

A Walk on the Wild Side?

OVER THE HILLS

Often and often it came back again
To mind, the day I passed the horizon ridge
To a new country, the path I had to find
By half-gaps that were stiles once in the hedge,
The pack of scarlet clouds running across
The harvest evening that seemed endless then
And after, and the inn where all were kind,
All were strangers. I did not know my loss
Till one day twelve months later suddenly
I leaned upon my spade and saw it all,
Though far beyond the sky-line. It became
Almost a habit through the year for me
To lean and see it and think to do the same
Again for two days and a night. Recall
Was vain: no more could the restless brook
Ever turn back and climb the waterfall
To the lake that rests and stirs not in its nook,
As in the hollow of the collar-bone
Under the mountain's head of rush and stone.

Edward Thomas 1878-1917

I've been thinking about this poem, which is all to do with how we can't turn the clock back and relive happiness.

On one level, it's perhaps rather obvious: the "restless brook" can never return to the "lake that rests and stirs not". The moment of happiness is past and all one can do is brood on how magical it was.

It's worth, however, unpicking the poem a little to try to see what is going on here below the surface. The moment of happiness might seem just a little bare. After all, what did it amount to? Thomas went for a walk over hills to a place he didn't know, found a pub and spent a happy hour or two with friendly folk, who made him feel welcome. Why should *that* experience weigh on him so profoundly. "I did not know my loss" is quite strong.

Thomas grew up in central London, Lambeth, so life later on with his wife and family in the countryside, on a farm near Sevenoaks in Kent, and finally at Steep in East Hampshire, can be seen as an escape from city life. At a deeper level, with Welsh parents, Thomas always felt just a little bit of an outsider in England with his Celtic roots that lay further to the west.

He was thirty-six with war looming when he turned to poetry from prose essay writing (often about nature) and book reviewing. In this, he was encouraged by Robert Frost, who was visiting England at the time (around 1913) and who became a firm friend. Indeed, Frost's poem, 'The Road Not Taken' might ironically have contributed to Thomas's death in April 1917, as it could have been taken as a gently mocking reproof of Thomas's seeming

indecisiveness about whether to join up or not, (it was probably meant more as a private joke between two writers than people since may have taken it to be). Thomas was certainly not keen on war and, given his age, as a father of two, he need not have volunteered at all to go out to France when war came in 1914.

In those days, just before the arrival of cars and buses, it is worth remembering that transport was limited mainly to the railways – cycling was in its infancy and the era of travel by horse and carriage was about to pass on. Forster's car journeys in 'Howard's End', written about this time, give us a sense of a new age of travel arriving and reshaping the landscape accordingly. Howard's End, the house will soon be in suburbia.

Villages in England not served by railways were a sort of largely unknown hinterland, often quite cut off. You get a sense of that in books like "Cider With Rosie" and "Lark Rise to Candleford". Even in "Wind In The Willows", the adventures of Mr Toad recall this era of the comparative *remoteness* of everywhere in the countryside.

Some of this remoteness is revealed in another famous poem of his, worth quoting in full as it is so short, "Adlestrop". Here the central tension lies in the contrast between the human world of express trains and a still undisturbed nature lying beyond.

Yes. I remember Adlestrop—
The name, because one afternoon
Of heat the express-train drew up there
Unwontedly. It was late June.

The steam hissed. Someone cleared his throat.
No one left and no one came
On the bare platform. What I saw
Was Adlestrop—only the name

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

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

The "bare platform" and the "lonely" haycocks and cloudlets create a sense of otherness in the countryside. The birds are plentiful but humans much less so. Loneliness in the poem is a key idea.

Edward Thomas, like Frost, suffered from bouts of severe depression, with even suicidal thoughts hinted at. For example, in his prose, 'The Attempt', published in *Light and Twilight* (1911) he writes tellingly:

"To escape from the difficulty of life, from the need of deliberating on it, from the hopeless search for something that would make it possible for him to go on

living like anybody else without questioning, he was eager to hide himself away in annihilation, just as, when a child, he hid himself in the folds of his mother's dress or her warm bosom, where he could shut out everything save the bright patterns floating on the gloom under his closed eyelids."

A feeling of escape and the pleasure of exploring unknown worlds is certainly part of what "Over The Hills" is about, but it is also, at a deeper level, perhaps, a wish to return to the safety of the womb, "the lake that rests and stirs not in its nook". Life with its work and money worries, not to mention the approach of war, is becoming the "restless brook" unable to "turn back and climb the waterfall".

The "lake" underneath the mountain", in its "collar bone" is an image full of ambiguity in this respect. It may be womb-like and secure, but it also has connotations of the stillness of death. In a sense, maybe, the poem has something in common with another of Frost's poems, "Stopping By Woods", where the lure of the icy woods, "lovely, dark and deep" seems to hint at a similarly suicidal impulse, one that is tantalising but ultimately rejected ("But I have promises to keep, And miles to go before I sleep...").

Walking in the countryside was certainly therapeutic, although it was linked too, professionally, to his work as a writer about nature. The "inn where all were kind All were strangers" is a sort of heavenly haven of safety and inclusion. It is the complete opposite of "the lake" which is isolated, high and remote from other people. The poem thus brings together both a longing for human warmth and sociability, *and* its complete opposite, a desire to *escape* from the busy, bustling world of people.

The paradox of poetry, which *can* recall the past, is brought out in "Recall was vain..." Recall is not *totally* vain, when it is transposed into art. This paradox reminds me of Keats' "Ode To A Grecian Urn", where the artful experience suggested by the urn is felt by the poet to be similarly vain – art is a "cold pastoral", a mere shadow of real experience, "teas(ing) us out of thought". But while art cannot totally be a substitute for a real experience, it does have the power to turn memory into a valid experience even so, surely? Otherwise, why write anything?

We are left at the end, perhaps, with two "therapies" to counter the harsh realities and uncertainties of life: walking and creating poetry, both here celebrated in thought-provoking ways.