RICHARD JEFFERIES AND EDWARD THOMAS: A SPRING, AN INSCRIPTION AND A SECRET

A talk given to the Richard Jefferies Society on February 6th 1984 by Kim Taplin. (This talk was first given at a conference "Writers in a Landscape" on South Country writers, held at Winchester School of Art on 2nd October, 1982)

There are three related ideas in what I have to say, and each has its emblem: a spring, with its qualities of purity and originality; an inscription, with its suggestion of solemnity and lastingness in the writing; and a secret, the knowledge of which can only be got by initiates. They all share a connection with the idea of truth, and each of them yields almost infinitely, so that all I can do is to throw out a few hints.

I also want to look at the relationship between the two writers. Edward Thomas knew Jefferies, and Jefferies never knew Edward Thomas of course; but I believe that relationship is still the word to use. Writers can receive gifts from those who come after them, as well as the other way about, by helping their work to be understood.- a gratefully acknowledged gift means a two-way relationship.

To begin then with some familiar words of Jefferies:

> Let us get out of these indoor narrow modern days, whose twelve hours somehow have become shortened, into the sunlight and the pure wind. A something that the ancients called divine can be found and felt there still.

Edward Thomas read these words of Jefferies as a boy, and copied them out repeatedly in books and albums. Later he called them a gospel. As you know, they are the last words of *The Amateur Poacher,* an early book; and although Jefferies went on to elaborate, explore and restate this belief, he never essentially altered it. So simple a gospel could hardly remain sufficient for a man like Thomas: indeed it seems necessary for most men to go 'around and about' to their salvation, like Ibsen's Peer Gynt, instead of going straight to the source. Yet these simple words when brooded upon will be found to contain unsuspected depths of truth, telling us about entering the realm of freedom and reality, going far beyond a mere eulogy of 'outdoor leisure pursuits'.

Edward Thomas went on to acquire a far more cumbersome load of intellectual furniture than Jefferies, and had, so far as we can judge, a far more complex personality. These things got between him and the simplicity of 'sunlight and pure wind' just as surely as did Jefferies' declining physical health, which in the end confined his body within doors. When this happened Jefferies' spirit went on trying to claim its freedom by ranging among stored memories, but it was a cruel deprivation and he felt it to be so. What he called his 'soul life' depended upon contact with the real and actual world, principally with the landscapes near Coate in Wiltshire and of the Sussex Downs. His sense of embodiment was very strong. He felt that spirit was incarnate, in the flesh, and that it was nurtured by making contact with the spirit embodied in other material realities, through his feet making contact with the earth, or his whole body as he lay at length on the turf of the downs or with his back against an oak; by his lungs breathing

the thyme- or sea-scented air, by his eyes feasting the heart and mind on the ground's green or the sky's blue, by his skin's absorbing the sun's rays, experienced as benediction. *The Story of My Heart,* Jefferies' spiritual autobiography, is the most abstract statement of these beliefs. In her introduction to the Macmillan edition, Elizabeth Jennings wrote:

> Only in Richard Jefferies can I find the exaltation of spiritual rapture combined with an ecstatic enjoyment of the beauty of the physical world.

I, too, find this rare, and embrace and endorse it. But I would not use the word 'combined' which to me suggests confluence from two separate origins: I believe that to Jefferies the spiritual and the physical were indivisible and from one spring. That's something I hope to show in this talk.

'Let us get out'. Even when he could no longer respond innocently to this call - and it is the doctrine of eternal boyhood so enchantingly set forth in *Bevis* - Thomas must always have felt the truth of it on a primary level, as adult life demanded that he sit long hours confined to his desk in writing the reviews and commissioned books that made a living for himself and his family. To be indoors was to be confined. Out of doors he found some relief from his persistent depression. To be indoors was to be shut away from the reality he wanted to understand and find his place in. As I wrote these words I was distracted by a small tortoiseshell butterfly that came in at the window by mistake and couldn't find its way out until I played God and put it back in its element. Then my heart went out with it into the sunny air where it could fly freely instead of fluttering with vain, pitiful waste of energy against the glass. Next the sunlight did its best to foil me by making the paper glare. And the warmth enticed me. A memory stirred, and I realised I was in country Jefferies knew. I reached for a book and turned the pages till I came on these words:

> Human thoughts and imaginings written down are pale and feeble in bright summer light. The eye wanders away, and rests more lovingly on greensward and green lime leaves. The mind wanders yet deeper and farther into the dreamy mystery of the azure sky. Once now and then, determined to write down that mystery and delicious sense while actually in it, I have brought out table and ink and paper, and sat there in the midst of the summer day. Three words, and where is the thought? Gone. The paper is so obviously paper, the ink so evidently ink, the pen so stiff; all so inadequate.

This passage is from the essay called 'Meadow Thoughts'. Most writers sooner or later come up against the absurdity of sitting writing about the life they ought to be living, and of trying to catch reality as it were on the hop. Writers who are trying to penetrate man's relationship with nature, as Jefferies and Thomas both were, may feel it the most powerfully of all. And of course writing or speaking about writing, as I'm doing, is one further remove from reality, a reflection of *a* reflection. One needs all the warmth in the masters' footsteps not to become fainthearted and doubtful of the value of the endeavour, and before long I shall let Jefferies and Thomas speak for themselves.

It would be absurd to outline the processes of nutrition every time one served a meal. In the same way it would be wearisome and unnecessary to go back to first principles every time one wrote or talked about literature. I

mention this now because I believe it's essential to understanding Jefferies to see that he sought union with reality as the lover seeks union with the loved one, or as the mystic seeks union with God, with singlemindedness and passion. This is his credo: 'My heart is fixed firm and stable in the belief that ultimately the sunshine and the summer, the flowers and the azure sky, shall become, as it were interwoven into man's existence…Pain and sorrow flow over us with little ceasing as the sea-hoofs beat on the beach. Let us not look at ourselves but onward…'. These are Jefferies' words in *The Pageant of Summer* and they give us the clue to the transparency and unselfregarding purity of his writing. He never seems to have the slightest desire to fudge the facts. If the nightingale doesn't sing, if at *a* distance he mistakes one flower for another, he tells us so. He knows that reality is beyond anything he can invent.

Again in 'The Pageant of Summer' he says:

> Every blade of grass, each leaf, each separate floret and petal, is an inscription speaking of hope. Consider the grasses and the oaks, the swallows, the sweet blue butterfly - they are one and all a sign and token showing before our eyes earth made into life.

Jefferies penetrating the secret places or stretched on the turf of the high downs was understanding the earth by making love to it, by knowing it with all his senses - carnal knowledge. It seems to me that it was there in making that relationship, that his struggle as an artist went on, and that the labour in the study to find the right words was a comparatively minor matter. Hence the utter plainness of his best writing: he is simply reading us out the inscriptions as he reads them himself in the book of 'earth made into life'. He is not so much creating as deciphering, flesh back into word. Here is hes reading of wood-sorrel from '*Summer in Somerset';*

> The pathway winds in among the trees at the base of the rocky hill: light green whortlberries fill every interstice, bearing tiny red globes of flower - flower-lamps - open at the top. Wood-sorrel lifts its delicate veined petals: The leaf is rounded like the shadow of a bubble on a stone under clear water. I like to stay by the wood-sorrel a little while - it is so chastely beautiful; like the purest verse, it speaks to the inmost heart.

It is so easy when writing to do violence to so delicate a subject, with the best intentions to pluck the flower to show it, and then it will die. Jefferies leaves it where it is, where it 'lives'. First he shows us the landscape where it lives -pathway, trees, rocky hill - the pathway leads us in. And then it is the whortlebeffies that predominate -'fill every interstice'. We have a sense of the abundance of nature that Jefferies so often celebrates. And then the tiny red globes are seen to be shaped like lamps, this is not fanciful - and as lamps they light our way to understanding of the wood-sorrel. I won't risk damaging the wood sorrel by trying to analyse it: I'll read it again:

> Wood-sorrel lifts its delicate veined petals; the leaf is rounded like the shadow of a bubble on a stone under clear water. I like to stay by the wood-sorrel a little while - it is so chastely beautiful: like the purest verse, it speaks to the inmost heart.

'Purity of Heart' said Kierkegaard, 'is to will one thing' and I believe that this singleness of mind, this love of what was not himself, was what enabled

Jefferies to say 'I' and to tell us what he 'likes[1] and still to give us the wood-sorrel purely, as nature gives it to us, generously, without falling into the traps of the poets who try to edit themselves out of the landscape.

Edward Thomas too was a truth-teller. His honesty lay in giving us the truth of his feeling and thought, and this, almost always was feeling and thought clouded or made painful by his sense of separation and failure. His prose writings contain a little gallery of rural portraits of men whose real or fancied contentment he envied. They belonged in their countryside and they lived in the present moment. His Welsh poacher is typical, of whom he wrote:

> None ever chattered less about past happiness and future pain. He seemed to owe a duty to the present moment of which he partook as if he were eating ripe fruit...pain he took as some take medicine, on trust.

'The Glory' is a poem expressing Thomas's failure to 'enter into life' as that poacher and other country figures he writes of could:

The Glory
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,
Beside the lovely of motion, shape, and hue,
The happiness I fancy fit to dwell
In beauty's presence. Shall I now this day
Begin to seek as far as heaven, as hell,
Wisdom or strength to match this beauty, start
And tread the pale dust pitted with small dark drops.
In hope to find whatever it is I seek,
Hearkening to short-lived happy-seeming things
That we know naught of, in the hazel-copse?
Or must I be content with discontent
As larks and swallows are perhaps with wings?
And shall I ask at the day's end once more
What beauty is, and what I can have meant
By happiness? And shall I let all go,
Glad, weary, or both? Or shall I perhaps know
That I was happy oft and oft before,
Awhile forgetting how I am fast pent,

Thomas brings us the same water as Jefferies but it comes tainted with the bitter blood of the human heart. He won't pretend otherwise, and as a writer he must be honoured for that as much as Jefferies who seems to stand closer to the source. In fact, it is now well-established that we should honour Thomas, and one reason may be that most of us who share these concerns are closer to his condition, that is 'fast-pent' in a state of 'discontent' and inability to 'bite to the core' the experience of figuring in a landscape. Because Jefferies escaped the malady of the intellectual, it would

be a mistake to think his single-mindedness was simple-mindedness. Thomas has the wisdom to recognise Jefferies' quality, though he could only follow him part of the way. His book about him is a generous, inspiring and comprehending one, full of long quotations that give the essential man - a pattern to biographers. Here is its peroration:

> Though he had read much, it was without having played the sedulous ape that he found himself in the great tradition, an honourable descendant of masters, the disciple of none, and himself secure of descendants; for he allied himself to nature, and still plays his part in her office of granting health, and hearty pleasure, and consolation, and the delights of the senses and of the spirit, to men.

Jefferies, as we know, died of a painful and debilitating illness in 1887 at the age of 38 and Thomas was killed by a shell in 1917 at the age of 39: a like span, and many of the best hours of it spent by each in walking alone amidst south country landscapes. The debt Thomas owed to Jefferies in learning to see, to record what he saw, and for the influence of his more sanguine temperament on Thomas's darker one, was a debt acknowledged with gratitude. Donald Davie writing about Thomas accused Jefferies of influencing him 'balefully'. This extraordinary casual dismissal accompanied a patronising appraisal of Thomas, accusing him among other things of lacking the proper philosophical vocabulary for what he was writing about. But as Eliot knew and wrote in one of his essays:

> What every poet starts from is his own emotions...poetry is not a substitute for philosophy or religion as Mr. Lewis and Mr. Murry sometimes seem to think: it has its own function. But as this function is not intellectual but emotional it cannot be defined adequately in intellectual terms. We can say that it provides consolation...'

Eliot goes on to question this word 'consolation' (and it has also of course been claimed as a function of philosophy) but it will do for me. And it was, if you remember, one of the 'offices' (what an excellent word!) of nature, to which Thomas said Jefferies had 'allied himself'. So Thomas honoured the writer of prose, and rightly so, for having a quality essential to poetry - consolation. And Donald Davie must be ranked with Mr.Lewis and Mr.Murry as having missed the point. But I don't like Eliot's tone there, any more than I like the same tone in Professor Davie and I don't want to imitate it. *I* mention this merely to show there are two views on this matter of influence; but mine is that Jefferies' influence on Thomas was both benificent and vital, as it was on many other writers, and that if Jefferies has on the whole escaped the academics by simply being beyond them, it may well be a blessing in disguise.

Of course discrimination entails judgement and rejection. And celebration loses all meaning without it. But it can be done without sneers and bitterness. Thomas's own criticism, gathered together in Edna Longley's superb book called *A Language Not to be Betrayed*, is a lesson in how to do it. it would be hard to think of a duller formula than this: reviews written against time, often of writers now forgotten, mixed with excerpts from unscholarly critical works long out of print. But to read the book is to breathe a purer, an invigorating air - not, it is true, the thyme-scented air of the Downs, but as far as literary criticism goes. For instance, and it's an

instance that I could multiply a hundredfold, there's an extract from a review of *Sherburne Essays,* second series, by Paul Elmer More which originally appeared in something called the Academy...But it contains the impressive rightness of a sentence like this:

> It is...the duty of a critic to be open, passionately open, to impressions, to have a personality, just as it is his duty to detect the same openness, the same personality, in writers of books.

This openness Thomas had both as critic and as creative writer, and it was this that he honoured in Jefferies, who was even more liberatingly open to nature. Those who believe (as I do) in the spirit of celebration tend likewise to be celebrators of the spirit. It is not possible to celebrate the spirit of Thomas or Jefferies in the tones of academic rancour or defensiveness: but this should not blind the professors to the possibility that not all praise is unthinking eulogy.

Jefferies is supposed to have fed the small but struggling soul of Leonard Bast in Forster's novel *Howards End.* 'Within his cramped little mind', Forster wrote, 'dwelt something that was greater than Jefferies[1] books - the spirit that led Jefferies to write them.' There may or may not be an undervaluing of Jefferies there - Forster may mean that the books were trivial or he may mean that the spirit was even greater. More important is the truth implied that there may be in the smallest of us an indwelling spark of the spirit of freedom Jefferies stands for and which he passionately believed - to return to the 'gospel' -would be fanned into life by the 'pure wind'.

'Let us get out of these indoor narrow <u>modern</u> days'...(to find)... 'a something the <u>ancients</u> thought divine' - the words suggest a harking back to a time of greater closeness to nature. And Thomas thought enviously of Jefferies' boyhood, only 30 years before his own, as being more free. Raymond Williams has explored this ever-receding image of a more wholesome past as it appears among writers about the countryside in his book *The Country and the City.* He refers to it as a kind of escalator by which the golden past can never be arrested but is always moving further off -all the way back to Eden. Williams' identification of this nostalgia and its attendant political confusion was of signal importance. 'Thus in a strange relation to an active delight in trees and flowers and birds' he wrote in the section on Jefferies, 'There is a virtually unconscious extension to the values and attachments of an unjust and arbitrary society.' He partly exonerates Jefferies, pointing to the changes in his political thinking, the progress from right to left. The order of Jefferies[1] writing has in fact since been questioned, undermining this idea of a steady shift across the political spectrum. This is a large and separate subject, but the point I want to make here is that though Jefferies could and did record with shrewdness the social changes he observed, his vision was in a way beyond politics, and his 'ancients' who sensed the numinous, who knew the spirits of place, were both prehistoric and a part of the eternal present. His 'modern days' stretch back for centuries; he senses that the rot started early. Paradoxically it was Edward Thomas with his greater historical knowledge who was the more guilty - if

guilt it is - of nostalgia: but modern days for him did after all entail unlovely villas and rubbish and a proliferation of deskbound jobs.

But I do not think he was politically naive: on the contrary his sense of the country's past was both deep and subtle. He was unable to share Jefferies' mystical present, but found instead a cumulative historical human persistence embodied in his figure of Lob, or in the transfixed but time-drenched timelessness of The:

> The rock-like mud unfroze a little and rills
> Ran and sparkled down each side of the road
> Under the catkins wagging in the hedge.
> But earth would have her sleep out, spite of the sun
> 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. Small church, great yew,
> And farmhouse slept in a Sunday silentness.
> The air raised not a straw.
> The steep farm roof,
> With tiles duskily glowing, entertained
> The midday sun; and up and down the roof
> White pigeons nestled.
> There was no sound but one.
> Three cart-horses were looking over a gate
> Drowsily through their forelocks, swishing their tails
> Against a fly, a solitary fly.
>
> The Winter's cheek flushed as if he had drained
> Spring, Summer, and Autumn at a draught
> And smiled quietly. But 'twas not Winter –
> Rather a season of bliss unchangeable
> Awakened from farm and church where it had lain
> Safe under tile and thatch for ages since
> This England, Old already, was called Merry.

Two years ago I visited this Hampshire hamlet on a day the complete psychic reverse of that one - a grey day in summer, with a chilly and disquieting wind. Three notices warned trespassers away from the Manor Farm (which personally I had only intended viewing from outside), and another, more in sorrow than in anger, was fixed to the locked church door, and spoke of vandalism. If Thomas sensed the coming of times like these, when nothing it seems is 'safe under tile and thatch' any more, perhaps something was genuinely passing that it would take a very committed revolutionary not to lament.

The same predominance of the cosmic sense in one and the historical sense in the other led to the far less frequent use of place names by Jefferies than by Thomas. We know where Jefferies' places are, indeed they can often be located very precisely. But he is interested in the essence of places, in the soul-food they offer; so that at the same time as being particular, and it is vital that they are so, they are exemplary. Thomas on the other hand is in love with specificity. Some of his poems contain litanies of the kind that produced George Orwell's disgusted reference to 'the regurgitation of stomachs stuffed with place names'. It would be quite wrong to think

Thomas was besotted with mere sounds. He knew that love goes hand in hand with knowledge, and he was much of the time seeking a place to belong to and to be permitted to love. And it would also be quite wrong to think that Jefferies loved no particular places because he doesn't often name them, on the contrary he knew that rootedness is vital: 'It is necessary to stay in it like the oaks to know passages from it, and one more poem of Edward Thomas and try to show how they demonstrate and discuss some of the things I've been saying. Some of Jefferies' essays are simply nature notes. They are very excellent nature notes, and I would rather read them than many another's ponderous reflections arising from far more shallow observation. Then there is, at the opposite pole*, The Story of My Heart,* a book I can now read with great sympathy and profit, but which I once found unwholesome in the urgency of its perfervid tone. I can feel with those for whom that reaction still prevails. But I think the best of Jefferies is in certain essays of which 'Meadow Thoughts' is one where observation and feeling are almost entirely fused. His almost superhuman (or perhaps I should say) feral powers of concentration upon natural phenomena produced results that are scattered through his writing with a prodigality resembling nature's own, almost carelessly, it might seem. Yet it is the product of precisely the opposite, extreme attention. In 'Meadow Thoughts' this easiness, this apparent easiness of expression, which reflects this being at home in nature, is blended with an intense and dedicated desire to express what such belonging could mean to us:

['Meadow Thoughts': First paragraph 'The old house…to know it.]

That triple repetition of seclusion, the old house **secluded** by many a long long mile, and yet again **secluded** within the walls of the garden, and the distance from London wide enough to **seclude** any house, to hide it like an acorn in the grass - this repetition shows the importance he attaches to the idea, and also imitates it, acting as a triple wrapping round his secret, layer upon layer upon layer. He wants the secret to be found: in a sense it is open, but only to a kind of gnosis: it is impossible for it to be rudely laid bare. Although he refers to London as 'the great centre' he is covertly questioning this valuation of and perspective on it -as his novel *After London* questions, and not naively, all that we mean by civilisation. And this despite the fact that he was able to write from London. That gives his words the greater weight. London is 'the great centre' but the garden walls of the old house are also 'great'. Docks and nettles, the weeds of neglect, have obliterated 'the chipped inscription low down' (another inscription but this time a man-made one) which sought to place him at the end of a line of desire for a goal 79 miles off.

In the second passage I have chosen, Jefferies takes us to the spring. It is a more secret place still. It is a physical place, and there is cool, pure water to quench a bodily thirst, but it is something else as well. Again he takes us step by step through a landscape to find it:

[Meadow Thoughts; 'The espalier apple…groove of it.' and 'Faster than the starling… the end of the essay]

This is the fruit Edward Thomas could not bite to the core. Any natural thing truly seen and told conveys essence - and that is one reason why we need art as well as committees in defence of the countryside; but Jefferies is so great a master of seeing that his spring and basin, a real but unnamed, unhistoric place, becomes a metaphor for life itself.

I'd like to finish by reading you the poem of Thomas's that contains the strange phrase 'a language not to be betrayed' from which Edna Longley's volume is named. There is also an essay of the same name by Stan Smith on Edward Thomas. These two independently pointed to a matter of central importance to him. Thomas aimed at truth: and his own words about Walter de la Mare might well be applied to Jefferies and to Thomas himself:

'Here' he wrote 'is sincerity speaking, as sincerity always does, a strange new tongue because it is unlike our muddy conventional speech…the careful reader will find himself experiencing a sense of gratitude to the poet for so passionately putting his spiritual life into his work.'

Thomas's remark to his friend Robert Frost about wanting to 'wring the necks of my rhetoric - the geese' is well known. He didn't believe that complete sincerity was humanly possible, but his poem sums up his longing for pure, clear undefiled words, his sense of the relationship between man and landscape and a belief he shared with Jefferies in a secret accessible only to those who had ears to hear the gospel and eyes to see the reality to which it pointed:

I never saw that land before,
And now can never see it again;
Yet, as if by acquaintance hoar
Endeared, by gladness and by pain,
Great was the affection that I bore

To the valley and the river small,
The cattle, the grass, the bare ash trees,
The chickens from the farmsteads, all
Elm hidden, and the tributaries
Descending at equal interval;

The blackthorns down along the brook
With wounds yellow as crocuses
Where yesterday the labourer's hook
Had sliced them cleanly and the breeze
That hinted all and nothing spoke.

I neither expected anything
Nor yet remembered: but some goal
I touched then; and if I could sing
What would not even whisper my soul As I went 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

Notes about books mentioned:

'A Language Not To Be Betrayed'

Selected prose of Edward Thomas with Introduction,
Edna Longley/Carcenet Press 1981 £12.50
'The Country and the City'
Raymond Williams/1973 (Out of Print)