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Edward Thomas and Plants

Rowan Middleton

In *The South Country*, Edward Thomas describes a train journey during which a man enters the carriage and recognises a sailor whom he had known twenty-two years ago. 'Oh Christ! but what times we had' exclaims the sailor as the pair begin to reminisce in a lively manner. They discuss a girl they both used to fancy, and other details of their private lives, while the other people in the carriage sit and listen. A 'trim shop assistant' views the men with 'cold contempt', while a 'pale-faced puritan clerk' looks on pityingly as if they were children. Others roll their eyes and sit behind their newspapers, retaining a 'dense veil over their individuality that made them tombs, monuments, not men.' The chapter ends with the following plant-related metaphor:

One sat gentle, kindly, stupidly envying these two their spirited free talk, their gestures, the hearty draughts of life which they seemed to have taken.
All were botanists who had heard and spoken words but had no sense of the beauty and life of the flower because fate had refused, or education destroyed, the gift of liberty and of joy.¹

Like the clerk and the shop assistant, Thomas is also an observer of the two men, yet his sympathy draws him towards them rather than pushing them away through judgement. The passage takes on a new richness of meaning when it is considered in relation to Thomas' poetry, particularly the way in which he writes about plants, where the themes of life, beauty, and sympathetic engagement feature strongly. Given Thomas's predisposition towards the countryside, the theme of plants is a broad one, with most of his poems involving plants in some way or another. Poems such as 'Old Man' or 'Tall Nettles' might seem obvious examples and much has already been written about them, so for this talk I have chosen to focus on 'The Penny Whistle' and 'Beauty'. These poems are less notable for their detailed descriptions of plants than their emphasis on ways in which plants might be approached by humans. The poems also offer contrasting perspectives on the relational dynamic between humans and plants.

The sentence about the envy towards the men in the carriage is indicative of the lack of ability to join in, to be stuck in a negative emotional state, something that is also apparent in the opening to 'Beauty':

What does it mean? Tired, angry, and ill at ease,
No man, woman, or child alive could please
Me now. And yet I almost dare to laugh
Because I sit and frame an epitaph –
'Here lies all that no one loved of him
And that loved no one.'²

The idea of an epitaph connects the negative emotions and self-criticism to another kind of tomblike isolation, where the self is veiled in melancholic and irritable introspection. This is a motif that recurs in other poems, with variations being visible in 'I built myself a house of glass', and 'October'. In 'Rain', solitude and lack of love are linked to death, with Thomas's helplessness likened to 'cold water among broken reeds'. Similarly in 'Beauty', Thomas's state of mind is compared to a river that appears never to have seen the sun, its surface made file-like by the wind. But the mercurial nature of the poem enacts a change in consciousness as it shifts away from self-preoccupation:

This heart, some fraction of me, happily
Floats through the window even now to a tree
Down in the misting, dim-lit, quiet vale,
Not like a pewit that returns to wail

¹ Edward Thomas, *The South Country*, Wimborne Minster: Little Toller, 2009 [1909], pp. 94 and 95.

² Quotations from the poems are from Edward Thomas, *The Annotated Collected Poems*, ed. Edna Longley, Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2008.

For something it has lost, but like a dove
That slants unswerving to its home and love.
There I find my rest, and through the dusk air
Flies what yet lives in me. Beauty is there.

While the peewit is used to evoke emotional turmoil, the dove expresses a reaching out through the heart to something beyond the self, connecting the life within and the life without. This gesture is also evident in 'Adlestrop', where the distractions of the inner life fall away in a moment of silence, enabling Thomas's consciousness to travel beyond the railway carriage to the plants, birds, and clouds. In 'Beauty' and 'Adlestrop', elements such as the house, the railway carriage, and everyday emotions involve a containment which must be overcome in order to connect with the life beyond.

The Penny Whistle

The new moon hangs like an ivory bugle
In the naked frosty blue;
And the ghylls of the forest, already blackened
By Winter, are blackened anew.

The brooks that cut up and increase the forest,
As if they had never known
The sun, are roaring with black hollow voices
Betwixt rage and a moan.

But still the caravan-hut by the hollies
Like a kingfisher gleams between:
Round the mossed old hearths of the charcoal-burners
First primroses ask to be seen.

The charcoal-burners are black, but their linen
Blows white on the line;
And white the letter the girl is reading
Under that crescent fine;

And her brother who hides apart in a thicket,
Slowly and surely playing
On a whistle an olden nursery melody,
Says far more than I am saying.

The poles of death and life that emerge from Thomas's description of the railway carriage in *The South Country* are strongly present in the world of 'The Penny Whistle'. The moon as ivory bugle relates both to the death of an animal and the life of music. The trees are blackened by winter, yet spring brings the first primroses. The wood taken from trees and burnt for charcoal reduces the sap bearing branches to lumps of black carbon. Yet the practice of coppicing relies on the power of the tree to regrow new limbs, and the blackened charcoal burners are contrasted by the whiteness of their washing, the life of their family, and the brightness of their wagon. Their relationship with plants is physical, embodied, and integral to their livelihood. So it is with other people in Thomas's poems, such as the itinerant labourer in 'Man and Dog', who has hoed and harvested 'in half the shires where corn and couch will grow', or the ploughman who steadily reduces the square of charlock in 'As the team's head brass'.

Although there are exceptions such as 'Digging', Thomas is generally the wandering outsider, stopping to talk, or watching from afar, much as in the episode in the railway carriage. In 'The Penny Whistle', Thomas is also an outsider, a position that is augmented by his statement that the child's tune on the penny whistle carries greater depth of meaning than his poem. This emphasis on the purity of childhood and its concomitant ability to access truths that are illegible to those such as the clerk on the train can also be found in other poems such as 'The Brook', where it is the child who arrives at the words that can truly express the essence of the place.

In 'The Penny Whistle', the theme of childhood is linked to the folk tradition by the simple rhyme scheme in Thomas's use of ballad meter. The poem's fairy tale quality is enhanced by the setting of the

dark wood, and the simplicity of the different elements within the poem: moon, trees, charcoal burners, girl, boy, tune. Within this strange world, it is possible even for the grown-up outsider to be childlike for a time, to understand that 'First primroses ask to be seen'.

In the passage from *The South Country*, Thomas writes about the gifts of liberty and joy that are necessary to understand the beauty and life of the conversation between the sailor and his friend. Such attributes have been educated out of the clerk and the shop assistant, presumably by the kind of education that tries to mould people to fit narrow economic and political agendas instead. As the middle-class hack writer in the carriage, Thomas suffers too, but is always looking for an escape, which he finds in the countryside. Something is released in those moments when he frees himself from troublesome mental chatter and negative emotions, such as when he reaches outwards to perceive the tree in 'Beauty'. The relational dynamic that is at play here is contrasted by that of 'The Penny Whistle'. In this poem it is possible that the children's remote upbringing has enabled them to escape the clutches of miseducation. At any rate, the atmosphere of the charcoal burners' camp is enough to prompt Thomas's observation that plants have gifts which they would extend towards those who are open to receiving them.