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## EDWARD THOMAS, ROBERT FROST, AND ‘THE ROAD NOT TAKEN’

Henry ATMORE

The occasion for this essay is a book by the *NYTBR* poetry columnist David Orr, *The Road Not Taken: Finding America in the Poem Everyone Loves and Almost Everybody Gets Wrong* [2015; referred to hereafter as *Finding America*]. The burden of Orr’s case is that Robert Frost’s famous poem is definitively ‘American’ in the sense that the Dallas Cowboys are America’s team, pumpkin pie is America’s contribution to the pumpkin, and wealth is every American’s destiny. I do not accept this reading although I acknowledge it is one Frost himself sometimes favoured. In what follows I submit that if – as Orr does in fact contend – the poem is a study in *prevarication*, and the bearing this has on questions of moral and physical courage, then its English provenance is as important as its American authorship.<sup>1</sup>

Now, it is not news that Frost wrote ‘The Road Not Taken’ towards the end of his 30-month sojourn in England from 1912-1915, or else shortly after his return to the US in February 1915. Nor, for that matter, that it was written for Frost’s closest English friend, Edward Thomas, and addresses Thomas’ difficulty in choosing which path to follow on country walks, and, in a more oblique fashion, his agonies of indecision over whether to enlist in the British Army. Orr sketches the background in a way that suggests he does not consider it ultimately pertinent (as indeed it is not to his interpretation of the poem). Matthew Hollis gives a full and more sympathetic report in his book about Thomas’ wartime experiences, *Now All Roads Lead To France: The Last Years of Edward Thomas* [2011]. What is offered below should thus be read as supplementary to the received account; certainly it is motivated by no revisionist intent. We are at present two years into and not yet midway through a strangely festive, if not downright orgiastic, British collective commemoration of the Great War and its agonies (which are fainter to the rest of the world’s recall). It seems, then, a timely moment for revisiting some ancient English ground.

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<sup>1</sup> My wider reasons for disagreeing with *Finding America* can be found in [Atmore, 2015]. Space did not allow, in that essay, for the detailed consideration of Edward Thomas’ relevance given here.

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‘The Road Not Taken’ is noncommittal about its landscape: there is a yellow wood, some grass, a carpet of mulched up leaves. It is an outdoors poem with the outdoors left unspecified, and the encounter of it turned into what can be interpreted, without obvious violence to Frost’s intentions, as a *maxim*:

Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted I should ever come back.

The bareness of the space has encouraged analysis of the poem’s philosophy, as if Frost’s lines were such as an Academy geometer once might have drawn in Athenian sand. I do not deny the relevance of such studies, although I do wonder at the extent of Frost’s technical interest in philosophizing. (“A Cartesian I heard Poe called”, he once said to Richard Poirier, “a Cartesian philosopher, the other day . . . tssssss . . .” [Poirier et al, 893].)

Thomas’ most famous poem, ‘Adlestrop’, has a comparably cloistral sense of geography. In it, roads over the horizon, yet to be traversed, and trials, yet to be undergone, figure more palpably than the here and now:

And for that minute a blackbird sang  
Close by, and round him, mistier,  
Farther and farther, all the birds  
Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire.<sup>2</sup>

Only a lofty consciousness could have let pass the concluding rhyme of “Gloucestershire” and “mistier” (or, for that matter, the idea of songbirds having gradations of mistiness). But ‘Adlestrop’ is, in this respect, unrepresentative of Thomas. Asked why he had joined up he is supposed – with that brooding sense of the melodramatic that characterized many of his doings – to have taken some earth between his fingers, crumbled it, and said “Literally, for this”. So while it can certainly be argued that the Great War is kept at a distance in Thomas’ poetry (“remote as if in history, / Rumours of what had touched my friends, my foes, or me”), this tendency is inflected by his commitment to a ‘deep England’

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<sup>2</sup> The texts of Thomas’ poems are from [Wright, 2013].

enduring down the centuries and almost, but never quite, abstracted from accidents of human habitation.

Thomas saw, earlier than many, the danger in this commitment, the potential darkness of the melodrama of crumbled soil. The remoter the violence, in time if not in space, the more enduring the harm it inflicts. Here is 'The Combe', one of the batch of fifteen poems Thomas wrote in December 1914, his remarkable first flowering of creativity in the field, prompted by Frost's insistence that he was by nature a 'poet':

The Combe was ever dark, ancient and dark.  
 Its mouth is stopped with bramble, thorn, and briar;  
 And no one scrambles over the sliding chalk  
 By beech and yew and perishing juniper  
 Down the half precipices of its sides, with roots  
 And rabbit holes for steps. The sun of Winter,  
 The moon of Summer, and all the singing birds  
 Except the missel-thrush that loves juniper,  
 Are quite shut out. But far more ancient and dark  
 The Combe looks since they killed the badger there,  
 Dug him out and gave him to the hounds,  
 That most ancient Briton of English beasts.

A 'combe' is a hollow or valley in the side of a hill. The Welsh word is *cwm*: Thomas loved Welsh assonances. Some visual insinuation of 'combat' might be intended, but not aural: the 'o' in combe is a satisfyingly long one. (The more common spelling is 'coomb'.)

The end of the poem is interesting. [M]ore ancient and dark ... *since* they killed the badger there". The Combe is recently ancient: the antiquity is factitious, or more kindly, mythical. A place looks ancient when it is unused, like the Combe is unused: but it was used once, by the badgers who lived there, who at some point in the past were plentiful, and then exterminated. (English farmers traditionally regard badgers as vermin.) The wider point, a mordant one, is that violence underlies the yearning for 'ancient' England. The proximate din of bloodshed calls into being the Combe's quietude. The yearning is Thomas' own, so 'The Combe' can be seen as an exercise in self-criticism or, at least, self-interrogation. Thomas had not yet enlisted, but was beginning to worry over enlisting, when he wrote it.

Antiquity and violence meet in the figure of the hunting-dog. Badger-baiting and fox-hunting are, of course, time-honoured pursuits of the English county classes, about whom

Thomas, like many a lowborn Englishman, attitudinized fretfully. Dogs are bred down the generations to be at the same time ferocious and obedient. Ditto, in theory, the English fighting-man; the reality, as Thomas knew, was different. And the last line of this poem is a bitter irony at the expense, above all, of the more asinine literary expressions of martial spirit – rhetoric’s deafness to history. ‘[A]ncient Briton’ and ‘English’ are *equated* when in any antiquity worthy of our respect they were fast foes. The British were dug out of their ancestral lands by Anglo-Saxon invaders, as the farmers dug the badgers from their sets. No violence is so distant that it cannot awaken a native echo; there is much to value and safeguard in hawthorn, bracken, and briar, but no autochthonous English innocence to preserve.

We need not, then, take literally the ‘literally’ in Thomas’ “Literally, for this.” As to what *did* motivate him to fight, the character of the compulsion varies from case to case, mood to mood. Sometimes it is guilt, as in ‘The Owl’:

Then at the inn I had food, fire, and rest,  
 Knowing how hungry, cold, and tired was I.  
 All of the night was quite barred out except  
 An owl’s cry, a most melancholy cry

Shaken out long and clear upon the hill,  
 No merry note, nor cause of merriment,  
 But one telling me plain what I escaped  
 And others could not, that night, as in I went.

And salted was my food, and my repose,  
 Salted and sobered, too, by the bird’s voice  
 Speaking for all who lay under the stars,  
 Soldiers and poor, unable to rejoice.

‘Salted’ and ‘sobered’ are opposite, not complementary. The owl’s cry, and its invocation of the sufferings of unluckier or hardier others, deepen his pleasure in the food and company at the inn. He then immediately distrusts this response. What right, he wonders, does he have to his enjoyments? A different, but still acuter self-distrust surfaces in ‘I Built Myself a House of Glass’:

I built myself a house of glass:  
 It took me years to make it:  
 And I was proud. But now, alas!  
 Would God someone would break it.

But it looks too magnificent.  
 No neighbour casts a stone  
 From where he dwells, in tenement  
 Or palace of glass, alone.

'People in glass houses [shouldn't throw stones]' is a proverb expressing the truism: we shouldn't be quick to criticize peoples' characters and actions when our own characters and actions are suspect. Thomas wrote a story on the subject for his children in 1911. The proverb is a charter, as if the English required such a thing, for minding one's own business and leaving others to theirs. But the poem is denying the truism's force, saying: I don't *want* to be left alone. I *need* to be judged.

We also have, in the "house of glass", an image of isolation. A soul trapped within can look out; others or another can look in; but there can be no contact between them. This is a common theme in Thomas, one of his demons. The idea that he couldn't love damaged his relationship with his wife (and, collaterally, his children). It didn't make much difference to Thomas' behaviour that he knew the barriers were self-erected. The failure of self-knowledge to make a difference on the world was another of the things haunting him.

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Thomas and Frost were prickly, brilliant, ungovernable men who each found his measure in the other. What did they talk about on their rambles? On Thomas' testimony: "flowers, childhood, Shakespeare, women, England, the war" [Spencer, xviii]. Poetry generally, it can be ventured. Thomas would later write to Frost that "the simple words and unemphatic rhythms" in 'The Road Not Taken' were "not such as I was accustomed to expect great things, things I like, from", but this is not so much an adverse judgment as an acknowledgement on Thomas' part of another stage passed in his poetic education. (It follows on from discussion of the "self indulgence" of Rupert Brooke's posthumously published *1914 & Other Poems* [Spencer, 61].)

Children would have cropped up. Neither man was fully at ease with his offspring and this worried Thomas especially. When the Frosts returned to America in February 1915 they took Thomas's son Mervyn with them, in part to get him away from his father. Thomas admitted to what we would now call psychological, and half-admitted to physical, abuse of the boy. Frost often asked of readers that they read 'The Road Not Taken' as a jest, and gauge it as such; Thomas too, having been piqued by the poem, was counseled not to take it seriously. But theirs was not, by any standards, a lightsome relationship, and Thomas does not seem to have taken kindly to joking at his expense. (As for Frost, he indulged in raillery enough, but also was not receptive to being the butt of it.) There was always something at stake between the two men, even, perhaps, a willed portentousness in their mutual dealings.

One of Thomas' strongest pieces of prose is a short story, published in *Light and Twilight* (1911), giving what Matthew Hollis judges to be a very thinly fictionalized account of a suicide attempt in the winter of 1908 [Hollis, 21-22; Longley, 260-64]. A man takes an revolver into a wood and turns down a "neglected path where he had never met anybody"; he imagines "almost with tenderness" the effect the sight of his corpse will have on his wife; he puts the gun against his chest and squeezes the trigger (it's an old gun so this is not enough to discharge it); at the last minute he throws the gun into the wood; time forks here – a little clumsily, but Thomas' métier was not the short story – and down another of its paths the attempt succeeds, the body and gun are discovered, and the luckless discoverer meditates on the "unusual coolness and confidence" with which the suicide was effected. Qualities that have *not* been displayed by the man who threw the gun away. This would not be the last time Thomas would meditate on the comparative weakness of character evidenced by his still being alive. The story ends down the other fork with the man returning home for tea, his wife "divining all", and the man mistakenly "thinking himself impenetrably masked"; this wonderful evocation of the illusoriness of opacity tells us a great deal about Thomas and has a bearing on his predicament in 1914-15.

I have gone into detail here in part because of obvious structural parallels with 'The Road Not Taken': a walk in (winter) woods; the choice of a neglected path; the wider sense of a decision that matters greatly, that does indeed make all the difference; the prolepsis; the bifurcation of possibilities for selfhood, on which Orr in *Finding America* lays a strong stress. I'm not quite willing to say we should add Thomas' story to the occasions for Frost's poem; my interest is in probing biographical contexts for their conversations. These conversations being, we can agree, the loam from which the poem budded. Was there, then, talk of suicide? Frost's strange excursion to the Great Dismal Swamp on the Virginia-North Carolina border in 1894 may or may not have been made with this end in view (he was frightened he might

lose Elinor White, to whom he had been engaged for two years, to another man). The consensus is probably not. What can be said, Jay Parini has argued [Parini, 48-51], is that the numerous times we meet with solitary walkers or travellers in Frost, the desire for oblivion, if not the will to pursue it, is a common motive of the performance. Frost expressed irritation at readings of his second most famous poem, 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening', that discovered a death wish in the iteration of "sleep" in the final lines. Mark Richardson, who is more inclined to see comicality in Frost than I am, emphasizes the pleasure Frost got from the polish of the poem's final achievement and the "hell of a good time" he later recalled he experienced on the occasions he achieved such perfection [Richardson, *Ordeal*, 192]. But the warmth of the poem, I think, enables it to regard the prospect of sleep/death as an enticement born of more than whimsy. How inviting Frost makes the darkness and the "downy flake[s]" settled by "easy wind" – there is a hint of *fin de siècle* voluptuousness being applied to these modifiers in a poem otherwise pared to the essentials – into pillows on which a soul-tired traveler might fatally rest his head. 'Stopping by Woods', too, is about indecision and choice, but in it self-actualization is not posited as an outcome. Here the need to go on at all seems a constraint on the freedom to choose.

Richardson also makes a case for Frost deploying restraint in the doling out of his griefs [Richardson, *Ordeal*, 190]. No one denies that he had griefs, deep ones, but a sense of the decencies kept him from showing them naked. Thomas, an epitome of reserve in his day-to-day dealings, is different. Here he is, giving *thanatos* free rein in a poem that is terrifying and ludicrous in equal measure – or, better, depending on how far one allows one's sympathies to be engaged. It answers the 'paradox' of 'The Road Not Taken', that the seeking of one's own way through a stretch of life might in retrospect be regarded as a mistake. The herd might be something to follow, even if it is bound for slaughter:

Rain, midnight rain, nothing but the wild rain  
 On this bleak hut, and solitude, and me  
 Remembering again that I shall die  
 And neither hear the rain nor give it thanks  
 For washing me cleaner than I have been  
 Since I was born into this solitude.  
 Blessed are the dead that the rain rains upon:  
 But here I pray that none whom once I loved  
 Is dying tonight, or lying still awake  
 Solitary, listening to the rain,



Either in pain or thus in sympathy  
 Helpless among the living and the dead,  
 Like a cold water among broken reeds,  
 Myriads of broken reeds all still and stiff,  
 Like me who have no love which this wild rain  
 Has not dissolved except the love of death,  
 If love it be for what is perfect and  
 Cannot, the tempest tells me, disappoint.

Thomas imagines death as a *company*, and he thinks he will be welcomed into its ranks; in a poem written a little later, 'Roads', he envisages the ghosts of dead soldiers "Crowding the solitude" of the English countryside. So at least in death he wouldn't feel so damned lonely. Also, he thinks that being dead is clean – cleaner than being alive. We could take this literally: bodies decay quicker when it is damp, and bones are the kind of thing that rain works upon to polish effectively. But the psychological explanation is tempting. After all, Thomas doesn't say life is unclean, but "solitude". It is the festering of an ensorcelled consciousness that makes for filth. Other poems written around this time similarly present as the spur for decision a desire to submerge individuality and forgo the burden of choice – via the array of opportunities war would surely provide, from the barrack-room bollocking to the sealed movement order, to the abandonment of corpses in No Man's Land.

Death is the only love the rain hasn't dissolved, but the route to death – the business of dying – he doesn't love. This is because dying elicits 'sympathy', takes the poet out of himself, to people he once cared for and places he has never been. Thomas hasn't been in No Man's Land and won't in fact go there (as an artillery officer he will be stationed behind the front line), but he provides a bleakly beautiful image of what it must be like to suffer it: the bodies lying like "broken reeds all still and stiff", the pools of freezing water, the still-living in their bunk-holes so close to and yet so distant from the recently-killed and the injured and necessarily abandoned. In fact, Thomas is sympathizing with the sympathy these conditions must give rise to; he knows it would be a presumption actually to venture out amongst the dying.

But sympathy with the dying is not the poem's grace note; that would be too easy a solution to the difficulty presented in 'I Built Myself a House of Glass'. 'Rain' in fact has no grace notes, and achieves its only satisfaction in the asking of unanswerable questions. Can death, being "perfect", be loved? Or should we only love what is breakable or broken? If so, why did Thomas always say he couldn't love everybody who was broken around him?

Thomas came to see potential for silliness in this, when enlistment brought neither death nor company but boring work teaching map-reading to recruits – and a chance, that he took, to tangle lines with a nubile admirer. The failure of fate to march to order, of course, just deepened his fatalism: “Nobody persuaded me into this, not even myself,” he wrote to Frost in August 1915, and in November: “Am I indulging in the pleasure of being someone else?” [Spencer, 93, 107]. Interest in bifurcated selves or no interest in bifurcated selves, Frost saw clear to putting a stop to *that*: “Don’t be run away with your nonsense” [Spencer, 109].

Thomas says such things often in the correspondence – lambasting the weakness of his own will while absolving Frost of responsibility for directing it. He opens up two fronts on which to protest overmuch. The decision to enlist mattered and indeed the ennui into which he lapsed subsequently could almost be seen as proof of the difference donning a uniform could make. (Thomas’ state of the nation reportage in August 1914 is marked by anxiety that *his* thoughts on the war, by dint of their lucidity, should appear more interesting than the often pig-headed opinions delivered by the people he spoke to [Longley, 222-43]. Full participation in the war effort involved submitting to a kind of exalted dullness.) And Frost’s opinion on the issue, certainly, weighed more with Thomas than anybody else’s.

And what had they talked about when they talked about the war? My guess is they talked about how to think of Germans, with both of them having acquaintance with hate, but Thomas more struck by the dubiety of indulging it. *Vide* his scornful account of his father’s patriotism (“My father is so rampant in his cheery patriotism that I become pro German every evening”) in his letter to Frost of August 9, 1915 [Spencer, 89], and the somewhat overwrought poem, ‘This is No Case of Petty Right or Wrong’, he eventually wrote in response:

This is no petty case of right and wrong  
 That politicians or philosophers  
 Can judge. I hate not Germans, nor grow hot  
 With love of Englishmen, to please newspapers.

...

But with the best and meanest Englishmen  
 I am one in crying, God save England, lest  
 We lose what never slaves and cattle blessed.  
 The ages made her that made us from dust:  
 She is all we know and live by, and we trust  
 She is good and must endure, loving her so:  
 And as we love ourselves we hate her foe.

This is from Christmastime 1915, when many reasons were being given to love England and hate Germany. Politicians and newspaper proprietors urge men to fight because their power and status are tied to the War's prolongation. 'Philosophers' argue from abstractions like democracy and liberty (actually Thomas does this himself: *freedom* is what 'never slaves and cattle blessed') – arguments not of a kind to move him. Love of England is so rooted that it can barely be articulated. It is not an idea that you can plant in the minds of others: you have to trust that it is already settled. This trust, or faith, is Thomas' way out of the glass tenement.

We find Frost, on the other hand, stating in September 1914: "I hate the Germans but I must say I dont [*sic*] hate the war. Am I a jingo?" [Sheehy et al, 218].

I suspect that what they mainly talked about, though, was courage and its shaping by pressures to conform. Thomas was troubled by this and by how he stood as a protagonist in the eyes of his friend. The famous 'Gamekeeper Incident' (in which Frost stood up to a shotgun-wielding bully and Thomas held back; it is so legendary an event in the two men's biographies that one is tempted to suspect it never happened at all, but was a kind of exudation of the mythic possibilities of the moment), was for Frost mainly an opportunity to hone his sense of un-Englishness, but for Thomas it represented a crisis. What he saw as the pusillanimity of his response to the gamekeeper's physical threats had been reinforced by his deference to the man's social function. Frost was not intimidated by the man or his gun and despised the function; the contrast evidently hit Thomas hard.

Asked by Richard Poirier about Thomas (in an interview conducted in 1960, i.e. forty-three years after Thomas' death), Frost said they found fellowship in isolation and in their "instinct against belonging" to literary crowds, specifically the one centered on Ezra Pound, a devil's name to conjure with in 1960. This included, which is a fact of relevance here, T.E. Hulme, about whom Frost was carefully, cagily, discreet [Poirier et al 876; the passage is quoted in Orr, 153-54]. We know also from letters in the early-1920s that Frost was ambivalent about Siegfried Sassoon – Louis Untermeyer, for example, irritated him by his lauding of Sassoon and dispraise of Thomas. Hulme and Sassoon were of the Tory landowner type Frost considered the worst of Englishmen, but both displayed unusual bravery. In Sassoon this was linked very publicly with his determination to give the lie to traditional structures of English authority. This was another world Thomas, an inveterate tracer of the lines and demarcations of rural England, haunted the margins of; these were standards by which he could feel himself judged and Frost likely could not help but judge him. To make a decision like Thomas' decision to enlist is to 'prove' in a double sense: to elect to undergo trials in which one's metal will be tested; and to assert an identity that, the

trial not undertaken, will continue to be frayed by self-recrimination and regret. After Thomas' death Frost, grieving, denied that he had had a hand in it. I believe he was being disingenuous, albeit in circumstances that make me not want to press the case further than I have pressed it here.

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Robert Graves' suggestion that "The Road Not Taken" reflects *Frost's* "agonized" uncertainty about whether to join the British army is described by Orr in *Finding America* as "somewhat baffling" and dismissed, parenthetically: "There is no evidence that Frost ever contemplated doing so, in agony or otherwise" [68]. That "in agony or otherwise" is the reason for the sentence: Robert Graves is cut down to size. Graves, Orr can count on sufficient of his readers remembering, was no stranger to hyperbole and wild hypothesis. But the payoff, a bit of humor at the expense of a notorious eccentric, comes at a cost. The following, from an August 1914 letter to Sidney Cox, is, if not evidence of Frost actually considering joining the British army, evidence at any rate of something Orr should have taken into account:

You must think I have been and gone to war for the country that has made me a poet. My obligation is not quite as deep as that. If I were younger now and not the father of four – well all I say is, American or no American, I might decide I ought to fight the Germans simply because I know I should be afraid to [Sheehy et al, 213].

This starts off as a joke: poetry is more a matter of life and death than whatever it is Frost is obliged to England for [*pace* Kendall, 190]. Like infinity, or perfection, or in the old argument, God, matters of life and death do not lend themselves to aggrandizement. The thought proceeds in a strain of self-mockery: a double conditional ("If I were ... I might decide ...") capped by a less than clarion commitment to action ("ought" as Stanley Cavell points out differs from "must" in implying *alternatives*) [Cavell, 28]. The syntax of prevarication looks piquant on paper, but Frost knew enough middle-aged Englishmen to know it could be bitter in reality. So the sentence ends on a far from jocular note: there would be shame in not fighting and in what not fighting would say of Frost (as of what it would say of Edward Thomas), that the accident of nationality would never mitigate. If we accept that Thomas wasn't fighting "literally" for Old English soil then we should also consider how Frost's taste for combat arose from sources deeper than native New England cussedness.

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