

Edward Thomas's Sonnet 'February Afternoon': The Dreamer and the Dream¹

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Men heard this roar of parleying starlings, saw,
A thousand years ago even as now,
Black rooks with white gulls following the plough
So that the first are last until a caw
Commands that last are first again, - a law
Which was of old when one, like me, dreamed how
A thousand years might dust lie on his brow
Yet thus would birds do between hedge and shaw.

Time swims before me, making as a day
A thousand years, while the broad ploughland oak
Roars mill-like and men strike and bear the stroke
Of war as ever, audacious or resigned,
And God still sits aloft in the array
That we have wrought him, stone-deaf and stone-blind.²

Edward Thomas's sonnet 'February Afternoon' was written during the time of the First World War, after Thomas had enlisted as a soldier. The poem has been dated to early February 1916, during a period when Thomas, in the uniform of a Lance Corporal, was responsible for instructing officers in map-reading at Hare Hall Camp, Gidea Park, Romford, fourteen months before he was killed at the Battle of Arras.³

The sonnet is a narrative of contemplative and allusive utterance. It is as though in creating his poem the poet walks thoughtfully round a dream lake of deep time and by skilful selection and with careful deliberation sends words like pebbles skipping across its surface creating ripples which widen and merge with each other creating a multiplicity of meanings. The key words bear punning, metonymic, and allegorical weight, and are deployed with an awareness of lexical register. The effect of the fusion of the human and anthropomorphic is surreal and cryptic. Despite the difference in tone and intended readership, the theme of birds contending for dominance in the context of a food supply suggests the influence of Richard Jefferies' child-centred apologue *Wood Magic* (1880).

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² Edna Longley, *Edward Thomas: The Annotated Collected Poems* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2008), p. 109. All quotations from Thomas's poems are from this edition.

³ See Note in Longley, *ibid.*, p. 274.

The theme of the sonnet is stated in the sestet to be war, but the poem is not located in France. The diction – ‘plough’ and ‘ploughland’, ‘hedge and shaw’ - evokes rural England. The poem’s imagery is thus rooted in an agrarian landscape which men must abandon to go to war, rather than till. Shadowing the combative sense of ‘strike’ (l. 11) is a possible secondary sense. The word possesses also a long tradition of agrarian meaning, referring to the techniques of ploughing.⁴ The holding and tilling of land is thus very closely identified with its defence. But also inherent in the poem is the doubt that the waging of war in the land’s defence will achieve this. It would seem that both senses of ‘strike’ are held in conflicting tension. The sonnet is comparable, in this respect, with ‘As the Team’s Head Brass’. Also featuring a ploughing scene in time of war, the poem discusses the depletion of a landfolk possessed of traditional skills, and implies too the demise of the horses trained to their command.⁵

The sonnet’s central image proposes a quintessential and perennial scene of a farmed landscape – that of birds foraging on earth newly turned to the surface by the plough. But the two identified bird species are distinct in character, the rooks being essentially land birds and the gulls, sea birds. The difference between them, however, is not simply one of geographical range and habitat. In the manner of traditional beast fable, the birds’ punning names and contrasting plumage suggest a stark moral identity, that of deceivers and the deceived. The word ‘following’ looks towards ‘plough’, but it also implies the sub-text of an inverted word order - the notion of the gulls in the wake of the rooks and being led, or rather misled, by them.

Thomas’s gulls and rooks are depicted in a recognisable context, but the ‘parleying starlings’ lack context, and are characterised by sound rather than visuality. The word ‘parley’ suggests a militaristic dialogue to establish the terms on which conflict might cease but since only one bird species is named the opposing sides are not distinct, and the notion of any negotiation by verbal exchange is thus undermined. ‘Roar’ is onomatopoeic, usually

⁴ *OED* (sense 16a): ‘*Agriculture*. To mark off (land, a ridge) by ploughing once up and down the field (also with *down, up*); to make (furrows) in this manner.’ The nineteenth century *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society* (1846, 7: i: 41) explains: ‘This land [. . .] is again ploughed across [. . .] in the manner we term striking, or back-bouting. This is done by turning one furrow to the land, and in returning to turn over this furrow, and the furrow or earth on which it was laid.’

⁵ The poem is dated 27 May 1916 and, like ‘February Afternoon’, was written while Thomas was stationed at Hare Hall Camp in Essex. The poem concludes:

The horses started and for the last time
I watched the clods crumble and topple over
After the ploughshare and the stumbling team.

understood to represent the low-pitched full-throated roar of a large beast, or the raucous, inarticulate human utterance of a crowd. Used here of birds whose vocalisations are in actuality a complex mixture of whistles and squeaks,⁶ the effect is consistent with the incongruity of dream. Furthermore, this word association is qualified by the rhyme of ‘roar’ with ‘caw’, a guttural bird sound that can be identified with the crow family, and hence, in the poem, with the rooks. Thus there is also the possibility that the starlings, birds who - as Thomas of course was aware - are expert at mimicry,⁷ are ‘parleying’ in the character of these birds. Subsequently, in another dreamlike transition it is the ‘ploughland oak’ that ‘roars mill-like’, implying that this is where the starlings are gathered, but serving also as a metaphor of mechanised conflict causing death on an inhuman scale.⁸ The idea of obliteration by being ground between two stones is a corollary, it appears, to the ‘dust’ in line 7. In Thomas’s earlier poem ‘Lob’, the eponymous, charismatic and archetypal figure of the countryman – finally declared a Wiltshireman, ‘As he has oft been since his days began’ – is summoned from his fields and woods to battle, and a similar metaphor is employed:

One of the lords of No Man’s Land, good Lob, -
 Although he was seen dying at Waterloo,
 Hastings, Agincourt, and Sedgemoor too, -
 Lives yet. He never will admit he’s dead
 Till millers cease to grind men’s bones for bread,

In ‘February Afternoon’ the idea is extended to a god who is accommodated in and/or represents (the syntax is deliberately ambiguous, it seems) an ‘array’ (a word whose French

⁶ In Thomas’s poem ‘The Barn’, the voices of starlings are characterised thus:

Starlings used to sit there with bubbling throats
 Making a spiky beard as they chattered
 And whistled and kissed, with heads in air,
 Till they thought of something else that mattered.

⁷ In his 1909 biography of Jefferies, Thomas considered that the casting of starlings as royal couriers between the opposing armies of the Emperor Wood Pigeon, Choo-Hoo, and King Kapchack the Magpie, in *Wood Magic* ‘a stroke of genius’; *Richard Jefferies* (London: Faber & Faber 1978), p. 144.

⁸ In Thomas’ poem ‘The Mill-Water’ concerning a derelict old mill, the mill is remembered in happier days as a ‘work-place and a home’ and the sound of the once toiling water as ‘The music of the mill-wheel’s busy roar.’

Thomas’ conception of the starlings may owe something to Jefferies’ characterisation of them in his essay ‘Walks in the Wheat-Fields’, where starlings are depicted thus: ‘A line of dark Spanish oaks from which the sharp pointed acorns were dropping, darkest green oaks, shut out the shore. A thousand starlings were flung up into the air out of these oaks, as if an impatient hand had cast them into the sky; then down they fell again, with a ceaseless whistling and clucking; up they went and down they came, lost in the deep green foliage as if they had dropped in the sea.’ The image is repeated, and adapted, to include an allusion to artillery fire: ‘The starlings grew busier and busier in the dark green Spanish oaks, thrown up as if a shell had burst among them; suddenly their clucking and whistling ceased, the speeches of contention were over, a vote of confidence had been passed in their Government, and the House was silent.’; Richard Jefferies, *Field and Hedgerow, Last Essays* (London: Longman, Green & Co., 1889), pp. 125-127.

derivation is comparable with 'parley' and signifies a line of battle) and presides over the carnage and its aftermath 'stone-deaf and stone-blind', the repetition being identifiable with the roaring oak, since the grinding capacity of a traditional mill is based on the revolution of two hewn and chiselled stones.

The chronological perspective established in the opening lines is historical and medieval, implying - if 'one thousand' is assumed to be a rhetorical approximation - the battle on English soil against an invading force from northern France which had momentous consequences. Thus, beyond the rhetoric of 'stone-deaf and stone-blind' there may also be an historical reality - the extensive building programme in stone - church, cathedral and castle - which took place in the wake of the Conquest, and whose cost was met by the great wealth seized by the invaders when the Domesday Book survey revealed the amount of revenue that could be extorted from the conquered English manors. Jefferies expressed the significance of what lay between 'hedge and shaw' in his essay, 'Walks in the Wheat-fields':

Of the broad surface of the golden wheat and its glory I have already spoken, yet these flower-encircled acres, these beautiful fields of peaceful wheat are the battlefields of life. For these fertile acres the Romans built their cities and those villas whose mosaics and hypocausts are exposed by the plough [. . .] Next the Saxons, next the monk-slaying Danes, next the Normans in chain-mail - one, two, three heavy blows - came to grasp these golden acres. Dearly the Normans loved them; they gripped them firmly and registered them in 'Domesday Book.' They let not a hide escape them; they gripped also the mills that ground the corn. Do you think that blood would have been shed for barren wastes? No, it was to possess these harvest-laden fields. The wheat-fields are the battle-fields of the world.⁹

The 'law which was of old' in Thomas's sonnet is ironically expressed in the wording of Christian gospel:¹⁰ what is implied can be found in the writings of the early ecclesiastical histories, recording the successive waves of incursion and conquest which characterised Sub-Roman Britain, followed by internecine strife between the island's ethnically diverse kingdoms, conveying the unstable and ephemeral nature of revolution achieved through militarism. The cost in terms of human lives may be gauged, for example, from the verse entry recording the Battle of Brunanburh, for the year 937, in the *Anglo Saxon Chronicles*

⁹ Richard Jefferies, *Field and Hedgerow*, p. 155.

¹⁰ Mark 10.31.

(here in translation): ‘They left behind to divide the corpses, to enjoy the carrion, the dusky-coated, horny-beaked black raven, and the grey-coated eagle, white-rumped, greedy war-hawk, and the wolf, grey beast in the forest. Never yet in this island was there a greater slaughter of people felled by the sword’s edges’.¹¹ On this theme Richard Jefferies wrote:

It is strange to think of, yet it is true enough, that, beautiful as the country is, with its green meadows and graceful trees, its streams and forests and peaceful homesteads, it would be difficult to find an acre of ground that has not been stained with blood. A melancholy reflection this, that carries the mind backwards, while the thrush sings on the bough, through the nameless skirmishes of the Civil War, the cruel assassinations of the rival Roses, down to the axes of the Saxons and the ghastly wounds they made. Everywhere under the flowers are the dead.¹²

Whilst Thomas’s poem is located in a landscape of religion, militarism, and power politics, and a geography which is fundamentally a food resource, it is also the provenance of profound cultural and metaphysical meaning, and it is with this that the poet expresses a close identity.

The figure of the underground ‘sleeping hero’ is a familiar trope of folk and fairy tale: Thomas explores this idea, for example, in his poem ‘The Brook’,¹³ in which the epiphany of the concluding lines is expressed by a child. Similarly, when the narrator of ‘Lob’ is travelling ‘at hawthorn-time in Wiltshire’, and first encounters the old countryman, possessed of ‘a land face, sea-blue eyed’, Lob recalls the excavation of some barrows:

They thought as there was something to find there,
But couldn’t find it, by digging, anywhere.

- where the cadence of the second line sardonically emphasizes, and so questions, the notion of archaeological excavation to gain understanding of the barrow’s significance.

¹¹ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, translated and edited by Michael Swanton (London: Phoenix Press, 2000), pp. 109-110.

¹² Richard Jefferies, *The Gamekeeper at Home, Sketches of Natural History and Rural Life* (1880) (Ludlow: Excellent Press, 2005), p. 67.

¹³ Lines 20-24:

And I sat as if we had been there since
The horseman and the horse lying there beneath
The fir-tree-covered barrow on the heath,
The horseman and the horse with silver shoes,
Galoped the downs last.

A metaphysical understanding of downland terrain is an important aspect of Richard Jefferies' work, defining him as a creative writer. In the 1909 biography, Thomas referred to the Wiltshire downs, with their barrows, burial mounds and hill-forts, as 'a most visibly ancient land': Jefferies, he said, 'came to express part of this silence of uncounted generations'.¹⁴ The dreamer, in Thomas' sonnet, asleep for a thousand years, is imagined to have 'dust' laid on his 'brow', where 'brow' not only implies the mind in contemplation, but also suggests a topographical meaning, referring to the contour of a hill or a barrow; its 'dust', or earthen covering, symbolically invoking the toll of war on generations of human lives.

The narrative of Jefferies' bird fable *Wood Magic* culminates in a war between the vast army of predatory wood pigeons led by the renegade Emperor Choo Hoo, and the thousands-strong host of rooks who have allied themselves with the fraudulent and tyrannical regime of the King Magpie, Kapchack, on the basis that his talent for architecture can help them to build better nests. The starlings are subject, we are told, to their jurisdiction. Intent on territorial expansion, the wood pigeons are attracted to Kapchack's kingdom by its fields of corn, green crops and clover. The enmity of the two opposing forces, threatens the individualised characters - animal, insect, bird - and their sanctuary, Windflower Copse. These creatures the reader meets through the mediation of a small child, nicknamed 'Little Sir Bevis',¹⁵ who is eager to seek them out, to learn about their lives, and befriend them.

The concluding chapter of *Wood Magic* focuses on the archaeological artefacts of Wiltshire's downland. During the great battle of the birds, the wood pigeon Ti Kui, son of the emperor Choo Hoo, fleeing from the scene is said to have 'alighted for a moment upon an ancient grass-grown earthwork - a memorial of former wars - which crowned a hill'. In the aftermath of the battle, Little Sir Bevis climbs up onto the downs, and runs about the hill-fort, with little understanding of its significance. The child wandering freely on also comes across a stone circle and several burial mounds, one of these being described as 'a little hill' that Bevis feels he would like to take home with him. He then becomes lost, is guided by a butterfly, and, subject to the tutelage of the downland wind, is brought to stand upon the burial place of one who, the child learns, was the lord of an ancient people. Through the enchantment of the wind's song, Little Sir Bevis is initiated into a timeless world, and introduced to the concept of linear progressive time as an invalid response to the past and a deception: he also learns that his own life is contiguous with that of the prehistoric 'man in

¹⁴ Edward Thomas, *Richard Jefferies, His Life and Work* (London: Faber and Faber, 1978) pp. 1 and 20.

¹⁵ The name almost certainly derives from the medieval romance *Sir Bevis of Hampton*.

the hill'. The wind on the hilltop is linked to the magical brook the child converses with previously in the tale, thus implying the notion of the fluidity of time, or time as an ever-flowing stream, past, present and future moving as one amorphous entity. The conception of time in Thomas' sonnet is comparable. In the context of the poet's empathy with the dreamer, what, for example, is the sense of 'before' in 'Time swims before me' in the line that begins the sestet? Does the preposition signify time in the past, prior to the speaker's existence, or is it to be understood as referring to future time; it seems both are suggested. Thomas's dreamer not only drives the sonnet, but implies also an understanding of *Wood Magic* as the dream of the 'man in the hill' - a dream which Little Sir Bevis has been privileged to enter into and explore. The child's initiation by the wind is an indication of the exceptional life in relation to landscape the author is to possess as an adult, and anticipates the revelation of *The Story of My Heart*:

There were grass-grown tumuli on the hills to which of old I used to walk, sit down at the foot of one of them, and think. Some warrior had been interred there in the ante-historic times. The sun of the summer morning shone on the dome of sward, and the air came softly up from the wheat below, the tips of the grasses swayed as it passed sighing faintly, it ceased, and the bees hummed by to the thyme and heathbells. I became absorbed in the glory of the day, the sunshine, the sweet air, the yellowing corn turning from its sappy green to summer's noon of gold, the lark's song like a waterfall in the sky. I felt at that moment that I was like the spirit of the man whose body was interred in the tumulus: I could understand and feel his existence the same as my own. He was as real to me two thousand years after interment as those I had seen in the body. The abstract personality of the dead seemed as existent as thought.¹⁶

Thomas's poem - bleak in atmosphere and sense - is skilfully crafted within the context of a formal, conventional and long established poetic format. It invites contrast with passages of prose-poetry by Thomas which are affirmatory, give the impression of being more spontaneous, direct and expansive in expression, and enhance our understanding of what he sought to achieve, and what in the end he seemed prepared to give up his life for. The vigour and beauty of the following passage, for example, describing a February day in Wales, must question a too ready acceptance of Thomas's oft quoted perception of himself as a 'hack writer' merely responding to commission, whose turn independently to poetry represents his true *métier*. Here he provides a very different insight into landscape – not as a theatre of war,

¹⁶ Richard Jefferies, *The Story of My Heart, My Autobiography* (1883), with an Introduction by Jeremy Hooker (Totnes: Green Books, 2002), p. 36.

but as an orchestrated celebration of rural life and its seasonal renewal. The prose serves its purpose well:

the willows were in bud, and for that very reason – there were so many tender things to look cold – the sting was more keen. All day were seen rapid clouds tumbling past a white horizon, firmly stamped with the outlines of trees; the willow undulating altogether, like a living wave of foliage and limber boughs; the river flowing out of silver into blue shadow, and again into silver where the sky bent as if to touch it; leaf and flower of celandine gleaming under the briars; whilst the air was vibrant though windless – stirred like water in a full vessel when more is still poured in. It was the most perfect of days. The air had all the sparkling purity of winter. It had, too, something of the mettle and gusto of spring.¹⁷

This panorama of skyscape, light, pure air and wild flower colour, recording the beauty of a single day now lost to us in time, and conveyed by a writer whose life ended more than a century ago, yet makes its experience part of our experience, for the words read like an enchantment. Its constituents are typically aspects of the natural world that Jefferies was especially sensitive to.

Thomas's personal commitment to the conflict which took his life has been revealed in an oft repeated anecdote that his friend the writer Eleanor Farjeon tells: asked by her if he knew what he was fighting for when he enlisted, Thomas picked up a piece of earth, crumbling it between finger and thumb and answered, 'Literally, for this.' But what exactly did these crumbs of earth mean to him? In reporting the incident Farjeon is imprecise as to location or date, except to say that it was in the countryside and possibly during 1916.

This extract, from an essay written in September 1914, remembering the Herefordshire countryside and Thomas's companionable walks and talks with the American poet Robert Frost perhaps can explain the conundrum in terms of the plenitude of an English harvest:

Now it was August, and again no rain fell for many days; the harvest was a good one, and after standing long in the sun it was gathered in and put up in ricks in the sun, to the contentment of

¹⁷ From a passage titled 'February in Wales', extracted from *Rose Acre Papers* (1910), in Roland Gant, *Edward Thomas on the Countryside: a Selection of His Prose and Verse* (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), pp. 139-140.

men and rooks. All day long the rooks in the wheat-fields were cawing a deep sweet caw, in alternating choirs or all together, almost like sheep bleating, contentedly on till late evening.¹⁸

Thomas' acknowledged mentor, Richard Jefferies, wrote in more general terms of earth as the medium of growth, providing the means by which all life is sustained, in one of his most beautiful, sustained and inspired essays, 'The Pageant of Summer'. Thomas quotes from the essay in his biography of Jefferies. The notion of 'the immense weight of Matter – the dead, the crystallised' pressing 'ponderously on the thinking mind' perhaps contributed to the concept of the dust on the brow of the dreamer in Thomas's sonnet:

Summer shows us Matter changing into life, sap rising from the earth through a million tubes, the alchemic power of light entering the solid oak; and see! it bursts forth in countless leaves. Living things leap in the grass, living things drift upon the air, living things are coming forth to breathe in every hawthorn bush. No longer does the immense weight of Matter – the dead, the crystallised – press ponderously on the thinking mind. [. . .]

Though not often consciously recognised, perhaps this is the great pleasure of summer, to watch the earth, the dead particles resolving themselves into the living case of life, to see the seed-leaf push aside the clod and become by degrees the perfumed flower. [. . .] It is in this marvellous transformation of clods and cold matter into living things that the joy and the hope of summer reside.¹⁹

In addition, Thomas's own feelings for humanity were surely also part of the equation - as expressed, for example, in the poem 'The Owl', in which the bird's cry speaks

for all who lay under the stars,
Soldiers and poor, unable to rejoice.

and in the understated sadness of 'In Memoriam (Easter, 1915)':

The flowers left thick at nightfall in the wood
This Eastertide call into mind the men

¹⁸ From an article titled 'This England' written in September 1914, and published in the *English Review*; Collected in David Wright, *Edward Thomas, Selected Poems and Prose* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981), p. 161.

¹⁹ Richard Jefferies, *The Life of the Fields* (1884) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 3; and Edward Thomas, *Richard Jefferies: His Life and Work*, pp 198-199.

Now far from home, who, with their sweethearts, should
Have gathered them and will do never again.

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