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## **Edward Thomas and the Languages of Nature**

### **Abstract**

Edward Thomas' poetry is read as belonging to the mystical tradition of English poetry, particularly in relation to Wordsworth's conception of the poet as mediator between the 'everyday' appearance of the world and that which goes beyond it. Whilst Thomas may not be seen as an obvious contender for such a tradition, several of his poems concern both the physical aspects of nature and a quiet search for something beyond the physical that is felt to be there, even if access to it is uncertain or unachieved. Of particular interest are the recurring references to 'languages' of nature in poems such as 'Sedge-warblers', 'The Word' and examples from his prose. Thomas' poetry is placed in the context of his time and the prevailing materialistic worldview. By rejecting the dream of the water nymph in 'Sedge-warblers' and focussing solely on the water of the brook, Thomas aims to write in a way that is appropriate for his time, yet also engages with the transcendent aspects of nature. Further examples of Thomas' works are examined in relation to links between the sensitivity of children and the sensitivity of poets towards both the physical and transcendent aspects of nature. Antony Easthope's work on empiricist poetics is discussed in relation to Thomas, as is Scott Knickerbocker's theory of sensuous poesis. The article concludes by examining some of Thomas' own writing and poetry that concerns the 'aliveness' of language, and how it can be used to create poems that achieve the vital power described by Wordsworth.

Dearest Friend,  
Forgive me if I say that I, who long  
Had harboured reverentially a thought  
That Poets, even as Prophets, each with each  
Connected in a mighty scheme of truth  
Have each for his peculiar dower, a sense  
By which he is able to perceive  
Something unseen before; forgive me, Friend,  
If I, the meanest of this Band, had hope  
That unto me had also been vouchsafed  
An influx, that in some sort I possessed  
A privilege, and that a work of mine,  
Proceeding from the depth of untaught things,  
Enduring and creative, might become  
A power like one of Nature's.<sup>1</sup>

This passage that precedes Wordsworth's vision of the past on Salisbury plain describes a role for poets as mediators between 'everyday' experience of the physical world and that which goes beyond it, able to access aspects of existence that are not normally perceived, and then to create a poetic work that also contains a vital force. Whilst the quotation above refers to insights into the past, a little later in *The Prelude* Wordsworth also discusses the ability to perceive 'a new world' within 'life's everyday appearances' that is 'fit / To be transmitted and made visible / To other eyes'.<sup>2</sup> When thinking about this conception of the poet in relation to the English tradition, poets such as Blake and some of the mystical poets of the seventeenth century such as Henry Vaughan and Thomas Traherne might spring to mind. Edward Thomas is a less obvious contender, with critical responses often focussing on areas such as his poems' relationship with modernism, nationality, or the environment. Yet in addition to these areas, Thomas' work contains a profound interest in both the physical aspects of nature and the transcendent. In the introduction to his *Selected Poems of Edward Thomas*, R. S. Thomas writes:

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<sup>1</sup> William Wordsworth, *William Wordsworth: A Critical Edition of the Major Works* ed. by Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 576.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 578.

Somewhere beyond the borders of Thomas' mind, there was a world he could never quite come at. Many of his best poems are faithful recordings of his attempts to do so: 'When First', for instance; 'Parting'; 'Old Man', and especially 'The Unknown Bird'.<sup>3</sup>

It is arguable that in 'I Never Saw that Land Before' Thomas does 'touch a goal', yet either way, this quiet search or longing for something that is felt to be there, even if access to it is uncertain or unachieved, places Thomas in the mystical tradition of English poetry. An area of Thomas' work that is of particular interest in this regard is that which engages with the theme of 'the language of nature'. This recurring theme is used to express a fascination with the hidden processes and forms that transcend our everyday awareness of the world. The use of language-based descriptions in poems such as 'Sedge-Warblers' and 'The Word' indicate both a sense of commonality and mysterious otherness, raising questions about whether it is possible for us to access the wisdom that Thomas sees as lying behind these 'languages'.

Thomas' prose also contains examples of this theme, a few of which are discussed here. Thomas' poetry emerged out of his prose, with Robert Frost claiming to have recognised Thomas' potential as a poet after reading his prose.<sup>4</sup> David Wright argues that the prose gave Thomas the practice in 'handling words' that was needed as preparation for becoming a poet.<sup>5</sup> Wright also finds traces in the prose that anticipate the poetry, such as Thomas' numerous disguised portraits of himself in works such as *The South Country* or *In Pursuit of Spring* which foreshadow 'The Other'.<sup>6</sup> Despite connections such as these, Wright describes much of Thomas' prose as 'tedious' and 'the wrong medium for what he wanted to

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<sup>3</sup> R. S. Thomas, 'Introduction' in *Selected Poems of Edward Thomas* by Edward Thomas, ed. by R. S. Thomas pp. 11-14 (p. 11).

<sup>4</sup> Robert Frost, cited in 'Introduction' by David Wright, in *Edward Thomas: Selected Poems and Prose*, by Edward Thomas, ed. by David Wright (Middlesex: Penguin, 1981), pp. 13-28 (p. 22).

<sup>5</sup> David Wright, 'Introduction' in *Edward Thomas: Selected Poems and Prose*, by Edward Thomas, ed. by David Wright (Middlesex: Penguin, 1981), pp. 13-28 (p. 19).

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 21.

express'.<sup>7</sup> By contrast, Robert Macfarlane praises *The South Country* for its hypermodern collage-like feel created by the shifts between location and the 'irregular movement between the empirical and the mystical'.<sup>8</sup> Whilst the poems do not involve such a 'hypermodern' style, they do make connections between the empirical and the mystical. The use of 'the empirical' in the poetry involves the rejection of certain 'dreamlike' mystical attitudes of the past. Whilst this is painful, it opens up new ways of understanding nature that are in tune with the time in which Thomas lives. Stan Smith offers insights into this period through his examination of the way in which contemporary social and economic factors contributed to the sense of alienation experienced by Thomas. Pierre Hadot adds to this context through his argument that human alienation from the transcendent aspects of nature is linked to the development of mechanistic science in the seventeenth century and its subsequent rise to become the dominant mode for understanding the world. Like Wordsworth, Thomas sees children as having a particular sensitivity towards the world around them, being more capable of perceiving both physical and transcendent aspects. Poets are also seen as possessing such sensitive capacities, with contemplation being one way of achieving this. Antony Easthope and Jeffrey Side's work on empiricist poetics is discussed in relation to Thomas' poetry, as is Scott Knickerbocker's theory of sensuous poesis. The article concludes by examining some of Thomas' own writing and poetry concerning the 'aliveness' of language that poets work with to create poems that can achieve the vital power mentioned by Wordsworth in *The Prelude*.

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<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Macfarlane, 'Introduction' in *The South Country*, by Edward Thomas (Wimborne Minster: Little Toller, 2009, pp. 7-12 (p. 9)).

## Context

Smith argues that the experience of dispossession and displacement in Thomas' poetry can, in part, be traced back to the biographical and social conditions of his life.<sup>9</sup> Citing Thomas' description of his 'accidental Cockney birth', Smith describes how Thomas saw himself as an expatriate Welshman, his family having left their roots in Tredegar to move to London, where Thomas' father worked in the Civil Service.<sup>10</sup> In the context of Thomas' own career as a professional writer, Smith describes how the altered economic situation at the turn of the century meant that literary and academic careers could not be sustained as easily as many young intellectuals hoped, with the result that many turned in on themselves with a sense of marginality and irrelevance.<sup>11</sup> In *The South Country*, Thomas describes meeting a 'stranger' with Welsh roots who had also worked as a 'hack writer'. Smith notes the similarities with Thomas' life, and sees Thomas' own experiences and outlook in the stranger's description of the frustration and deracination of middle class suburbia:

I realize that I belong to the suburbs still. I belong to no class or race, and have no traditions. We of the suburbs are a muddy, confused, hesitating mass, of small courage though much endurance. As for myself, I am world-conscious, and hence suffer unutterable loneliness.<sup>12</sup>

Smith also refers to passages in *The South Country* and 'February in England' which describe English landscapes that have been altered by house-building, and damaged by industrial development.<sup>13</sup> With regard to Thomas' poetry, Wright argues that Thomas' importance lies in his position as the last in the line of poets, beginning with Wordsworth, who elegised and recorded the slow destruction of the English rural environment and its culture, caused by the

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<sup>9</sup> Stan Smith, *Edward Thomas* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), p. 37.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>12</sup> Edward Thomas, *The South Country* (Wimborne Minster: Little Toller, 2009), p. 85.

<sup>13</sup> Smith, p. 32.

industrial revolution and its subsequent developments.<sup>14</sup> Yet as hinted at in Smith's comments about the deracination and alienation of suburban inhabitants, the rise of industrialisation and increase of urbanisation did not solely affect the countryside, but also had deeper and perhaps less obviously visible effects on the relationship between humans and the natural world. After the passage quoted by Smith, the 'stranger' who Thomas meets in *The South Country* says the following:

'I am weary of seeing things, the outsides of things, for I see nothing else. It makes me wretched to think what swallows are to many children and poets and other men, while to me they are nothing but inimitable, compact dark weights tumbling I do not know how through the translucent air – nothing more, and yet I know they are something more. I apprehend their weight, buoyancy and velocity as they really are, but I have no vision.'<sup>15</sup>

The use of phrases such as 'compact dark weights' and 'weight, buoyancy and velocity' give us a sense of what it would be like to perceive the world solely through physical measurement. At the same time, the repetition of 'nothing' and the use of 'weary' and 'wretched' create a strong impression of the emotional experience of a character who is limited to such an extreme form of materialistic perception. Interestingly, it is both poets and children who are among those who the character sees as possessing the ability to access a vision of life that is not limited to the physical. Yet the knowledge that other people might have something of this ability only adds to the character's feelings of pain and despair. The way in which he can only experience the swallows through physical measurement alone can be read in the context of the Romantic dissatisfaction with materialistic science, as found in Keats' lines about the 'cold philosophy' that seeks to 'clip an angel's wings' and 'unweave a rainbow' in 'Lamia'.<sup>16</sup> In the passages of meditative verse of which parts were incorporated into *The Excursion*, Wordsworth depicts a science whose 'dull eye' is 'chained to its object in

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<sup>14</sup> Wright, p. 27.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas, *The South Country*, pp. 85-86.

<sup>16</sup> John Keats, *Keats: Poetry and Prose* (London: Oxford University Press, 1922), p. 72.

brute slavery', focussing its dim attention on ever smaller pieces of 'dead and spiritless matter'.<sup>17</sup>

Hadot traces the emergence of this science back to figures such as Francis Bacon, Descartes, Galileo and Newton, who developed ways of understanding nature that are 'limited' to the 'rigorous analysis of what is measurable and quantifiable in sensible phenomena'.<sup>18</sup> This development meant that the methods and focus for understanding nature underwent a profound shift, with the new science employing instruments such as the microscope and telescope to pursue previously undiscovered material entities such as blood corpuscles, bacteria or sunspots.<sup>19</sup> Whilst such discoveries are of clear importance in the development of our understanding of the universe, Hadot argues that the rise of the mechanistic methods that facilitated them came at the cost of a diminishment of other means of knowledge that were concerned with the 'occult and invisible qualities, hidden forces, and unsuspected possibilities that lie beyond appearances' that had been the objects of nature study in the past.<sup>20</sup> The despair and emotional distress experienced by Thomas' stranger can be linked to that experienced by the knight in 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', who is left 'pale and loitering', unable to return to 'La Belle Dame' and her 'elfin grot'.<sup>21</sup> Her 'language strange' has become a distant dream for the knight, who has 'woken up' on the cold hillside.<sup>22</sup> Keats' poem has a particular resonance with Thomas' 'Sedge-Warblers', especially regarding the reference to the water nymph that occurs near the beginning of the poem:

This beauty made me dream there was a time  
Long past and irrecoverable, a clime  
Where any brook so radiant racing clear

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<sup>17</sup> Wordsworth, p. 679.

<sup>18</sup> Pierre Hadot, *The Veil of Isis: An Essay on the History of the Idea of Nature* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2006), p. 123.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>21</sup> Keats, pp. 158-159.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, p. 159.



Through buttercup and kingcup bright as brass  
But gentle, nourishing the meadow grass  
That leans and scurries in the wind, would bear  
Another beauty, divine and feminine,  
Child to the sun, a nymph whose soul unstained  
Could love all day, and never hate or tire,  
A lover of mortal or immortal kin.<sup>23</sup>

These lines contain something of the brook's movement within them, speeding along through phrases such as 'radiant racing clear', then slowing down at the comma after 'gentle'.

Following Knickerbocker, this can be seen as an example of 'sensuous poesis', in which poetic language is used to enact the experience of nature.<sup>24</sup> The characteristics of the brook also find their way into the expression of the poem's train of thought, for, having set the poem up with the promise of a 'dream' from the distant past, Thomas takes several lines to 'meander' through the rather beautiful descriptions of the brook before reaching the 'other beauty' of the water nymph. It is as if openly discussing such a being requires some tentative leading up to in the 'clime' of the early twentieth century. Having touched upon this figure, Thomas dismisses her almost straightaway:

And yet, rid of this dream, ere I had drained  
Its poison, quieted was my desire  
So that I only looked into the water,  
Clearer than any goddess or man's daughter,  
And hearkened while it combed the dark green hair  
And shook the millions of the blossoms white  
Of the water-crowsfoot, and curdled to one sheet  
The flowers fallen from the chestnuts in the park  
Far off.<sup>25</sup>

Associating his 'dream' of the water nymph with a 'poison' that needs to be drained creates a strong sense of the rejection. This could be read as the 'poison' of his lust for a 'feminine' nymph figure which would contaminate his relationship with nature. Alternatively, the phrase

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<sup>23</sup> Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems* (London: Selwyn and Blount, 1920), p. 109.

<sup>24</sup> Scott Knickerbocker, *Ecopoetics: the Language of Nature, the Nature of Language* (Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), p. 13.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas, *Collected Poems*, p. 109.

could present the dreamlike state itself as poisonous, a ‘veil of dreams’ from the past that should now give way to a more ‘awake’ form of consciousness, one which is capable of seeing nature afresh. By choosing to focus solely on the water in front of him, Thomas attempts to restrict himself to the physical manifestations of the landscape, as perceived by his senses. In this manner, he can be seen as consciously rejecting the ancient ‘dreamlike’ ways of knowing and engaging with the materialistic paradigm shared by the ‘stranger’ and mechanistic science. Despite his sober intentions, in the succeeding description of how he listened to the water as it ‘combed the dark green hair’ of the water-crowsfoot, the personification indicates the difficulty he has in rejecting his ‘dream’. The description of the ‘sheet’ of horse chestnut flowers covering the water is somewhat less personified, although the fact that a ‘sheet’ can also refer to a bed sheet complicates this somewhat. The poem continues by describing the sedge-warblers themselves:

.... And sedge-warblers, clinging so light  
To willow twigs, sang longer than the lark  
Quick, shrill or grating, a song to match the heat  
Of the strong sun, no less the water’s cool,  
Gushing through narrows, swirling in the pool.  
Their song that lacks all words, all melody,  
All sweetness almost, was dearer then to me  
Than the sweetest voice that sings in tune sweet words.  
This was the best of May – the small brown birds  
Wisely reiterating endlessly  
What no man learnt yet, in or out of school.<sup>26</sup>

The detailed manner in which the sedge-warblers are described as ‘clinging so light / To willow twigs’ suggest that Thomas is now succeeding in his resolve to limit himself to precise, sensory description. The adjectives ‘Quick, shrill or grating’ give the reader an unsugared sense of what the birds’ song sounds like. Edna Longley reads Thomas’ comparison of the sedge-warblers with the ‘Romantic’ lark as a further indication of his

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<sup>26</sup> Thomas, *Collected Poems*, p. 109-110.

rejection of a Romantic ‘dream’ and its replacement by a focus on ‘seeing clearly’.<sup>27</sup> This rejection of the past also finds its expression in the well-known review in which Thomas criticises one of his contemporaries for writing as if the tube did not exist.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, when discussing a passage from *Rest and Unrest* that weighs up the social benefits of a new mine, Martin Scofield describes Thomas as having moved away from ‘the Edwardian idyll, or the rustic-suited Georgianism of so many of Thomas’s friends and contemporaries, towards a fuller, more vital and less comfortable awareness of modern life’.<sup>29</sup> Because he possesses this awareness, Thomas cannot ‘dream’ of past ways of seeing the world like Keats’ knight. Instead, Thomas engages with the conditions in which he lives by rejecting his dream of the water nymph and concentrating on the physical manifestations of nature. At the same time, it is also important to note that Thomas’ ‘awakened’ description of the physical appearance of the birds and the sound of their song is infused with a subjective appreciation of their beauty. This leads him to a recognition of the hidden wisdom that he recognises as being present within their song, even if he cannot fully comprehend it. Where the lines ending cool/pool, melody/me and words/birds form neat couplets, the rhymes at the ends of the final two lines do not. Instead, they refer back to the rhymes at the end of previous lines, giving the poem an open gesture. The mystery has not been solved; it is still there, waiting to be approached.

### **Sensitivity of Children and Poets**

In the passage previously quoted from *The South Country*, the ‘stranger’ describes both poets and children as possessing a mode of seeing the world that goes beyond the material externalities of things. This position is reflected in another passage from *The South*

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<sup>27</sup> Edna Longley, *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1986), p. 69.

<sup>28</sup> Andrew Motion, *The Poetry of Edward Thomas* (London: Routledge, 1980), p. 9.

<sup>29</sup> Martin Scofield, ‘Edward Thomas’s Prose of Modern Life’, *English*, 42.172 (1993), 21-43 (p. 30).

*Country* in which Thomas contrasts the ‘adult’ approach to perceiving a tree with that of a child:

In those days we did not see a tree as a column of a dark stony substance supporting a number of green wafers that live scarcely half a year, and grown for the manufacture of furniture, gates, and many other things; but we saw something quite unlike ourselves, large, gentle, of foreign tongue, without locomotion, yet full of the life and movement and sound of the leaves themselves, and also of the light, of the birds, and of the insects; and they were givers of a clear, deep joy that cannot be expressed.<sup>30</sup>

The dry manner in which the adult view is described in comparison to the ‘clear, deep joy’ experienced by the child indicates a profound sense of loss for the child’s way of seeing and relating to the tree. Read in the light of the last section, it is unlikely that Thomas is proposing that we cease to make gates out of wood, or is arguing that such a utilitarian approach to interacting with a tree is wrong. Instead, the passage can be read as suggesting that the situation has become unbalanced, that we have become accustomed to seeing the tree solely in relation to our utilitarian ends, and that we as adults would be better off if we could also find ways of deepening our connection with the tree and understanding the secrets of its ‘foreign tongue’ in ways that go beyond human utility.

The contrast between the different approaches taken by ‘adults’ and ‘children’ to perceiving and interacting with the world is also evident in ‘The Path’:

Running along a bank, a parapet  
That saves from the precipitous wood below  
The level road, there is a path. It serves  
Children for looking down the long smooth steep,  
between the legs of beach and yew, to where  
a fallen tree checks the sight: while the men and women  
Content themselves with the road and what they see

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<sup>30</sup> Thomas, *The South Country*, p. 127.

Over the bank, and what the children tell.<sup>31</sup>

The road and the path indicate two ways of being, of moving through the world, with the adults ‘travelling’ efficiently towards their destination along the level road. By contrast, the children ‘see’ more of the trees and other features of the landscape than the adults, looking between the legs of the trees as they might look between the legs of their parents. The children are arguably more ‘present’ and receptive to the landscape because they are less focussed on reaching a specific destination and are consequently content to spend more time ‘being’ with the trees and other aspects of the countryside. When commenting on this poem, Anna Stenning describes how walking through the landscape along such a path attunes one’s senses to ‘the features of the environment that are mobile and ephemeral’.<sup>32</sup> Because they notice such features, the children have a special role in ‘telling’ the adults what they have experienced. Smith suggests that Thomas himself has travelled the path and shares the values of the children; a sympathy that indicates that the children’s special role can also be extended to poets.<sup>33</sup>

Another of Thomas’ poems that features a child in this role is ‘The Brook’, in which Thomas watches a child paddling on a sunny day. Thomas begins to describe aspects of the place around them, such as the mugwort that smells like honeycomb, the sharp call of the thrush or the way in which a butterfly alights upon a stone. The poem ends with the following lines:

... All that I could lose  
I lost. And then the child’s voice raised the dead.  
‘No one’s been here before’ was what she said  
And what I felt, yet never should have found

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<sup>31</sup> Thomas, *Collected Poems*, p. 17.

<sup>32</sup> Anna Stenning, “‘What to make of a Diminished Thing’: Nature and Home in the Poetry of Edward Thomas and Robert Frost 1912-1917”, (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Worcester), 2014, p. 167.

<sup>33</sup> Smith, p. 119.

A word for, while I gathered sight and sound.<sup>34</sup>

Despite Thomas' diligent 'gathering' of sensory descriptions of physical aspects of the place, his expression of it is incomplete. Instead, it is the child who offers a description that, whilst not factually correct, offers a poetic truth about the experience of a place that startles Thomas with its aptness. This enables the poem to acknowledge not only the physical 'realness' of a place, but also the less tangible qualities of what might be referred to as its atmosphere. As with the wisdom contained within the song of the sedge-warblers or the primal purity of the thrush's 'word', the atmosphere is something that is 'felt' or sensed. It is deeply involved with the physical, yet also transcends it. Doreen Massey argues that people experience and interact with places in different ways depending upon factors such as their position in society or their gender.<sup>35</sup> It can also be argued that places are made up of different layers and that the different approaches of adults and children access different layers of place. In 'The Brook', for example, the physical details of the place that Thomas initially describes are a part of what makes up the place, yet the place also includes something else, an atmosphere that, whilst it includes the physical, is at the same time more than physical. The tree can also be seen as having layers; where the 'adult' perceives the physical, the 'outside' as the stranger puts it, the child has an additional awareness that the tree speaks a 'language' and is therefore something with which one can form a relationship, even if it is 'without locomotion'.<sup>36</sup>

The focus on the special qualities of childhood perception in Thomas' work can be linked to Wordsworth, particularly in relation to the sensitivity of children towards those aspects of nature that are less obvious to adults. In Wordsworth, this kind of sensitivity is

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<sup>34</sup> Thomas, *Collected Poems*, p. 177-178.

<sup>35</sup> Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994), pp. 147-150.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas, *The South Country*, p. 127.

particularly prominent in ‘Ode (“There was a time”)', where childhood contains a ‘visionary gleam’:

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,  
The earth and every common sight.  
To me did seem  
Apparelled in celestial light <sup>37</sup>

Wordsworth describe how, with the onset of adulthood, the ‘visionary gleam’ of childhood passes away, and ‘things which I have seen I now can see no more’.<sup>38</sup> The trees and fields now ‘speak of something that is gone’, leaving the adult cut off from a complete understanding of them.<sup>39</sup> Yet Wordsworth also draws strength from a sense that there are nonetheless attributes of childhood that can reach into and uphold our adult lives. These not only include ‘High instincts, before which our mortal Nature / Did tremble like a guilty Thing surprized’ but also ‘those obstinate questionings / Of sense and outward things’.<sup>40</sup> This suggests that profound awe and wonder, and a sense that there is something beyond the limits of the material, can also form part of our adult lives. Whilst Thomas shies away from phrases such as ‘Apparelled in celestial light’, the children in the examples discussed here offer profound insights that both involve and go beyond ‘sense and outward things’. They achieve this through being aware of nature in ways that adults are not, by spending time wandering down a path rather than hurrying towards a destination or by listening to a tree. For Thomas’ ‘stranger’, poets are among those adults who can also achieve a ‘childlike’ sensitivity towards nature. As Edna Longley reminds us:

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<sup>37</sup> Wordsworth, p. 297.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, p. 297.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, p. 298.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*, p. 301.

Thomas's versions of the artist involve not the builder or maker but the listener, the observer, the nomad, the receiver of signals from the environment, the apprentice to natural language, the vehicle of human language <sup>41</sup>

One way in which the poet may find their way back to a childlike sensitivity to the world around them is through contemplation. Maia Duerr defines 'contemplative practice' as a process of quietening the mind in order to develop a personal capacity for deep concentration and insight.<sup>42</sup> In addition to more obvious forms of contemplative practice, such as sitting in silence, Duerr includes other activities such as mindful walking and focussed experiences in nature.<sup>43</sup> Whilst focussed experience in nature and deep concentration and insight are clearly evident in Thomas' work, 'contemplative practice' somehow sounds too formal in relation to the experiences depicted in Thomas' poems. Instead, certain poems represent a contemplative 'approach' to seeing, listening, walking and 'being with' plants, animals and landscapes in a manner which involves 'deep listening' and insight. This approach is evident in what is perhaps Thomas' most well-known poem, 'Adlestrop'.

The poem's first stanza appears somewhat unpromising in this regard, with Thomas giving the reader the 'facts' of the event he is about to relate: that it occurred in June, that it was hot and that the train he was on stopped 'unwontedly' in a place whose name is 'Adlestrop'. At the same time, it is conversational, as if Thomas were describing a memory to the reader, with the implication that it is a significant memory creating a sense of anticipation. Having set up the poem in this manner, the second stanza takes us directly to the scene:

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<sup>41</sup> Edna Longley, *Poetry and Posterity* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2000), p. 45.

<sup>42</sup> Maia Duerr, 'Assessing the State of Contemplative Practices in the United States' in *Contemplation Nation: How Ancient Practices are Changing the Way We Live*, ed. by Mirabai Bush (Kalamazoo, MI: Fetzer Institute, 2011), (pp. 9-34) p. 10.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*, p. 10.



The steam hissed. Someone cleared his throat.  
No one left and no one came  
On the bare platform. What I saw  
Was Adlestrop – only the name.<sup>44</sup>

Easthope refers to this stanza as representing a ‘little crisis of subjectivity’, in which meaning has dropped out Thomas’ world, leaving him ‘separated from it, facing only writing, a name, Adlestrop’.<sup>45</sup> The stanza can also be read as representing the transition from an everyday awareness to a deeper, more contemplative state of being, one that is triggered by the unexpected halt that the train makes and the emptiness on the platform. The short, clipped sentences reinforce the mundane nature of the sounds, whilst simultaneously highlighting the significance they assume in the context of the unexpected silence and Thomas’ heightened sensory awareness. The repeated negative phrases and images in the rest of the stanza further emphasise the lack of activity within the human environment of the station. The result is that Thomas begins to form a deeper relationship with what he perceives in the world around him. His increased sensitivity enables the activity of the outer world to take on greater meaning, as can be seen through the increased significance assumed by the sounds of the escaping steam and the person coughing. In the third stanza, this awareness and sensitivity is extended to the landscape beyond the station:

And willows, willow-herb, and grass,  
And meadowsweet, and haycocks dry,  
No whit less still and lonely fair  
Than the high cloudlets in the sky.<sup>46</sup>

The use of ‘And’ at the beginning of the stanza, combined with manner in which the aspects are listed and connected with the further use of ‘and’ emphasises the suddenness with which the beauty of the surrounding countryside impresses itself on Thomas’ consciousness. By

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<sup>44</sup> Thomas, *Collected Poems*, p. 52.

<sup>45</sup> Antony Easthope, ‘How Good is Seamus Heaney?’ in *English*, 46.184 (1997), 21-36 (p. 24).

<sup>46</sup> Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems*, p. 66.

contrast, the tempo in the second half of the stanza is slowed by the long vowel sounds in 'fair', 'high' and 'sky' and the references to stillness and loneliness. This variation qualifies the description, adding to the power of the scene and its apprehension. The manner in which the solitary self in the train carriage expands its consciousness to relate to the surrounding countryside is continued in the final stanza:

And for that minute a blackbird sang  
Close by, and round him, mistier,  
Farther and farther, all the birds  
Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire.<sup>47</sup>

Easthope describes this as a 'moment of transcendent insight', in which the poem presents an experience of a synthesis of internal and external, human and natural.<sup>48</sup> The experience of contemplative openness that leads to this insight is achieved when the train stops, when all thoughts of 'getting somewhere' are replaced by a 'childlike' state of simply 'being with' the landscape. Like the metalled road in 'The Path', the technology of the train, its attendant timetable systems and the enclosure of the carriage can be viewed as creating an efficient way to reach a destination whilst also alienating the 'adults' inside from the countryside around them. Yet the train is also the reason that the subject of the poem is in Adlestrop at all, and when the train stops, the moment of contemplative openness experienced through the carriage window is made all the more profound through its contrast with the preceding conditions of modernity.

## Language and Poetic Empiricism

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<sup>47</sup> Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems*, p. 52.

<sup>48</sup> Easthope, pp. 24-25.

Easthope characterises ‘Adlestrop’ as a poem whose speaker is certain that ‘language can represent the real’.<sup>49</sup> Consequently, Easthope sees Thomas as part of a dominant tradition of ‘empiricist’ poetry in English that stretches back to Wordsworth, passes through Hardy and Walter de la Mere, then avoids modernism as it progresses through Auden and Hughes to Heaney. Easthope defines empiricism in relation to poetry by setting out how it views the object, the means of representation and the subject: (1) the object is assumed to exist in a ‘pre-given real’ and can be observed ‘objectively’ by excluding any pre-judgement or self-deception.<sup>50</sup> If the real is observed in this manner, it will ‘yield knowledge of itself’;<sup>51</sup> (2) The means of representation is taken to be transparent, or to interfere only slightly with the subject’s access to the real;<sup>52</sup> (3) The subject is not ‘constructed’, but is simply ‘there’ as a subject for experience or knowledge.<sup>53</sup> Easthope does not specify whether his definition of reality is limited to the physical alone. His description at the beginning of the article of Johnson refuting Bishop Berkeley’s idealism by kicking his foot against a large stone would suggest that this is the case, although his acknowledgement of the moment of ‘transcendent insight’ in Adlestrop and his inclusion of Wordsworth in his line of empiricist poets suggests that reality also has other dimensions.<sup>54</sup> When viewing Wordsworth as an empiricist poet, Jeffrey Side admits that his poetry contains ‘transcendental’ elements that are not consistently empirical in the way a philosopher might be, yet because he is a poet, Wordsworth can incorporate both of these elements in his work.<sup>55</sup> As previously discussed, poems such as ‘Sedge-warblers’ and ‘The Brook’ depict experiences that encompass both the physical and other layers of reality, such as the atmosphere of place and the wisdom of the birds. It might

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<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*, p.25.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*, p. 21

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, p. 21

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*, p. 21, p. 25 and p. 22.

<sup>55</sup> Jeffrey Side, ‘The Influence of Wordsworth’s Empiricist Aesthetic on Seamus Heaney’s Criticism and Poetry’ *English* 59.225 (2010), 128-53 (p. 128-29).

be argued that the beauty that is often seen in the objects of both Thomas and Wordsworth's poems means their work is not 'objective', yet because their experience of the real is also the object of their poem, as long as the experience itself is also described 'objectively', the poem can still be considered empiricist.

According to Easthope, experience of the real must also be presented 'transparently' in an empiricist poem. Andrew Motion describes how Thomas was engaged in a struggle to find a language that would bring his readers as close as possible to the 'very grain and texture of experience'.<sup>56</sup> Motion sees Thomas as striving towards a discourse that could in principle be considered 'transparent' whilst being simultaneously aware that the words he uses 'establish a difference between themselves and their object'.<sup>57</sup> Yet for Motion, it is this very awareness that makes Thomas relevant rather than dated, because it means that he is also engaged with the modernists' 'intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings', albeit in a different and more 'reticent' manner than Eliot.<sup>58</sup> 'I Never Saw that Land Before' is a poem that contains elements of a 'transparent' evocation of an experience, as well as a self-conscious awareness of language itself:

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 on my journeying,

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<sup>56</sup> Motion, p. 4.

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*, p. 4.

I should use, as the trees and the 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.<sup>59</sup>

The way in which the breeze ‘hints’ but does not ‘speak’ is similar to Thomas’ sense that the song of the sedge-warblers contains a hidden wisdom, even if he cannot fully comprehend it. By contrast, the second stanza quoted here appears to describe a moment in which Thomas does reach an understanding of the ‘language’ of nature, even if it is a momentary insight. Whilst most of the poem can be considered empiricist in that it offers a transparent discourse of an experience of a place through the medium of a unified self, Thomas refuses to reveal one part of the experience in a transparent way. In this, he deviates from Wordsworth’s proposal that poets should transmit and make visible the ‘a new world’ that is perceived within ‘life’s everyday appearances’. <sup>60</sup> Thomas self-consciously informs the reader of his decision not to make the entirety of the experience in the poem visible, saying that if he could put this experience into words, he would write in a way that only those who are ‘made’ like him would understand. This is effectively what he has done, with the phrase ‘touch a goal’ evasively implying momentary attainment without specifying any details. Like the breeze, Thomas hints all but does not say anything directly. Elsewhere, the complex web of clauses, negatives and qualifiers add to the sense of mystery. Yet enough detail of the experience is provided so that, if we too have experienced such a profound moment of understanding in nature, we might be able to understand what Thomas’ ‘goal’ was. Thomas has left a gap in the text, one that the reader must either leave as a mystery or fill in for themselves. This poetic strategy adds another dimension to Thomas’ poetic technique, even if the poem as a

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<sup>59</sup> Thomas, *Collected Poems*, p. 92-93.

<sup>60</sup> Wordsworth, p. 578.

whole is presented through the medium of a unified self, and most of the experience is represented in an empiricist fashion.

As Motion notes, even aiming for transparency is not without its inherent challenges.

Knickerbocker refers to a deconstructionist attitude which views language as ‘failing’ because of its inability to properly recreate our immediate experience of nature.<sup>61</sup>

Knickerbocker acknowledges that whilst reading and writing about a herd of caribou or submerging oneself in a river will not be the same as having these experiences oneself, the attempt to communicate such experiences through language is vitally important to our status as human beings.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, Knickerbocker sees poetry playing a particularly important role in this attempt, because it has the power not only to describe experience, but also to enact it through the use of poetic features of language. As noted previously, this is clearly evident in ‘Sedge-warblers’, where the sounds and structure of the poem enact the movement of the brook and Thomas’ experience of it. ‘The Word’ is another poem that contains elements of poetic enactment, even if the first few lines might appear less promising in this regard:

There are so many things I have forgot,  
That once were much to me, or that were not,  
All lost, as is a childless woman’s child  
And its child’s children, in the undefiled  
Abyss of what will never be again.  
I have forgot, too, names of mighty men  
That fought or lost or won in the old wars,  
Of kings and fiends and gods, and most of the stars.<sup>63</sup>

Rather than a specific experience, these lines constitute a more generalised meditation on the theme of forgetfulness, an evocation of the magical ‘abyss’ of forgetting, with the repetition

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<sup>61</sup> Knickerbocker, p. 6.

<sup>62</sup> Knickerbocker, p. 7.

<sup>63</sup> Thomas, *Collected Poems*, p. 156.

in the phrases about the ‘childless women’s child’ lending a mysterious riddle-like quality. Whilst it does not relate to a specific experience, the way the language is used here enacts something of the mental experience of forgetfulness and lack of interest, with the repetition and lists giving the impression of falling asleep in a dry school history class. By contrast, the use of words such as ‘clear’ and ‘tart’ in the extract below wake the poem up as they describe the qualities of the ‘empty thingless name’ of the thrush that Thomas *can* remember:

There is always one at midday saying it clear  
And tart – the name, only the name I hear.  
While perhaps I am thinking of the Elder scent  
That is like food; or while I am content  
With the wild rose scent that is like memory,  
This name suddenly is cried out to me  
From somewhere in the bushes by a bird  
Over and over again, a pure thrush word.<sup>64</sup>

There is a contemplative aspect to this passage, for it is when Thomas is not actively looking for the thrush’s ‘word’, but musing on the synesthetic associations of flower scents, that it bursts into his consciousness. The power with which it does so is enacted in the contrast between the gentle repetition of the long vowel sounds in ‘while’ and ‘wild’, the ‘murmuring’ sound of ‘memory’, and the urgent connotations of ‘suddenly’, ‘cried’ and ‘over and over again’. Although it is such a small sound, Thomas hears in it a kind of primal purity, with the poem’s title hinting at ‘the Word’ of St John’s Gospel. Contrasting the experience of the thrush’s ‘word’ with the forgotten ‘names’ of ‘mighty’ men also has the rhetorical effect of increasing the significance of the thrush’s ‘word’. Again, Thomas is not rejecting the passage of human history and culture, merely reminding us that it is all underpinned by the vital forces that are embodied in nature. Thomas’ poetry therefore enacts not only the experience

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<sup>64</sup> *ibid.* p. 156.

of the physical aspects of nature, but also the experience of elements that transcend the physical.

For Knickerbocker, the use poetic technique returns us to an appreciation of the sounds of words as well as their meaning. Knickerbocker cites his own son's varied attempts to say the word 'tree', as well as Bernstein's impression of poetry as creating something of the conditions of a foreign language.<sup>65</sup> Because of this emphasis on sound, poetry effects a rematerialisation of language: 'The body of a poem – its form, its sound – is part of the body of the world. When a poet takes the world's sounds to form the body of a poem, he or she participates in a physical world.'<sup>66</sup> Thomas poetry also employs the sounds of the world to create poetic forms that participates in a physical world, yet as this article has attempted to demonstrate, the world depicted within his poems is a world that reveals snatches of the transcendent or is felt to involve aspects that go beyond the physical alone. Such an outlook can also be seen in some of Thomas' writing on language and poetry, such as the following:

It is, of course, true that writing stands for thought, not for speech, and that there is a music of words which is beyond speech; it is an enduring echo of we know not what in the past and in the abyss, an echo heard in poetry and the utterance of children<sup>67</sup>

Whilst this has much in common with Knickerbocker, such as a preoccupation with the utterances of children and a sense of the musicality of poetry, there is also a haunting sense of something mysterious that reaches beyond this. This sense of the strangeness of language is also evident in parts of 'Words':

Out of us all

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<sup>65</sup> Knickerbocker, p. 1-2.

<sup>66</sup> *ibid.*, p. 162.

<sup>67</sup> Edward Thomas, *Walter Pater: A Critical Study* (London: Secker, 1913), p. 219.



That make rhymes,  
Will you choose  
Sometimes –  
As the winds use  
A crack in the wall  
Or a drain,  
Their joy or their pain  
To whistle through –  
Choose me,  
You English words?

I know you:  
You are light as dreams  
Tough as oak,  
Precious as gold,  
As poppies and corn,  
Or an old cloak:  
Sweet as our birds  
To the ear,  
As the burnet rose  
In the heat of Midsummer:  
Strange as the races  
Of dead and unborn:  
Strange and sweet  
Equally,<sup>68</sup>

The opening is reminiscent of the traditional classical appeal to the muse. Yet rather than employ Miltonic confidence and grandeur, Thomas opts for an appeal that is hesitant and full of humility. Furthermore, he does not appeal to a traditional muse, but to language itself. In doing so, he portrays the English language in a manner that goes beyond an arbitrary Saussurian system of signs, becoming an entity which has its own distinctive quality and character. The varied use of similes creates a sense of an all-encompassing, magical force, whose shape-shifting ability allows it to take on many diverse characteristics, being both ‘light as dreams’ and ‘tough as oak’. The earthy nature of some of the similes reminds us of language’s role in representing the physical in addition to its more magical elements, such as

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<sup>68</sup> Thomas, *Collected Poems*, p. 84-85.

the way in which it animates like the wind, capable of ‘whistling’ through the poet. Yet Thomas’ humility indicates that the poet cannot take the magical ‘aliveness’ of words for granted. Thomas argues that Pater was ‘forced against his judgement to use words as bricks, as tin soldiers, instead of flesh and blood and genius.’<sup>69</sup> To prevent such a mechanical and dead use of language, the poet needs to work with it in a way that words become ‘living and social’.<sup>70</sup> The poet must therefore develop a sensitivity towards language, even as they seek to develop a ‘childlike’ sensitivity towards nature. Wordsworth describes how:

There is an active principle, alive in all things;  
In all things, in all natures, in the flowers  
And in the trees, in every pebbly stone  
That paves the brooks, the stationary rocks,  
The moving waters and the invisible air.<sup>71</sup>

If nature is conceived of as having within it such an active principle, a poet who perceives it, or even senses that it exists, and wishes to respond through poetry must work with the corresponding ‘active principle’ that Thomas sees as present within language in order to write a poem that

Proceeding from the depth of untaught things,  
Enduring and creative, might become  
A power like one of Nature’s.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Thomas, *Walter Pater*, p. 215.

<sup>70</sup> *ibid.*, p. 213.

<sup>71</sup> Wordsworth, p. 676.

<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*, p. 576.