie sentiments behind 'Only the bugles know, / What the bugles say in the morning, And they do not care' (7-9) dispel any notion that the warring parties may worry about the human consequences of their war. If he is to die in France, he may not care, but neither will his government. The poem takes up the trumpet symbol from his earlier poem, 'The Trumpet', but this time the poem does not mourn the people who are about to leave England to face a likely death, but those that have already left.

The 'bugle call' may also be viewed as a reminder of the home from which he has set off to fight – it plays a tune that he associates with England, like the many songs that occur and reoccur in his poetry. So the bugle may actually bind him to the place that is England even when he is abroad. In 'Home (Fair was the morning)', the soldiers are also singing as they venture out through the 'strange' (3) land, which covered by 'untrodden snow' (3) looks unmenacing. The men had 'fair tempers' (1) and 'were glad' (5) for the company they were keeping each other. But nonetheless, he remarks that 'Happy we had not been there, nor could be, / Though we had tasted sleep and food and fellowship / Together long.' (13-15) This place and this company have little positive effect on their moods, because it is not the place they want to be

in. There is nothing charitable or hospitable in his description of the camp: they 'spend the night' under 'cold roofs' (12), which seems like the opposite of proper dwelling. Community can arise from such an arrangement, but true connexion or even a home cannot. '"How quick", to someone's lip / The words came, "will the beaten horse run home!"' (15-16) Their suffering is foregrounded in the expression of a 'beaten horse', but the word 'home' has the greater effect on the men. 'The word "home" raised a smile in us all three' (17) – but only the word, not the actual thing. The men are displaced from their true homes and have to make do with makeshift simulacra. The men come from 'three counties far apart' (20) and are but 'fellows in a union' (23), but they realize at the same time that they all know a similar sensation attached to three different places, namely the 'sad shires' (8) of Wilfred Owen's 'Anthem for Doomed Youth'. These are extraordinary lines, which betray the concept of a nation for what it is: an assembly of separate places called 'home' by the people who live there, or as Thomas puts it himself 'a system of vast circumferences circling round the minute neighbouring points of home'.

In 'Home (Fair was the morning)', the importance of place in defining England becomes undeniably evident. England is not a concept that escapes earthly boundaries, but a specific place of significance to the people who dwell in it. The men all understand what 'home' means, but struggle to put it into words, as it is a personalized experience that cannot easily and understandably be translated onto the page. In 'A Private', another poem which might have been inspired by Rupert Brooke, a young soldier has died in France and has been displaced, as nobody knows his exact resting place. In his English home county, he also dwelt in a place so specific that nobody truly knew where he stayed: 'None knew which bush.' (5) The

man slept outside, under 'Mrs. Greenland's Hawthorn Bush' (4), which, as mentioned before, was so clear a place to him that Thomas chose to capitalize each of the words. But there were 'a hundred' (6) of these bushes around the area, so only he really knew which one he meant. His English home is significant to him, but he cannot expect others to share this feeling. In these poems of displacement, Thomas manages to reinforce the image of England as a home, because he attaches the word with distinct and personalized connotations. The war in France is the ultimate journey away from home, and an act of displacement so strong that the strange friendliness he found on his walks through England cannot be expected – the connexion is lost.

> Now all roads lead to France
> And heavy is the tread
> Of the living; but the dead
> Returning lightly dance:
>
> Whatever the road bring
> To me or take from me,
> They keep me company
> With their pattering,
>
> Crowding the solitude
> Of the loops over the downs,
> Hushing the roar of towns
> And their brief multitude. (53-64)

The final lines of 'Roads' epitomize Thomas' conclusions about his travelling and the meaning of place. The English and Welsh roads he so admires were linked to Helen, and thereby to the Trojan founding myth of Britain, while the roads to France allude to another (Roman) mythical past. The places – France and Britain – are distinct, but wherever he travels in Britain, on the roads the dead 'keep me company', which means there is something familiar in all of them. They 'are not modern means of

transport but, as it were, the veins running through the body of that ancient English landscape which was the ground of his patriotism.'[223] Thomas sees the dead returning from France as freer than those soldiers that are yet to embark on their journey. Their return, whether physical or in memory, changes the English people, their outlook and ultimately the place they live in. And as they come back to England, they crowd around Lob's 'old paths that no one uses / But once a lifetime when he loves or muses' (60-61) – the history of the fallen impresses its mark upon the English countryside and its people.

[223] Motion, 1991, p. 128

‘A Double Pain’ – Home and the Lack Thereof

Where are birds at home?

In his war poetry the distance between the place the soldiers come from and the place they die in is always on Edward Thomas’ mind. The question of home is one that is central to the fighting men, both in terms of where it is as well as in what it constitutes. Throughout the first five chapters, the topic of home and dwelling has been reoccurring, as it is central to Thomas’ discussion of England. England is a place in which history, culture and nature evidently work together, but what is the goal of this collaboration? It seems that it may be to create a home. But the notion of home in Thomas’ poetry is never an easy one to comprehend, not least because of Thomas’ own difficulty in finding a place he could call such for his own. Thomas was of Anglo-Welsh descent, born in London, but drawn to the countryside. He moved frequently, because he did not have the means to settle down in one place where he could stay for a significant period of time.[224] If not necessarily homeless, Thomas was at all times rootless, because he never found a place where he could thrive perpetually. In ‘Wind and Mist’, Thomas says ‘the house was not to blame’ (33) for his lack of comfort – it is not the structure itself that bothers him, but in association with its position, the climate around it, and the people who live there, it becomes impossible for him to make it a home. The same house instils him with gloomy thoughts of what life will be like after his death in ‘The New House’. He knows the house will outlast him, and the idea of him growing old in it is negated right away as

[224] Hollis, 2011, p. 120

'Old at once was the house, And I was old' (5-6). His aging is instantaneous and the thought of making a home of this place becomes preposterous.

Thomas' uncertainty about his own character is closely tied to his lack of a home to speak of. His wanderings have made him restless, and the road figuring as his temporary home, often sees him take on a second persona as in 'The Other', because his person is neither here nor there. The idea of home is vital to Thomas' image of what a person is, and his illustration of the agrarian workers in 'Haymaking' celebrates the notion of people who have found their place on Earth. The 'woodman's cot' (17) in 'Interval' equally represents an image of peacefulness in an otherwise uproarious world. 'It hunches soft / Under storm's wing.' (23-24) It is antithetical to the commotion of the precipitations outside. Thomas himself pictured himself outside of the cot; he 'shall roam' (28) – which would explain Helen Thomas' choice of *Under Storm's Wing* as the title of her memoir about her tempestuous relationship with her husband.[225] Thomas had to look for a home where others had found the place in the world where they could weather the storm. In 'House and Man', Thomas writes of his desire to find a place where he might experience the comforts of home life himself. The titular house and man do not refer to him, but to a second, other person he has encountered. They appear to him in memory as no more than a 'reflection in a rippling brook' (2), which both constitutes another act of doubling as well as putting a layer of haze over his description. The image in his mind is not clear, but distorted and once again experience cannot be replaced by memory of it. The wonderfully antithetical sentence, 'Empty it sounded.' (4) begins Thomas' description of the house – what does emptiness sound like? The only evidence of

[225] Helen Thomas, *Under Storm's Wing*. (Manchester: Carcanet, 1988)

actual sounds are the 'forest silence and forest murmur' (7), which place the house outside of all culture, but closer to nature as it is 'Part of the squirrels' track' (6). Thomas appreciates this house because it is integrated into nature and 'lonely' (8), but most importantly, he says '[it] was his' (10). Thomas recognizes the value of possessing a home.

Nevertheless, he also paints the man as someone insubstantial, as he is said to 'hang rather than stand' (12), looking 'Ghost-like' (13) and 'useless' (14). Loneliness and solitude seem to have made the man less than human. These lines can also be seen as another act of doubling. For in the final paragraph, when Thomas evokes their parting – 'I at the gate, and he / In the house darkness' (18-19) – he clearly seems to see himself in the inferior position. As insubstantial as the man in the house may be, his own image is illuminated by the darkness that surrounds him, while Thomas outside has nothing to hold on to. What brings on his recollection of this encounter with the man is his sight of a 'magpie veering about, / A magpie like a weathercock in doubt.' (19-20) His comparison of the magpie to a weathercock helps to underline his own indecision and homelessness. The weathercock spinning around is fully taken 'under storm's wing' just like himself. But the magpie on the other hand is only assumed to be indecisive, because the bird can just about fly wherever it will. Thomas attempts to anthropomorphize the bird's behaviour when actually it is completely normal, as the bird is at home everywhere. He instead is not, and thus his assumed allegiance with the magpie is a mistaken one.

'House and Man' does not only indicate Thomas' desire to find a home, it crucially also suggests that it is possible. Bate suggests that: 'We only know the feeling of at-homeness-upon-the-earth because we also know the feeling of being lost in the

world.'[226] In 'Home (Not the end)', Thomas directly addresses what this means for himself.

> I would go back again home
> Now. Yet how should I go?
>
> This is my grief. That land,
> My home, I have never seen:
> No traveller tells of it,
> However far he has been.
>
> And could I discover it,
> I fear my happiness there,
> Or my pain, might be dreams of return
> Here, to these things that were. (7-16)

Thomas, the endless wanderer, opens his poem with a line of desultory admission that he has probably seen and experienced everything there is for him to see: 'Not the end: but there's nothing more.' (1) He does not consider death ('I weary not' (5)), but he nonetheless feels like there is nothing new life could offer him. Instead what he thinks he might want to do is go home. The isolated 'Now' of his wish strengthens the feeling's immediacy. 'Yet how should I go?' The question of feasibility does not hinge upon his inability to find the means to get to his home. His problem is much rather that he does not know where it is, and whether it exists. 'No traveller tells of it' – Thomas is completely in-between places, and even if he wanted to start a home he would not know where or how to do it. This is not just an issue of displacement but of an actual lack. Perhaps even worse is his fear of 'happiness' or 'pain'. He is afraid that he might want to go back to a state of homelessness once he has found a place of home, because the imagined respite from life he would like to find there might not satisfy him. So, he chooses to 'blink at what is not good' (24)

[226] Bate, 2001, p. 260

and to suffer what he knows rather than to possibly engender greater suffering. He reverses his earlier suggestion to say he 'would not if I could' (22) go home, because he could not possibly face the 'irremediable' (18) ills that might await him there.

Thomas' lack of a home in these lines becomes less a question of possibility than one of personal choice. He sees himself as incapable of living a worthwhile home life and therefore would rather avoid it altogether. His rejection of a stable settled life echoes Raymond Williams' view of the 'idealisation of settlement, in its ordinary literary-historical version, as an insolent indifference to most people's needs.'[227] What Thomas needs is not what a traditional home might be able to give him, just like the man in 'House and Man' might possess such a place, but need not necessarily have gained in substance because of it. Thomas' assumed allegiance with the magpie in that poem is thus relevant to the understanding of home in the context of Thomas' personal situation. Thomas is torn between his desire of a home and his desire to wander, and the bird as a creature, which is home in all places, might possess the freedom he seeks for himself. 'The freedom of birds […] is a necessary imagining.'[228] It does not necessarily correspond to the truth, but it has a comforting effect on the poet. In 'The Word', Thomas hears the 'pure thrush word' (22), which he always recognizes no matter where he is. The birds speak a language he can somehow understand, even though it is different from his own. On the other hand: 'Some things I have forgot that I forget.' (9) The doubling of this line accentuates Thomas' distance from typically human existence – he has forgotten ever having known certain facts about human life but cannot forget what it is the birds are calling to him.

[227] Williams, 1973, p. 84
[228] Bate, 2001, p. 93

Thomas is drawn to birds because they exist in a state where they 'dwell perpetually, are always at home in their ecosystem, their territory.'[229] Like his attraction to roads, birds allow him to imagine a life where one is at home in more than just a closed vicinity but an entire region or country. In 'Birds' Nests', Thomas underlines that birds do not dwell the same way as humans. Their nests are hidden in bushes and hedges, and are a continuous part of their natural environment.

> And most I like the winter nests deep-hid
> That leaves and berries fell into:
> Once a dormouse dined there on hazel-nuts,
> And grass and goose-grass seeds found soil and grew. (13-16)

The poem's final lines suggest that the birds are integrated into nature and are part of the cyclical renewal of the non-human. He admires the nests' reverting back to feed the earth they have come from. In 'Thaw', the birds' nests give them an advantage, as their perspective on their surroundings is a better one. They see more than what 'we below' (4) can see and are therefore more attuned to the seasonal change that is happening. There is a greater concordance between birds and their homes than between humans and theirs because they are fully part of nature. In 'Under the Woods', Thomas notes that the 'thrushes' ancestors / As sweetly sung / In the old years' (2-4). This is of course reminiscent of Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale' in which 'The voice I hear this passing night was heard / In ancient days by emperor and clown' (63-64). The heritage of thrushes and nightingales is passed on from generation to generation, and their dwelling is thus flexible but sustainable. This is contrasted by the 'thatched cot' (9), whose first owner's memory has long been lost. Bachelard thinks that 'a thatched cottage is set on the ground like a nest in a

[229] Bate, 2001, p. 274

field.'[230] He thus explains that the reason for man's failure to understand birds' nests lies in his incapacity to see that the nests are only ever meant to be temporary before they are returned to nature. The 'stoat' (20) the cottage's owner had shot, which still hangs on the wall, is 'shrivelled and green' (21). It is disfigured and the man's heritage has thus become inconspicuous. Man's dwelling is complicated by the fact that it does not occur in perpetuity to such a degree as birds' living does, because unlike birds, they seek an unsustainable permanence in their dwelling instead of letting their homesteads regress back to where they came from.

Homelessness and homesickness

As much as Thomas may want to see himself as the birds' fellow countryman, he is not. His search for nests in 'Birds' Nests' is a selfish endeavour, as winter makes 'the seeing no game' (8). It is a personal challenge to him to find the nests, the birds' homes, but it is equally a violation of their subjectivity. He objectifies the birds he wants to be allegiant to and therefore finds himself again in a situation where it is questionable whether his wish for perpetual dwelling can be compatible with his human condition. As a man it is simply impossible for him to live like a bird and be truly at home in his entire ecosystem. His emotional side, which makes him feel a 'light pang' (9) of remorse when it has become all too easy for him to spot the nests in 'Birds' Nests', separates him from the non-human characteristics of birds. To seek allegiance with the birds means to deny one's human side, and as seen in the example of John Clare's tragic life such an undertaking cannot be successful.[231] For Clare, living in his accustomed environment meant giving himself the allusion of

[230] Bachelard, 1994, p. 98
[231] Greenblatt (ed.), 2006, p. 859

being at one with nature. Away from it, he languished. Homesickness is also a topic that interests Thomas, as on many occasions the absence of home reinforces the importance of its possibility. As already seen in 'House and Man' and 'Home (Not the end)', Thomas is often made to consider the idea of a personal home. In poems like 'Parting' and 'Home (Fair was the morning)' that possibility becomes a reality and the poems' subjects' responses change accordingly.

In 'Home (Fair was the morning)', the mere mention of the word 'home' has three men from different countries mentally travel to their homes. The poem's prosody changes from an irregular rhyme scheme to rhyming couplets right when Thomas begins to think of the word's implications. He thinks of 'only the word, / 'Homesick'' (28-29) but needs to stifle any impulse to delve further into a consideration of his current state away from home. The presence in his mind of the idea of a home might break him and distract him from his present mission. 'If I should ever more admit / Than the mere word I could not endure it / For a day longer: this captivity' (30-32). The absence of a home increases the emotions associated with the place – thus to mentally dwell on it might cause him to disintegrate further. The metrical rigidity of these lines indicates the self-discipline that he requires of himself. For both the actual situation of being away from home, as well as the potential thought of that place can hold him captive in a state of mind that is not conducive to his survival as the person that he is. The same considerations run through the poem 'Parting', where he confesses that 'memory made / Parting to-day a double pain' (12-13). The first pain is the simple fact of separation. The second pain is one more complicated, namely that evoked by memory: it is the loss of actual emotions, which have become 'spiritualized' (22) only. As he becomes divorced from his past, it remains

nevertheless present in his mind. Yet instead of being felt and experienced it is but an afterthought of all the wrongs committed.

The systematic development of emotional and mental presences through the absence of physical experiences is vital to Thomas' versions of English homes. On his journeys through the countryside, he more than once experiences others' homes, or places that are connected to the idea of dwelling. In 'I Never Saw that Land Before', he feels 'affection' (5) made up of 'gladness' and 'pain' (4) for the unknown land that must be somebody else's dwelling place. The 'breeze / That hinted all and nothing spoke' (15) is unassuming. This countryside makes him feel a kind of nostalgia about itself but also about places just like it. However, it does not do so aggressively, but quietly and full of self-confidence. The thought of such a land evokes in him a longing for belonging and taking part. The land is not his own home, but connected to it through memory, similarity and contrast. He records the same sentimental journey in 'When first', which concludes with the following lines:

> One thing I know, that love with chance
> And use and time and necessity
> Will grow, and louder the heart's dance
> At parting than at meeting be. (21-24)

Thomas suggests here that his journeys may be invigorating to him, but that new discoveries of localities can never affect him as powerfully as the departure from those he already knows. 'Chance', 'use', 'time' and 'necessity' introduce a sense of inevitability to his thinking about home – one cannot but become attached to a land one spends a significant amount of time in. So, absence and departure from such a land can only serve to strengthen the bond one feels. As in 'Parting', where the separation from one's past opens up a new emotional range, here the creation of

absence makes the heart grow fonder of the place than any pleasurable experience may have done. The poem's opening lines – 'When first I came here I had hope, Hope for I knew not what' (1-2) – indicate the importance of place to the man's mind-set. Hope is tied to place, even if it is unclear what exactly it is one is expecting to get. 'Never will / My heart beat so again at sight / Of any hill although as fair / And loftier.' (8-11) Thomas talks of the countryside as a lover would of the receiver of their affection. Thus losing these surroundings one has grown accustomed to means losing part of one's identity, which is formed in relation to the country we inhabit.

The link between identity and place is fortified by the human habit of instilling one's land with markers of one's culture. The relation between humans and their natural surroundings is reciprocal, and this is true also when we discuss the formation of home. In 'The Mountain Chapel', Thomas observes that the 'loss of the brook's voice / Falls like a shadow' (4-5) over the chapel humans have erected on top of the mountain. The brook's absence once more makes it seem more present than when the author could actually see and hear it, even more so because this chapel seems wholly separate from any actual human dwelling. Instead of being a community's place for spiritual experience, it is just a landmark senselessly placed into nature. Men's coming in this poem is impermanent and but a momentary distraction from the greater forces of the 'wind whistling in grass' (7). Yet the chapel's presence also brings to mind an awareness that humans 'could / Live happy here' (32-33). There is a potential of making a home in this place that means more than the mere invasion of space with one's structures of worship. Finally, creating a home, creating any place of meaningful existence, means becoming aware of one's bonds with nature,

which predates men and will probably outlive them: 'When gods were young / This wind was old.' (41-42)

Approaching home and dwelling

Despite his journeying, home is a necessity in Thomas' thinking. In a letter to his friend Gordon Bottomley, he surprisingly wrote: 'You know I am no traveller. I am always wanting to settle down like a tree, for ever.'[232] Yet the core questions of what home entails and of how one can find or form such a place remain unanswered. We have seen that a home is a personally realized place, but that the feeling of home can be the same for many. Home can mean a number of places and the desire to feel at home everywhere is real. Yet ultimately, as in 'The Mountain Chapel', Thomas keeps returning to the idea that home is equivalent to dwelling. Bate notes that: 'A home is a house in which one does not live but dwell.'[233] Greg Garrard says of dwelling that it is 'not a transient state; rather, it implies the long-term imbrication of humans in a landscape of memory, ancestry and death, of ritual, life and work.'[234] Poems like 'The Sheiling', 'Home (Often I had gone this way before)' or 'The Manor Farm' display that Thomas was aware of such a definition. The four stanzas of 'The Sheiling' are all concerned with different ideas that circle around homes: first the approach to the house from the outside, second the look inside the house, then the effect the place has on its inhabitant and finally the greater significance of the place's existence. The poem is perfectly balanced in its theoretical treatment of the subject. The house's beauty is equally due to nature's impact as its surrounding land

[232] Edward Thomas, 'To Gordon Bottomley, From Bearsted' (March 17th, 1904) in Wright (ed.), 2012, p. 18
[233] Bate, 2001, p. 274
[234] Garrard, 2012, p. 117

is ‘Nourished on wind and stone’ (5), as well as to cultural efforts that have embellished the house through ‘arts and kindliness’ (8). This interplay between nature and culture is key to the house’s homeliness and it is what makes dwelling a serious proposition. Dwelling is the same as the ‘Safe resting’ (11) man experiences in this place. Everything around them is beauty, because they recognize the pastoral ideals that they wish to replicate in their actual being. Beauty and music make the living in ‘The Sheiling’ agreeable, which brings the poem closer to Heidegger’s dictum that ‘poetically man dwells.’[235]

The ‘resting’ of ‘The Sheiling’ is noteworthy, because to rest one has to feel at rest, at peace. And finding peace means resisting all adversity. A place of dwelling allows rest simply because it is a place of ‘authentic being’, to borrow Heidegger’s terminology once more.[236] Consequently in ‘Home (Often I had gone this way before)’ Thomas himself says ‘I never could be / And never had been anywhere else’ (2-3). The being is of existential nature, not just circumstantial. ‘’T was home’ (4). The archaic tone of this short phrase in which Thomas lauds his place of authentic being summarizes man’s indebtedness to historical developments in finding a home. He and the birds share ‘one nationality’ (4), yet again evoking his desire to be at home in perpetuity. But importantly, he differentiates between home and nationality – the former is one locale, while the latter can be an accumulation of various such places. The birds function as a connector between these places, and just as his home is familiar to him when he returns to it, migratory birds have a sense of destination when they fly from one place to another. Bate claims that ‘to share a nationality with the thrushes is to declare allegiance to the species of a biologically

[235] Heidegger, 2000, p. 88
[236] Bate, 2001, p. 275

demarcated region, not the institutions of a politically constituted state.'[237] The birds greet him as he arrives 'somehow from somewhere far' (8). Once he has found his home, the other becomes insubstantial and does not need to be mentioned by name. The birds' song is incremental in representing what home constitutes for him, as their singing doubles his emotions. It meant 'the same thing familiar' (10) to both birds and Thomas, and his doubling of the familiarity drives the message of how specific the feeling is to them further home. The end of their singing shows that the 'day was done' (18), which again allows him to share a common rest with the birds. Bate suggests that the 'impossible task of the ecopoet is to speak the silence of the place.'[238] Edward Thomas might just have found a way to conquer this impossibility and instil the silence he speaks with meaning.

'And, through the silence, from his shed / The sound of sawing rounded all / That silence said.' (22-24) The labourer's sawing adds a pastoral note of agrarian bliss to Thomas' homecoming, which is 'pleasant' and 'strange' (11) as he walks past the 'dark white cottage' (19) of the labourer. The oxymoronic structures here create a perfect balance between the different emotions and prevent either from taking over. There is a quiet acquiescence at the poem's core that demonstrates the impact dwelling has on man and nature. The poem is 'rounded' by the 'sound of sawing'.[239] Man and nature are encircled within it to create their own little ecosystem or biosphere, which is home. Home, when defined as a dwelling place, is a place where the human and the non-human can coexist peacefully as is the case in 'Home (Often I had gone this way before)', but also in 'The Manor Farm'.

[237] Bate, 2001, p. 276
[238] Bate, 2001, p. 151
[239] Bate, 2001, p. 275

Nor did I value that thin gilding beam
More than a pretty February thing
Till I came down to the old Manor Farm
And church and yew-tree opposite, in age
Its equals and in size. The church and yew
And farmhouse slept in a Sunday silentness. (5-10)

The almost phallic church tower and yew-tree are opposite one another but do not oppose each other. They have become complementary 'equals' over time and one can imagine that the tree's roots might actually have grown into the church building's foundations. As mentioned before, they tower over the late winter scene as this society's two guiding principles of culture and nature. The description of the farmhouse continues the imagery of connectedness established by the dual representation of culture and nature: 'up and down the roof / White pigeons nestled' (13-14) while the 'cart-horses' (15) are given the same Sunday rest as all the other farm workers. The scene is wholly peaceful and illuminated, but Thomas feels more than mere aesthetic appreciation for it. He 'values' the sight because he sees what potential meaning of dwelling can be attached to 'the old Manor Farm'. This farm is a remnant of history and represents an ideal all-English pastoral society. The poem is aware of seasonal change as it mentions the specific month ('February' (6)) and season ('Winter' (18)). Yet Thomas perceives something different, a 'season of bliss unchangeable' (21). The postponed adjective 'unchangeable' gives the poem the air of an operating principle of nature, as this season, which is 'withdrawn from the diurnal round by being an amalgam of all seasons,' is not so much dependent on the movement of Earth around the Sun, but on the position of the farm on the

planet.[240] It is the environment that is at the root of this season, not the passage of time.

What turns this environment into this 'season of bliss unchangeable' is the fact that nature has been 'Safe under tile and thatch' (23) for a long time – where humans live and respect their natural surroundings and work with them instead of against them, they can create a sustainable place of dwelling. According to Bate, Heidegger thought that a 'human being is distinguished by its temporality and human dwelling by its particularity – by, one might say, its cottageyness.'[241] And this form of dwelling, Thomas ultimately suggests is what defines England, a country which has existed according to these rules 'since / This England, Old already, was called Merry.' (23-24) This interconnectedness becomes historical fact in Thomas' eyes and the capitalization of the adjectives in the poem's line serves again to give a name to the place. England becomes Merry Old England, a place that has history and over centuries has lived according to the aforementioned rules, albeit with a changing cast of human participants – a place in which human and non-human coexistence is not an exception but a law of nature. That the line looks strange, as Andrew Motion acknowledges, helps to reinforce the sentiment as it stands out from the poem.[242] Yet, once spoken, the line sounds like absolutely normal English speech – a sign that these principles have sunk into the fabric that makes the English people part of their land.

It is, however, important to note Thomas' delayed perception of these facts in lines 5 to 7. It takes him a moment to realize what he sees, and it is only natural to conclude

[240] Motion, 1991, p. 56
[241] Bate, 2001, p. 206
[242] Motion, 1991, p. 83

that others might not fare any differently. What makes him overcome this dissonance is Thomas' poetic mind, which can see the sunlight for something more than a seasonal event. 'Man's dwelling depends on an upward-looking measure-taking of the dimension, in which the sky belongs just as much as the earth.'[243] Dwelling is contingent on our understanding that the distance between heaven and earth cannot be bridged, but that all that is part of earth is ours to enjoy. Therein lies the poetry Heidegger sees as a starting point for our successful stay on the planet. England as a 'system of vast circumferences circling round the minute neighbouring points of home' is then fertilized as an idea by the poet whom I had defined as a chronicler of place, history, nature and culture in chapter 2. Ultimately then, if England is the mother of Englishmen, as Thomas suggests in 'There Is No Case for Petty Right or Wrong', then the poet must be their father, since he engenders the procreative act of tracing a dwelling place out of earth, water and stone. England is thus certainly a system of intersections between history, nature, culture and place. But lastly, it is also founded on poetry, the art that can make those intersections visible and relatable.

[243] Heidegger, 2000, p. 93

Conclusion

Edward Thomas' unique vision of England lies in his understanding that England is neither unique nor unified. In and of itself, his England is a combination of a plurality of places that have changed through history and continue to change through space. These places are separate homes in which humans diversely interact with the non-human elements present in their locale. England is, to once more borrow Thomas' own words, 'a system of vast circumferences circling round the minute neighbouring points of home' – a point that is abundantly supported by the visions of the country he presents in his poetry. This underlying theme which runs through Thomas' poetry is all the more striking as it was perceived at a time of war, when the country and its men were beckoned to fight as one for a common cause. Thomas himself joined the fight, but not to defend a glorified kingdom in which all were united in thought and experience, but a United Kingdom composed of different biospheres and customs and joined through natural and manmade connectors. Thomas says about his love for the country that:

> Probably there are two kinds of patriot; one that can talk or write, and one that cannot; though I suspect that even the talkers and writers often come down in the end to "I do not understand. I love."[244]

Despite being a talker and writer himself, he fails to understand the whole, as it contains too many layers for one man to comprehend. Although, as J.M Coetzee would say, the world of Edward Thomas does not exist any more, his thinking about the nation of England and the repercussion of those ideas on any discussion of place

[244] Edward Thomas, 'Tipperary' in Wright (ed.), 2012, p. 130

and home are as relevant today as they have ever been.[245] Robert Crawford rightly points out that '[though] Thomas is long gone, his best poetry does not seem or sound long gone. It is meticulously immediate, and sends out a ripple that never stops.'[246] Faced with the prospect of global annihilation caused by manmade changes to climates and ecosystems, one cannot look at Thomas' work without seeing a precursor to contemporary environmentalist movements, which regularly remind us to think globally and act locally. Thomas' deep ecocentrism causes him to establish 'a monistic, primal identification of humans and the ecosphere.'[247] To Thomas, the interplay between the global, national, regional and local are always at the forefront of his thinking and they are what most clearly defines places.

Therefore, despite his frequent association with more backward-looking and nostalgic pastoral verse, Thomas' treatment of England in his poetry is strikingly modern, as his England is one of ever changing conditions. Therein lies the secret to Thomas' persistent and indeed increasing popularity. His poetry is not only a worthy representative of its period. Its themes, rightly understood, are the timeless companions of human existence and have influenced countless poets. Andrew Motion summarizes this appeal Thomas has for poets:

> Why do so many poets love Edward Thomas […]? In some respects the question is easy to answer: Thomas's overall vigilance, his attention to neglectable details, his sympathetic quiet-speaking, his genius for producing poems which appear to think aloud rather than be a means of delivering finished thoughts.[248]

Thomas' poetic craft, Motion suggests, is one poets can appreciate, because they acknowledge that it is simultaneously simple and complex. And yet, Thomas has not

[245] J.M. Coetzee, *Youth*. (London: Secker & Warburg, 2002), p. 58
[246] Robert Crawford, 'Left, Right' in Cuthbertson and Newlin (eds.), 2007, p. 99
[247] Garrard, 2012, p. 23
[248] Andrew Motion, 'Foreword' in Cuthbertson and Newlin (eds.), 2007, p. 11

been recognized as a vital part of the English canon. Instead he often finds himself relegated to the margins of literary study, while the men he inspired like Auden, who 'was the first major poet to be influenced by Thomas's poetry, unless one counts Thomas Hardy,' are feted worldwide.[249] It makes sense for Edna Longley to raise the question about what Thomas' reception in the literary world may suggest about our reading practices. 'Thomas's poetry immediately spoke to intelligent poet-readers like Hardy and Robert Frost, if not always to critical opinion-formers. Is there an inverse relation between a poets' poet and an academics' poet?'[250] He may not be the kind of writer to instigate critical compendiums of his work or academic debates, but he is certainly a writer who can speak to people and stimulate poetic thinking and writing.

So, overall, some of his contemporaries like W.B. Yeats or T.S. Eliot may be considered the more accomplished writers, whose poems look like the more challenging and striking pieces of writing. Yet Thomas may be the one who can bring people, and chiefly young readers, to a new appreciation of poetry. 'Thomas is accessible to adolescents because he is not difficult, but also because, like Keats's, his work processes characteristics that appeal to, or reflect, adolescence.'[251] His timeless modernity is just as understandable to the young as his appreciation of nature and country, his word-weariness and his interest in times past and future are. Although he did not start writing poems until he was well into his thirties, traits of teenage angst run throughout much of his oeuvre. Thomas' poems are short, easy to read and lend themselves to a quick and yet deep analysis of human dwelling on

[249] Guy Cuthbertson, 'The Teenage Poet and the Edward Thomasy Poem' in Cuthbertson and Newlin (eds.), 2007, p. 54-55
[250] Longley, 2007, p. 30
[251] Cuthbertson, 2007, p. 52

earth. Finally then, although the centenary of his death is but a year away, there seems to have never been a better time to read Edward Thomas, as his prophetic ecological writing has the power to raise people's awareness of both the themes he explores, as well as to prompt a new appreciation of poetry as a whole. In his own days, Thomas may never have been the poet he aspired to be. A century later, he could finally reach that goal, as his poetry has truly begun to reap the acclaim that alluded him while he was alive.

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