... now, in the hot, vivid summer of 1976, I feel that I have reached a point of rest. My thoughts have been taking a personal, reminiscent turn; I am glad, allowing for the inevitable ups and downs, that things have turned out as they have, that my adolescence in Oxford is bearing some fruit in my maturity in Oxford. I write a poem 'To My Young Self'; it catches some of this mood. It is time to make a statement in public; after three years out of my five in the Chair, time to gather up what I have been thinking and saying, and make a parcel of it, interspersed with this commentary that has evolved, as I have gone on with it, into a kind of personal letter to the people who voted me into the Chair, and others who might think in the same way. I must bring out a book now, while I still have some time left in the Chair, so that when it comes out I shall still be here to answer criticisms, still carrying the can.

It is a mistake to try to wrench one's thoughts out of the course in which they have become set. Something deeper and less biddable than reason, some powerful tidal flow, is drawing them along, and the best policy is to go with them. Since the direction of my mind at the moment is towards reminiscence and biography, the sheer fascination of what happened, I decide to make my summer lecture biographical in vein. I want, that is, to produce not so much a spoken critical essay as a portrait, a biographical landscape with moving figures.

So I decide to tell the story of Edward Thomas, one of the poets I most admire, and the woman who loved him . Biography is not a substitute for criticism but, if I can bring those two deeply alive and deeply suffering people before the mind's eye, I shall perhaps have marked out an avenue to their writings, to his poetry and her prose.

I take pleasure in writing this lecture; and take pleasure, too, in the thought that this is the last I shall write . For the rest of my term, I shall speak my thoughts into the air and let them fall where they may, with no attempt to gather them up in print. Giving a lecture is fun; giving a lecture and then writing it up for publication is work. So this is the last of the work. When I finish delivering it, and go across to the King's Arms, a long stint of work will be over and I shall feel that I have gone some way towards paying a debt.

EDWARD THOMAS AND HELEN THOMAS

They met in adolescence, in an ordinary little house in an ordinary street in a suburb on the edge of London. He was sixteen, a pupil at St Paul's School; she was seventeen and living at home.

Her father was a man of letters, not important but with genuine gifts and respectably established. He had published several books and was in regular work as a reviewer. Their home had been in Liverpool, but at the age of fifty James Ashcroft Noble moved with his wife and family to Wandsworth. Having made this move he settled down quickly again to his quiet, regular life. The household was a placid one, though the middle daughter, ambitiously named Helen Berenice, did not get on well with her mother.

James Noble was a kindly man, generous with his time and attention, well qualified and well disposed to help a beginner in the art of literature. One of his Wandsworth neighbours was Philip Henry Thomas, a stocky dark-haired man, hard-working, disciplined, ready of speech, assertive. Starting from a Welsh country background he had dragged himself up by severe effort into a responsible and secure, though by no means glittering, job in the Civil Service; he worked for the Board of Trade and had responsibility for tramcars and light railways. Mr Noble did not know Mr Thomas, but was informed by a local clergyman of the existence of Thomas's elder son Edward, who had literary talent and ought perhaps to be encouraged. He spoke of the matter at home; the girls giggled and dubbed this unknown schoolboy 'the Genius'. Mr Noble sent a message inviting Edward Thomas to call and talk with him. He did so; they went into Mr Noble's study; after a time, Helen, out of curiosity to see 'the Genius', slipped into the room on some pretext, and they were introduced. The boy had been talking animatedly enough, but with the entry of the girl he fell silent, and soon took his leave, refusing an invitation to stay to tea. Helen has described his appearance at this time in As It Was, the memoir she wrote in the 1920s, in which she calls Edward 'David Townsend' and herself 'Jenny'.

David was tall - just six feet - and slim, with a broad chest and shoulders, which he carried well - loose-limbed and athletic. He had a beautifully shaped head with a fine brow, and his thick fair hair, worn rather long, curled a little over his forehead and ears. His nose was long and straight, his mouth very sensitive, with the upper lip slightly overhanging the lower. The chin was strong. The eyes were grey and dreamy and meditative, but fearless and steady, and as if trying to pierce to truth itself. It was a most striking face, recalling a portrait of Shelley in its sensitive, melancholy beauty. His hands were large and powerful, and he

could do anything with them from the roughest work to the most delicate: they symbolize for me his strength and his tenderness. It is his hands even more than his beautiful face that remain in my vision when I think of him; I shall never forget them .

And, more briefly and dismissively, her own:

I was at the age plain, with a round healthy face and small nose; rather serious in expression, but not entirely unattractive. I had a lot of dark brown hair, which I wore parted in the middle with long plaits wound round my head - a simple style suiting my dress and my general seriousness. I was straight and tallish, and my own well-shaped and strong and - as I think now - really lovely body gave me intense delight. I loved being without clothes, and moving about naked, and I took a pride in my health and strength.

The only photograph of Helen Thomas that I have seen shows her at the age of twenty-two: an attractive face, handsome rather than pretty, with somewhat broad cheek-bones, a mouth well shaped and strongly defined, and - her most striking feature - eyes that look ahead intensely, as if welcoming life with eager curiosity and acceptance. It is a girl's face, but already one sees in it a woman capable of loving and being loved.

Helen Noble did not fall in love with Edward Thomas at that first meeting, but he engaged her interest, and soon he was taking her out for walks on Wandsworth Common, which in the 1890s was rural to an extent quite unimaginable today. Though they both had the same urban or suburban background, he already had a deep love of rural nature and a growing fund of information about birds, flowers, trees, fish, which he imparted to her. Their love blossomed; one summer day, in some deep recess of the Common, they became lovers in the physical sense. Afterwards he gave her the signet-ring from his own finger, which had belonged to his great-grandfather. They regarded themselves as married.

In this attitude they were typical young people of their time.It was the age of bold unconventionality in the face of the narrow and rigid dictates of Victorian respectability. This revolt did not take the form of an insistence on the right to promiscuity; it involved a code of behaviour not much less strict than the official code, but claiming a freedom from convention and social rite. In his own autobiographical fragment, Edward Thomas has described how his deep dislike of the official world, the world of rules and regulations and assemblies and outward appearances, was rooted in him by enforced Sunday attendance at a Unitarian chapel.

Chapel and Sunday-school were to me cruel ceremonious punishments for the freedom of Monday to Saturday. I have still a profound quiet detestation of Sunday in whatever part of England or Wales it overtakes me, but most of all in London. I think I began learning to hate crowds and societies, and grown-up people, and black clothes, and silk hats and neatly folded umbrellas and shining walking-sticks, and everything that seemed a circling part of that deathly solemnity as I was not.

So matters stood. Their lives were no different from the lives of thousands of young people at that time: a narrow round of simple pleasures and inexorable duties, watched over by parents who would be outraged at any deviation from the solemn respectability of Victoria's last days, but aware already of the stirring of a new spirit. Like finds out like, and Helen had a knack of striking up acquaintance with 'advanced', even 'Bohemian' families, of making herself welcome in households frequented by writers and painters. Edward, for his part, was intensely solitary, feeling at ease only with simple people who lived close to the earth and knew its ways. In childhood holidays at Swindon he had met an old man called David Uzzell, a character of the hedgerows and canal banks, an ex-poacher who knew the name and nature of everything that grew out of the ground or moved on it. He had kept in touch with Gaffer Uzzell, and now took Helen down to the tiny cottage where the old man and his wife lived. They delighted her by treating her as a bride, spoiling the young couple, showing a genuine love for Edward. Perhaps these two or three days were the happiest of her life.

This little honeymoon was to buttress them against a separation, for Edward Thomas had persuaded his reluctant father to let him read for a scholarship to Oxford. He won it, and entered the University first as a non-collegiate student and then as a member of Lincoln College. Here, he blossomed into the typical rather precious young aesthete of the time, reading and writing chiefly for fine phrases and adopting a generally willowy stance. It was a slightly tiresome phase (and particularly so to energetic duty-ridden Thomas *pere*), but we need not be harsh about it; no one becomes wise overnight, and no writer becomes a mature artist without some uncertain period of development. Helen went off contentedly enough to take the first of several jobs as a governess. She loved children and her dearest wish was one day to bear some for Edward.

That wish was granted prematurely. Helen became pregnant during Edward's second year at Oxford. Their first action was to get married, taking the view (one that persisted until very recently) that, while mating did not require official sanction, parenthood decidedly did. Then they broke the news to their parents. Mrs Noble, whose relations with Helen had never been good, at once broke them off for ever. Edward's father groaned, complained, but continued his allowance for another year, to enable him to take his degree.

He did so, getting a decent Second, and then at once left Oxford and plunged into the brackish water of literary journalism and hack book-making. After their child, a boy, was born in 1900, he and Helen settled in a London slum, a real slum, with drunkenness and ill-health and despair on every side, while he trod the stairs of literary editors and publishers and she struggled to keep a cheerful and decent home. Work came in slowly, and was wretchedly paid; they moved, again to a slum, and finally decided that come what may they must get out into the countryside. Edward went house-hunting in Kent; the only affordable place he could find was a hideous little house on a knob of raw earth, and Helen's heart sank when she saw it, but at least they were out of the city, never to return, and in closeness to the natural rhythms of the earth they felt more themselves.

For the next dozen years their life was no more than normally eventful. They moved from house to house and from village to village, but always in the countryside. Edward Thomas wrote reviews and articles and books as publishers and editors wanted them; uncongenial work wasted his time, frustrated his energies and soured his temper, but there was rent to pay and mouths to feed. His one deep abiding solace was the countryside, the contact with simple people and the beauty of the earth; and, since he was known principally as a writer on rural themes, many of his commissions were for books that involved him in long solitary journeys of exploration. He covered hundreds of miles on foot, sleeping at inns and cottages, and always, however deep his melancholy, responding with quiet joy to trees, flowers, stones, birds and animals. Mostly he preferred to be alone among these sights and sounds, but in sunnier moods he would take Helen along, with or without the children, and then her joy and content were boundless, loving him, as she did, utterly. With no gush, no sentimentality, but with her usual simple truthfulness, she has conveyed the nature of the happiness she found in their country pleasures.

All this work I loved, as I did the housework, the gardening or any work which gave my strong body exercise, and which satisfied my spirit with its human necessity. David too was glad for me to do these things, and I tried my hand at brewing, wine-making, hop-picking and even reaping. Of course hay-making on the lovely slope of Blooming meadow was a festival for us all at the farm, and we learnt how the ricks that rose like a town in the rick-yard were shaped so symmetrically, and thatched as carefully as a house. It is this full life of homely doings that I remember chiefly at the farm - the early morning expeditions with David to a large pond about three miles away to fish for perch and roach and even pike; the walks to Penshurst and Leigh and Ightham Moat; the pickings and storing of apples; the making of quince jam; the finding of an owl's or a nightingale's nest; the woodpecker which cut the air in scallops as it flew from oak to oak; the white owl which brought its young to the roof ridge to be fed; the beautiful plough-horses with their shining brass ornaments; the cows going into their stalls like people going into their pews in church; the building and thatching of the ricks; the hedging and ditching; the wood-cutting and faggot-binding by men whose fathers had done the same work and whose fathers' fathers too; the work of the farm, leisured as the coming and going of the seasons; the lovely cycle of ploughing, sowing and reaping; the slow experienced labourers, whose knowledge had come to them as the acorns come to the oaks, whose skill had come as the swallows' skill, who are satisfied in their hard life as are the oaks and the swallows in theirs.

These are not progressive sentiments. If Helen had been an up-to-date young woman of her time - if, for instance, she had been a Fabian Socialist - she would have said that the rural labourers were not happy or, if they were, they were fools, tamely putting up with low wages and long hours and primitive accommodation, and that they ought to unite and do something about it. But, with the clear sight of her simplicity, she saw what was in front of her: country people, exploited as they were no less than the town population, were often happy in the beauty of their surroundings and the skill of their work. The rural population of England have never been materially prosperous, and now they never will be, since with the mechanization of agriculture and the disappearance of its work-force the rural poor as a class are no longer with us. And yet during their long history of privation, in such glimpses as we catch of them through their songs and stories and dances and feasts and festivals, they seem to be happy quite as often as miserable, and if they were happy then it must have been for the reasons that Helen Thomas gives, for certainly there were no others.

When there was happiness about, Helen reflected it like a mirror, and always she was a faithful moon to the sun of her husband's moods. Often these would be black and bitter. When the toil of hack-work caused a normal fatigue and depression she could understand and bear it, but sometimes this fatigue and depression linked up with a deeper, innate melancholy that would, they both realized, have worked in him whatever the circumstances of his life. Then he went through hell and she followed him, and at times her

hell was deeper than his because she had to suffer guilt (her body had brought forth the children who had to be fed, she ran the home that had to be paid for) and the even worse pain of knowing that her love could not help him. During her second pregnancy, while Edward grimly parcelled up some of his beloved books to be sold against the extra expenses, Helen wrote despairingly to a friend,

'He cannot love, Janet, he cannot respond to my love. How can he when all is so dark, and I, I have deprived him of it all, the joys of life and love and success. If he would only begin life again without me my heart would rejoice. I should be very happy, for his happiness is all I care for.'

And in World Without End, the continuation of As It Was (the two are nowadays always printed together), she has described one of the bad times in agonized detail.

In spite of the lifting of financial cares the attacks of gloom and wretchedness had become of late more frequent and more lasting, and there were terrible days when I did not know where he was; or, if he was at home, days of silence and brooding despair. Often during this period while I was doing my housework or playing with the children or working in the garden I was straining to hear his coo-ee from the hillside, or his foot on the steps up to the gate. And often when he came I was terrified by the haggard greyness of his face, and the weary droop of his body, as he flung himself into his study chair, not speaking or looking at me. Once in one of these fits, after being needlessly angry with one of the children who cried and ran away from him, he rummaged in a drawer where he kept all sorts of things like fishing tackle and tools, and where I knew there was also a revolver. This he put into his pocket, and with dull eyes and ashen cheeks strode out of the house up the bare hill. I watched him go until he was lost among the trees at the top. I thought 'perhaps I shall never see him again', but I knew he would not leave me like this; it would not be like this that he would save himself. Nevertheless my limbs went weak and slack, my tongue was dry in my mouth, the questions and chatter of the children were an agony to me. I wanted to be alone and listen. But I could not. I took the children down to the stream in the hollow where they could paddle and sail their boats without wanting me to join in their play. There I sat with my hands in my lap unable to sew or read or think, and while the children played I listened. I prayed too that he might be released from his agony and I from mine. When the sun set and the children got tired of their game I took them home and put them to bed. I changed my dress, made up the study fire, drew the curtains, and got the tea things ready on a little table. I was in the kitchen, ironing, when he came in.

'Hello,' I called, though the word came out like a croak.

He was safe. When I could control my voice and face I went to the study. He was taking off his shoes by the fire, and I saw they were coated with mud and leaves. He did not look up .

'Shall I make the tea?' I said.

'Please,' he answered, and in his voice I was aware of all he had suffered and overcome, and all that he asked of me.

Though they faced honestly their frequent unhappiness, and each insisted on taking the blame for the other's sufferings, there was never any question of a separation. Edward Thomas, though he could often be harsh and cruel to Helen when the despairing mood was on him, would tell her at other times that she was the essential underpinning of his life. 'If you turned to anyone else,' he told her in a letter, 'I should come to an end immediately.'

Even when another woman brought him at least intermittently a happiness strong enough to lift his melancholy, Helen never felt her marriage threatened. The young and gifted Eleanor Farjeon came into Edward Thomas's life in 1912 and has drawn a sympathetic and sensitive portrait of him in *Edward Thomas: the Last Four Years*. He enjoyed her company, responding both to her intelligence and her femininity, but their involvement was not physical and Helen seems to have viewed Eleanor as an ally in the struggle against Edward's melancholy. Her account in World Without End of a visit Eleanor paid to them shows the two women united in the effort to help the man.

Exactly why Edward Thomas was so melancholy and reserved can, of course, never be known. It would be simpler to dismiss the question, to say 'he was melancholy and reserved' and leave it at that. Yet it is also tempting to speculate on how his particular mental composition got itself together. His photographs show a thin, sensitive face marked by deep lines of strain, with large, emotional eyes, and obviously such people suffer in the rough arena of human life. But one feels that the special circumstances of his own life were also to blame. If Philip Henry Thomas had not left his Welsh background, he would have been a poor man but his children would have known a richer tapestry of relationships and stories and customs, a more nourishing soil

than the bleak examination-passing existence among suburban chimney-pots. Edward Thomas reacted against his parental background and escaped back into the countryside, but he did so as a solitary being, an escaped animal doomed to isolation from others of his kind. This drove him further into inhibition and aloofness. The warmth of Helen's love for him might well have melted this frost, but unfortunately he never loved her as deeply as she loved him; the rays of her being did not penetrate into the recesses of his; and, after their idyllic beginning, he came all too soon to identify her love for him with domesticity and financial pressure.

Oxford, though he enjoyed it, seems to have done little for him, except in the narrow sense that an Oxford degree may have made it slightly easier for him to get a toe in the door when he came to look for literary work. (But he had already started his career as a *feuilletoniste*, had published articles and even a book, before he went there.) It has been wisely said that the university is the place where you go to have the nonsense put back that was knocked out of you at school; where a young man can delight in colour and individuality and variety after the harshness and narrowness of school life. Edward Thomas certainly took Oxford in this spirit, rather than seeing it, as his father wanted him to, simply as a means of 'getting on'. But the effect was not lasting. He relapsed into his shy, solitary melancholy. Though it was his fate to tramp round looking for literary piecework, he so abhorred any taint of salesmanship that his interviews with editors and publishers would have been comical if the situation had not been so dismal. The kindly H. W. Nevinson, whose befriending of the Thomases was crucial, remembered their first meeting and Edward Thomas's characteristic style in offering his services:

He was tall, absurdly thin, and a face of attractive distinction and ultra-refinement was sicklied over with nervous melancholy and the ill condition of bad food or hunger. Almost too shy to speak, he sat down proudly and asked if I could give him work. I enquired what work he could do, and he said 'None'.... I asked whether he would like some reviewing on any subject, and was quite sure he could not write, but certainly he did want work of some sort....

As in professional life, so in personal, it was extremely difficult for him to build a bridge to another human being; he was one of those to whom, as he put it in a letter to Gordon Bottomley, 'social intercourse' was 'only an intenser form of solitude'.

This isolation was so intense that the family life of which, as a father, he was necessarily at the centre seems to have impinged on him mainly as a remote play of shadows. Not that he failed to do his best as a provider and organizer. The Thomases were inclined to worry about the schooling of their eldest child, Merfyn, and at some point in his boyhood they heard of the existence of Bedales, one of the then new 'progressive' schools: no repressive atmosphere, no school uniform or regimentation or conformism. To Bedales, then, Merfyn should go, and the family moved to be in that neighbourhood, taking a cottage in Ashford, near Petersfield, in 1907.

During their years here, Edward and Helen each behaved in an entirely characteristic way. He continued to live a life as solitary as a badger's; she threw herself warmly and eagerly into contact with people, which meant partly the villagers but mainly the personnel of Bedales School. The relationship, though she persevered at it, was anything but a success. High-minded theoretical libertarians, seeking simplicity in conscious recoil from the complexities of modern living, engaging in the uncomplicated life according to a rational plan, confronted a couple who, whatever their temperamental differences from one another, were at least united in living the simple life for no theoretical reason but because it was the only one they knew. With the breed of reasonable, hygienic, self-approving reformists represented by Bedales, Edward and Helen Thomas had no more in common than an unkempt hedge full of wild roses has with the lawns of the Trianon. On the surface, they might have some beliefs in common; but as soon as that surface was disturbed, as it inevitably was in a few minutes' conversation, the fundamental non-recognition showed itself. Helen Thomas assiduously attended discussion meetings for parents and teachers, and at some of them she even found herself speaking, but these speeches were never a success. She agreed with the Bedales clan, on the surface, about Women's Rights, but when she stood up before an audience to defend the feminist position somehow the wrong words came out: instead of taking the required anti-masculine line, she spoke frankly as a woman who enjoyed her work in the home, delighted in looking after her children and husband, found fulfilment in cooking and keeping a house. Helen tried; Edward did not try; but, in any event, no lasting friendships were formed.

One man, though even he did not form a real, living link with the Thomases, was an honourable exception. Geoffrey Lupton was a simple-lifer like the others, devoted to William Morris and the dignity of craftsmanship, but, like Morris himself, he had the skill and the devotion and the patience to do real work of value. He had money and was able to please himself, and his idea of pleasing himself was to make fine things with his hands, using stone he had seen quarried, and timber he had seen felled and then seasoned

in his own workshop . This man now offered to build a house for Edward and Helen. He used perfect stone and seasoned oak, he built the house up from the ground with his own hands, perching it dramatically on a high platform of rock from which the ground fell away steeply on every side, and when it was finished it was the perfect home for a poet and his wife and children to be happy in. That was the blueprint. But the Thomases, though grateful to Lupton, were not happy there. It was too new, like a suit of clothes that has not had time to become comfortable; and, more than that, it was too planned, too intentional. They could love oak beams and stone walls in some centuries-old cottage that seemed like a natural thing grown out of the earth, fed by sun and rain and the generations of history, but this house seemed like an extension of Bedales.

We were not there long enough [wrote Helen] *to conciliate the spirits which for ever moved and complained about the house. Human birth and sweat and tears of joy or grief had not had their way with that house. The stone threshold was still unworn. Doors had not opened to welcome a bride, nor shut on hushed and darkened rooms. The great oak planks of the floor were unmarked by human usage; no swallows had found the eaves nor lichen the roof. These changes would come, but not in our time.*

Edward Thomas's answer to it all was either to be out on long solitary walks or to escape to his study, a small room he had succeeded in humanizing and where he could work contentedly enough. But these were thin, sour years, and the relationship with his family seems to have done little towards releasing the central current of his energies. He seems to have drudged on very much in the spirit of some eighteenth-century Grub Street hack, despising most of what he had to do, making book after book just to be working and earning money, and never earning enough to put any aside and buy himself some time for peace and concentration.

It is an appalling life to contemplate, the more so knowing, as we do, what was building up inside him. Edward Thomas was a poet long before he began writing poetry in December 1914. His sensibility was forming itself, the physical materials of his poetry were being taken on board and stacked away, his imaginative compass-bearings were being worked out, and all without his knowing it. When Eleanor Farjeon asked him why with his knowledge of poetry and acknowledged authority as a judge of it he did not try his hand as a poet, he replied dismissively, 'I couldn't write a poem to save my life.'

Obviously the inhibiting factor, the thin but impenetrable membrane that stood between Thomas's consciousness mind and his deep creativity, must have been related to that self-consciousness, that inability to build bridges to other people, which he recognized as an illness. In 1911, when he seemed at breaking-point, Helen took the desperate step of appealing for outside help; she wrote to a friend of theirs, E. S. P. Haynes, civil servant and man of letters, who promptly gave them money and advice. Haynes suggested that Edward should see a 'nerve specialist', as psychiatrists were called in those days. Edward jibbed at this, but apparently did seek medical help at various times in the next few years. I have no idea what kind of treatment was tried on him, but it had no effect. Poets, in any case, are immune to psycho-analysis; being too subtle and intuitive, they elude the analyst at every turn, and any analyst who takes on a poet is himself courting a breakdown. When deliverance came, it came from within, abetted by a curious combination of circumstances. Three things came together. Thomas met Robert Frost and they became friends; the war began; and Thomas started to write poetry. The three are inter-related beyond unpicking. Frost undoubtedly gave Thomas the nudge that set his machinery in motion. But that machinery was already fully formed, waiting to begin its work. It was not merely that Thomas found stimulus and encouragement in friendship with a practitioner. He already knew many poets, notably Gordon Bottomley who was a fellow-protege of Mr Noble's, and he was recognized as a perceptive critic of poetry. When Harold Monro opened the Poetry Bookshop with a party in 1913, Edward Thomas was invited, and accepted on condition that he should not be introduced to any of the poets. As a reviewer of verse, he felt it would be embarrassing and hampering to meet the writers on whose work he had been, or would one day be, passing judgment. (George Orwell, at a similar stage of his life, had similar feelings.) Frost was at that party, but they did not meet until Ralph Hodgson introduced them later in the same year.

There is no need to make an elaborate search for the reasons why Frost was so important as a catalyst to Thomas. Both poets were in pursuit of the same ends, and in reviewing North of Boston in 1914 Thomas stated his own poetic in a description of his friend's:

Mr Frost has, in fact, gone back, as Whitman and as Wordsworth went back, through the paraphernalia of poetry into poetry again. With a confidence like genius, he has trusted his conviction that a man will not easily write better than he speaks when some matter has touched him deeply, and he has turned it over until he has no doubt what it means to him, when he has no purpose to serve beyond expressing it, when he has no audience to be bullied or flattered, when he is free, and speech takes on form and no other. Whatever discipline further was necessary, he has got from the use of the good old English medium of blank

verse....

*The effect of each poem is one and indivisible. You can hardly pick out a single line more than a single word. There are no show words or lines. The concentration has been upon the whole, not the parts. Decoration has been forgotten, perhaps for lack of the right kind of vanity and obsession .... Naturally, then, when his writing crystallizes, it is often in a terse, plain phrase, such as the proverb, 'Good fences make good neighbours', or ... 'Pressed into service means pressed out of shape'. But even this kind of characteristic detail is very much less important than the main result, which is a richly homely thing beyond the grasp of any power except poetry. It is a beautiful achievement, and I think a unique one, as perfectly Mr Frost's own as his vocabulary, the ordinary English speech of a man accustomed to poetry and philosophy, more colloquial and idiomatic than the ordinary man dares to use even in a letter, almost entirely lacking the emphatic hackneyed forms of journalists and other rhetoricians, and possessing a kind of healthy, natural delicacy like Wordsworth's, or at least Shelley's, rather than that of Keats.***[Cited in William Cooke, Edward Thomas: a critical biography (1970), p. 71. The excisions are Mr Cooke's.]

Without doubt it was Frost's handling of language that attracted Thomas. Of course, what draws one poet to another is always, in a broad sense, 'technical'; words, rhythms, relationship to the singing or speaking voice. Frost's New England rhythms fell on Thomas's ear like the sound of his own voice coming back to him. The point is not without interest at a time like the present, when in some English circles there is a critical orthodoxy that sweeps aside the native tradition and preaches a subservience to American poetry at the point where it is most different from English. To exhort a young English poet to imitate, say, William Carlos Williams is to urge him to abandon his own language altogether in favour of one that he must learn as a foreign tongue. Between Frost and Thomas no such gulf existed. In those months between their meeting and Thomas's beginning as a poet, he listened with rapt attention and complete sympathy to the rhymes and cadences of such poems as 'The Death of the Hired Man' and 'The Wood-Pile'. 'You really should start doing a book on speech and literature', he wrote to Frost, 'or you will find me mistaking your ideas for mine and doing it myself.' In that same letter he mentions for the first time his own impulse to poetry. 'I wonder if you can imagine me taking to verse.' That was in May 1914. On 3 December of that year, Thomas wrote his first poem - the first, that is, since the inevitable adolescent verse of twenty years earlier. It was 'Up in the Wind'. The barrier was down, the membrane of diffidence and self-doubt was broken, and now poem followed poem at an unbelievable pace; five poems in the first five days, and from then on several every week. Or, rather, the pace would be unbelievable if we did not know that this was the opening of a long-buried treasure-chest. In the central core of his being, Thomas had been making his poems for years. Like Hopkins, he had worked out his idiom unconsciously, in silence; and, again as in the case of Hopkins, the releasing impulse came from what seemed accident.

How shall we briefly characterize Edward Thomas's poetry? There is a good deal of the man in it; while never aiming at 'self expression', whatever that is, he reveals his own nature and his own situation with that unvarnished directness that he and Helen have in common. He presents himself simply and honestly, 'as a sad man; one who finds no particular welcome in the society of human beings and the system of life; who is so far from being well adjusted and happy that he hardly envisages the possibility. He is rather like a visitor from some other world,accidentally landed here and unable to go back home, who contemplates without resentment an order of things in which he has no meaningful part, but which he does not seek to change. A poem like 'The Long Small Room', for instance, presents him as an uncomprehending spectator of the revolving machinery of life.

The long small room that showed willows in the west
Narrowed up to the end the fireplace filled,
Although not wide. I liked it.
No one guessed
What need or accident made them so build.

Only the moon, the mouse and the sparrow peeped
In from the ivy round the casement thick.
Of all they saw and heard there they shall keep
The tale for the old ivy and older brick.

When I look back I am like moon, sparrow, and mouse
That witnessed what they could never understand
Or alter or prevent in the dark house.
One thing remains the same - this my right hand

Crawling crab-like over the clean white page,
Resting awhile each morning on the pillow,
Then once more starting to crawl on towards age.
The hundred last leaves stream upon the willow.

The sadness there, the resignation, never degenerate into self-pity; the originality and distinction of the writing would ensure that, if nothing else did; the satisfying trajectory of the poem, the way the willows, seen through the small window in the first line, reappear in the last, now singular and an unmistakable personal emblem.

Thomas accepted his fate, and part of that fate was an intense loneliness and sense of exclusion, beautifully distilled in 'Gone, Gone Again':

Gone, gone again, May, June, July,
And August gone,
Again gone

Not memorable
Save that I saw them go,
As past the empty quays
The rivers flow.

And now again,
In the harvest rain,
The Blenheim oranges
Fall grubby from the trees

As when I was young -
And when the lost one was here -
And when the war began
To turn young men to dung.

Look at the old house,
Outmoded, dignified,
Dark and untenanted,
With grass growing instead

Of the footsteps of life,
The friendliness, the strife;
In its beds have lain
Youth, love, age, and pain:

I am something like that;
Only I am not dead,
Still breathing and interested
In the house that is not dark: -

I am something like that:
Not one pane to reflect the sun,
For the schoolboys to throw at -
They have broken every one.

What saves this sadness from any taint of mawkishness is that it is accepted so calmly and that the poet is not primarily engaged in probing his own feelings; he is looking outward, 'breathing and interested'.

This introspection or, more precisely, self-contemplation is also the clue to one of the most important features of Edward Thomas's poetry, its modernity. He is perhaps the first, as he is certainly one of the best, of the English modern poets. By 'modern' I mean not chic, avant-garde, having the external trappings of international modernism; I mean reflecting accurately those characteristics of the present-day world which mark it off from the world before. Chief of these qualities is isolation. Belief in a coherent system underlying the universe gives the human a sense of kinship both with other human beings and with 'nature', insofar as he thinks of himself as standing outside the merely 'natural'. When these beliefs go, the loneliness that results is far more intense than the loneliness that arises from the mere absence of other human beings.

The unformed, chaotic nature of 'modern' art also has affinities with this isolation of unbelief. If we think of ourselves as part of a meaningful structure, we take more naturally to the discipline of building meaningful structures in our work, and the public whom we address enjoys them more. It is impossible to imagine, say, the music of Mozart coming out of an age that accepted as its dominant metaphor emptiness, isolation, the black metaphysical void of a merely accidental universe. This metaphor is what modern people, at any rate in their characteristic majority, do accept, and modern art is one of the results, as modern politics is another.

If we come to Thomas after reading any of the English nineteenth-century poets, this isolation is one of the first things we notice. The religious poet could look at a beautiful landscape and say, 'This is beautiful, therefore the Creator is good.' If he happened to be of an anti-God turn of mind, he could look at an animal dying of gangrene in a trap, and say, 'This is hideous, therefore the Creator is evil.' Either attitude is equally religious; Hardy is just as much a religious poet as Hopkins. But when we pass to Thomas we become aware of the working of the modern mind in poetry. Thomas does not build bridges. If he looks at a landscape, he does not connect with it, feel it to be part of a system that includes him. He looks at it, writes down what he sees, and ... what else? What further step is possible? Only one, obviously; he can look at himself looking at it, study his own mind in the process of contemplation. This self-consciousness is the one hallmark that all modern art has in common. Now that the human mind feels itself to be alone in a universe of fragments, the only relationship it can form is with itself. Hence the typical modern poem is a poem about writing poetry. This is the process that Yeats saw at its beginning, and unhesitatingly faced and described, for instance in 'Ego Dominus Tuus':

Ille. By the help of an image
I call to my own opposite, summon all
That I have handled least, least looked upon.

Hic. And I would find myself and not an image.

Ille. That is our modern hope, and by its light
We have lit upon the gentle, sensitive mind
And lost the old nonchalance of the hand;
Whether we have chosen chisel, pen or brush,
We are but critics, or but half create,
Timid, entangled, empty and abashed,
Lacking the countenance of our friends.

Thomas is that gentle, sensitive mind. Even when he paints a water-colour for its own sake, his thoughts are always partly directed towards the act of perception. Take his delightful vignette, 'Thaw':

Over the land freckled with snow half-thawed
The speculating rooks at their nest cawed
And saw from elm-tops, delicate as flower of grass,
What we below could not see, Winter pass.

This, of course, conveys perfectly the physical quality of a mild February day after snow; but its real subject is perception, the awareness of the man at ground-level that the birds at treetop-level are attuned to a change in season that has not yet reached him. And as with physical, so with mental and emotional perceptions. What attracts him is the thing half remembered , the truth that is only to be seen out of the eye's corner. All the miraculously close-knit observation of natural shapes and colours is in the service of this evanescent perception. 'The Glory' begins with a short, intense hymn to natural beauty, 'The cuckoo crying over the untouched dew', and all the other unsmirched loveliness, and quickly passes to an effort to pin down 'the happiness I fancy fit to dwell/In beauty's presence'; the poem works away at this problem with no conclusive result, ending in a gesture of relinquishment:

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,
How dreary-swift, with naught to travel to,

Is Time? I cannot bite the day to the core.

In 'Old Man', the particular scent of a herb, the crumbling of it between his fingers, leads back to some unattainable memory, and it is this memory or, rather, the lack of it, the fruitless rummaging for it, that makes the poem's subject.

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

Thomas does not build bridges; he perceives states. And the more subtle they are, the further they lie outside the hard circle of light that we experience as normal consciousness, the more he reaches out towards them with all the direction-finding power of his imagination. As in 'The New House':

Now first, as I shut the door,
I was alone
In the new house; and the wind
Began to moan.

Old at once was the house,
And I was old;
My ears were teased with the dread
Of what was foretold,

Nights of storm, days of mist, without end;
Sad days when the sun
Shone in vain: old griefs and griefs
Not yet begun.

All was foretold me; naught
Could I foresee;
But I learned how the wind would sound
After these things should be.

One of the marks of a good poet is his ability to make his poem capacious without turning it into a mere rag-bag. Simple poems, of course, have their place ('My love is like a red, red rose' could not be improved, in its own terms), but an important poet, Burns himself, to stick to that example - can organize his poetry along sufficiently complex lines to include most of what he really cares and thinks about. It is this capacity that marks off Edward Thomas from the ruck of 'Georgian' poetry, subsequently so disapproved of that the name of their movement had , by 1935 or so, become a synonym for bad poetry, weak, false and artificial. Edward Thomas was in most things a Georgian poet; in terms of a literary programme, in respect of things like diction and versification and choice of subject-matter, his aims were their aims. Since he was a good poet and it has been an axiom of criticism for forty years that Georgian poetry means bad poetry, this created a difficulty from which the usual way out has been to deny that he was a Georgian poet at all. In fact, he was that critical non-person, a good Georgian poet: a poet who used the Georgian idiom and made out of it a poetry that could be the vehicle of major statements. 'Roads', for instance, is a subject on which the run-of-the-mill Georgian poet could easily spread himself or herself: one of the ancestors of the Georgian style, A. E. Housman, had used the beautiful image of

Where under branching elms the highway
Would mount the hills and shine

in a way that opened it up for a use mainly picturesque. Edward Thomas's way is different, subtler and more comprehensive:

I love roads:
The goddesses that dwell

Far along invisible
Are my favourite gods.

Roads go on
While we forget, and are
Forgotten like a star
That shoots and is gone.

On this earth 'tis sure
We men have not made
Anything that doth fade
So soon, so long endure:

The hill road wet with rain
In the sun would not gleam
Like a winding stream
If we trod it not again.

They are lonely
While we sleep, lonelier
For lack of the traveller
Who is now a dream only.

From dawn's twilight
And all the clouds like sheep
On the mountains of sleep
They wind into the night.

The next turn may reveal
Heaven: upon the crest
The close pine clump, at rest
And black, may Hell conceal.

Often footsore, never
Yet of the road I weary,
Though long and steep and dreary,
As it winds on for ever.

Helen of the roads,
The mountain ways of Wales
And the Mabinogion tales
Is one of the true gods,

Abiding in the trees,
The threes and fours so wise,
The larger companies,
That by the roadside be,

And beneath the rafter
Else uninhabited
Excepting by the dead;
And it is her laughter

At morn and night I hear
When the thrush cock sings
Bright irrelevant things,
And when the chanticleer

Calls back to their own night
Troops that make loneliness
With their light footsteps' press,
As Helen's own are light.

Now all roads lead to France
And heavy is the tread
Of the living; but the dead
Returning lightly dance:

Whatever the road bring
To me or take from me,
They keep me company
With their pattering,

Crowding the solitude
Of the loops over the downs,
Hushing the roar of towns
And their brief multitude.

The poem uses four separate ingredients, which it sets out to blend into a unity: the discriptive, the personal, the mythological, and a fourth that I think we can best call the historical, in that it points to the stage at which the history of European man has arrived now. (Perhaps some people would prefer the word 'topical', but I would not.) The four ingredients are not, of course, laid mechanically end to end; the opening stanza brings in the mythological element and, though in the next six stanzas the descriptive prevails, it is very much a description of mood and atmosphere, with the most serious issues everywhere implied ('Heaven' and 'Hell' are not empty, descriptive terms).

In stanza 8, the 'I' of the poem makes an appearance, and forms the necessary hinge between the purely contemplative - a poetic essay on the theme of the permanent and the evanescent and the more dense central argument of the poem. Quickly, we pass to the tale of Elen in the Mabinogion, which Thomas himself retells in the first chapter of his book on the Icknield Way. (The Roman Emperor Maxen, in a dream, saw a castle with a girl sitting therein, so beautiful that he saw her again whenever he slept, and could think of nothing else when waking. He sent his emissaries across the whole Empire to find a place that corresponded to his description, and they found the castle and girl at Caernarvon. She became his Empress, he built her three castles, and she caused roads to be built between them, connecting up three areas of the kingdom of Britain. As Thomas himself mentions, Elen of the Roads has become fruitfully confused in the popular mind with Helen the mother of Constantine.) The spirit of Elen, part ghost and part symbol, walks beside the poet as he strides the roads, and with her, naturally, come other ghostly presences, all those unknown multitudes who have traversed these roads and left no trace except the numinous air of their passing. 'Troops that make loneliness/with their light footsteps' press' conveys this perfectly, but because it introduces the word 'troops' it reminds us that this, like all Thomas's theory, was written between the declaration of war and his own arrival on the battlefield. Thomas is a war poet in the sense that a poem about a brick wall, in war-time, is a war poem; anything as all-pervading as war is bound to make its presence felt on the pulse of a sensitive man. And so the poem enters its last phase, when the ghosts who throng the roads are at last identified with the young men who, passing in an endless stream towards the slaughter, return in another endless stream as their dead selves.

To remark on the fineness of this, the delicacy and accuracy with which the emotions are gathered into the poem, would be superfluous.

When the war was less than a year old, Edward Thomas enlisted as a soldier, though he was well past normal military age. As a shy, proud man, he feared ineptitude and failure at the menial tasks of soldiering more than he feared the enemy, and before joining his unit he got a friend to take him to a quiet stretch of Hyde Park and show him the rudiments of drill so that at least he would not have to endure the sarcasm of a sergeant-major. He worked conscientiously to turn himself into a good soldier, and did well enough to be accepted as a cadet at the Royal Artillery School in Handel Street, London - a place vividly described in C. M. Bowra's Memories - and to be commissioned.

His enlistment came just about half-way through his life as a poet. The flow of poetry went on as fast as ever, allowing for the inevitable disruptions of military life. Whether as a soldier or a civilian, the war-time Edward Thomas was a much freer man than his peace-time equivalent had been. With the end of the long Edwardian peace, as normal habits and normal expectations were uprooted and no one could be certain of the future, he seems to have slipped his collar of grinding financial responsibility. Regular literary piece-work, though it might still exist, could not be counted on, and in any case no one could seriously think of sitting at a desk and turning out a string of books with titles like *Feminine Influence on the Poets* or *A Literary Pilgrim in England* as Europe slithered into red ruin. After August 1914, though Thomas's material prospects were no better, were indeed sharply worse, he seems to have stopped worrying about them. As John Moore

sensibly put it in his *Life and Letters of Edward Thomas* (1939):

... while the War had not really solved any of his problems - in fact it had increased the difficulty of making a living - it had at any rate relieved him of the necessity for worrying about them. It had not lessened his responsibility; but it had lessened his sense of responsibility.

How often one comes across it, when reading about the lives of writers - that liberation through débâcle, that moment when the situation becomes so bad that it is good!

Of course enlistment must always have been in his thoughts, and with it the knowledge that Helen and the children would have the routine financial support which, pittance though it was, kept alive thousands of families and put households up and down the land on an equal footing. He hesitated for a few months, as was natural for an older man, with no military training, in a situation where many were still predicting a short war; but his world was changed overnight, war-time England was not the same as peace-time England, and the war makes itself unobtrusively felt as a theme in his work from the beginning. Edward Thomas is not a 'war poet' in the ordinary sense in which that term is applied to the civilian generation who found themselves in the trenches in those years: he does not write about the horrors of the battlefield, and his poetry was all written before he saw action; but it is war poetry in the truer and deeper sense, that the world it describes, and the sensibility out of which it comes, are moulded by being within a context of war. 'The Owl', 'As the Team's Head-Brass', and other familiar poems refer to the over-arching reality of conflict and death, refer to it in an unemphatic, unstrained fashion; Thomas is accepting the world, as he always did, taking for granted that it was not arranged to suit his purposes, finding it too remote from his ways to try to alter it by protest.

On Helen, meanwhile, a blow had fallen that hurt her in the recesses of her being. Lupton was at the front; his wife inhabited the house he had built for the Thomases, while they crowded into a poky, but cheap, dwelling down below in the village of Steep. Lupton had made Edward Thomas a gift, for a nominal rent, of the study he had grown used to, and his books awaited him there. Now Mrs Lupton began to find this arrangement inconvenient. She needed the room for a woman who was moving in as her companion; she sent Helen Thomas a letter asking her to clear it of her husband's possessions; she ignored a long letter in which Helen made a passionate plea for Edward to be spared this final uprooting, this loss of a refuge where his books and papers could quietly await his visits on leave. Mrs Lupton was immovable; she would have the room, and Helen must take away everything that was Edward's. Helen fumed and raged. After years of trusting optimism and adaptability, after all that long effort to like and agree with people of that well-washed and well-planned unconventionality, she suddenly saw the deep fissure that ran between them. People of the Bedales stamp, cushioned in well-being and self-justification, comfortably disapproving of the war, comfortably patronizing about men like Edward who were so misguided as to go off and fight, suddenly seemed to her the worst enemies she had ever known.

The rumour of their dispute spread. A young Bedales master paid a well-meaning social call on Helen, asking if he could in any way minister to a better understanding. Helen turned on him like a fishwife, the submissiveness of years boiling over in corrosive resentment. He must have been glad to get away. Afterwards Helen, equipped only with a donkey-cart driven by an ancient villager, took Edward's books away, load after laborious load, under Mrs Lupton's stony eye. The old man could not help her handle the books; he had just strength enough to drive the cart.

On his next leave, which was his last visit to Steep, Edward Thomas picked out the few books he wanted to keep and burnt the rest. Review copies, books he had read for no better reason than to earn a guinea, all the detritus of his long servitude, books he had kept because his library was his only asset and because, after all, books were books, he tossed in among the flames, burning his past, triumphing over his years of drudgery, till the flames mounted so high that he was seriously afraid his neighbours would think he was signalling to Zeppelins. Edward Thomas, hack writer, died in that fire; his discarded books made a better showing against the night sky than they would have done on well-planned shelves in Mrs Lupton's house.

What angered Helen about the episode of the study was, of course, that it was an attack on Edward. Her entire life was given to thoughts of him. Seeing their situation as she did with complete clarity, she found from somewhere the courage to face the knowledge that her love for him was not returned in anything like its full radiance. He was not a man to wrap anything up in evasions, and she always knew the state of his feelings, but when he wrote his poetry he set down his feelings about Helen for the rest of us also to read. On four successive days in April 1916 he wrote four poems to his family - the elder daughter, the younger daughter, the son, and Helen. W. B. Yeats liked the first poem in the sequence, 'If I were ever by chance to own', so much that it is the only specimen of Edward Thomas's work in the Oxford Book of Modern Verse, which Yeats edited in 1936. One sees why, because it is jaunty and skipping and fits in better than Thomas's

more characteristic work with Yeats's odd notion that 'the Muses' loved 'gay and warty lads'. But the best poem of the four, the one with the deepest flow of felt life, is certainly 'And You, Helen'. It is not in the ordinary sense a love poem, and yet there is love in it; he looks at her and sees her as a real woman, whom he knows in her depths and who shares his life. And in that concluding gesture, half love and half helplessness, when he tells her that he would give her

myself, too, if I could find
Where it lay hidden and it proved kind,

we have distilled into a line and a half the essence both of their sharing and their suffering. Even in its withdrawn way it comes closer to an expression of love than the equally beautiful but much bleaker poem he had written to her in the previous month. 'No one so much as you' is a bare, honest, despondent poem, beautiful and lonely in its refusal to take comfort. Iris Murdoch says somewhere that most of the things that cheer us up are illusions; Edward Thomas made his poem out of the refusal to be, or to permit Helen to be, cheered up by any false rainbow colours in their steel-grey landscape.

No one so much as you
Loves this my clay,
Or would lament as you
Its dying day.

You know me through and through
Though I have not told,
And though with what you know
You are not bold.

None ever was so fair
As I thought you:
Not a word can I bear
Spoken against you.

All that I ever did
For you seemed coarse
Compared with what I hid
Nor put in force.

My eyes scarce dare meet you
Lest they should prove
I but respond to you
And do not love.

We look and understand,
We cannot speak
Except in trifles and
Words the most weak.

For I at most accept
Your love, regretting
That is all: I have kept
Only a fretting

That I could not return
All that you gave
And could not ever burn
With the love you have,

Till sometimes it did seem
Better it were
Never to see you more
Than linger here

With only gratitude
Instead of love -

A pine in solitude
Cradling a dove.

This is not a poem of rejection: the pine is 'cradling' her, and she is not a woodpecker but a dove. The extent of his feeling for her is very accurately conveyed. Nevertheless, it must have taken all Helen's courage to assimilate that poem when it finally reached her. Just once, many years later, that courage momentarily failed. In a radio interview in April 1967, she gave it as her opinion that 'No one so much as you' had been written to Edward's mother. Her own strength was failing by this time and, if ever a lapse into human weakness could be perfectly understood and forgiven, this one can.

The war ground on, events took their relentless way, and in January 1917 Edward Thomas was given his last home leave before going overseas. Helen's description of their last night together cannot be quoted. It must be left in its natural setting, tightly folded in the petals of the flower she grew for Edward out of her memories and her suffering. Dragged out, it would be too much like a bleeding torn-off limb. It is personal, but universal; universal because personal - the agony of one woman, repeated in thousands of women whenever nations go to war. So their last night was over; he was ready to go; he must go. The children were to go with him to the station, and she was to stay behind in the house. The last words of *World Without End* say it all.

A thick mist hung everywhere, and there was no sound except, far away in the valley, a train shunting. I stood at the gate watching him go; he turned back to wave until the mist and the hill hid him. I heard his old call coming up to me: 'Coo-ee!' he called, 'Coo-ee!' I answered, keeping my voice strong to call again. Again through the muffled air came his 'Coo-ee'. And again went my answer like an echo. 'Coo-ee' came fainter next time with the hill between us, but my 'Coo-ee' went out of my lungs strong to pierce to him as he strode away from me. 'Coo-ee!' So faint now, it might be only my own call flung back from the thick air and muffling snow. I put my hands up to my mouth to make a trumpet, but no sound came. Panic seized me, and I ran through the mist and the snow to the top of the hill, and stood there a moment dumbly, with straining eyes and ears. There was nothing but the mist and the snow and the silence of death.

Then with leaden feet which stumbled in a sudden darkness that overwhelmed me I groped my way back to the empty house.

She never saw him again. He was killed at the battle of Arras on 9 April, Easter Monday, 1917; and she lived on without him for fifty years.