



Stenning, A. (2016) 'Edward Thomas's 'Ecstasy': an unpublished essay', *Essays in Criticism*, 66 (4), pp. 466-487.

This is a pre-copyedited, author-produced PDF of an article accepted for publication in 'Essays in Criticism' following peer review. The version of record is available online at:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/escrit/cgw022>

ResearchSPace

<http://researchspace.bathspa.ac.uk/>

This pre-published version is made available in accordance with publisher policies.

Please cite only the published version using the reference above.

Your access and use of this document is based on your acceptance of the ResearchSPace Metadata and Data Policies, as well as applicable law:-

<https://researchspace.bathspa.ac.uk/policies.html>

Unless you accept the terms of these Policies in full, you do not have permission to download this document.

This cover sheet may not be removed from the document.

Please scroll down to view the document.

Edward Thomas's 'Ecstasy': an unpublished essay, Anna Stenning

Edward Thomas's previously unpublished manuscript entitled 'Ecstasy' (1913) reveals his skills as a literary critic, a historian of ideas, a scholar of language, and a student of human nature.¹ It illuminates Thomas's ideas about artistic creation, and confirms his scepticism about the possibilities of a merely naturalistic approach to life. Furthermore, it places Thomas in the context of a wide range of literary and theoretical influences that extend well beyond the context of Georgian England. Sections of the typescript of this essay have been extracted elsewhere, but the piece merits reading in its entirety.

His work as a literary scholar in this long essay deepens our understanding of Thomas's concerns well beyond 'Georgianism' and into a global network of ideas ranging from Eastern mysticism to American Transcendentalism. It also links him to other contemporary writers, including Edward Carpenter and Clifford Bax, who were interested in esoteric themes and theosophy.² Beyond this, the essay connects with Thomas's interests in the emerging field of psychology, which he had been acquainted with as a cure for his own melancholy, and with his interest in transcendent experiences of nature. Tracing the evolution of the term 'ecstasy' from medieval scholasticism to modern literature, Thomas revealed his historical training at Oxford and the fruit of his long friendship with the Reverend Jesse Berridge, a formative friendship that has become overshadowed by Thomas's later association with Robert Frost. Perhaps most importantly, the essay reveals Thomas's quest to find a theme of personal significance that would enable him to express himself more freely, and demonstrates a profound interest in the American philosopher William James.

Thomas approached his mystical-religious subject via the more earthly realms of abnormal psychology and Romantic literature, in a meditative, digressive long essay of around 3,000 words, which he intended to form part of the series of Fellowship Books for Batsford along with his 1913 *The Country* (which consisted of 10,000 words).³ As Peter Howarth notes, the essay was never finished and was abandoned at the end of 1913, partly due to a bout of depression and other deadlines, and in any case Thomas considered it a failure.⁴ The essay, like *The Country*, differs from the majority of Thomas's prose in that it includes passages of philosophical speculation. In it, Thomas listed those authors who either described ecstasy or its synonyms, or whose characters exemplified these states in one or more ways. This theme of literary ecstasy was also addressed in his unpublished essay 'Passion in Contemporary Fiction' from October 1913.⁵ In 'Ecstasy', Thomas connected ecstasy with melancholy and unusual psychological states, which, as he explained, originated in his own experience. As Howarth notes, Thomas's 'ecstasy' can be paraphrased as 'distraction'.⁶ This concern with an inner rather than outer landscape was an unusual starting point for Thomas's prose writing, which had included so much natural description.⁷

However, although 'Ecstasy' engages with scientific psychology, Thomas went beyond naturalism to include speculation on the nature of a supernatural mysticism. He argued that non-religious experiences of ecstasy were at least kindred to a genuine mystical experience. Yet he seemed to be unsure how much this should be thought of as religion. In the typescript of the essay he amends the lines from the holograph version, 'Even when we do not connect ecstasy with religion so it is solemn to us', to the more orthodox-sounding: 'So long as men are capable of this ecstasy religion cannot perish. By this ecstasy men learn that they are citizens of eternity'.⁸ Thomas was perhaps inspired by his friendship with Berridge to discover a personal experience of religion and looked for its basis in his mental suffering and his experience in reading certain kinds of literature.

Akin to James's account of 'The Sick Soul' in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Thomas's idea of the state of ecstasy focused here on individual, rather than collective, religious experiences that arose out of a state of melancholy.⁹ James was aware that for many a religious sense needed to be able to encompass awareness of the destructive and terrifying aspects of nature, and to remedy what he saw as the despair produced by a purely naturalistic or scientific account of the universe. Also, as in James's chapter on 'Conversion', Thomas preferred to show the value of religious beliefs through their consequences for human life, as contributing to psychological happiness rather than from any a priori principles.¹⁰ Thomas quoted James's *Talk to Students on Some of Life's Ideals* in his 1913 essay *The Country*. He described how James had also used examples from literature to illustrate his ideas about religious experiences. In *Talk to Students* James had

quoted a passage where Jefferies describes his rapturous communion on the Downs 'with the earth, the sun and sky, the stars hidden by the light, with the ocean. ...' His comment was: 'Surely a worthless hour of life, when measured by the usual standards of commercial value. Yet in what other *kind* of value can the preciousness of any hour, made precious by any standard, consist, if it consist not in feelings of excited significance like these, engendered in someone, by what the hour contains?'¹¹

Like Thomas, James believed that individual religious experiences had their basis in certain states of mind, and enumerated what he saw as the characteristics of these 'mystical states of consciousness'. These included their 'ineffability' and 'noetic quality'; he described their 'transiency' and their 'passivity'. He described how they may be induced by 'intoxicants', by meditation and prayer, or by experiences of nature. James linked the resultant state to the idea of ecstasy or rapture, and admitted that this may be seen by the medical professional as little more than a kind of hypnotic trance.¹²

Thomas's friend Frost reportedly stated that William James had been his greatest inspiration when he was a student. Although Frost was not taught by him while at Harvard, James's *Psychology: Briefer Course* was used on a course that Frost took.¹³ Frost was inspired by James's combination of scientific rigour with religious curiosity, and probably also by his ability to speak candidly about his experience of depression: Frost's own depression had led him almost to suicide. Frost taught James's *Psychology* and *Talks to Teachers* to students at Plymouth State Normal School in 1912.¹⁴

In *Varieties*, James described a 'unanimous' tendency of these mystical experiences, which is matched in Thomas's essay

This overcoming of all the usual barriers between the individual and the Absolute is the great mystic achievement. In mystical states we both become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness. This is the everlasting and triumphant mystical tradition, hardly altered by differences of clime or creed.¹⁵

In this analysis Thomas and James overlapped with Edward Carpenter's work on mystic teachers in *Towards Democracy* and *Adam's Peak to Elephanta*, the latter of which at least was also familiar to Thomas, as he had cited it in his earlier biography, *Richard Jefferies*.¹⁶ As Jesse Berridge explained in his memoir of Thomas, Thomas's readings on mysticism were part of his research while writing the biographies of Jefferies in 1909 and of the philosophical playwright and poet Maurice Maeterlinck in 1911, but it did not begin with

these.¹⁷ It is open to speculation when Thomas began researching this theme; it is possible that his use of laudanum since his time at Oxford could have produced an interest in the relationship between intoxicants and experiences of ecstasy.¹⁸ However, one important factor in the production of this essay was his friendship with Jesse Berridge.

Thomas had first met Berridge, who at the time was working for a bank, in London in 1901 at a meeting of his Oxford friends. As a keen walker who enjoyed Thomas's company, Berridge was a companion on many of Thomas's walks and bicycle rides, including part of the ride that served as the basis of the 1913 work *In Pursuit of Spring*. As Moorcroft Wilson explains, Berridge was partly the basis of Thomas's 'Other Man' in this book, and, as Thomas admitted to Frost, had been the inspiration for Mr Torrance in *The Happy-Go-Lucky Morgans*.¹⁹ They had discussed writing novels together, and Berridge procured books for Thomas on religious and spiritual themes: St Teresa's writings, the *Imitation*, the Vulgate. Furthermore, Thomas 'borrowed Inge's 1899 *Christian Mysticism* several times', and presented Berridge with gift copies of the writings of Jacob Behman and Richard Crashaw.²⁰ Berridge explained in his memoir of Thomas that the poet 'rejected emphatically the easy label of *anima naturaliter Christiana*' and yet that 'he had written earlier, "Among my unfertilised plans still lies an Essay on the Gospel of St John by a Devout Agnostic"'.²¹

While Thomas does refer to Christian mystics in this essay, including Leo Tolstoy and S. T. Coleridge, he departs from Christian perspectives. Like James's, some of Thomas's ideas in this essay are contrary to a conventional Christian understanding that the flesh and spirit are opposed: here, again, he gestured towards a naturalistic pantheism. As demonstrated by Whitman, whom Thomas mentioned in this connection, as well as in some strains of dissenting Transcendental and Romantic theosophy, the ecstasy of the spirit has been connected to the ecstasy of the body. Thomas's writing here connects him with his hero Richard Jefferies, and with the concept of 'soul life' described in *The Story of my Heart* – where the ecstatic state is inseparable from an affective state that is inspired by nature, and when it displaces habitual patterns of thought and behaviour. As Thomas explained in his 1909 biography of the writer, Jefferies's prayer was for 'the sun, the hills, the wind, the flowers, the sea – the sea whose moving waters he esteems as religiously as Keats':

Thought must expand so as to 'correspond in magnitude of conception' with sun and sea. This immeasurable soul life which he desires is always associated with the flesh, as in its origin it was associated with his own senses. Nothing is of any use unless it gives him a stronger body and mind.²²

Thomas had hinted at his interest in this sort of natural mysticism in other prose writings, for example in *The South Country*, *In Pursuit of Spring*, and *The Country*. In the latter he describes the kinds of pantheistic, unanimous quality that characterise James's version of mystical states.²³ The theme of fleeting moments of transcendence discerned through nature, as well as their relationship to melancholy, their 'noetic' quality, and their inexpressibility, would be addressed in some of Thomas's poetry, for example in 'The Other', 'I never saw that land before', and 'The Ash Grove'.

Peter Howarth has argued that Edward Thomas's interest in ecstasy informed his move to poetry, both reinforcing Thomas's determination to write for 'his own sake' rather than publishers' ambitions for him, and because it led him to discover that 'self-expression' was 'inseparable from self-dispossession'.²⁴ Howarth believes that Thomas arrived at this conviction by way of his criticisms of Walter Pater and certain members of the Georgians

and Imagists: he disliked their ‘self-conscious adoption of otherness’.²⁵ This meant that while these poets sought the intensity of the ecstatic experience they could not achieve it by avoiding the superfluous word or phrase in their verse. In the holograph version of the essay, Thomas explains of Pater that

His writing is one of the attempts, one of the failures to make literature all of one even – and mechanical – intensity. It is no more a proof of the possibility of ‘burning always with a hard flame’ than is ragtime music ... or the lives which are all sunflowers, peacock feathers and crème de menthe and aesthetic poetry and pseudo-Bergsonism. The mystic knows that ecstasy and notable days are not marked out in advance on the calendar: above all he knows that the other days are far less humbled in comparison with the great and notable days than exalted by their influence.²⁶

Howarth focuses on how Thomas saw ecstasy as inspiring self-forgetfulness and distraction: ‘Where the life of the great known or unknown poet culminates there is ecstasy: they are exalted out of themselves, out of the street, out of mortality’.²⁷ Howarth describes how this self-transcendence contributed to Thomas’s approach to poetic rhythms and sounds. For Thomas, established patterns of metre and rhyme would be disrupted only once they were no longer noticeable, for ‘the common metrical grounding of regular verse, with its necessary lack of intensity at certain points, may be less of a hindrance than part of the self-dispossession he hoped for’.²⁸

Howarth observes that everything in Thomas’s poetry is ‘crossed’ by forces outside itself: metre by speech; speech by line endings/stanza breaks; feet by phrases – as he puts it, ‘so that its rhythmic boundaries and unstressed or half-rhymes seem to happen only in passing’. Where patterns exist, they are something we are only ‘half aware’ of. Howarth concludes that Thomas’s is ‘a poetry that ... is always in the process of disowning itself’.²⁹ This idea of self-dispossession may point at a difference between Thomas’s aesthetics and those of his ally Frost, in that Frost’s sentence sounds were deliberately ‘struck across the rigidity of a limited metre’, while Thomas’s verse rhythms were at least in part unintentional. In reality, both poets were interested in conveying the limits of human experience, what they saw as the barely conceptualisable and the fleeting, and on finding a compromise between the conformity of form and the extravagance of the mind. Frost expressed the need for the unforeseen element of poetry, suggesting that ‘A poem may be worked over once it is in being, but may not be worried into being. Its most precious quality will remain its having run itself and carried away the poet with it’.³⁰

Thomas’s themes could also be ‘ecstatic’. Memories and ideas may crop up, ‘unwontedly’ within the stream of everyday experience. These epiphanic moments frequently occur within his poetry of birdsong, introspection, love, and melancholy. More generally, his poetry frequently addresses the impossibility of conveying in language the personal dimensions of experience. This once again links Thomas to James and Frost, and to Frost’s inspiration in Henri Bergson, who addressed the difficulties of conveying subjective experience in the intersubjective medium of language. In both Thomas’s and Frost’s poetry these unconceptualisable experiences are an important part of aesthesis.³¹

Thomas’s essay on ecstasy addresses religious and spiritual ideas in the context of contemporary debates around mechanism, and the value of religion and individual experience. And yet here and in his essay on ‘Passion in Contemporary Fiction’ he was interested in talking about the practical value of such experiences, reflecting his Jamesian

tendencies, as they tended to produce poetry or deeds. In the spirit of this sentiment, Thomas eventually abandoned the project of writing about 'ecstasy' in favour of fiction, autobiographical writing, and then poetry, before subsequently enlisting. If he had found a sense of religion, it was one that defied conceptualisation. As he explained in the last pages of his diary before he died in France: 'I never understood quite what was meant by God'.³²

[Ecstasy]

The history of men is the history of ecstasy and reflection. Both, howsoever starry, are based on observation as their foundation and express themselves, late or soon, in action. Where a man's life culminates in some hidden or famous deed of love, heroism, poetry, where he is exalted out of himself, out of the street, out of mortality, there is ecstasy. Its light is the brightest, its shadow the most dark, in human life.

When I told a friend I thought of writing on ecstasy, he answered that he did not know which to envy me, my impudence or my theme which, said he, was the loveliest theme in the world. Ecstasy was the instrument by which Beauty was conceived and recognized. He quoted Goethe:

He that sees beauty is himself set free ...³³

and the poem where Hafiz cries out: 'Whoever goes in fear of love is no true lover. Either be her foot upon my head, or be my lip upon her mouth'.³⁴ He lifted up his voice, saying that the essence of true ecstasy was self-forgetfulness, and that no sensuous delight, dependent on personal desire, should be given the holy name so jealous was he of ecstasy.³⁵

But some to whom I spoke seemed to dread any open worship of such a god in these days, as if we had greater need of order than of ecstasy. Others were hostile and contemptuous, as if ecstasy had been one of the last enchantments of the middle ages lingering in some university cobweb, or a quack medicine from America ...

I did not make as a short cut to the moment's prejudices. It was, in fact, past doubting, that among people whose opinions I should consider, those in favour of ecstasy would be in the majority. I was myself in favour of ecstasy. It was my name for the faculty in man which came nearest to being, for aught I knew, illimitable and divine. If I envied anyone it would have been the poets who could declare, and in words capable of making me nothing but ear and soul, as the great Persian did, – that they were neither Christians, nor Jews, nor Moslems; that they were not of any country, east or west, not of land or sea, not of this world or the next, of Paradise or Hell: because their place was the Placeless, and because, belonging to the soul of the Beloved, they were neither body nor soul; they had seen that the two worlds were one, they had put away duality; they were drunk with Love's cup; theirs it was to revel and carouse; if they had ever spent a moment without Love they repented it; they trampled on both worlds, they danced in triumph for ever, they told no tales but of drunkenness and revelry.³⁶ If I had been so bold, in a world where ideas of perfectibility are mawkish, as to imagine a perfect state, I think it would have been ecstasy with its companions liberty, sanguine, generous energy, the 'faith to eat all things',³⁷ the flow of spirits and speech, alternating with stillest quiet.

My chief ground and qualification for this choice was my intimate and long-standing acquaintance with the opposite of ecstasy. I knew so well the 'grief without a pang' described with some flattery in Coleridge's 'Dejection'; so often had griefs not without a

pang appeared to me as almost delights by comparison; so often had I looked at things, unless I am much mistaken, as the poet was doing when he said:

I see them all so excellently fair,
I see, not feel, how beautiful they are³⁸

Nor was I entirely ignorant of that extreme lack of ecstasy which, as in this poem, becomes something like ecstasy itself, – of the state only a little removed from ecstasy, when that remoteness, real or imagined, produces grief. In that state the soul desires to feel, with a perhaps inhuman, angelic, intensity, how beautiful things are. It cries out on Life, as Whitman did on Hymen: ‘O hymen, Hymenee, why do you sting me for one short moment only?’³⁹ It is willing to change minds with one in Bedlam because of his ‘rapt gaze’ and his ‘dreams divine’ that

Lift his long, laughing reveries like enchanted wine,
And make his melancholy germane to the stars.⁴⁰

Not this age alone has been awed, fascinated, put to school, by the mad man, though perhaps it was not flattery before today to call a man mad. Dryden knew that it was a very difficult thing to write like a madman, although easy for most men to write like fools. Wordsworth, when he heard the mad lover of pretty Barbara raving three years after she had died, prayed that love would turn her face from him if she had ever thought of storing up such hours for him. The grave passionate poet, though he could not, as Herrick and Blake did, turn the mad maid into a singer, half elvish, – or should I say therefore – only half human, nevertheless was profoundly drawn to the distracted.⁴¹ Earlier ages seem to have treated them less as human beings lacking something than as distinct, even favoured, species, like birds or beasts, with some uncanniness added by their superficial humanity. Those who were rapt from sense of the outer common world were credited insight and sanctity. Then, too, it had early been observed, as by the Chinese Chuang Tzu, that a frequently drunk man who falls out of a cart does not die: ‘His spirit is in a condition of security. He is not conscious of riding the cart; neither is he conscious of falling out of it. Ideas of life, death, fear, etc., cannot penetrate his breast: and so he does not suffer from contact with objective existences ...’⁴² Folly seemed a kind of wisdom. Some things madmen could do better than wise men, some things that were impossible to wise men. Some powers and appearances they had in common with sibyls, witches, prophets and poets, and all have been condemned or exalted together because all are in similar degrees different from the average merchant soldier, labourer, or housewife. Language also has related them, and for the state of all of them the description, ecstasy, has been used.

The word meant the condition of being out of place, out of the accustomed, or if you like, the proper place; applied to the mind, it would mean insanity or bewilderment. It came to be the term for alienation or distraction of mind, especially from terror or astonishment, and, at last, in the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles, for terror, amazement, entrancement, or the state of trance, and so definitely for what was believed to be the withdrawal of the soul from its accustomed place in the body during a mystic or prophetic trance.

As when the Indian poet, Rabindranath Tagore, sits at three o’clock every morning for two hours, immovable in contemplation or reverie on the nature of God. At its utmost ecstasy was a taste of the happiness of Eternity, an entrance into oneness with God or Nature.⁴³

English has many corresponding phrases of various degrees. To be ‘beside oneself’ is one; to ‘jump out of one’s skin’ is another; to be ‘out of one’s wits’, or ‘absent minded’, ie to be separated from the mind, or to have the mind travelling, are other phrases. But there is no exact equivalence to ecstasy.

It was first used in English by Wycliffe in a place where we now use [*sic*] have ‘amazement’ – in the sentence, ‘And they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him’.⁴⁴ Shakespeare’s ‘ecstasy’ is the state of mind of Hamlet, Macbeth, and Othello. He uses it figuratively; for many of his contemporaries it would have been a mere synonym of madness. Milton, in his prose, he speaks of a woman ‘in a kind of ecstasy’ foretelling calamities to come: in his poetry, it has a fresher and more figurative use, when the pealing organ dissolves him into ecstasies and ‘brings all Heaven before his eyes’.⁴⁵ Donne’s ‘Ecstasie’ must not be forgotten, the poem where two lovers sit like sepulchral statues all day with hands and eyes locked, but speechless

And pictures in our eyes to get
Was all our propagation⁴⁶

By Gray’s time ecstasy could be given a capital letter and personified into some sort of steed on which Milton soared – ‘rode sublime upon the seraph wings of Extasy[’].⁴⁷ Jeremy Taylor before him had spoken of ‘Seraphims and the more ecstasied order of intelligence’.⁴⁸

The author of the ‘Anatomy of Melancholy’ gives the name of ‘ecstasy’ to the state of the opium-eater and also of the oracular witches in Lapland who ‘answer all questions in an ecstasy you will ask; what your friends do, where they are, how they fare, etc.’.⁴⁹ He quotes in another place a description of ecstasy by Erasmus as ‘a taste of future happiness, by which we are unified unto God’. This was the mystic sense of the word: for the mystics the significant form of ecstasy was that which they called an emigration of the soul from the body, a drawing away of the mind to heavenly things, what Locke was inclined to call ‘dreaming with the eyes open’.⁵⁰

Today, apart from its medical application to conditions where the mind, absorbed in a dominant idea, becomes insensible to surrounding objects the word ‘ecstasy’ is either stolen for a phrase like ‘I was in ecstasies’, which is equivalent to ‘I was awfully pleased’, or it is reserved for religious exultation or anything closely resembling it in the experience of lover or poet. We should use it of any passion that makes us its booty, even of anger when it is like Ilusha’s in ‘The Brothers Karamazov’, of whom his father said: ‘He is a little creature, but it’s a mighty anger’.⁵¹ That book is all ecstasy. It is to be seen in Ivan who knows that he will fall to the ground and weep as he kisses the graves of great men on his travels, because he loves some great deeds of men as he does some people, as he does the blue sky and the sticky little leaves as they open in the Spring. It is in his brother Alyosha who says ‘I think everyone should love life above everything in the world ... love it, regardless of logic ... it must be regardless of logic, and it’s only then one will understand the meaning of it’. It is in the sick boy, when he hears that he may live for months or years yet and exclaims ‘my dear ones, why do we quarrel, try to outshine each other and keep grudges against each other? Let’s go straight into the garden and play there, love, appreciate and kiss each other, and glorify life’. It is in the monk, his brother, who bids men to love all things, ‘love all men, love everything. Seek that rapture and ecstasy. Water the earth with the tears of your joy and love those tears. Don’t be ashamed of that ecstasy, prize it, for it is a gift of God and a great one; it is not given to many but only to the elect. To him all was like an ocean, flowing and blending – ‘a touch in one place sets up movement at the other end of the earth’. That is to

say that a robin redbreast in a cage sets all heaven in a rage.⁵² Here is the essence of ecstasy. The man who speaks so has stepped out of self into a boundless world in which most men are isolated as in a diving bell without a window. He has come clear of what belongs merely to the family, to the state, clear, as he thinks of all that is finite, of space and time. He is like the poet, Lascelles Abercrombie, when he says:

I was exalted above surety
And out of time did fall.⁵³

This is religion. Or, rather, it is what the religions endeavour to make easy, daily, and universal. As the creeds have diminished it is seen to be independent of them. There is no connection with any creed in the trance which Tennyson induced by repeating his own name, when his individuality dissolved and faded away into boundless being, when death became a laughable impossibility, and the loss of personality seemed ‘no extinction, but the only true life’.⁵⁴ Nor has a creed anything to do with that ‘direct sensation of existence in the most intense degree’ coupled with that understanding of the saying that there shall be no more time, which the epileptic in ‘The Idiot’ had before his seizure.⁵⁵ Religious people use the word God very potently on these occasions: the truly wise and virtuous man, for example, is said to be lifted above his own consciousness and sensible existence and to enjoy in ecstasy the vision of God, and what he sees, he tells us, is not by the help of man but by the light of the Lord Jesus Christ and by his immediate Spirit and Power.

No creed is necessary that we may learn those lesser ecstasies of which Sir Thomas Browne speaks, when he says that he loves the impossibilities and mysteries of religion in which he can lose himself, and his reason has naught to do but utter ‘O altitudo’.⁵⁶ He delights to suffocate the reason, as St Francis did by repeating the words ‘My God, My God’, as other Christians did by setting their hearts on the name of Jesus until the name sounds like a song, as one of the Persian Sufis did by crying ‘Allah, Allah’, as Tennyson did by means of his own name.

And we know by experience that on a dark night we see best when we think least.

Religion or not, we cannot but make use of this knowledge when we suffer under the oppression of the confused, multitudinous, mass of things which we can neither ignore nor grasp. The mass is not to be overcome by the brain only. A few can concentrate on some little section and draw down upon the rest a blind proof against sun and stars. Others appear to get free through passion, through drugs, through asceticism or excess, through some form of devotion. Some perhaps might be found who sell all and follow a master like the Sufi who said: ‘Whatever is in thy head forget it, whatever is in thy hand give it away, and whatever happens to thee disregard it’.⁵⁷ It is easy to fall into a mood where it is possible to envy or admire all sorts of persons, from Dante and Sappho to Borrow and Jane Cakebread, and the poor drunken schoolmaster-Christ in ‘Creatures that once were men’⁵⁸ – all sorts of genius, extravagance, eccentricity, and simplicity. Tolstoy, we know, saw something more than admirable in the ordinary peasant who still had the faith that made life possible, without which Tolstoy himself could not live [i.e. live], or imagine others living, what he called life.⁵⁹ We ask for something that will suddenly knot up our science and illuminate it or maybe altogether blot it out. We are tempted, but not converted by, when poets sing: ‘Wisdom is very wearisome, bring for its neck the noose of wine’.⁶⁰ We remember the scalding porridge that set Robert Owen, as he believed, on the path of genius.⁶¹ If we cannot have an illumination like the astonishing and blinding light that smote Paul on the road to Damascus, – or that lighted mind which made the converted sinner in ‘The Everlasting Mercy’ think

that all earthly creatures knelt from rapture of the joy which he was feeling –

The narrow station-wall's brick ledge,
The wild hop withering in the hedge,
The lights in the huntsman's upper storey,
Were parts of an eternal glory ...⁶²

at least we might pray for an enlightening accident like Owen's. 'Come, O come,' says Hafiz, 'for at this moment I seek ruin from wine. Who knows but in such ruin we might find a treasure'.⁶³ Even the sage and holy Tagore knows the strain, and himself sings:

Let all crooked scruples vanish, let me hopelessly lose my way.
Let a gust of wild giddiness come and sweep me away from my anchors.
The world is peopled with worthies and workers, useful and clever.
There are men who are easily first and men who come decently after.
Let them be happy and prosper, and let me be foolishly futile.
For I know 'tis the end of all works to be drunken and go to the dogs.⁶⁴

Could such a teacher be followed as easily as he who says that twice two is four, we might escape 'the purely naturalistic look at life' which according to William James 'however enthusiastically it may begin is sure to end in sadness'.⁶⁵ If we have learnt that ecstasy is not the exclusive privilege of the religious, can we not hope by aid of it to avoid this sadness? There is perhaps no other way, save suicide, unless, of course, a skin of leather and brains to match are procurable. The docile can obtain some kind of satisfaction by imitation. The less docile eat ashes.

No wonder, therefore, that ecstasy has a solemn as well as a delightful sound, that men speak of being *in* an ecstasy as if it were something outside them, 'afar from the sphere of our sorrow'. A book was written eleven years ago – a good book, too, Mr Arthur Machen's 'Hieroglyphics' – to show that there could be no fine literature without ecstasy. The writer said that ecstasy was 'the infallible instrument by which fine literature may be discerned from reading matter, by which art may be known from artifice, and style from intelligent expression'. But then he chose the word only as the representative of many, allowing you to substitute, if you wished, 'rapture', 'beauty', 'adoration', 'wonder', 'awe', 'mystery', 'sense of the unknown', 'desire of the unknown'. Nor did he make it quite clear how, at least without his help, ecstasy was to be detected when it was not present in its unveiled form.

At the present day the ecstasy or the name is often present in books. Take, for example, the poet Rupert Brooke. One of his best and most characteristic poems is 'Dust', where he speaks of the day when two lovers, now dust, – but 'not dead, not undesirous yet' – shall meet and make 'such a radiant ecstasy' in the air that the poor later lovers in the garden

... Shall learn
The shattering fury of our fire,
And the weak passionless hearts will burn

And faint in that amazing glow,
Until the darkness close above;
And they will know – poor fools, they'll know –

One moment, what it is to love ⁶⁶

The yearning for ecstasy within this poem becomes almost ecstasy itself.

A writer one or two generations earlier exhibits ecstasy, and with it desire and worship of ecstasy, in almost the highest degree. Prayers for ecstasy in this vain are not uncommon

Come back, come back, O Lover of my soul,
And thrill my life with music once again,
Even if pain
Need be, that your old ecstasy shall roll
And break the flood-gates of my impotence.
Let every sense
Ring to the riot of your hurricane. ⁶⁷

But Jefferies, besides being so much unlike the newspapers, really clove a way for himself through all the messes of civilisation. He goes straight to the sun, whether he is on the Wiltshire Downs or amid the traffic at the Mansion House. Beyond the dead accumulations of matter, and beyond the mere thinking about things which is without end, he takes us with him. ⁶⁸ What Jefferies has described in detail and with redundant eloquence, the poets have told us in a word or two, as when Wordsworth, watching sunrise from behind a headland, saw ‘unutterable love’ in the silent earth, sky, and sea –

Sound needed none,
Nor any voice of joy: his spirit drank
The spectacle, sensation, soul, and form,
All melted into him; they swallowed up
His animal being: in them did he live,
And by them did he live: they were his life.
In such access of mind, in such high hour ⁶⁹

This is religion, or, rather, is what the religions vainly endeavour to make easy daily and universal. As long as men are capable of this ecstasy religion cannot perish. By this ecstasy men learn that they are citizens of eternity.

NOTES

Manuscript and typescript material is reproduced by kind permission of The Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

¹ [Ecstasy] two typescripts (original and carbon) of unpublished essay’ (The Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, New York). The typescripts are undated. Peter Howarth dates the text to 1913 by using Thomas’s correspondence: *British Poetry in the Age of Modernism* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 68.

² Clifford Bax commissioned Thomas to write three pieces for his magazine *Orpheus* in 1912-13: ‘The Chessplayer’, ‘Green and Scarlet’, and a book review: see Jean Moorcroft Wilson, *Edward Thomas: From Adlestrop to Arras* (2015), pp. 210-11.

- ³ The Fellowship series included *Trees* by Eleanor Farjeon and *Friendship* by Clifford Bax: see *The Letters of Edward Thomas to Jesse Berridge*, ed. Anthony Berridge (1983), p. 72.
- ⁴ Howarth, *British Poetry in the Age of Modernism*, p. 68.
- ⁵ ‘Essay on passion in contemporary fiction, typescript of unpublished essay’; undated (Berg).
- ⁶ Howarth, *British Poetry in the Age of Modernism*, p. 78.
- ⁷ Thomas had previously written about the supernatural in collaborations with Frank Podmore, one of the founders of the Fabian Society, in 1906: ‘Apparitions: Thought Transference’ and ‘The Natural and the Supernatural’.
- ⁸ ‘[Ecstasy]. The history of men is the history of ecstasy’, undated holograph draft of essay. Loose pages inserted in notebook cover, 34 pp. (Berg), here p. 15. While the holograph draft of ‘Ecstasy’ addresses the same theme, it substantially differs from the typescript.
- ⁹ See James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902; Fontana edn. 1971), pp. 137-72.
- ¹⁰ James also addresses the benefits of religious conversion to society as a whole in his two chapters on ‘Saintliness’: *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, pp. 258-365.
- ¹¹ Edward Thomas, *In Pursuit of Spring* (1913), pp. 25-6.
- ¹² James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, pp. 366, 367-8, 398.
- ¹³ Lawrance Thompson, *Robert Frost: The Early Years 1874-1915* (New York, 1966), pp. 536 n. 2, 239.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 372.
- ¹⁵ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 404.
- ¹⁶ Edward Thomas, *Richard Jefferies* (1909), p. 167.
- ¹⁷ *Letters of Thomas to Berridge*, p. 89.
- ¹⁸ See, for example, Moorcroft Wilson, *Edward Thomas: From Adlestrop to Arras*, p. 72.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 99, 100.
- ²⁰ *Letters of Thomas to Berridge*, p. 88.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 89. The phrase *anima naturaliter christiana* (‘the soul is naturally Christian’) comes from Tertullian (*Apologeticum* 17.6).
- ²² *Richard Jefferies*, pp. 178, 179.
- ²³ *The Country* (1913), p. 54.
- ²⁴ Howarth, *British Poetry in the Age of Modernism*, pp. 68-9.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 77.
- ²⁶ From the holograph draft of ‘Ecstasy’, quoted *ibid.*, p. 75.
- ²⁷ Holograph draft of ‘Ecstasy’, quoted *ibid.*, p. 69.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 78.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 67, 78.
- ³⁰ Robert Frost, *Collected Poetry, Prose and Plays*, ed. Richard Poirier and Mark Richardson (New York, 1995), pp. 131, 778.
- ³¹ In *Sustainable Poetry* (Lexington, 1999) Len Scigaj argues that we can paradoxically use the shortfalls of language to invoke the perceptions that come about through our own phenomenal immersion in nature’s processes. For Scigaj, ‘language is an instrument that the poet constantly refurbishes to articulate his “originary” experience in nature’. The ‘originary’ experience is ‘a perception of stimuli initiated by events in the natural world’ (p. 29).

- ³² Matthew Hollis, *Now All Roads Lead to France* (2011), p. 333.
- ³³ The source of this quotation is unknown: it may be a misattribution.
- ³⁴ The American writer Charles Dudley Warner's 1896 anthology *A Library of the World's Best Literature, Ancient and Modern*, vol. xvii: *Greeley to Hawthorne* (New York, 1896), p. 6800, includes this poem as 'Whoever is in dread of the restlessness of anxiety, not genuine in his love / Either be her foot upon my head, or be my lip upon her mouth'.
- ³⁵ It seems probable that this friend was Jesse Berridge, both because of his role in the essay's formation and also because of the tone, which resembles him as a more saintly version of Mr Torrance in *The Happy-Go-Lucky Morgans* (Thomas to Robert Frost, 15 Apr. 1915). The dislike of the sensual dimensions of ecstasy puts us in mind of Berridge, with whom Thomas disagreed when they were hoping to co-author a novel about a honeymoon in 1913.
- ³⁶ Thomas seems to be referring to a poem that had been attributed to Rumi ('the great Persian') by the British translator Reynald A. Nicholson in *Rumi: Selected Poems from the Divani Shamsi Tabriz* (Cambridge, 1878), pp. 70-3, 124-7. However, this attribution has been contested by M. Shafi 'i Kadkani, and it is claimed that this has created an image of Rumi as a pantheist in Western thought. See Saeed Zarrabi-Zadeh, *Practical Mysticism in Islam and Christianity* (Abingdon, 2016), p. 152 n. 80.
- ³⁷ Romans 14: 2.
- ³⁸ S. T. Coleridge, 'Dejection: An Ode', ll. 37-8.
- ³⁹ Walt Whitman, 'O Hymen! O Hymenee'. The poem was added to the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*.
- ⁴⁰ Ernest Dowson, 'To One in Bedlam'. This poem was first published in *The Albemarle Review* (Aug. 1892): see *The Letters of Ernest Dowson*, ed. Desmond Flower and Henry Maas (Rutherford, NJ, 1967).
- ⁴¹ Robert Herrick 'The Mad Maid's Song', from *The Hesperides & Noble Numbers by Robert Herrick* (1898); the poem by Blake is probably 'Mad Song'.
- ⁴² *The Teachings and Sayings of Chuang Tzu*, ed. Herbert A Giles (New York, 1909), p. 180. An earlier edition of Herbert Giles's translation was published by Quaritch of London in 1889.
- ⁴³ Thomas seems to be referring to W. B. Yeats's 1912 introduction to Tagore's first English-language collection *Gitanjali* (1913): 'Every morning at three – I know, for I have seen it' – one said to me, 'he sits immovable in contemplation, and for two hours does not awake from his reverie upon the nature of God. His father, the Maha Rishi, would sometimes sit there all through the next day; once, upon a river, he fell into contemplation because of the beauty of the landscape, and the rowers waited for eight hours before they could continue their journey'.
- ⁴⁴ Thomas refers to the leading fourteenth century English philosopher and theologian John Wycliffe, in his translation of the Bible, Acts 3: 10.
- ⁴⁵ Milton, 'Il Penseroso', l. 166.
- ⁴⁶ John Donne, 'The Extasie', ll. 11-12.
- ⁴⁷ Thomas Gray, 'The Progress of Poesy: A Pindaric Ode', l. 96.
- ⁴⁸ Jeremy Taylor, *Holy Living and Dying*, apparently misquoting a passage extolling the benefits of chastity, in which virgins are described as like 'cherubim' among the 'ecstasied order of holy and unpolluted spirits' (Bohn edn., 1850), p. 71.
- ⁴⁹ Robert Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621).

- ⁵⁰ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding* (1689), ch. 19.
- ⁵¹ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (1912). Thomas generally quotes accurately from the text.
- ⁵² William Blake, 'Auguries of Innocence', 1st pub. in Alexander Gilchrist, *The Life of William Blake*, vol. ii (1863), p. 94.
- ⁵³ Lascelles Abercrombie, 'The Trance', from *Poems and Interludes* (1908).
- ⁵⁴ An extract from Tennyson's letter to Mr B. P. Blood is reproduced in James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 370.
- ⁵⁵ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. Constance Garnett (1913).
- ⁵⁶ Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici* (1643), IX, quoting Romans 11: 33.
- ⁵⁷ Abu Sa'id bin Abu-l-Khair of Mahna in Khorasan/modern Turkmenistan, according to E. Whinfield in his 1898 introduction to his translation of Rumi's *Masnawi* (New York, 2010), p. xxiii.
- ⁵⁸ Maxim Gorky, *Creatures That Once Were Men*, trans. J. K. M. Shirazi (1905).
- ⁵⁹ Tolstoy, *My Confession: Critique of Dogmatic Theology* (1904).
- ⁶⁰ The line appears in Warner's *Library of the World's Best Literature* (p. 6805), attributed to Hafiz.
- ⁶¹ See, for example, B. L. Hutchins, *Fabian Tract Number 166: Robert Owen: Social Reformer* (1912).
- ⁶² John Masefield, 'The Everlasting Mercy', *English Review*, October 1911.
- ⁶³ It is unclear what Thomas's source was for this quotation since various translations of Hafiz's poetry were available. *Hafiz of Shiraz: Thirty Poems*, trans. Peter Avery and John Heath-Stubbs, includes the couplet from poem CXCIX, 'Come, let us get drunk, even if it is our ruin / For sometimes under ruins one finds treasure' (1952), p. 46.
- ⁶⁴ Rabindranath Tagore, 'O you mad, you superbly drunk! ...', *Poetry* (June 1913).
- ⁶⁵ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 149.
- ⁶⁶ Rupert Brooke, 'Dust', 1st pub. in *Georgian Poetry 1911-1912* (1912), p. 38.
- ⁶⁷ D. H. Nicholson, 'A Prayer', from *Poems* (1913), p. 37.
- ⁶⁸ Richard Jefferies, *The Story of My Heart: My Autobiography* (1883); *Nature Near London* (1887); *After London; or, Wild England* (1905).
- ⁶⁹ William Wordsworth, excerpt from 'The Excursion' (1814), as printed in *The Complete Poetical Works* (1888).