

“ALL THINGS FORGET THE FOREST:” THE CONVERGENCE OF THE WAR AND THE
PASTORAL IN EDWARD THOMAS’S BODY OF WORK

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ABSTRACT

Edward Thomas, often identified as a war poet, eludes definitive characterization despite the fact that his poems are often anthologized as war poems. However, unlike other widely-known war poets, such as Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, the imagery present in Thomas's poetry contains much subtlety and features dominant usage of nature themes. This project attempts to navigate the multi-faceted world of Edward Thomas through consideration of his love for nature, his melancholic predispositions, and his preoccupations with the looming Great War in order to study Thomas's use of natural imagery in the context of grief, melancholy, and traumatic experience. To give proper consideration to these various contexts, this project uses Thomas's poetic body of work and written letters as well as a few of Thomas's prose pieces in order to provide extensive background to Thomas's poetry. The trauma theories of Michelle Balaev and Cathy Caruth are given consideration, as well, in order to discuss the themes of trauma as they correspond to Thomas's often haunted nature imagery.

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INTRODUCTION

Transcending the boundaries of literary eras, Edward Thomas has eluded concrete characterization. As Thomas's poetic body of work contains a variety of themes, such as war, nature, and loss, scholars have struggled to clearly categorize the enigmatic poet. If one were to attempt to define Thomas merely by literary era, he would fall under the umbrella of the early Modernist or Georgian poets who eschewed the "sentimental prettiness" of the Romantics in favor of a poetic aesthetic that relied more heavily on realism (Ross 15–16). Other scholars, such as Michael Kirkham, have attempted to analyze Thomas's poetry from a psychological and metaphysical perspective. He describes Thomas as a poet who was fully aware of his own predispositions for melancholy, but who used this awareness to ruminate upon his own inadequacy as a human being in terms of social and moral ideas:

The criteria of living by which Edward Thomas measures his inadequacy in these poems – spontaneous delight and energy, untrammelled expression of one's nature, . . . and undivided sensibility – are psychological; I mean simply that they refer to forces within the personality. A label of this kind is a matter of convenience; it assumes a no doubt inadmissible division between inner and outer: a personality is partly, perhaps very largely, constituted by the kinds of relationships it makes or is able to make with the outside world. Personal well-being is also social and 'natural' well-being, and Thomas the 'born' solitary was acutely aware of this. The values invoked in his poems are more frequently social and natural – connection with others and otherness – than, in the narrow sense,

personal. (“The ‘Desert Places’” 294).

While Kirkham does not reduce his analysis of Thomas’s body of work to a purely psychoanalytic analysis, he does reassert the commonly-held belief that Thomas’s innate melancholy serves as a primary driving force for his poetry. He describes Thomas’s poetry as Thomas’s own thoughts regarding the tension between his melancholic inner world and his feelings of solitude in relation to society.

Thomas’s melancholia is well-documented, and his poetry shows an underlying mood of melancholia, which he struggled with throughout life (“Roads from France” 2 - 3). In this sense, melancholia is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as “a pathological state of despondency” as well as “a theatrical or aesthetic indulgence in reflective or maudlin emotion” (“melancholia”). According to Edna Longley, Thomas wrestled with self-doubt and neurosis, and at times, these struggles would escalate into a significant and crippling depression, resulting in a complex and fitful sadness that has many characteristics in common with melancholia (2 - 3). In an early letter, Thomas writes “I am swallowed up. I live for an income of £250 & work all day & often from 9am until 1am. It takes me so long because I fret & fret . . . My self criticism or rather my studied self contempt is now nearly a disease” (qtd. in “Roads from France” 3).

Cooke confirms Thomas’s neurotic self-doubt while making a further attempt to explain Thomas’s murky place in the literary arena. Cooke argues that Thomas’s poetry grew out of his own ennui at writing the prose (journalistic, critical, or nature-inspired) that he was contracted to write. Though Thomas was predisposed to bouts of depression, Cooke reduces the cause of Thomas’s melancholia to the hopelessness he felt at his tiring vocation as a poorly-paid prose writer:

Today Thomas's poetry is likely to be looked on as the culmination of his literary career, expressing economically, freshly and directly all that he had tried to express over the years in prose. Certainly this is how Thomas himself regarded it. Always rigorously self-critical, he had no illusions as to the quality of those books he wrote solely for money. Throughout his life he had been the slave of publishers' contracts, producing merely what was asked and paid for. And despite his apparent diffidence, he grew more conscious than any of his friends that he was working against his own nature, that such an existence robbed him of every opportunity realizing his innermost ambition—to become a poet.

However, though Thomas shows his ambition to write poetry in early letters to Frost, his poetry was not widely accepted. In particular, some of the Georgians rejected his work as Edward Marsh excluded Thomas's poetry from the *Georgian Poetry II* anthology (Cooke 92).

The difficulty in clearly characterizing Thomas's work as one kind of poetry or another may account for the undervaluing of his poetry, as Longley claims ("Roads from France" 2). She sheds further light upon the difficulty of assigning Edward Thomas to a specific era:

His poetry appears in most Great War anthologies, and the war had a crucial role in its genesis. Yet, since he wrote no trench poems, he eludes or disturbs the category "war poet." If he looks rather more like a "Nature poet", his generic range and symbolic reach expose the limits of that category too. Thomas's art also eludes the critical grasp when it is seen as 'quiet', 'understated' or diffident'. This is to mistake means for ends. (11)

With his expansive literary knowledge and understanding of symbolic resonance, Thomas's work is often subtle. His poems often contain symbols, syntactical structures, and word choices

that lend themselves to a variety of possible interpretations, as one may see in poems, such as “Rain,” “The Owl,” “The Unknown Bird,” and “As the Team’s Head Brass.” This subtlety combined with Thomas’s innate melancholia, as seen in his idyllic, pastoral, yet melancholic imagery characterizes Thomas’s body of work.

Because of his overarching, if subtle, interest in the pastoral, it is paradoxical that Thomas is often seen as a war poet, with his works included in war anthologies, such as *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*, *War Poetry: An Anthology*, and *Out of Battle: The Poetry of the Great War*. While the subject of war makes an appearance in several Thomas poems, Thomas does not fit the category of “war poet” as neatly as some of the better-known war poets, such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, since he wrote no poetry while in combat. Furthermore, Thomas’s subtle and complex poems addressing the war lack the direct references to death on the battlefield, save for a few exceptions, such as “Gone, Gone Again,” and “In Memoriam.” However, as Thomas’s letters and earlier prose works show, his thoughts were often focused on the imminence of the Great War, particularly as he struggled with his decision to enlist in the war effort: a decision that seems paradoxical at first glance because of his love for nature and his desire to preserve the pastoral landscapes of rural England.

Though some scholars, such as Anthony Johnson, claim that Thomas’s poetry contain some late-Romantic themes, Thomas also eludes the clear label of Romantic poet both in terms of the obvious time period of his writing and his poetic tone and content. Johnson states,

The poetry of [Thomas] bears some of the distinctive hallmarks of late Romanticism; in particular, it displays a rich spectrum of resolutions of a dialectic in which a poetic Self defines itself through contact with a resistant Other. (85)

As Johnson claims, much of Thomas's nature poetry characterizes forces of nature as the "resistant Other," which leads to Thomas's account of nature being simultaneously elegiac and reverent, with melancholic turns to many of the images that are the subjects of his poems. While one may argue that Thomas could be compared to the Romantic writers of the sublime, his poetry does not feature particularly strong imagery of terror, though many of his chosen images remain just beyond the grasps of both the speaker and the reader, which is characteristic of sublime experience. For instance, the speaker in Thomas's "The Unknown Bird" hears a haunting bird melody that he cannot identify, and the speaker states "Yet that he travelled through the trees and sometimes – / Neared me, was plain, though somehow distant still / He sounded" (*Edward Thomas* 55). The presence of this disconnection between the speaker and his experiences in nature as well as the speaker and the reader is a predominant characteristic in Thomas's poetry that excludes him from being classified as a Romantic poet.

If Thomas cannot be clearly identified as a war poet, a Georgian contemporary, a nature poet, a Romantic poet, or even a Modernist poet, the question remains, how does one begin to identify his body of work?

In order to investigate Thomas's enigmatic and paradoxical poetic style, one must accept that his style straddles the boundaries of multiple literary eras. Thomas himself claims to have possessed a predisposition for finding the melancholia in nature from a young age as his meditations upon nature led him to think of the grief bound to the human experience of death (Gant 9). In order to fully explore this predisposition, one must consider Thomas's childhood love for poetry as well as the subject of his love, which included eighteenth century poet, Thomas Gray.

As a teenager, Thomas was a voracious reader of poetry, copying out the works of such writers as Richard Jeffries and Izaak Walton; however, his discovery of Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" is described as a "significant turning point" by Cooke (19). Specifically, Thomas seems to have been enamored with the first two stanzas of Gray's Elegy:

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
 The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,
 The plowman homeward plods his weary way,
 And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight,
 And all the air a solemn stillness holds,
 Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,
 And drowsing tinklings lull the distant folds. (Gray 863)

Gray's "Elegy" begins with an expansive view of landscape involving the mass of a "lowing herd," and this expansive view narrows to the singular speaker, who states that the plowman "leaves the world to darkness and to me." This first stanza of Gray's elegy is echoed in the second and third stanzas of Thomas's poem "The Other," which describes a traveler who searches for his likeness on a long journey:

I learnt his road and, ere they were
 Sure I was I, left the dark wood
 Behind, kestrel and woodpecker,
 The inn in the sun, the happy mood
 When first I tasted sunlight there.

I travelled fast, in hopes I should
 Outrun that other. What to do
 When caught, I planned not. I pursued
 To prove the likeness, and, if true,
 To watch until myself I knew.

I tried the inns that evening
 Of a long gabled high-street grey,
 Of courts and outskirts, travelling
 An eager but a weary way,
 In vain. He was not there. (*Edward Thomas* 40)

In these stanzas, the speaker parallels the plowman in Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" who wearily plows his way homeward, just as the speaker in Thomas's "The Other" attempts to find his way "home" to his likeness. The speaker's doppelgänger has been seen by inn residents the day before, as shown in the lines "But 'twas here / They asked me if I did not pass / Yesterday this way?"

It is significant that Thomas describes the weariness of the traveler as he searches for his "other" on a long journey. Like the ploughman who travels a weary path toward home, the speaker in "The Other" searches for his home in "a weary way." Furthermore, Thomas's "The Other" begins in a similar way to Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard":¹

The forest ended. Glad I was
 To feel the light, and hear the hum

¹ Though a full comparison of Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" and Thomas's "The Other" is worth consideration, the comparison in this introduction serves to show how Thomas's work and influences share similarities with Gray's work; thus, only the beginning stanzas of each poem are considered for the sake of brevity.

Of bees, and smell the drying grass
 And the sweet mint, because I had come
 To an end of forest, and because
 Here was both road and inn, the sum
 Of what's not forest. (*Edward Thomas* 40)

Though Thomas's imagery is much more personal than Gray's, the expansiveness of the forest is comparable to the expansiveness of the lowly herd that Thomas describes at the beginning of the first stanza. However, in the first two stanzas of "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," Gray travels from the expansive landscape of the lowing herd and the parting day to the singularity of a droning beetle, much in the same way that Thomas travels from the sprawling landscape of an ending forest to the personal journey of the speaker who wishes to catch the "other."

Restlessness is a theme in both Gray's and Thomas's poems. As Kirkham asserts, the speaker in "The Other" finds a joy in the ending of the "dark wood," which ends his solitude and melancholy, making him "glad." However, the knowledge of the existence of an "other" that bears his likeness sets him off in a restless pursuit, thus ending his transient happiness and creating, in its place, a weariness like the weariness of Gray's ploughman (66–67).

Since Cooke asserts that Gray served as an inspiration for Thomas, this seems to be an important comparison. Thomas, unlike many of his Romantic predecessors, was predisposed to finding the melancholy in nature. Like Gray, his poetry takes the celebrated darkness found in nature and makes it personal. Both "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" and "The Other" begin expansively and quickly move to the singular, which is a common theme in many of Thomas's works. Thus, Thomas stylistically shares much with the Graveyard Poets who preceded the Gothics and Romantics. According to William Harmon, the Graveyard School was

“a group of eighteenth-century poets who wrote long poems on death and immortality,” and these poets are widely considered to be the immediate predecessors of the English Romantic movement. Harmon further explains that, “the poets so called tried to get the atmosphere of pleasing gloom by efforts to call up not only the horrors of death but the very ‘odor of the channel house’” (242).

As Thomas’s poetry features a heavy use of the melancholic and inaccessible, his work explores the sublime, even if the sublime is merely psychological. Edmund Burke first defines the sublime in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, first published in 1757 (xv). Burke says of the sublime:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operated in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. I say the strongest emotion, because I am satisfied the ideas of pain are much more powerful than those which enter on the part of pleasure. (39)

Any emotional passion is sublime by Burke’s definition, in which he states “The passion caused by the great and sublime in *nature*, when those causes operate most powerfully, is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror” (57). Burke directly correlates the vastness of nature with the idea of the sublime; therefore, it is important to investigate the role of the pastoral as it relates to the sublime and traumatic experience. Thomas frequently writes about the melancholic and vast characteristics of nature in many of his poems, including “The Other,” “Snow,” and “The Owl.” Further, nature appears to be a type of communicating force used for transmitting moods of

melancholy and inaccessible horror. Thomas often finds vastness in pastoral landscapes despite the pastoral's physical boundaries.

As Burke closely relates the sublime to terror, one must be careful not to confuse the sublime with the beautiful, though the two ideas are closely related. Burke defines beauty as “that quality or those qualities in bodies by which they cause love, or some passion similar to it” (91). Further, Burke explicates the differences between the beautiful and the sublime with regards to the vastness of dimensions, dark versus light, and smooth versus rough lines (124).

While many of the Romantics wrote poetry that deals with darkness in nature, they are commonly associated with the stereotypically Romantic idea of nature as a source of interminable beauty. However, Thomas regularly uses aspects of the sublime, particularly its vastness and inaccessibility, to represent nature from a melancholic perspective. In Thomas's poetry, the sublime corresponds with the pastoral in Thomas's tendency to link the English countryside with the notion of the inherent darkness and inaccessibility of nature. Though the connection is not concrete, there is an inherent connection between such darkness in nature, even melancholic passion, and the sublime.

Along with this type of sublime comes an overwhelming sense of nostalgia, which is also related to the paradoxical and inaccessible themes found in Thomas's poetry. Thomas's decision to join the war effort was a decision he labored over for many months, as shown in his letters to friend and contemporary, Robert Frost, and his decision stemmed from a desire to preserve the nature characteristics found in rural, pre-war England. Though his poetry features an absence of overt war imagery, such as can be found in Wilfred Owen's poems “Anthem for Doomed Youth” and “At a Cavalry Near Ancre” as well as Siegfried Sassoon's “Suicide in the Trenches” and “Trench Duty,” Thomas represents the war in terms of absence: the disintegration of the English

countryside, the rural landscapes, and the generations of countrymen that were destroyed on the battlefield. As I discuss in a later chapter, his representation of the war is significant as Thomas's decision to join the war effort was related to his desire to preserve his idea of the old, pre-war England, his nostalgic view of the English countryside, the natural beauty of the pastoral, and the rural people who populated the countryside. In terms of the war, Thomas approaches his poems about war from a standpoint of nostalgia in which it is clear that his decision to enlist was related to his true patriotism, which was characterized by a desire to preserve England in its ideal rather than a desire to show his loyalty to any particular political cause. Thomas shows this desire through his reliance upon pastoral imagery, subtlety, and nature images that are infused with darkness, distance, and melancholia.

As many different schools of poetry and life events influenced Thomas, his work remains difficult to characterize; however, he was certainly a poet who was predisposed to melancholia and nostalgia and well-versed in his literary tradition. As a result, Thomas's poetry often features themes of inaccessibility and nostalgia as well as images of nature's darkness, which is perfectly suited for the war-torn British society that struggles with the inaccessible trauma of World War I as it affects their ways of life.

This thesis will discuss Thomas's enigmatic style of poetry and its timeliness for the traumatized British society, who experienced the confusion and devastation of World War I from a distance through a veil of propaganda and media influence by analyzing the presence of significant themes in his poetry. Further, this thesis will contextualize Thomas's work by considering his letters and prose works along with the natural, political, and social states of England at the time. Much of Thomas's poetry contains themes that allude to the traumatic

experience suffered by the British population during World War I, which forever altered British society.

CHAPTER ONE

“THE BEAUTY OF SPRING MIXED WITH THE SADNESS OF DEATH.”

EDWARD THOMAS’S MELANCHOLIC NATURE

Thomas’s Connections with War and Nature

Edna Longley maintains that though Thomas is often anthologized as a World War I poet, he wrote no poetry while in the trenches in France (Longley 11). Instead, much of his poetry, even during the war years, is dedicated to natural environments that he loved throughout his life. According to Gant, in the autobiographical work, *The Childhood of Edward Thomas*, Thomas wrote “I enjoyed the beauty of spring mixed with the sadness of death” (9). This youthful love for the mixture of natural beauty and melancholy carried over into Thomas’s adult life. According to Gant, Thomas longed for open spaces not infringed upon by the technological advancements of the Industrial Revolution (12). Some of the most noticeable changes that occurred in the natural scenery of the English countryside were due to preparations for the “Great War” being fought in France. For example, the trees that Thomas so loved were chopped down to provide timber for the trenches on the French warfront (13). Thus, it seems even more paradoxical that Thomas joined the war effort since World War I helped to destroy those aspects of nature that Thomas longed to immerse himself in. Thomas’s little-known collection of prose

entitled *Wales*, published posthumously in 1924, includes an essay entitled “A Farmhouse,” which demonstrates his observant fascination as well as his interaction with nature. He writes,

We had been out all day, cutting and binding the late corn. At one moment we admired the wheat straightening in the sun after drooping in rain, with grey heads all bent one way over the luminous amber stalks, and at last leaning and quivering like runners about to start or like a wind made visible. At another moment we admired the gracious groups of sheaves in pyramids made by our own hands, as we sat and drank our buttermilk and ale, and ate bread and cheese or chwippod (the harvesters’ stiff pudding of raisins, rice, bread, and fresh milk) among the furze mixed with bramble and fern at the edge of the field. Behind us was a place given over to blue scabious flowers, haunted much by blue butterflies of the same hue; to cross-leaved heath and its clusters of close, pensile ovals, of a perfect white that blushed towards the sun; to a dainty embroidery of tormentil shining with unvaried gold; and to tall, purple loosestrife, with bees at it, dispensing a thin perfume of the kind that all fair living things, plants or children, breathe. (qtd. in Gant 85)

The scene that Thomas describes is one of a peaceful interaction with nature, in which he and his companion admire the beauty of the blue scabious flowers, purple loosestrife, and wheat. Rather than describing the act of harvesting in terms of labor and ennui, Thomas shows his appreciation for the agricultural life as well as native plant life and the wet weather. Destroying nature was part of the process of preparing for war, and natural beauty is not a factor in scenes of war¹.

¹ Evidence showing the massive deforestation that occurred in preparations for World War I can be found in Chapter Three on p. 61.

Therefore, it seems nonsensical that Thomas would join the war effort as he would not be able to indulge his love and appreciation for nature.

However, once Thomas joined the army in 1915 and began fighting in France in 1917, Thomas kept notes in a diary that described the paradoxical mixture of war's carnage and nature's beauty. As Gant claims,

Yet, surrounded by desolation, he could still find brief delight in the 'chilled clean air' and his ear and mind were receptive to the birds he had always loved, the blackbird 'singing in the quiet of the battery' and the larks in no man's land whose song he was intent on hearing in spite of the shelling as he went above ground in the early light. (Gant 13)

Thomas fuses nature, poetry, and traumatic experience in a form of melancholy, whether this melancholy originated from the war's effects on him as an Englishman or from his own personality.

Beginning in childhood, Thomas's choice of hobbies and reading demonstrated his love for nature. As Thomas claims in *The Last Sheaf*, "Almost as soon as I could babble. . . I babbled of green fields" (18). He often collected moths, butterflies, and birds' eggs as a child, and by the time he was a teenager, he was reading naturalist poetry along with Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written In A Country Churchyard" (Cooke 18-19). Thomas's love for nature and for poetry that melded the melancholy with nature was such that in all of his books, he copied the following lines from *The Amateur Poacher* by Richard Jefferies: "Let us get out of these indoor narrow modern days, whose twelve hours somehow have become shortened, into the sunlight and the pure wind. A something that the ancients thought divine can be found and felt there still" (20). These lines, which Thomas found to be important enough to repeatedly copy out, correspond

with the philosophy of the 18th century Graveyard School. Thomas identified with the mournful tone present in these lines. The second line, in which Jefferies writes of the “ancient thought divine” that can be found in nature, echoes one of the principle characteristics of the Graveyard School.

While Thomas’s poetry often takes an elegiac tone, the apparent horror that characterizes true Graveyard poetry is absent. However, Romantic scholar Marilyn Gaull explains how the English poets and artists were inspired by the idea of the graveyard, and specifically, the idea of landscape as a graveyard. She further explains how nature and landscape are inherently infused with melancholia for the English poet:

The ease with which the English, indeed most Europeans, accepted the idea of landscape as a graveyard, of natural history as a succession of failures, may be attributed in part to painters and poets who found inspiration in graveyards, death, and decay. Verse inspired by graveyards usually presents a pensive and solitary speaker reflecting on death among ruins, or in a graveyard, or on a hillside, at twilight or by moonlight, surrounded by cypress or yews or hollow oak trees inhabited by owls and bats, stirred by an impending or departing storm. The speaker usually exhibits that fashionable characteristic “sensibility,” a susceptibility to delicate or tender feeling, an emotional responsiveness expressed either in tears or exaggerated rhetoric. . . The beauty, order, and harmony of the universe as found in landscape, for example, aroused feelings of kindness, pity, generosity, and love, what [Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury] called the “natural affections,” expressions of kindness and tenderness for orphans, animals, widows, and aged men. In James Thompson’s “The Seasons”

(rev. 1744–1746), a poem that delighted and fascinated Romantic writers and painters, the cultivation of feeling by studying landscape takes on an elegiac tone.

(Gaul 216–217)

Many of Thomas's poems represent this idea of the interconnectedness between nature and melancholy, or more specifically, nature and elegy. For instance, in his poem, "Birds' Nests," the first stanza describes a natural graveyard found in nature by the speaker:

The summer nests uncovered by autumn wind,
 Some torn, others dislodged, all dark,
 Everyone sees them: low or high in tree,
 Or hedge, or single bush, they hang like a mark. (*Edward Thomas* 43)

While nests are commonly associated with birth and new life, the nests are uninhabited. Nature itself is a graveyard, as the "torn," "dislodged," and "all dark" nests are "a mark," echoing the darkness that would characterize a graveyard. The connection between nature and death is further emphasized by the phrase "they hang like a mark." The further use of the word "hang" carries a morbid connotation when combined with the imagery of the torn and empty birds' nests.

Thomas wrote poetry during the era of the Georgian revolt, the prewar grouping of young poets, writers, and artists who sought to revolutionize the arts and humanities, which they believed had descended into an insipid, "sentimental prettiness" from the aesthetic of the Romantic movement, and which further revolted against the widespread Humanism that T.E. Hulme blamed for being responsible for "the state of slush in which we have the misfortune to live" (Ross 15–16). Many Georgians sought to revolt against the poetic standards which had been considered the norm since the Romantic era, to revolt against widespread intellectual

Humanism, and to revolt against Victorianism (17–20). In other words, many Georgians longed to create a new aesthetic that denounced the blindness of the Victorians and some Romantics, who eschewed the less brutal images present in nature and life in favor of an aesthetic that featured idealized imagery of nature and reality.

Though Thomas's poetry appears to come from Romantic leanings upon first observation, the presence of the melancholy within his observations and musings upon nature represents the realism and sincerity that many Georgian poets wished to bring back to poetry. Thomas is not often considered to have played a large part in the Georgian revolt, but his correspondences with such Georgians as Lascelles Abercrombie along with his predisposition for uniting the English pastoral with unflinching realism lead to him being inextricably bound to the era. Georgian writer John Gould Fletcher quotes the Irish dramatist J.M. Synge when describing the changes that must be made to poetry in order to form this new aesthetic: As Synge states, "poetry, to be human again, must first learn to be brutal" (qtd. in Ross 21). Yet, Thomas showed the tendencies of the Georgians early in life. Although Thomas's work does not share the tone of brutality that Synge advocates, Thomas's poetry features a different mode of brutal honesty in that he consistently represents the darker, more melancholic side of nature in his poetic imagery.

Nature and Melancholy in Thomas's Poetry

As Thomas enjoyed "the beauty of spring mixed with the sadness in death" even in childhood, one finds evidence that Thomas was predisposed to mixing the melancholic with the natural, and that he demonstrated a strong love and reverence for nature, beginning at a young age (Gant 9). Though there is plenty of imagery present in Thomas's poetry that praises nature's beauty, there are also many images that are paradoxical in the sense that the images themselves

seem to come from double-negative thinking used to express the positive. One example appears in the poem “The Cuckoo:”

That's the cuckoo, you say. I cannot hear it.
 When last I heard it I cannot recall; but I know
 Too well the year when first I failed to hear it -
 It was drowned by my man groaning out to his sheep 'Ho! Ho!'

 Ten times with an angry voice he shouted
 'Ho! Ho!' but not in anger, for that was his way.
 He died that Summer, and that is how I remember
 The cuckoo calling, the children listening, and me saying 'Nay'.

 And now, as you said, 'There it is', I was hearing
 Not the cuckoo at all, but my man's 'Ho! Ho!' instead.
 And I think that even if I could lose my deafness
 The cuckoo's note would be drowned by the voice of my dead.

 (*Edward Thomas 54*)

The poem is written in a loose iambic pentameter with many deviations. One such notable deviation occurs in line five when the speaker describes her memory of her lover using an “angry voice” toward the sheep. However, the man did not have anger but used an angry voice nonetheless. The “angry voice” may reflect upon the widow’s own strong feelings of losing her lover after the cuckoo’s prophetic call, which she first fails to hear before her lover dies. His “angry voice” drowns out the call of the cuckoo and possesses enough resonance to

herd the sheep. The first major break in iambic pentameter, occurring in the first stanza as the widow describes her lover “groaning out to his sheep,” represents the aural image of the “angry voice.” Both “groaning” and “angry” are particularly lively and strong words to describe the particular tone of her lover’s voice while still alive. This is a tone that drowns out the call of the cuckoo, to which the widow becomes deaf.

In the final stanza, the speaker mentions the possibility of losing deafness – specifically, to lose her deafness to the cuckoo’s call. Longley’s note on this poem gives more information about the speaker and the source of her grief. Even if she could hear, her grief for her lost lover, or “[her] dead,” would supplant any reprieve from her silence, thus rendering her unable to hear the bird:

In ‘An Old Farm’ Thomas refers to “the palpitating, groaning shout of the shepherd, Ho! ho! ho! ho! ho! (*HE*, 72). . . This is unique among Thomas’s poems in being a dramatic monologue spoken by a woman. He lays out a mnemonic paradox: the widow’s inability to hear the cuckoo brings a human voice into elegiac presence (“Notes” 181)

Therefore, it makes sense, in this poem, that Thomas would mention the acquisition of hearing as a different type of loss. The paradox of losing deafness is explained through the widow’s grief, who knows she will not be able to hear the cuckoo’s call because she is grieving for her lost lover, and she associates the cuckoo’s call with her memories of her lover. According to *The Continuum Encyclopedia of Animal Symbolism in Art*, the cuckoo symbolizes much in the realms of love and death.

Nearly universally regarded as a harbinger of spring, the cuckoo was also a prophetic bird, a portent of death, and a SOUL carrier (Gimbutas cites instances

from the Baltic region, England, Wales, Lithuania, Greece, and Siberia, 195). . .

The bird's call "cuckoo" gave rise to the word "cuckold" because of the traditional sexual license and the temporary abandonment of marriage bonds during the traditional May festivals. (123)

It is significant that Thomas chose the call of the cuckoo as the call that the widow could not hear. The cuckoo precedes the lover's death in the first two stanzas of the poem:

When last I heard it I cannot recall; but I know

Too well the year when first I failed to hear it –

It was drowned by my man groaning out to his sheep 'Ho! Ho!'

Ten times with an angry voice he shouted

'Ho! Ho!' but not in anger, for that was his way.

He died that Summer, and that is how I remember

The cuckoo calling, the children listening, and me saying 'Nay'. (*Edward Thomas*
54)

She fails to hear the cuckoo in her memory of her lover, who calls out in an angry voice to the sheep, yet not *in* anger. While it is paradoxical that this angry voice is not used to speak in anger, the "angry voice" may be considered to be a particularly resonant voice used by the shepherd to guide sheep as well as his household. The widow has not always been deaf to the calls of the cuckoo, but during the first spring before her lover's death, she could only hear his call to the sheep. It is interesting that she knows that the cuckoo was present in this scene, yet she cannot hear its call; this knowledge suggests that someone, her lover or her children, brought her attention to the presence of the cuckoo. That she fails to hear the call shows that she refuses to

make her lover a cuckold, even in death, which represents her devotion to her husband despite his absence. The last line of the poem clearly shows her refusal to “lose [her] deafness” in order to hear the cuckoo’s call because she believes the cuckoo’s call “would be drowned by the voice of [her] dead” (54). As such, this is a love poem with an elegiac tone as the speaker refers to [her] dead in the final line, and it is clear that she is referring to her lost lover. By expressing the widow’s grief in terms of her memories of the cuckoo’s call and her late lover, the cuckoo is a melancholic image of nature.

This poem, written by Thomas in January of 1915, is a manifestation of Thomas’s tendency to combine nature with the melancholic. His immersion in poets, such as Shakespeare, Shelley, and Keats, who were attuned to the conventional symbolic uses of nature, allows him to employ symbols drawn from nature for his own purposes. Thus, he uses the cuckoo not as a symbol of spring’s arrival and rebirth but of death, remembrance, and mourning. The speaker is not referring to “the dead” in the final line, but “[her] dead,” meaning she takes possession of the dead, specifically her dead lover, who keeps her from hearing the cuckoo’s call. This ownership explains her failure to recall the cuckoo’s song because she possesses the remembrance and mourning of her lover, making her deafness a personal deafness. The cuckoo’s call is drowned out by her own lament for her lost lover.

Though one may argue that “The Cuckoo” is distinctive in terms of using nature in an elegiac sense, several other poems in his body of work show this same tendency. Edward Thomas’s “Rain” shows Thomas’s penchant for finding the melancholy in nature and for representing nature in such a way that nature appears to be a stimulus for remembrance and mournfulness. Written January 7, 1916, Thomas composed this poem while in active training for

duty during World War I at Hare Hall Camp, Gidea Park, Essex after being promoted to lance corporal (Cooke 90). According to Longley, “Rain”’s

. . . seamless symbolism blends sound, image, cadence, and the voice of the ‘ghostly double’ into a prospect of ‘annihilation’ or nihilism now intensified by war. The repeated ‘rain’ (rhyme, refrain, rhetoric, onomatopoeia) fuses outward bombardment with inner dissolution. (“Notes” 267–68)

Thus, in “Rain,” Thomas uses paradox, irony, and symbolism in order to reflect upon the uncertain qualities of life, the transient nature of death, and the finality and inevitability that characterize death. These reflections were likely influenced by his observations of and training for the war, which would understandably lead to a heightened consideration of the mysteries of death and dying.

“Rain” is also an elegiac poem. Here, through his use of ambiguity and poetic form, Thomas represents the brevity and continuous action of the dying process, shown parallel to the finality of death:

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 to-night 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. (*Edward Thomas* 105)

While iambic pentameter is the consistent meter of choice, Thomas deviates from the meter on several occasions. Each line beginning with a stressed word is anomalous, showing the importance of the stressed words as these lines deviate from iambic pentameter.

These deviations, in the cases of “rain” (1), “blessed” (7), “solitary” (10), and “myriads of broken reeds” (14), alert the reader to the weight these words bear.

At first glance, one may interpret the poem as an artistic reaction to a natural earthly occurrence. However, Thomas creates internal tension by connecting the rain with a theme of death in lines 1 – 3, just as the cuckoo is connected with the death of the widow’s husband. While rain is necessary for life to thrive, it is paradoxical that the rain provokes the speaker's ruminations about death's inevitability. The rain’s association with death, memory, and mourning is consistent with Thomas’s melancholic view of nature.

Thomas relies on the connotative association between rain and solitude by placing the words in close proximity. As the speaker lies in solitude in his “bleak hut,” he imagines that others also remain in solitude as it rains (105). This solitude, as a quiet state of aloneness,

contrasts with the wild nature of the rain. Furthermore, the speaker prays that none that he has ever “loved / Is dying to-night or lying still awake / Solitary. . .” (105). Within these lines, death and solitude are nearly synonymous, and the speaker infers that solitude is equivalent to death rather than being a simple state of aloneness.

Solitude is a natural state for every human life, however transitory it may be; in “Rain,” the speaker’s solitude must involve more than merely a quiet state of being alone. Thus, he defines solitude as “lying still awake.” If the emphasis is placed upon the word “lying,” the line reveals the speaker’s restlessness within his solitude, much like the “wild” rain that is in perpetual motion. However, if the emphasis is placed upon the “lying still,” the speaker is clarifying that he is not in a state of sleep, though his body is at rest.

Though the speaker alludes to an aversion to death through his prayer to spare his loved ones from death, the final lines of the poem contain an ironic statement that complicates the speaker’s feelings toward death as he describes a rain that has destroyed all loves, excluding the “love of death.” Death is a dominant theme in the poem; hence, this theme is emphasized through a metaphorical repetition as the speaker compares death to “broken reeds” that are “still and stiff”. “Broken reeds” reference literal plant life that is no longer living as a broken reed may not receive the nourishment from sunlight and rain that is required to sustain its life.

However, Thomas’s choice of “broken reeds” as a symbol is particular; in early Greek elegy, the singer of elegy was accompanied by the *aulos*: a reed instrument similar, though not identical to, a flute (Bowie 14). The association between the reed and the elegy appears to be an association of which Thomas was aware. Thomas’s choice of words and images suggests that he viewed the act of dying as a process that was caught in a state of transition with no resolution.

That the reeds are broken implies that the elegy cannot be sung, and thus, comfort may not be found in the process of dying.

Despite the strength of this symbol, the speaker refers to a “love of death” when he prays that “none of those whom [he] once loved / Is dying to-night. . .” (105). The irony is revealed in the final two lines of the poem when the speaker states his true motivations behind this love: “If love it be for what is perfect and / Cannot, the tempest tells me, disappoint” (105). The speaker’s love of death lies in its inherent inevitability as death will never disappoint by refusing to occur. Therefore, as the rain reminds the speaker of death, it also interrupts the somber tone of the poem by intruding upon the images of bleakness and solitude

The theme of death is further perpetuated in the speaker’s allusions to the tradition of baptism. For example,

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:

The acts of giving thanks and being washed clean allude to this biblical tradition involving a metaphorical death. As the speaker describes the rain as “washing [him] cleaner than [he has] been,” he identifies the moment of total immersion during baptism, that marks the transient moment placed between metaphorical death and life as the baptized leaves his former life of original and acquired sin and begins life anew as a follower and child of Christ (105). The tradition of baptism correlates with other symbols in the poem as it alludes to the transient moment between life and death.

Further, to “remember again that I shall die” suggests that the speaker experiences constant remembrances of the dead and that such solitude brings his own realization that he will also make the transition from life to death. Like the widow in “The Cuckoo” who is deaf to the cuckoo’s call because of her remembrance of her lover’s death, the speaker in “Rain” feels “helpless among the living and the dead” for those who mourn their lost loved ones and those who have made the journey from life to death.

The speaker further laments the uncertainties of life while envying the dead:

But here I pray that none whom once I loved
 Is dying to-night or lying still awake
 Solitary, listening to the rain,
 Either in pain or thus in sympathy
 Helpless among the living and the dead (105)

Thomas’s word choice in the preceding passage uniquely combines past and present tense. The speaker prays at the current moment, yet he prays that “none whom once [he] loved / Is dying to-night or lying still awake. . .” (105). “Dying” and “lying” are both in a present continuous tense, which suggests that the speaker fears both actions as progress rather than their completed states. As previously mentioned, the speaker equates the process of dying with the process of lying in solitude, as both processes involve uncertainty. In particular, the process of dying is especially transient, and its symbolic representation lies in the “midnight rain,” where midnight occurs between two distinct days. Like midnight, which exists between the death of one day and the birth of another, the process of dying occurs between being and nonbeing. It is difficult to identify the exact moment of existence that lies between life and death; the speaker prays that “those whom once [he] loved” do not exist in this transient state between being and

nonbeing, which shows his aversion to this uncertain state. The process of dying is a natural occurrence, though transient, and the “wild” and “midnight” rain symbolizes these characteristics of death. Though rain often symbolizes life within a positive context, Thomas’s poem reflects upon the uncertain and transient nature of life while the speaker longs for the finality of inevitable death.

This “love of death” is a common theme upon which Thomas brooded during his life. In 1908, he wrote: “How nice it would be to be dead if only we could know we were dead. That is what I hate, the not being able to turn round in the grave & to say It is over. With me I suppose it is vanity: I don’t want to do so difficult a thing as dying without any chance of applause after having done it” (“Notes” 268). According to Longley, both poetry and death were inextricably fused in Thomas’s mind. Like the nature that he muses upon, he considered death to be “a kingly thing which was once only at any man’s call. After it came annihilation” (268). The speaker in “Rain” lies in a “bleak hut” while reminiscing about those lost to death, the same death that the speaker claims that the “wild rain” has not yet dissolved his love for. Rather than fearing death itself, the speaker, and Thomas himself, fear annihilation and the unconsciousness that may be characteristic of death.

Thomas’s Friendship with Frost in Terms of War and Poetry

His close friend Robert Frost believed that Thomas enlisted in the war effort as a result of an incident with a belligerent gamekeeper, during which Thomas was threatened (Longley 17). Thomas refused to fight the gamekeeper, and this refusal led to him confronting his own fear of annihilation as represented by his failure to enlist in the war effort. The incident forced Thomas to reconsider his own cowardice in terms of war enlistment as he wrote in a letter to Frost,

I had to spoil the effect of your letter by writing 1000 words about Rupert Brooke's posthumous book - not daring to say that those sonnets about him enlisting are probably not very personal but a nervous attempt to connect with himself the very widespread idea that self sacrifice is the highest self indulgence. . . I daren't say so, not having enlisted or fought keeper. (qtd. in Longley 17-18)

However, Thomas's struggle with his decision to enlist is far more complex and cannot be reduced to a single incident. Plagued by a failure to find literary work that could keep Thomas out of poverty, he faced a decision: join Frost in America to find work or enlist in the war effort (17). Thomas's feelings of despair over his lack of meaningful work are seen in a diary entry from October 27, 1903:

Morning writing. Afternoon a 6 mile walk with Merfyn in rain and wind. Merfyn happy and I, too, perhaps: but once I got home I could have fallen into bed and have slept forever. Day by day I wish for that. Trifling debts-no money-little but countless dirtiness and untidiness in the house-lack of forcible company-lack of ambition-inability to write except pitiful reviews. . . all make me powerless, isolated and yet indifferent, discontented and yet inert. I cannot kill myself and fate will not. (*Edward Thomas: Selected Letters* 31)

Thomas's work as a literary critic and journalist was unsatisfying and impoverishing, and it wasn't until he met Robert Frost that Thomas began to seriously consider writing poetry and thus, coming to terms with his own fear of annihilation.

Thomas's relationship with Frost began before he met Frost when Thomas wrote a review praising Frost's work, *A Boy's Will*, in July 1914 (Lehmann 141). After this review, Thomas became acquainted with Frost when Frost moved to Little Iddens village on the border

of Gloucestershire in spring 1914 (146). This began a budding friendship between Thomas and Frost; while Thomas had previously written prose, reviews, and journalist pieces, Frost encouraged him to turn his talents to poetry (148). According to Lehmann, Thomas's interest in poetry was further ignited by the beginning of World War I:

And it was not only Frost's continual perceptive persuasion that brought him to cross the borderline, but also the intense awareness that the war evoked of himself as an Englishman, of belonging to the English tradition and the country of England; an awareness that he was going to be able to express most skillfully, without any jingoism or platitudinous sentiment. (148)

As Longley maintains, Thomas's decision did not lie in a simple drive to remain patriotic to England. His decision to enlist in the army was an act of poetry in and of itself, and thus, his experience with enlistment and military training manifested a fusion between war and poetry (14). In a sense, Thomas seemed to live a life of internal conflict plagued by doubt and fear. At first, he was reluctant to write poetry, often sticking to prose about the English countryside, literary criticism, and journalism. Frost began to encourage Thomas to take up poetry writing, but Thomas originally eschewed Frost's suggestions as he struggled with a low self-esteem. In a letter to Robert Frost, Thomas writes

I wonder whether you can imagine me taking to verse. If you can I might get over the feeling that it is impossible – which at once obliges your good nature to say “I can.” In any case I must have my “writer's melancholy” though I can quite agree with you that I might spare some of it to the deficient. On the other hand even with registered post, telegraph, or all modern conveniences I doubt if I could transmit it. (Cooke 73)

Though Frost's encouragement was much appreciated by Thomas, his encouragement did not act as the catalyst to begin Thomas's poetry writing. Thomas showed self-doubt in his poetry writing abilities, which may have come from his reviewing such gifted contemporaries. Thomas believed that it would be "impossible" to write poetry as strong as that of Robert Frost, which led to his reluctance to attempt the art form. On June 6, 1914, Thomas wrote to Frost, explaining, in part, his hesitation to write poetry, stating

I am so plagued with work, burning my candle at 3 ends. Every night late I read one of your poems. I enjoy them but if I did what I liked I wouldn't read them now. It is not fair at all. . . Yes, I quite see about using the 'naked tones', not the mere words, of certain profoundly characteristic instinctive rhythms. And No, you don't bore me. Only I feel a fraud in that I have unconsciously rather imitated your interest in the matter. . . (R. Thomas 94 – 95)

In this excerpt from the June 6 letter, we see that Edward Thomas's love of poetry was ignited before he seriously considered writing it. As a literary critic, he often praised Frost's work, becoming particularly enamored with Frost's use of rhythm that echoes speech without compromising imagery. In his review of Frost's *North of Boston*, Thomas alludes to his love for poetry as a representation of realism and emotion in nature:

The new volume marks more than the beginning of an experiment like Wordsworth's, but with this difference, that Mr. Frost knows the life of which he writes rather as Dorothy Wordsworth did. That is to say, he sympathizes where Wordsworth contemplates. The result is a unique type of eclogue, homely, racy, and touched by a spirit that might, under other circumstances, have made pure lyrics on the one hand or drama on the other. . . There are moments when the

plain language and lack of violence make the unaffected verses look like prose, except that the sentences, if spoken aloud, are most felicitously true in rhythm to the emotion. Only at the end of the best pieces, such as ‘The Death of the Hired Man’, ‘Home Burial’, ‘The Black Cottage’, and ‘The Wood-pile’ do we realize that they are masterpieces of deep and mysterious tenderness. (72–73)

It is interesting that Thomas would refer to the possibility that Frost’s prose-like verses may contain a “lack of violence” at first glance. Yet, he praises Frost for sympathizing with nature rather than merely contemplating it. By mentioning a “lack of violence,” Thomas suggests that good poetry would normally contain some sort of violence or conflict, or rather, that the verses should be “true in rhythm to the emotion.” In other words, Thomas long agreed with the Georgians that Romantic verse should not descend into “sentimental prettiness,” but should be true to life in all of its violence, mystery, and conflict, even when merged with natural beauty.

Thomas’s associations of nature with conflict were not unnoticed. Frost soon expressed his belief in Thomas as a poet who would be moved to poetry by circumstances of the war. In a letter to Lascelles Abercrombie, written on September 21, 1915, Frost writes, “I forgot to mention the war in this letter. And I ought to mention it, if only to remark that I think it has made some sort of new man and a poet out of Edward Thomas” (R. Thomas 248).

Yet, Thomas was reluctant to join the war effort. As a result, much of the imagery and his syntactical quirks are the result of Thomas’s own struggle to reconcile both of his reluctant lives – life as a poet and life as a soldier.

In many of Thomas’s nature poems, this blend of war’s devastation with the bucolic is evident. Thomas seemed to want to preserve the pastoral landscapes in the English countryside, so his decision to join the war effort, which helped to destroy the landscapes that Thomas so

loved, seems uncharacteristic. However, Thomas saw nature's own penchant for destruction, which he presents with realism in his poetry, and this view of nature allows for Thomas's decision to be considered from a standpoint of understanding.

Edna Longley explains at length how Thomas's poetry is a model for the "interrupted georgic" or "war pastoral" in that war "infiltrates an agricultural scenario" ("War Pastorals" 466). Further, according to Jane Haber, the pastoral "has always been a reflexive 'mode that work[s] insistently against itself, problematizing both its own definition and stable definitions within its texts'" (qtd. in "War Pastorals" 465). The pastoral is always in flux, particularly in the Modernist era, because of the constantly changing face of nature and the English countryside, which Thomas seems to have wanted preserved. As a prose writer, Thomas observed and experienced the state of the English countryside, which was in constant flux. According to Longley:

As English people became the most town-based in Europe, there was a surge of cultural compensation: a back-to-nature movement; renewed attention to all forms of folk tradition; ideological investment in country life, 'village England', and the vanishing farm-labourer as bearers of national identity. Thomas belonged to this cultural tendency. ("War Pastorals" 466)

In essence, Thomas saw the conflict between the industrialization and mechanizing of modernist England and the people's desire, which he shared, to preserve the countryside. Nature itself, in all of its joyous and melancholic characteristics, was a form of inspiration for Thomas's early prose as well as his poetry. As mankind's consistent and steady destruction of nature became evident to Thomas, he seemed to realize that nature itself was ridden with covert forms of conflict, symbolizing the further violence and conflict that man was bringing to nature.

Observing Nature's Inherent Conflicts

Thomas showed his own observations of this form of conflict in his poetry.

Longley states

In 'As the team's head brass [sic], [the interrupted georgic] adds a further dimension to the aesthetic strategy that Thomas shared with Robert Frost: speech rhythms played against verse pattern. At every level, the poem has its ear to the ground of wartime upheaval in rural England, where war or technology dooms the 'team.' (466)

One striking example of this amalgamation of destruction and natural beauty occurs in Thomas's poem "Digging," published April 4, 1915:

Today I think
 Only with scents, - scents dead leaves yield,
 And bracken, and wild carrot's seed,
 And the square mustard field;

Odours that rise
 When the spade wounds the root of tree,
 Rose, currant, raspberry, or goutweed,
 Rhubarb or celery;

The smoke's smell, too,
 Flowing from where a bonfire burns
 The dead, the waste, the dangerous,

And all to sweetness turns.

It is enough

To smell, to crumble the dark earth,

While the robin sings over again

Sad songs of autumn mirth.

(Edward Thomas 79–80)

While this poem has a twin, also entitled “Digging,” the focus of this poem lies in its pastoral imagery, which contains images of natural violence. Thomas uses several different senses to artistically render the natural. For instance, we are introduced to the concept of death in the first two lines as the speaker thinks “only with scents, - scents dead leaves yield” (79). Though leaves experience natural deaths during every autumn, we learn that the deaths of these leaves are not natural deaths that occur in cyclical fashion, but are deaths that are brought about by man’s own hand, which wields the spade, which occurs in the second stanza.

The spade “wounds” the tree, which releases the scents or “odours” (as they have transformed to by the second stanza), resulting in a seductive aroma that the speaker considers to be of “sweetness.” The use of the word “wound” is particular and violent in its connotations, though the result of such wounding leads to “sweetness” in the form of scents released from the attacked trees. “Wound” is inherently a warlike term tied to war’s destruction of both man and nature. In this stanza, violence leads nature to reveal its beauty even further, which may reference Thomas’s own revelations regarding his own love of the pastoral.

An intriguing double-meaning appears in the violence that characterizes the third stanza, as the man-made bonfire burns the aspects of nature. There is a line break between the second

and third lines of this stanza, making it unclear at first whether the speaker refers to the bonfire as a bonfire that is burning, or whether the speaker refers to the bonfire burning “the dead, the waste, the dangerous” (80). The latter reading lends itself to the interpretation that man’s hand burns the dead, much like the dead are continuously burned by further warfare and conflict. Their memories are not honored as more bloodshed occurs, much like the seasons, which occur cyclically leading to further death in the face of rebirth and recovery. As they are continuously wounded by the spade, the trees are unable to retaliate except to release their own beauty for man’s enjoyment. Other than the release of scents, nature responds in the robin’s song in the final stanza, as the robin sings “over again / sad songs of autumn mirth” (80).

That the songs are sad, but are representative of autumn mirth presents the reader with another oxymoron. However, this oxymoronic line echoes Thomas’s own experiences of the countryside, during which he saw nature from a conflicted point of view. The robin’s song, which is being sung “over again” calls to mind nature’s own memory, voiced via birdsong that is simultaneously mirthful and sad. The combination of sadness with mirth echoes the sadness and mirth present in humanity through violence, such as warfare. Autumn’s mirth is brought about by a literal wounding of its own physical state as the spade wounds the tree, and the tree releases pleasant scents. The robin’s song is nearly an afterthought, except that it ends the poem and shows that birdsong, once again, goes unheard and ignored. Like the widow’s deafness in “The Cuckoo,” the speaker merely hears the robin’s “sad songs of autumn mirth,” which seem to be sung from a standpoint of mourning nature’s cyclical destruction.

Again, Thomas combines nature’s passivity and beauty with war diction to illustrate his own melancholic view of what transpires in nature. By writing poetry of nature and showing aspects of nature in constant conflict with nature itself and manmade ventures, Thomas melds

together the violence of modernist thought and action with the oft-ignored beauty and conflict present in nature itself. Thus, Thomas's decision to enlist in the war, despite the war's devastation of the English countryside and rural landscapes, represents his own views of nature itself. Similar to the speaker's "love of death" in "Rain," Thomas loves nature in its reality rather than its Romantic "sentimental prettiness." War appears to be a natural state in and of itself, though nature's conflicts differ greatly from manmade conflicts. It is important to consider how Thomas came to develop this realistic, yet subtly dark view of nature in its wholly true form.

CHAPTER TWO

THE OWL'S CRY AND THE WOUNDED TREE: NATURE AS
COMMUNICATOR OF GRIEF AND TRAUMA**Thomas's Enlistment Decision in Relation to Development as Poet**

Though Thomas demonstrated a love for literature and poetry at a young age, he spent his early adult years as a journalist and prose writer for the *Daily Chronicle* in London. While it seems paradoxical that Thomas would be concerned with the war effort, given his love for the pastoral landscapes of the English countryside, it appears that Thomas did not fully commit to writing poetry until he encountered Robert Frost on October 5, 1913 and began to think about the looming war. Thomas was commissioned to write three essays about the war, and this assignment helped him further develop an interest and passion for poetry through his interactions with people and his observations. In the months of August and September, 1914, Thomas interviewed people in various English cities in order to understand the people's reaction to the war (Cooke 79). Even at the outset of the war, Thomas found conflicting opinions though many young men were enlisting, some out of feelings of duty, some for expectations of excitement, and others because they felt they had no choice (80). Yet, Thomas himself struggled with the decision of whether to enlist, as shown in a November 1914 letter to William Henry Hudson:

I have no news of myself. As you will have supposed, I have not enlisted, though I should have done [it] if I had been in company that had encouraged me. At least I think so. Not that I pretend to be warlike, or to think, except with blank misgiving, of any sort of life different from my past. . . It is just a little too late to jump at so very complete a release from the mess of journalism. The only pleasure I have had lately has been in reading the best of Wilfred Blunt's poems.

(Cooke 81)

Yet, despite Thomas's reticence to enlist in the war, the war's outbreak appears to have provoked Thomas into writing poetry. Thomas wrote to Jesse Berridge ". . . I am slowly growing into a conscious Englishman" (81). Some of his letters written to friend in 1914 show how he combined his conflicted feelings of enlistment with beginning to write poetry. For instance, in a letter to Gordon Bottomley, written December 19, 1914, he states:

There is little work that has to be done, so I do the other kind. [A first reference to his poetry.] Some day you may see it. I kept making excuses for not trying to join the army and know [sic] I am made to believe I should probably be refused, but am none the easier for it. (qtd. in R. George Thomas 242)

Thomas made the final decision to enlist, as he wrote in a letter to Frost, on July 11, 1915:

Last week I had screwed myself up to the point of believing I should come out to America and lecture if anyone wanted me to. But I have altered my mind. I am going to enlist on Wednesday if the doctor will pass me. . . So I must let them make an officer of me if they can. This is easier to do than to come out to you and see what turns up. But it will train me for the greater step. I wish I could explain

how it came about. But I don't quite know. . . If I am rejected, then I shall still perhaps come out in September. (qtd. in R. George Thomas 246)

Though this letter shows Thomas's eventual decisiveness regarding war enlistment, it also shows that Thomas considered joining Frost in America as his only other alternative. Through his decision-making process, Thomas began to develop consciousness of his role as an Englishman as well as his identity as a poet.

While growing this consciousness, Thomas began to compose poetry; from December 3 to December 7, Thomas wrote "Up in the Wind", "November", "March", "Old Man", and "The Sign-Post" (Cooke 82). Thomas's career as a poet began with the composition of these poems. Though Thomas was a humble and anxious writer who was reluctant to write poetry, his experience as a journalist and his ability to listen to the people to capture their perceptions allowed him to represent in poetry the traumatic experience of a horrified population. As I shall argue, nature was the vehicle for communicating the grief and trauma of war experience.

With Thomas's experience as a journalist interviewing the public to garner their attitudes about the war, which were conflicted from the beginning, his interviewing gave him information and access to public attitudes, which provoked his own thoughts regarding the war's effect on the British people and landscape. However, Thomas was reluctant to write poetry about his observations as he was conflicted in his own thoughts on the war. He first considered enlistment in 1914 but did not enlist until 1915, and he did not enter active duty until 1917. Thomas's apprehension about enlistment is parallel to his initial reluctance to compose poetry. Later in the chapter, I will discuss his reluctance to enlist, which may have resulted from the tension Thomas experienced between his two ideals: to preserve the beauty of England in his pastoral poetry, and to help protect England from foreign threats.

Edna Longley provides further explanation for Thomas's desire to preserve old England, centering on the more rural parts of England:

Before the war, influenced by the Irish revival and his Welsh roots, he was already thinking about England in inward, anti-imperial terms. In September 1914, he was commissioned to write articles about the war's impact on different parts of England. He concluded that "ideas of England" depend on "a system of vast circumferences circling round the minute neighbouring points of home.

(Longley "Roads from France" 3)

In this statement, Longley reconciles Thomas's two drives. The "minute neighbouring points of home" refer to the singular scenes of English countryside, which Thomas preserves in his verse as well as his early prose writings. Through his assignment to write about the war's impact, Thomas saw the imminent threat to the England he loved: England, which had already experienced significant change to its landscape.

Though his poetry was not composed while in active combat, Thomas shows a preoccupation with the devastating effects of the war on England. He thought of England in "anti-imperial" terms, showing that he was not blindly in love with his country's policies. Though he struggled with both decisions, Thomas decided to enlist in the war effort, just as he made the decision to write poetry at the encouragement of his literary friends.¹ These circumstances set the stage for Thomas to represent in poetry the experience of the English people during the war.

¹ Though his decision to enlist in the war effort was undoubtedly a more daunting decision to make (as he would be hard pressed to reverse this decision), Thomas's decision to write poetry carried a similar weight because of the anxiety he felt when he considered writing poetry instead of prose. For evidence, see Thomas's letter to Frost on p. 30.

It is widely understood that World War I had a disastrous impact upon the morale of England's people as they grasped the war's losses and devastation. While he did not write poetry for the express purpose of representing the English people, his love for the country and its people moved him to write. In his poetry, he expresses the horror felt by the people of England when they saw the shocking images and read the unsettling stories of the frontlines in the newspapers. Though there is no overt manifestation of trauma as one would expect to see from a poet who wrote in England during World War I, Thomas's poetry contains subtle imagery that possesses hints of traumatic experience. Thomas's role as war poet shows his ability to represent his country's traumatic experience.² However, unlike Wilfred Owen, Thomas does not use an overt representation of horror in his poetry. Rather, his poetry shows paradoxical relationships between nature and humans that become metaphors for the English people's traumatic war experience.

Thomas had several poignant experiences to draw from when composing his poetry, including his own personal psychological struggles and the grand scope of the war. Thomas's assignation of human feeling to the aspects of nature, whether communicating personal feeling or echoing human sentiment, shows Thomas's use of the pathetic fallacy. John Ruskin defines the pathetic fallacy as "an 'excited state of the feelings, making us, for the time, more or less irrational,'" which creates "a falseness in all our impressions of external things" (qtd. in "pathetic fallacy" 889.) However, though Ruskin asserts that there is a falseness of feeling, usually due to grief, this feeling inspires the writer to assign human emotions to natural aspects. *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* describes the modernist use of natural imagery, stating

² More discussion of the British public's reaction to the scope and horror of World War I will be presented in Chapter three.

The typical nature of 20th-century poetry is that of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Hart Crane's *The Bridge*, where the natural—and human—world is conceived as shattered, fragmentary, painful. Eliot's poem attempts to express this confusion: Crane's does express the confusion. . . [Yeats's] natural imagery is magical, hieroglyphic, wavering; or it is solid and Irish: it can serve for savage espousal of the harshest naturalism or for images that beget images of supernature. ("Nature" 822)

Many of Thomas's nature poems, such as "Rain," "The Unknown Bird," and "The Dark Forest," feature aspects of fragmentation, darkness, and harsh naturalism. Edna Longley uses a broad definition of the pastoral, stating "By 'pastoral,' I mean any poem that concerns the natural world or the human footprint on that world, including the poem itself. I take the pastoral field to encompass 'anti-pastoral'" ("War Pastorals" 461). In Thomas's nature poetry, he often includes scenes of the pastoral (using Longley's broad definition) while employing the use of pathetic fallacy by giving human emotions to nature. Thomas's use of the pastoral straddles the boundary between the eighteenth-century use, which features a "discourse of retreat" that "represents an . . . experience of lonely melancholy" and the later tradition of the anti-pastoral (included in Longley's definition), in which the lonely melancholy found in eighteenth century pastoral develops further into a theme of nature that rejects the Romantic idealism of nature (Gifford 62, 120). Citing Arnold's "Dover Beach" as an example, Gifford explains that anti-pastoral poetry features the theme "that the natural world can no longer be constructed as a 'land of dreams', but is in fact a bleak battle for survival without divine purpose" (120). In defining the anti-pastoral, Gifford states:

The anti-pastoral tradition might appear to be based simply upon exposing the distance between reality and the pastoral convention when that distance is so conspicuous as to undermine the ability of the convention to be accepted as such. But that distance can be caused, not only by economic or social realities, but by cultural uses of the pastoral that an anti-pastoral text might expose. (128)

By using pathetic fallacy and personifying different aspects of nature, Thomas's use of the pastoral applies to Longley's broader definition of the pastoral by juxtaposing idyllic forms of nature with nature in its harsh realities.³ While Thomas's poems, like "The Manor Farm" and "The Barn," often feature rustic imagery of the traditional pastoral countryside, many of Thomas's poems also contain aspects of fragmentation and distance, carried out through his use of melancholic natural imagery. This suggests that his cultural use of the pastoral reflects the sentiments surrounding one of the predominant themes of the modernist era: World War I.

Nature Imagery to Communicate Grief

Thomas's use of the birdsong that haunts the speaker in "The Unknown Bird," echoes the feelings of foreboding experienced by the British people during the war, although there is no clear evidence that "The Unknown Bird" was directly inspired by the war. Though it is an aural image, the song of the unidentified and unknown bird expresses haunting rather than mere remembrance. However, there exists a paradox between joy and grief, as well as nature and melancholy, which demonstrates the overall tension Thomas experiences between preserving the idea of England, through his enlistment in the war, as well as preserving its natural landscape, though his enjoyment of and poetic rendering of nature. This is a paradox because his act of

³ See later in the chapter, p. 53, for an example of Thomas's use of pathetic fallacy in a broad pastoral setting with my discussion of "The Owl."

enlisting in the war would seem to cancel out his appreciation for nature and its preservation as war, machination, and industrialization are not beneficial to nature's preservation:

Three lovely notes he whistled, too soft to be heard
If others sang; but others never sang
In the great beech-wood all that May and June.
No one saw him: I alone could hear him
Though many listened. Was it but four years
Ago? Or five? He never came again.

Oftenest when I heard him I was alone,
Nor could I ever make another hear.
La-la-la! He called, seeming far-off –
As if a cock crowed past the edge of the world,
As if the bird or I were in a dream.
Yet that he travelled through the trees and sometimes
Neared me, was plain, though somehow distant still
He sounded. All the proof is – I told men
What I had heard.

I never knew a voice,
Man, beast, bird, better than this. I told
The naturalists; but neither had they heard
Anything like the notes that did so haunt me.

I had them clear by heart and have them still.
 Four years, or five, have made no difference. Then
 As now that La-la-la! Was bodiless sweet:
 Sad more than joyful it was, if I must say
 That it was one or other, but if sad
 ‘Twas sad only with joy too, too far off
 For me to taste it.

But I cannot tell
 If truly never anything but fair
 The days were when he sang, as now they seem.
 This surely I know, that I who listened then,
 Happy sometimes, sometimes suffering
 A heavy body and a heavy heart,
 Now straightway, if I think of it, become
 Light as that bird wandering beyond my shore. (*Edward Thomas 55*)

In the poem, the speaker hears a bird that no other person hears, and the speaker states “No one saw him: I alone could hear him / Though many listened” (*Edward Thomas 55*). These lines suggest the speaker’s implicit and private knowledge of the bird’s music that others attempt to gain through listening, only to fail. It is not clear what experience the speaker alludes to when referring to the song of the unknown bird, which only he hears: “I never knew a voice, / Man, beast, or bird, better than this. I told / The naturalists; but neither had they heard / Anything like the notes that did so haunt me” (*Edward Thomas 55*).

The word “haunt” suggests that the bird’s song follows the speaker, even at times when the speaker wishes to be left in solitude. Haunting also alludes to the presence of an unseen being; the speaker hears the song of the “Unknown Bird” but cannot place the song with a physical body that can be known. Though he recognizes that it comes from a bird, the speaker does not know the ultimate source of the song, whose lasting quality stays with the speaker as a “haunting” rather than “remembering.”

Thomas recognizes that the song of the unknown bird should be joyful; yet, he observes that it is “sad, more than joyful” (55). Additionally, he memorizes the notes “clear by heart,” even though the notes were “too far off / For me to taste it” (55). Though they carry a melancholy tone, the notes that are engrained in the speaker’s heart remain distant. In this instance, the speaker refers to either the physical distance of the bird or the distance of the joy that the bird communicates. To be “sad only with joy too” suggests that the speaker believes that the source of the notes finds a type of solace in its own representation of grief.

As Longley claims in the notes accompanying this poem, it appears that the speaker is haunted by the idea that only he can hear the unknown bird. One interpretation of this haunting bird call is that it alludes to the haunting Thomas experienced when trying to reconcile his decisions to join the war effort and write poetry as a vocation. The haunting of the bird call parallels Thomas’s conscience surrounding his reluctance to enlist in the war as well as the moral conflict he experiences between his love for nature and his indecisiveness regarding enlistment. Though Thomas makes no direct references to the war in this poem, the haunted bird call that is “sad only with joy too” echoes the intermingled joy and sadness that Thomas finds in nature. Though the two ideas inherently oppose one another, war and nature are intermingled in Thomas’s

conscience. Eleanor Farjeon, friend of Thomas, writes a telling anecdote about Thomas that reveals Thomas's reasons for fighting the war – to save England's nature:

So on Tuesday July 27th I lunched for the first time with Edward in uniform. It might have been next year when we were walking in the country that I asked him the question his friends had asked him when he joined up, but I put it differently. "Do you know what you are fighting for?" He stopped, and picked up a pinch of earth. "Literally for this." He crumbled it between finger and thumb, and let it fall.
(154)

As he was predisposed to seeing the melancholic characteristics of nature, Thomas's interpretation of the unknown bird's call as "haunted" reflects how Thomas was haunted by his decision to enlist in order to protect English nature from harm. Further, Thomas believes that nature's representation is being diminished to mere scientific fact, which is another idea that is haunting to him. In a letter to Gordon Bottomley, written May 14, 1907, Thomas writes,

What you say about 'a new movement of Naturalism – naturalism of feeling where Wordsworth's was no more than a naturalism of thought', I believe is well worth thinking about, and I have meant to get conscious of it to some purpose (having long thought vaguely as you do);. . . Perhaps we worry less about conclusions, generalisations nowadays, in our anxiety to get the facts and feelings down– just as science picks up a million pebbles and can't arrange them or even play with them. I am by the way going to plead for a little more playfulness and imagination (if to be got) in archaeology, topography and so on: the way in which scientific people & their followers are satisfied with data in appalling English disgusts me, & is more-over wrong. (*Edward Thomas: Selected Letters* 43)

This statement suggests that Thomas experiences frustration with the human tendency to objectify nature when, in reality, Thomas believes that the true essence of nature is something that is unable to be fully grasped, just as the speaker hears the birdsong without being able to identify it. The song seems distant to the speaker, and the bird is characterized as being “bodiless sweet.” The speaker likens his association with the bird to a dream-like state as the speaker could never make others hear the birdsong that only he could hear, though he could not fully identify it.

The speaker represents Thomas, who is haunted by the presence he feels in nature. This presence takes on a melancholic quality as nature is personified as a character who observes the oncoming changes that England faces in light of the war. This unknown bird is a metaphorical representation of Thomas’s thoughts at the time. In a February 14, 1915 letter to his aunt, Margaret Townsend, Thomas reveals his confusion regarding the war:

I don’t know what to say about things in England now, except as they concern me. Naturally my work is gone and what I write is of less interest than ever. If the war should end before summer is over and I should feel it was fair to Helen and the children, I think of going to New Hampshire myself. My American friends, the Frosts, are taking a farm and want me to come and try farm life. (*Edward Thomas: Selected Letters* 105)

Though Thomas appears to have lukewarm feelings regarding the war, already one sees the conflict between Thomas’s attraction towards nature and his thoughts on the war, even in its early stages. As an experienced writer about nature, Thomas is able to access the metaphorical birdsong of the “unknown bird,” whereas the idea of war and his participation in it still remain elusive. Nature itself, represented in “The Unknown Bird” by a bodiless birdsong, shows the unease of the country caused by the changes coming to England as a result of the catastrophic

effects of The Great War. Thomas, who believes himself to be particularly attuned to nature, first begins accessing the melancholy and horror of war through his observations of nature.

The effects of war on the body and spirit of nature, resulting in the bodiless and inaccessible voice of birdsong, reflects Cathy Caruth's arguments about trauma. Grounding her thoughts in Freud's ideas presented in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Caruth explains that traumatic experience is rooted in repetition. Further, the original theory behind traumatic experience is likened to a wound against nature and the subsequent voice of nature that cries out upon being wounded. According to Freud,

The most moving poetic picture of a fate such as this. . . can be found in the story told by Tasso in his romantic epic *Gerusalemme Liberata*:

Its hero, Tancred, unwittingly kills his beloved Clorinda in a duel while she is disguised in the armour of an enemy knight. After her burial he makes his way into a strange magic forest which strikes the Crusaders' army with terror. He slashes with his sword at a tall tree; but blood streams from the cut and the voice of Clorinda, whose soul is imprisoned in the tree, is heard complaining that he has wounded his beloved once again. (*Unclaimed Experience 2*)

This story details a double wound that occurs against a human and against nature, though nature is representative of human suffering. Clorinda was first human before she became an aspect of nature that was re-wounded by Tancred. However, the cry of the wounded occurs when nature itself is injured. As the Greek word *trauma* literally translates to "wound," Freud's idea of trauma consists of a double meaning involving injury to the body and to the mind. The voice of

the wound is not heard until the second (or subsequent) injuries, which Caruth explains in terms of traumatic experience:

But what seems suggested by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is that the wound of the mind—the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world—is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that, like Tancred’s first infliction of a mortal wound on the disguised Clorinda in the duel, is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor. Just as Tancred does not hear the voice of Clorinda until the second wounding, so trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on. . . [Trauma] is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth. . . cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and language. (3–4)

The unknown bird, who haunts the speaker with its bodiless song, further represents the tension between body and spirit, much like traumatic experience, in that this song is heard by the speaker who cannot fully access the song’s source. Like Tancred’s wounding of the tree, which results in a bodiless voice crying out through the wound, the speaker in “The Unknown Bird” hears the melancholic and monotonous song of the bird when others are unable to hear it. One reading of this poem lends itself to the theory of traumatic experience in that the sad song of the bird is

heard by the speaker, but the song and its source remains distant and unknowable, though it is heard. Representing nature and nature's melancholy as the English countryside continues to disintegrate, nature is personified as a voice of loss and trauma.

Though Thomas's poem "The Unknown Bird" shows one instance of a bodiless voice of traumatic experience as it is repeated throughout history, there are several other poems that reflect traumatic experience as it applies to nature and Thomas's ideals towards nature. For instance, the poem "Digging," mentioned in Chapter Two, describes a spade that wounds a tree, much like Tancred unwittingly re-wounds Clorinda by striking out at a tree. Like the tree in *Gerusalemme Liberata*, the tree in "Digging" has its own voice, which cries out through the "odours" of "Rose, currant, raspberry, or goutweed, / Rhubarb or celery" (5–8). The crying out of the wounded voice appears to be a dominant motif in much of Thomas's poetry.

Like "Digging" and "The Unknown Bird," Thomas's poem, "The Owl," was written in February 1915, during a time that Thomas felt most in conflict with his urges to publish poetry and join the war effort. At first glance, "The Owl" does not appear to be a poem of war and trauma; however, a disembodied voice is recognized by the speaker of the poem:

Downhill I came, hungry, and yet not starved;
Cold, yet had heat within me that was proof
Against the North wind; tired, yet so that rest
Had seemed the sweetest thing under a roof.

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. (*Edward Thomas 64*)

Once again, "The Owl" features a speaker who hears a bodiless cry—in this case, a "most melancholy cry" (64). The speaker identifies this cry as one of being wounded, "telling me plain what I escaped / And others could not, that night, as in I went" (64). Though the speaker experiences some state of stress in the beginning of the poem as he travels downhill while experiencing cold and hunger, the speaker recognizes a suffering-by-proxy, which is communicated through the cry of the owl. The speaker clearly describes the call of the owl as a call of woe, claiming that the call is "Shaken out long and clear upon the hill, / No merry note, nor cause of merriment" (64).

Unlike the call of the "Unknown Bird," which is "sad only with joy," there is no mistaking the suffering present in the owl's cry. Though there is only one mention of soldiers, which occurs in the final line of the poem, Longley identifies this poem as one of Thomas's first war poems, specifically in the lines 11–12, in which the owl is "telling [him] plain what [he]

escaped / And others could not.” Longley describes this sentiment as a deciding factor considered by Thomas when he made his decision to enlist in the war effort.

The call of the owl is the vehicle by which the speaker experiences distant traumatic experience through his knowledge and memory of those who suffer due to the war. However, the owl is no mere voice; as a part of nature, the owl experiences parallel traumas that befall the human race in such instances as war experience. The owl both recognizes and represents the differing degrees of discomfort that are described within this poem. The speaker experiences initial discomfort due to the hardships of traveling, yet he is able to take refuge in an inn, where he receives food and warmth. However, the speaker states that “All of the night was quite barred out except / An owl’s cry, a most melancholy cry” (64). Rather than experiencing comfort in the idea that the speaker escaped the difficulties of a rough night on the road let alone the horrors of war and poverty, the speaker describes his nightly repose as “Salted and sobered, too, by the bird’s voice/ Speaking for all who lay under the stars,/Soldiers and poor, unable to rejoice” (64). As Longley claims, “salted” could refer to “spiced,” but in a different connotation, “salted” may reflect the pain of a wound, such as “the salt in the wound,” or the saltiness of tears, both which symbolize more melancholic meanings (198).

It is significant that the speaker experiences a “night barred out” upon receiving material comfort, beyond the owl’s melancholic cry. This suggests that the cry is so profound that the speaker hears it across a great expanse of distance, time, and experience. Again, Thomas uses an aspect of nature, in this case, the owl and its cry, to communicate suffering and traumatic experience to one who does not directly experience physical trauma. As such, the owl is nature’s voice as it reflects distant traumatic experience occurring on the battlefield.

Though the sorrows of war would have remained wholly inaccessible to the speaker, because we have no evidence in the poem that states that he is off to war, and furthermore, because he escaped the horrors of war (as shown in the lines “But one telling me plain what I escaped /And others could not, that night”). The owl acts as a force of nature that both observes and experiences the grief, trauma, and chaos of war, and this force of nature communicates such grief to the speaker. The owl is a nature image that reconciles the knowledge of war with the experience of war. Whereas the experience of war would have remained unknown to the speaker, the owl has allowed the speaker to experience a chasm between his body and spirit: though his body does not experience the horrors of war, he is able to grasp some emotional knowledge of war experience without being able to fully know the experience of being a soldier. As Longley maintains, this poem reflects Thomas’s own struggle to decide whether to enter the war effort; possessing the knowledge of war and the war’s effects upon his country, Thomas wrestles with the decision to enlist. Essentially, in this conflict, Thomas experiences his own traumatic experience in the form of a crisis of conscience, and his love for nature, which communicates the war’s far-reaching effects, completely coincides with this inner struggle.

Even after joining the war effort in 1915, Thomas uses dark natural imagery that suggests his preoccupation with typical thoughts of war, such as death and the destruction of both human nature and literal nature. For instance, in his poem “The Ash Grove,” themes of death are prevalent:

Half of the grove stood dead, and those that yet lived made
 Little more than the dead ones made of shade.
 If they led to a house, long before they had seen its fall:
 But they welcomed me; I was glad without cause and delayed.

Scarce a hundred paces under the trees was the interval -
 Paces each sweeter than the sweetest miles - but nothing at all,
 Not even the spirits of memory and fear with restless wing,
 Could climb down in to molest me over the wall

That I passed through at either end without noticing.
 And now an ash grove far from those hills can bring
 The same tranquillity in which I wander a ghost
 With a ghostly gladness, as if I heard a girl sing

The song of the Ash Grove soft as love uncrossed,
 And then in a crowd or in distance it were lost,
 But the moment unveiled something unwilling to die

And I had what I most desired, without search or desert or cost. (108)

In a letter to his wife, Helen, on October 5, 1914, Thomas writes “I don’t quite know why, but the ash is becoming my favorite tree,” (“Notes” 272). Indeed, Thomas seems to have a morbid fascination with the tree, whose name has a double connotation: the tree is of the ash species, but “ash” is a term that is often associated with death and cremation. While this connection may seem coincidental at first glance, the repetition of death imagery in the poem suggests that this connection is not by chance.

In the first stanza of the poem, Thomas immediately mentions death, as “[h]alf of the grove stood dead, and those that yet lived made / Little more than the dead ones made of shade”

(108). These lines show that Thomas notices, with emphasis, the trees that are dead rather than the living ones, and he compares the two, stating that both the living and the dead ash trees create the same shade. The use of the term “shade” suggests a murkiness of vision, or even a ghostliness, and significance lies in the fact that the living ash trees create the same shaded view as the dead trees.

The motif of death and ghostliness is further extended throughout the poem, with the themes of shade and distance appearing in repetition. Thomas writes of walking through the ash grove in “scarce a hundred paces. . . Paces each sweeter than sweetest miles,” which suggests an elongation of time and space. According to Longley, “. . . the long lines of *The Ash Grove* (up to sixteen syllables) stretch out [and] appl[y] to time, space, inner space, and the poem itself” (“Notes” 273). The length of the lines along with the length of the speaker’s walk represents a leisurely time, an unhurriedness that can be found in death, and the stretching out of time is consistent with the death imagery that pervades the poem. As such, “Not even the spirits of memory and fear with restless wing, / Could climb down in to molest me over the wall” (108). The use of the term “spirits” extends into the third stanza as Thomas writes of the “tranquility in which [he wanders] as a ghost / With a ghostly gladness” (108). Unlike typical war poetry that often features a constant, underlying fear of death, consistent with war experience, “The Ash Grove” appears to welcome the solitude and lingering of death in a sense of unhurriedness and tranquility. For Thomas, the ash grove represents death itself, though it represents death in a positive connotation rather than something to be feared.

The final lines of the poem explain Thomas’s cavalier and comforting attitude towards the solitude of death: “But the moment unveiled something unwilling to die / And I had what most I desired, without search or desert, or cost” (108). The “unwillingness to die” suggests the

enduring power of nature, even in the half-dead ash grove. Once again, Thomas shows the interconnectedness between nature, human experience, and death: death in its finality for human beings and death as a paradoxically temporary state of being for nature. This endurance of life in nature and natural experience is what Thomas most desired to find while in training at Arras. Thomas's description of the Ash Grove in a transitory state of half-death represents his own ruminations upon his own transitory state of being as a soldier in training for a war that is bound to destroy the elements of nature that he so loves. In the "Ash Grove," which was written in France while training, Thomas realizes that the death of nature is temporary, and though the war causes death and devastation on a grand scale, the forces of nature will regenerate, bringing back the former pastoral images of England that Thomas always longed to immerse himself in. Nature, in this sense, is symbolic for the realism of life as a temporary state of being. Yet, nature itself will always experience a rebirth. Thomas finds comfort in this promise of rebirth—an unwillingness to die completely- which is something inaccessible to him as a man.

In representing war experience, whether the experience is immediate or distant, Thomas employs the use of natural images much in the same way that the Romantics used these symbols in their attempts to impose an order on a chaotic universe. According to Foakes, author of *The Romantic Assertion*,

The concept of ideal order in human society, the world of man, which had provided Shakespeare and Pope with a frame of reference, had collapsed and could no longer supply images of harmony for the Romantic poets; . . . The natural world also lost its order and its old emblematic function of providing a set of correspondences to the world of man, and took on a new aspect, offering in its wildness, as untainted by man, a refuge from disorder, and in its grandeur, types

of the sublime, images of aspiration. Natural objects, which seemed pure and permanent, or permanently recurring, in relation to the corruption of society and the transitoriness of life, were translated into symbols of the Romantic search for order, or into images of a spiritual harmony. (44)

Thus, Thomas's reliance upon nature to communicate the melancholic disorder of society as it becomes affected by the chaos of war leads to a type of poetic harmony in which Thomas reconciles his love for nature with his acknowledgement of the changing modern world. One parallel between the Romantic era and the Modernist era is the dissolution of order and a sense of the threat to the self that is endemic to that larger scale societal disorder, which is ultimately replaced by a new order. For the Romantics, this order was a new natural order in which many Romantics, such as Wordsworth, ascertained that all human beings carried the same birthright. For the modernists, the new order arose out of the chaos and shock of the Great War. Though the Georgians eschewed the Romantics for their effusive sentiment, they shared commonalities in theme as both groups wrote poetry in an effort to give order to their respective environments.

British poet J.C. Squire describes the effect that The Great War had upon the young Georgian poets in his book *Water-Music*:

To people who were fifty when the war broke out it came as an interruption, however long, terrible and fraught with change. To us, who were thirty or less, it came as an end. We had no careers or long associations behind us, only beginnings, first sortings and plans, discoveries of friendship. The war broke on us, destroying, invalidating. Our youth went prematurely, we were scarred before our time by the griefs of age, we had to face a new world when we were just beginning to be acclimatized to an old one. And for half of us the parting from

youth was more bitter and final, for to those bones there is no return, even in imagination, to lost things; no remembering, with every pang and outline softened in the gold-dusty air of illusion, the joys and sorrows that were, and the faces, serious or laughing, of those who strayed through courts that strangers now inhabit and by streams that still so brightly and indifferently flow. (qtd. in Ross 139)

In this passage, one sees the dramatic and shocking effect that The Great War had on the young Georgians. Much like the Romantics, who were attempting to restore a new order to their chaotic world, the Georgian poets found themselves in the midst of a world that was in constant flux. Squire refers to the war as an end for the young Georgians: an end that takes place in front of a backdrop of nature, which perseveres in the form of “streams that still so brightly and indifferently flow.” In this instance, nature appears to be at odds with the shock and horror that surrounds the young poets who attempt to re-order their changing world through the act of writing poetry.

However, as Thomas always possessed a reverence and knowledge of natural forces around him, he uses poetry as an attempt to reconcile the starkness of such shock, described so aptly by Squire, of the changing world around him with the living forces of nature, who communicate the shock of sudden change, just as they communicate the sorrows that are experienced upon being wounded. Essentially, nature acts as a historical touchstone for Thomas in that its personification leads to the reconciliation between the inaccessible traumatic experience of distant war and his own personal shock at experiencing the trauma from a distance.

CHAPTER THREE

ROARING CAULDRONS AND A PLOUGHMAN'S TURN: TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE
AND THOMAS'S ROLE AS SOLDIER POET**The Great War and British Society**

The distance from traumatic experience was especially present for the British people, including Edward Thomas, during World War I. Clouded by misinformation and the brutal reality of massive numbers of combat deaths, particularly during the Battle of Somme, the public experienced a psychological disconnection as a result of the devastating effects of World War I. The British people struggled to cope with the mass-scale destruction of both landscape and countrymen. Farmer and Nesbet describe the full devastation of much of the English landscape in preparations for the war:

Much of today's British forest landscape has its origins in the policies developed after the First World War during which extreme demands were made on indigenous forests to meet war needs, especially pit props to sustain coal production. The forests of Britain were devastated; only those in remote locations, or where timber extraction was very difficult, escaped these ravages. (279)

As I state below, citizens were exposed to the overwhelming destruction of the industrial-scale warfare both in the trenches and in the British cities and countryside, whether they experienced

this exposure in the trenches or at a distance through rumors, stories, and the reality of fallen soldiers by the thousands. The British offensive known as the Battle of the Somme mounted in July 1916 led to the most casualties (560,000) of any other battle the British fought during the war (Eksteins 144). Describing a battle that occurred during the Somme campaign in December 1916, a British soldier, Alexander Aitken, describes the psychological disconnect that occurred in the middle of combat:

I passed through the smoke. . . In an attack such as this, under deadly fire, one is as powerless as a man gripping strongly charged electrodes, powerless to do anything but go mechanically on; the final shield from death removed, the will is fixed like the last thought takes into an anaesthetic, which is the first thought taken out of it. Only safety, or the shock of a wound will destroy such auto-hypnosis. At the same time all normal emotion is numbed entirely. (qtd. in Eksteins 172)

The British public was exposed to the horrors of this battle from a distance, but the Somme was one of three battles that single-handedly weakened the morale of the British society, due to its extreme nature of warfare and casualty.

According to Eksteins,

The battles of Verdun, the Somme, and Ypres embody the logic, the meaning, the essence of the Great War. . . the standard imagery that we have of the Great War—the deafening, enervating artillery barrages, the attacks in which long lines of men move forward as if in slow motion over a moonscape of craters and mud, only to confront machine guns, uncut barbed wire, and grenades—comes from these battles. . .” (145)

However, though the British people had a collective, if murky, understanding of the devastation of the warfront, the British media attempted to shield the British people from any negative news that would threaten to upset the morale of the country. According to Eksteins, defeats were often written as victories, “atrocities stories were invented and real atrocities were buried,” and newspapers were censored in the publication of photos of fallen soldiers (233). Government censorship went so far as the monitoring of mail that arrived and departed from the trenches, forbidding soldiers to speak with truth about their experiences (233).

However, this attempt at censorship only served to heighten the trauma and paranoia experienced by the British people, particularly when they began to notice that entire generations of their society were being wiped out in battles, such as the Somme:

The effect of such tampering by officialdom—whether on a grand scale or affecting merely an Ethel or Meg—was to unleash imaginations, fears, neuroses. Denied factual knowledge, people naturally turned inward. Myths, some of astounding magnitude, were spawned. . . Living on tenterhooks, people invented succor, but they also imagined danger. (234–235)

The combination of actual devastation with contrived paranoia led to a British population experiencing a collective traumatic experience as they watched from afar and news inevitably reached them of fallen brothers, neighbors, and friends.

Traumatic Experience Suffered Collectively

There is some difficulty in fully grasping the idea of traumatic experience, let alone collective traumatic experience due to the psychologically distant nature of trauma as it affects each person in a unique way. The repetitive experience of trauma occurs as the survivor struggles to grasp the historicity of the experience. Historicity refers to the fixed point in time and space of

the traumatic experience, which was completely inaccessible to the people of England as they received news of the war's horrors from a distance. In this struggle, the survivor's traumatic flashbacks occur in fragmented, nonsensical forms. In the Modernist era, much of World War I literature highlights this fragmentation as these works are products of the uncertainty and separation that is indicative of the early 20th century British consciousness. This fragmentation was created in part by the utter physical and psychological devastation of World War I as it affected the British people.

Paul Fussell, author of *World War I and Modern Memory* explicates the relationship between memory and the war as a "satire of circumstance" (3). In Fussell's introduction, he reiterates the shock and horror of a war that was expected to be short and victorious, but which became an interminable "stalemate," stating: "Casualties had been shocking, positions had settled into a self-destructive stalemate, and sensitive people now perceived that the war, far from promising to be 'over by Christmas,' was going to extend itself to hitherto unimagined reaches of suffering and irony" (Fussell 3).

Edmund Blunden, another World War I poet, described the complete devastation of the war, placing an emphasis on the desolation of the British people: "By the end of the day both sides had seen, in a sad scrawl of broken earth and murdered men, the answer to the question. No road. No thoroughfare. Neither race had won, nor could win, the War. The War had won and would go on winning" (qtd. in Fussell 13). Thus, World War I imposed itself upon the British society as a massive traumatic event, as British citizens were not prepared for the scale of the destruction. According to Bourke, the British public experienced its own shock on the home front. She states,

The "awful clutching fear" that sapped morale presented the British government with the formidable task of rallying not only the troops but the entire nation to the war effort. Loyalty was not guaranteed. The Independent Labour Party, No Conscription Fellowship, Fellowship of Reconciliation, Union of Democratic Control and the Women's International League opposed the war. In "Red Clydeside", there were anti-war demonstrations, industrial action in essential industries, rent strikes, and even cries for a Marxist revolution. Irish republicans went ahead with an armed rising at Easter, 1916. After a week, they were crushed and their blood sacrifice denounced as pro-German but, on the Irish home front, support for Sinn Féin and resistance to the war began growing. (Bourke)

This war precipitated a national collective trauma that was experienced from a distance, as it was not experienced on the battlefield, resulting in a collective traumatic experience that shook the morale of the British people. This long-distance trauma occurred as a result of the collective shock and uncertainty that the British people felt as they were exposed to the harsh truth that entire generations of men had been killed while they at home coped with the misinformation and propaganda precipitated by the British media and government officials.

However, despite the rules of censorship imposed on the society, the British people still viewed the destruction of the warfront as photos leaked into the press. According to Hynes, [Soldier diaries and letters] are all ways of vicariously experiencing war that earlier civilians might have known to some degree. . . . But there was one kind of knowing that was new in 1914: for the first time in history non-combatants at home could *see* the war. The invention of the half-tone block had made it possible to print photographs in newspapers, and so to bring realistic-looking images into

every house in England. . . enough photographs began to appear in papers like the *Illustrated London News* to fix in civilian minds images of the war: the rutted, muddy roads, the files of grubby men, the big guns firing, the ruined landscape. (120 – 121).

The citizens of England were unaccustomed to such imagery prior to World War I, and the presence of this imagery was itself a shock, as shown by the development of revolutionary parties during the war. As the above quotes by Hynes and Bourke suggest, between the disconnect of paranoia, the uncertainty caused by false propaganda, and the truth of vanishing generations and massive-scale destruction and death, the British people experienced a psychological shock that manifested itself as a traumatic experience suffered by the British public as a whole. Caruth details the mental processes of traumatic experience when she explains Freud's theory of the cause for flashbacks. She argues that trauma occurs when the consciousness of a person misses the original experience, causing the trauma to "not yet be fully known" (*Unclaimed Experience* 62). The original experience must be an experience in which the trauma survivor encounters his own imminent death, either psychically or physically. At its base, a traumatic experience is highly personal, and it affects the one experiencing it as he must struggle with the original shock of the experience through repeated flashbacks as the survivor's mind attempts to overcome the original shock. The shock of the British people stemmed from the pervasive uncertainty present in society. British citizens watched their loved ones leave for war and fail to return, and they were grappled with the false propaganda present in the media, which became mythic. For example, Fussell describes how myths arose with the help of the British media, who worked to turn the British public against the Germans completely. One, in particular, is that of the Crucified Canadian:

The usual version relates that the Germans captured a Canadian soldier and in full view of his mates exhibited him in the open spread-eagled on a cross, his hands and feet pierced by bayonets. He is said to have died slowly. Maple Copse, near Sanctuary Wood in the Ypres sector, was the favorite setting. The victim was not always a Canadian. Ian Hay, who places the incident as early as spring, 1915, maintains that the victim was British, that he was wounded when captured, and that he was crucified on a tree by German cavalymen, who then “stood round him till he died.” (117)

Fussell claims that the theme of crucifixion within news propaganda was often used for its “symbolic suggestiveness” as a symbol of sacrifice and honor for the British troops (118). Yet, with the constantly-changing stories that appeared in print and were transmitted via word of mouth, the British public was exposed to a constant barrage of propaganda designed to strengthen their national morale against the Germans while still supporting Britain’s place in the war.

In a sense, the British people who remained home while their compatriots went off to battle were survivors as well. They struggled to survive and make sense of the bombardment of misinformation coupled with the brutal realities of the war. According to Caruth, as the survivor repeatedly lives through his ordeal via flashback, the repetition ultimately leads to the “apparent struggle to die” (63). In her essay, “Parting Words: Trauma, Silence, and Survival,” Caruth further explains the concept of traumatic experience, relating the “apparent struggle to die” to the repetition of traumatic experience within the mind, as well as the inability to fully “know” the traumatic experience historically:

In the dreams of returning veterans, however, the encounter with death and horror cannot be assimilated to the fulfillment of desire: rather than turning death into a symbol or vehicle of psychic meaning, these traumatic dreams seem to turn the psyche itself into the vehicle for expressing the terrifying literality of a history it does not completely own. But the peculiarity of this returning, literal history also strikes Freud because it does not only bring back the reality of death, but the fright of unpreparedness for it (“Parting Words” 8).

The dreams filled with fright and horrors that Caruth describes indicate a lack of knowing that is characteristic of traumatic experience. Shown through the decreasing morale of the British public (in the form of mass riots and anti-war demonstrations that developed mid-war), the British struggled to express the horror they were experiencing in the form of constant misinformation and news of death. Indeed, as Fussell claims,

The whole texture of British daily life could be said to commemorate the war still. It is remembered in the odd pub-closing hours, one of the fruits of the Defense of the Realm Act; the afternoon closing was originally designed, it was said, to discourage munitions workers of 1915 from idling away their afternoons over beer. The Great War persists in many of the laws controlling aliens and repressing sedition and espionage. (315)

The lingering of war-time laws that were constructed shows a repetitive tendency of the British society to maintain and re-live war-time life. These laws, created during the war, have remained in place long after the war was over. As such, the British people struggled to cope with their own horror as they grappled with their sense of duty and responsibility for keeping a high national morale, and in a subtle manner, the British still struggle with the repetition (in the form of

maintained laws) that is indicative of traumatic experience. The attempts by the government and the media to sustain high morale are evident in the following newspaper ad that appeared in a London newspaper as the British forces experienced staggering numbers of casualties mid-war:

WHAT CAN I DO?

How the Civilian May Help in This Crisis

Be cheerful.

. . .

Write encouragingly to friends at the front.

. . .

Don't repeat foolish gossip.

Don't listen to idle rumors.

Don't think you know better than Haig. (Fussell 17)

This advertisement shows evidence that the morale of the British people was dying in the middle of the war. Along with damaged morale came the death of the innocence that engulfed British society prior to the war. Indeed, the summer before the beginning of the war was representative of the old England with its idyllic beauty in its countryside. This beauty corresponded with the innocence and bourgeois values that pervaded British society, and which were leftovers from the Victorian era (Eksteins 128). Fussell describes the last summer before the war in terms that echo the love that Thomas has for nature:

It was warm and sunny, eminently pastoral. One lolled outside on a folding canvas chaise, or swam, or walked in the countryside. One read outdoors, went on picnics, had tea served from a white wicker table under the trees. . . For the

modern imagination that last summer has assumed the status of a permanent symbol for anything innocently but irrevocably lost. (23–24)

The innocence of that last summer (and eras before World War I) that was irrevocably lost represents the plight of the British people as they struggled to adapt to a rapidly changing world – essentially, “struggling to die” in terms of accepting the dramatic changes and pervasive uncertainties that surrounded them as the war progressed. Like Thomas’s “Ash Grove” that was half-dead, yet unwilling to die, the British society experienced the same transitory state of dying as it rejected, yet was forced into irrevocable change while dealing with the nostalgia of the old England that would never again be a reality.

However, this “struggle to die” applies from the standpoint of a singular traumatic victim; Thomas’s poetry reaches to the people of England, who, in experiencing the trauma from a distance, are victims of a collective traumatic experience that is rooted in history. Caruth discusses the possibility of collective traumatic experience from the standpoint of historical experience by analyzing *Moses and Monotheism*:

The history of the Jews in *Moses and Monotheism* indeed resonates in significant ways with the theory of trauma in its attempt to understand the actual experience of the Jews – their historical development – in terms of an experience they cannot fully claim as their own, the passing on of the monotheistic religion. This passing on of monotheism is the experience of a determining force in their history that makes it not fully a history they have *chosen*, but precisely the sense of *being chosen by God*, the sense of chosenness that, Freud says, is what enabled the Jews to “survive until our day.” Jewish monotheism, as the sense of chosenness, thus

defines Jewish history around the link between survival and a traumatic history that exceeds their grasp. (*Unclaimed Experience* 67)

Caruth's explanation of the sense of chosenness corresponds to the experience of the British people during World War I. Though arguably not as metaphysical a concept, the British people, as a whole, were forced to experience the horrors of the war from a distance – a war in which they did not make the ultimate decision to participate. In this context, the term “collective trauma” refers to the traumatic experience that the British society suffered as a result of the Great War. That is to say that the influx of propaganda, misinformation, newspaper photos, and generation-wide destruction led the British society to suffer a repetitive shock, which resulted in changed laws that resulted in the development of a national culture steeped in paranoia (which still has remnants in today's society). As a result, the British society suffered a collective traumatic experience in the form of newly-developed traditions that perpetuated the culture of shock and paranoia, leading to an irrevocable change in the identity of the culture and its traditions. When viewing newspapers and propaganda and hearing whispers of the horrors of the frontlines, the British people experienced this trauma from a distance in such a way that they could not access the experience fully; as such, they experienced the shock or fright that is requisite of traumatic experience, which resulted in an overall traumatic experience for the entire country in the form of perpetuated myths, news propaganda, and new laws. So much change occurred as a result of the war, including changes in the population of British society as generations of young men were destroyed by the war, that society responded to the shock of the distant traumatic experience through the riots, the propaganda, and the newly created laws that are still in effect today.

Corresponding with Caruth's allusion to the possibility of a collective traumatic experience, Michelle Balaev, in her article "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory," concludes that the literally timeless nature of traumatic experience lends itself to collective experience through history:

The theory indicates that a massive trauma experienced by a group in the historical past can be experienced by an individual living centuries later who shares a similar attribute of the historical group, such as sharing the same race, religion, nationality, or gender due to the timeless, repetitious, and infectious characteristics of traumatic experience and memory. Conversely, individual trauma can be passed to others of the same ethnic, racial, or gender group who did not experience the actual event, but because they share social or biologic similarities, the traumatic experience of the individual and group become one (152).

As the examples from the newspaper and war propaganda show, the British public experienced its own shock away from the battlefield as they were forced to repeatedly re-experience the war through exposure to propaganda, war myths and stories (such as the Crucified Canadian), and societal breakdown in the form of riots.

War, qualifying as the "essential condition of consciousness in the twentieth century," according to Hardy, affected the psyche of the entire British society (qtd. in Fussell 321). While Thomas's poetry does not show the passing down of traumatic experience through generations, his poetry was written at a time when the British society's identity faced uncertainty and was forced to change. When considering Thomas's own preoccupation with war enlistment, one sees how his nature imagery shows the mobile nature of traumatic experience as it migrates outward

from the battlefields in Europe to the citizens of Britain: the distant witnesses to the massive scale of emotional and physical devastation of the war. This migration of traumatic experience resulted in a culture of trauma during the time, which manifested in riots and the perpetuation of war myths. Collectively, the nation was preoccupied with the developments of the war as the people wondered when the war would end and their countrymen could return home safely. Such uncertainty, combined with the accounts of war that reached the ears of the citizens, resulted in a massive, cultural traumatic experience.

The War in Thomas's Poetry

Thomas's poem "This is no case of petty right or wrong," published December 26, 1915 in the midst of the most intense of the war's fighting, gives hints of the effects of the confusion and uncertainty on the British people, leading to a wide-scale, collective trauma:

This is no case of petty right or wrong
 That politicians or philosophers
 Can judge. I hate not Germans, nor grow hot
 With love of Englishmen, to please newspapers.
 Beside my hate for one fat patriot
 My hatred of the Kaiser is love true:-
 A kind of god he is, banging a gong.
 But I have not to choose between the two,
 Or between justice and injustice. Dinned
 With war and argument I read no more
 Than in the storm smoking along the wind
 Athwart the wood. Two witches' cauldrons roar.

From one the weather shall rise clear and gay;
 Out of the other an England beautiful
 And like her mother that died yesterday.
 Little I know or care if, being dull,
 I shall miss something that historians
 Can rake out of the ashes when perchance
 The phoenix broods serene above their ken.
 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. (104)

One of the predominant images present in this poem is the nostalgia for the former, beautifully bucolic England that is disappearing in light of the war, which is combined with a hatred of any force that threatens England's beauty rather than a sole hatred of the enemies of the Allied forces. As the "[t]wo witches' cauldrons roar" in such a way that war sounds often roar, Thomas states that from one, "the weather shall rise clear and gay," and from the other, "an England beautiful/ And like her mother that died yesterday" (104). The theme of the rebirth of nature after death appears again as it has appeared in many of Thomas's poems. The roar of the witches' cauldrons represents the noise and devastation of the war as it destroys England and its

population; however, there is a tone of hope within this poem as Thomas predicts a rebirth of “an England beautiful,” which will regenerate in its bucolic landscapes.

Thomas also shows distrust of the press and its jingoistic propaganda in the lines “I hate not Germans, nor grow hot /With love of Englishmen, to please newspapers” (104). Thomas’s distrust of the press is qualified: in the essay “England,” published in *The Last Sheaf*, Thomas writes, “In print men become capable of anything. The bards and the journalists say extraordinary things. . . They feel they are addressing the world; they are intoxicated with social sense” (qtd. in “Notes” 266). Thomas speaks with expertise on the subject of press influence as he worked as a journalist and literary critic for the *Daily Chronicle* off and on from 1899 - 1915, interviewing the British people “in railway carriages, trams, taverns, and public places, talking about the war and the effects of it” (“Notes” 266). In the first eight lines of the poem, Thomas eschews the sincerity of the press, which attempts to sway the British population to hate the German enemy and believe that their cause for the war is just. Thomas appears to be concerned with the nature of England, as he writes, “Dinned/ With war and argument I read no more/ Than in the storm smoking along the wind/ Athwart the wood” (166). His decision to fight for the survival of nature and the promise of its regeneration is shown in the following lines:

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: (104)

Rather than hating all Germans and Axis forces, Thomas despises the forces that threaten his beloved nature that he has appreciated since childhood. From working in journalism, he is not so

easily confused and swayed by the press's propaganda and its conflict with the realities of disintegrating generations of people. Therefore, in this poem, Thomas shows why he is a perfect candidate for representing the true experience of war as it affects nature, considering it more important than the war's petty meaning of "us versus them." Fussell writes at length about the presence of such divisive war rhetoric that relies upon the use of vague pronouns rather than specific proper nouns to establish the identities of the people and forces involved:

The physical confrontation between 'us' and 'them' is an obvious figure of gross dichotomy. But less predictable the mode of gross dichotomy came to dominate perception and expression elsewhere, encouraging finally what we can call the modern *versus* habit: one thing opposed to another, not with some Hegelian hope of synthesis involving a dissolution of both extremes (that would suggest "a negotiated peace," which is anathema,) but with a sense that one of the poles embodies so wicked a deficiency or flaw that its total submission is called for.
(79)

In "This is no case of petty right or wrong," Thomas eschews this divisive and vague rhetoric that creates an ominous and faceless "other" by stating "I hate not Germans" while giving a description and a name to the being that threatens his idea of England, stating

My hatred of the Kaiser is love true:-
A kind of god he is, banging a gong.
But I have not to choose between the two,
Or between justice and injustice. (104)

Thomas rejects the widely accepted binary oppositions of "us versus them" and "justice versus injustice" in an attempt to fuse his love for England with his sense of duty in joining the war to

help save England. He battles the potential for traumatic experience by resolving these vague binary oppositions that pervade the war rhetoric of the time, and as a result, he fights against the causes of the collective traumatic experience of the British people through his poetry as well as his understanding of *his* cause for going to war.

Ultimately, Thomas is a true representative of a traumatized generation suffering from the same massive cultural trauma, bringing realization and understanding to concepts, such as perpetual uncertainty, fragmentation, disconnectedness, and the process of dying. He represents this trauma by showing the effects of destruction on nature. His beliefs about the war contrast greatly with that of many, as Ekstein discusses the development of the ‘war imagination:’

From its start, the war was a stimulus to the imagination. Probably no other four years in history have produced as much testimony on public events. Artists, poets, writers, clergymen, historians, philosophers, among others, all participated fully in the human drama being enacted. Most intellectuals, notwithstanding proud declamations of independence and rational decision making, responded to ingrained national loyalties and conducted themselves accordingly. If they were not able to enlist because of age or health, they joined the effort in other ways, as propagandists, war artists, ambulance drivers, or orderlies. But beyond the loyalty to king and country, which with few exceptions was foremost, the war exerted a singular fascination by its very monumentality and, as it progressed, its staggering ineffability. (Eksteins 208–209)

Since his decision to join the war effort and his decision to write poetry seemed to occur nearly simultaneously, Thomas was an anomaly among those who “responded to ingrained national loyalties.” While his loyalty was to England, this loyalty was to England in its most basic sense:

England's countryside, idyllic landscapes, and nature, which he longed to preserve. Upon seeing the destruction of both nature and man, Thomas worked to preserve England through his poetry.

While "This is no case of petty right or wrong" shows hope for England's regeneration, some of Thomas's poems feature feelings of despair due to the war's effects. For instance, "Gone, Gone Again," written while Thomas was an officer with the Royal Artillery in London mourns for both the lost nature and lost countrymen that the cruelties of war have stolen from England ("Notes" 309):

Gone, gone again,

May, June, July,

And August gone,

Again gone by,

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. (131–132)

The repetition of the words “gone,” “again,” and “dark” shows the weariness that Thomas feels as the war stretches on. The first stanza, with the passing months and the lack of memory, shows the fatigue and emotional exhaustion that Thomas experiences as he watches his England disappear before him. Like the British citizens at home, Thomas grows tired of the promises of victory and restoration, clouded by confusing and conflicting messages of victory and defeat present in the media propaganda.

In this poem, the elements of nature and landscape are damaged rather than regenerated. The Blenheim oranges are “grubby” rather than fresh and beautiful as they fall from the trees, which suggests filthiness in death. As Longley points out in her notes, “grubby” could also allude to “grubs,” as if the oranges have been befouled by worms (“Notes” 309). Thomas also represents the massive loss of life caused by the war through his image of the untenanted dark house that has no “footsteps of life” as the war has turned “young men to dung” (131–132). Though Thomas was in training when he wrote this poem, he still resided in London, and as a result, he was able to view the vanishing English landscape, which he joined the war to protect. As he wrote in *Richard Jefferies: His Life and Work*, he mourned

. . . the charm of the older suburban houses and gardens, yielding nothing to the tide that has surrounded them on every side, until one day their cedars fall and the air is full of mortar and plaster, flying from ceiling and wall, and settling on the grass and prostrate ivy. (qtd. in “Notes” 309)

As the old house is outmoded, nature endures as the grass grows tall around the broken down structure (132). The repetition of “I am something like that” in the last two stanzas shows Thomas’s own feelings of disconnection and brokenness stemming from the collective traumatic experience caused by the vanishing of England. Though wild English nature is being destroyed

through massive deforestation to prepare the distant trenches, more domesticated forms of nature also fall into disrepair as families break apart and able-bodied farmers and garden-keepers enlist in the war effort.¹ The final stanza is particularly poignant, as Thomas writes,

I am something like that;
 Not one pane to reflect the sun,
 For the schoolboys to throw at –
 They have broken every one. (132)

The identification of “they” in this stanza is unclear, yet it is probable that “they” refers to the war itself in its personified form. The image of the schoolboys suggests immaturity and single-mindedness of those who argue for the war’s justice and righteousness while ignoring the war’s devastating effects on society. In the poem, the speaker suggests that he feels alone in his beliefs, stating “Only I am not dead, / Still breathing and interested.” The use of the words “only” and “still” reflects feelings of singularity. In the next stanza, when the speaker mentions the schoolboys, the schoolboys acts in opposition to the speaker of the poem; in other words, the speaker feels alone against the group of schoolboys who “have broken every [pane],” leaving him no glass to reflect the light of the sun.

The glass in the house is broken and no longer reflects the sun, or the joy, hope, and enlightenment of the former England. As the British people see such empty houses and failing gardens and farms, they receive subtle reminders that the war is destroying their former ways of life, and the idyllic, sun-filled summer that preceded the war is nothing more than a nostalgic memory.

¹ Though I must differentiate between the destruction of “wild” English nature and the outmoding of gardens (as appears in “Gone, Gone Again,”) I rely on logical deduction here to argue that the war’s role in altering the British population causes the destruction of both. While the forests are destroyed to supply the trenches, gardens and farms are neglected as millions of young men leave for battle, leaving the tending of these more domesticated forms of nature to their smaller families.

“As the Team's Head- Brass,” written May 26, 1916, contains similar meaning of loss and conflict between war and growth, though the imagery is much more subtle than that of “Gone, Gone Again.” In the first stanza, the concepts of war and the pastoral are combined, specifically with the strategic use of the word “turn,” as both the ploughman and the horses of the head-brass turn in the first stanza:

As the team's head-brass flashed out on the turn
 The lovers disappeared into the wood.
 I sat among the boughs of the fallen elm
 That strewed the angle of the fallow, and
 Watched the plough narrowing a yellow square
 Of charlock. Every time the horses turned
 Instead of treading me down, the ploughman leaned
 Upon the handles to say or ask a word,
 About the weather, next about the war.
 Scraping the share he faced towards the wood,
 And screwed along the furrow till the brass flashed
 Once more. (131)

The field that the ploughman ploughs in this poem shares a double connotation: there is the literal field that he is plowing in the narrative poem, and there is the suggestion of the battlefield. At the end of the line of the “yellow square,” the ploughman must turn, just as the retreating forces of battle must turn at the “end of the line” of battle. This connection is emphasized as the ploughman asks the speaker of the war, and the fallen elm, which is symbolic of the fallen soldiers on the battlefield. Longley explains the connection in her notes, stating that the poem

. . . symbolizes war's intrusion into rural England, and into English (and European) pastoral. Before the war [Thomas] had written: "How nobly the ploughman and the plough and three horses. . . glide over the broad swelling field in the early morning! Under the dewy, dark-green woodside they wheel, pause, and go out into the strong light again, and they seem one and glorious, as if the all-breeding earth had just sent them up out of her womb—mighty, splendid, and something grim with darkness and primitive forces clinging about them, and the night in the horses' manes." Ploughing might seem to represent the opposite of war: agriculture, oneness with 'the all-breeding earth'. Yet this opposition proves. . . unstable." (300-301)

The ploughman has many possible meanings in this poem, none of which are mutually exclusive. Irish poet Seamus Heaney describes the significant etymology of the word "verse" and its coupling with the ploughman. According to Heaney, "'Verse' comes from the Latin *versus* which could mean a line of poetry but could also mean a turn that a ploughman made at the head of a field as he finished one furrow and faced back into another" (qtd. in Parker 64). Though Thomas does not use the word "verse" in "As the Team's Head Brass," he writes in verse. With the separation of the stanzas, there is a significant turn, just as the poet writes a turn at the end of a line or a stanza, and just as the ploughman turns at the end of the line.

The turn in this poem occurs as the first stanza transitions into the second. Though war is mentioned briefly in the first stanza, the conversation between the speaker and the ploughman is not specified, except to ask about it. Any mention of the war in the first stanza is symbolic or subtle. However, in the second stanza, after the turns of both the ploughman and the poet, the war becomes a greater presence as it meets the pastoral:

The blizzard felled the elm whose crest
I sat in, by a woodpecker's round hole,
The ploughman said. 'When will they take it away? '
'When the war's over.' So the talk began –
One minute and an interval of ten,
A minute more and the same interval.
'Have you been out? 'No.' 'And don't want to, perhaps? '
'If I could only come back again, I should.
I could spare an arm, I shouldn't want to lose
A leg. If I should lose my head, why, so,
I should want nothing more...Have many gone
From here? 'Yes.' 'Many lost? 'Yes, a good few.
Only two teams work on the farm this year.
One of my mates is dead. The second day
In France they killed him. It was back in March,
The very night of the blizzard, too. Now if
He had stayed here we should have moved the tree.'
'And I should not have sat here. Everything
Would have been different. For it would have been
Another world.' 'Ay, and a better, though
If we could see all all might seem good.' Then
The lovers came out of the wood again:
The horses started and for the last time

I watched the clods crumble and topple over

After the ploughshare and the stumbling team.

The felled elm, stumbling team, crumbling clods, and talks of dismemberment are all symbolic of war and the deaths and falls that it causes. Once again, the disintegrating landscape of England is mentioned with the felled elm that will not be taken away until after the war is over. The poem presents a paradox that seems to be present in Thomas's mind: The speaker, or soldier-poet, longs to be "out" in the war as long as he can come back again, but he sees the oncoming disappearance of rural England. According to Longley, Thomas told Frost on August 15, 1916, "This waiting troubles me. I really want to be out" (qtd. in Longley 300). However, "As the Team's Head Brass" is rife with symbolism that shows Thomas's own struggle with his identity as soldier-poet, which echoes the struggle that the British citizens suffer from as their national, post-Victorian identity is disappearing.

Significantly, there is much vagueness to the location and the identities of the speakers in the poems. The location of the field is not specific, which symbolizes that this field could be any field in rural England that is in danger of being lost due to the war. Further, the ploughman states, "Only two teams work on the farm this year./ One of my mates is dead. The second day/ In France they killed him" (124). The "mate" is unnamed, and the identity of "they" is vague. Ultimately, for Thomas, this poem takes place on every rural field and landscape in England as the ploughmen must fear the "they" that threatens their livelihood, whether the "they" are the enemies of the British or the war itself. As shown in "As the Team's Head Brass," Thomas believes that the enemy "they" is identified as any presence that threatens the livelihood of England, its nature, and its rural landscapes and people. At this stage, the enemy "they" is the presence of the war itself.

The end of the last stanza firmly secures the connection between war and the pastoral:

The lovers came out of the wood again:

The horses started and for the last time

I watched the clods crumble and topple over

After the ploughshare and the stumbling team. (124)

The lovers, who disappeared into the wood, left the wood and its safety and beauty at the end of the poem. This connects with the fact that the speaker sees the plough horses “for the last time” as they stumble after the ploughman. Though the poem is narrative in structure and the speaker ends his conversation with the ploughman, thus seeing the horses “for the last time,” Thomas’s word choice is deliberate: Just as timber was being felled in England for the trenches, plough horses were being collected as war horses, leaving ploughmen without a team to aid them in ploughing (“Notes” 302). By 1916, the disappearance of rural England’s livelihood was obvious to Thomas, and the war’s far-reaching effects had devastated British citizens. The lovers who enter and leave the wood during the conversation between the ploughman and the speaker (or soldier-poet) represent the brief respite that occurs when Thomas remembers pastoral England in its previous glory. After the war, there were far fewer forests for such lovers to escape into; thus, it is symbolic that they return from the wood as the stumbling team of horses aids the ploughman for the final time before being commissioned for war duty.

Ambiguity persists throughout the poem in the form of the uncertain identities of the mate, the speaker, the ploughman, and “they.” Though the ploughman makes no references to writing verses, the ploughman, in reference to Heaney’s definition, is an archetypal figure in literature that represents the poet. In this poem, the poet meets soldier, forming the identity of Edward Thomas who is the quintessential soldier-poet. If the ploughman is seen as a poet as he

creates turns, the ploughman fuses the pastoral with war conflict. He observes the felled elms that cannot be moved until the war is over, he speaks of war dismemberment with a cavalier and detached tone, and he creates his own symbolic verses of poetry through the acts of plowing and speaking to the poet.

The ploughman and Thomas are one and the same as soldier-poets. Thomas's act of writing "As the Team's Head Brass" represents his attempt to reconcile and resolve the collective traumatic experience he experienced alongside the British people who watched as their fellow countrymen disappeared along with their pastoral landscapes, idyllic scenes of nature, and rural ways of life.

Thomas's act of writing poetry as a soldier in the war as well as a writer who was laboring over his decision to enlist was an act that fused the effects of the war with his own concerns for the British landscape and people. Though his poetry was published posthumously, and it was not, perhaps, as widely read as it is today, Thomas's role of soldier-poet was unique and significant in its intricacies. Rather than being a typical soldier-poet who wrote with truth of the horrors of the battlefield and trench life, Thomas was a soldier-poet who wrote with truth of the war's traumatizing effects upon Britain as a whole: its countryside, its nature, its pastoral landscapes, its morale, and its people.

CONCLUSION

For those today who read the poems of the Great War, Thomas's body of work offers a unique perspective by using subtle, yet melancholic images of nature to communicate the grief and shock experienced by the British people as they saw the war's devastating effects on their own turf through the destruction of pastoral landscapes as well as through the destruction of generations of young soldiers. Though one does not hear the blasts of shells and the screams of wounded men in Thomas's poems, one hears the mourning cries of owls, the haunting calls of birds, the scratching rhythms of saws felling lumber, the whispering swooshes of injured leaves, and the anxious words of rural people losing their livelihoods to the war. These sounds communicate the quiet destruction of the British society on the home front as its people permanently affected by the war's scope and devastation, which resulted in the disappearance of their landscapes, countrymen, and ways of life.

While Thomas does not fit the mold of the typical soldier-poet due to his choices of poetic subject matter, symbols, and themes, Thomas's work is the work of a soldier-poet who represents the home front experience of World War I. Predisposed to melancholy and always finding the darkness present in nature in its most basic, undisturbed form, Thomas represents a modernist member of the Graveyard School for his tendency to ruminate upon subjects like death and mourning while placing these concepts in natural settings. With his use of pathetic fallacy, he communicates the grief and the shock experienced by those who did not enlist in the war effort yet experienced the trauma and suffering of the war from a distance as they watched

aspects of their beloved England disappear to be replaced by the new, post-war England where large numbers of people were shattered by “the war to end all wars.”

His unflinching acceptance of the realism of nature with its innate conflicts, its continual deaths and rebirths, and its abilities to communicate human suffering through its own reflected suffering shows that Thomas subscribed to Georgian views that eschewed the “sentimental prettiness” of most Romantic and Victorian poetry. Though he was originally rejected by the Georgians, Thomas’s personality predisposed him to accepting realism over idealism and using his poetry to represent the realism of war (however subtly it is represented) as well as the realism of nature and its disappearance due to human influence. The symbols of the crying owl, the incessant rain, the halting ploughman, and wounded tree roots echo the realities of war experience, both on and off the battlefield. By showing the communication of traumatic experience using aspects of nature as the messengers, Thomas’s poetry sheds light on a population of beings that were traumatized by World War I, yet are often-overlooked in war poetry: the people at home and the nature of England itself.

Several scholars have given consideration to Thomas’s work, though all have been from different perspectives. Michael Kirkham’s analyses of Thomas’s poetry often remark upon his peculiar and paradoxical desire to seek an “other” self that was not so predisposed to solitude and melancholy by focusing the themes of his poetry outward to broader society. Edna Longley has annotated the collected poems of Thomas, often connecting the nature and war symbols and themes present in his poetry to his earlier prose works and citing letters and quotes of Thomas’s acquaintances to further contextualize his poems. Several war anthologies have included Thomas’s poems, characterizing him as a war poet alongside poets, such as Owen, Sassoon, and Blunden.

However, none have given consideration to the idea that Thomas's poems fuse his observations of nature with his observations and experiences of war, which parallels the fact that Thomas struggled with his decisions to write poetry and enlist in the war effort simultaneously. When he began writing poetry that infused natural imagery with subtle war symbolism, Thomas communicated his own fusion of war and nature, demonstrating that nature, in its presence and absence, communicates the trauma of war in a quiet, yet resounding manner. This communication connects directly to the collective traumatic experience of the British people who experienced the war away from the battlefield by observing the disintegration of nature as it echoed the devastation occurring on the battlefields of France.

It is important for the modern reader to consider Thomas's poetry from the perspective of its communication of collective traumatic experience. For the literature of trauma, a primal scene of traumatic experience, described by Caruth (via Freud), involved the wounding of a tree, which was the re-wounding of Clorinda, the lover of Tancred, one who unwittingly and mortally wounded his wife in battle, then wounded her again as she became an part of nature. It is no accident that the original traumatic experience involved the wounding of nature, just as the wounding of nature (and nature's communications of both its own wounds and the wounds of others from afar), and it is not coincidental that Thomas's poetry combined nature and trauma to communicate the subtle, yet traumatic war experience of Britain's home front.

By reading Thomas's poetry with considerations given to traumatic experience, British landscapes, rural populations, and nature's capabilities to communicate emotion and pain, we might understand that the already-acknowledged grand scope of World War I's devastation is still larger. Thomas's poems represent the quiet collective traumatic experience of the British people who stayed in Britain while the literal fighting of the war occurred from a far distance.

Thomas's nature symbolizes the natures of men and all living beings who experience dramatic conflict and mortal wounding, whether the wounds are psychological or physical.

Thus, his poetry, however difficult it is to characterize, is important to read for the consideration it gives to the often-overlooked victims of World War I traumatic experience. Britain, in its entirety, suffered grievous wounds, and as many of the propaganda-influenced citizens did not have the ability to communicate their traumatic experience due to their own shock and confusion, England's nature and pastoral landscapes were the vehicles that Thomas used to communicate the traumatic wounds experienced by the home front. In the midst of battle occurring on a global scale, it is easy for one to forget the forest; however, Thomas remembered the forest when he fused his decision to enlist with his decision to write poetry in order to become a unique soldier-poet who never forgot the abilities, influences, and experiences of nature as they parallel the experiences of men.

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