**Keep Innocency: Edward Thomas and Fatherhood**

On 11 November 1985, a service was held at Westminster Abbey to mark the unveiling of a memorial to commemorate the lives of those poets who fought in the First World War. Among the speakers was the Poet Laureate Ted Hughes, and it was on this occasion that he described Edward Thomas, one of sixteen poets to have their name inscribed on the memorial stone, as ‘the father’[[1]](#endnote-1) of modern poetry. Hughes’s remark tends to be interpreted as a reference to the way in which Thomas’s poetry continues to shape the work of those who came after him. But Hughes’s view of Thomas as a paternal figure serves as a timely reminder that he was also a father in a literal sense and, moreover, that his bond with his children acted as an important stimulus for his writing. Guy Cuthbertson notes that:

In his poetry, Edward Thomas is frequently a father, a father of three children, and this subject is one that seems to have influenced Hughes and other father-poets. For instance, the well-loved ‘Full Moon and Little Frieda’ is reminiscent of the equally well loved poems by Thomas about Myfanwy, poems like ‘Snow’ and ‘The Brook’.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Those poems in which Edward Thomas adopts a paternal persona reflect a hitherto neglected dimension of his literary achievement, born of his fascination with childhood and the literary forms associated with it. This article charts the trajectory and range of that interest, which was sustained by Thomas’s friendships with Robert Frost, Eleanor Farjeon and Walter de la Mare, as well as his reading of Traherne, Blake, Coleridge and Wordsworth. The principal theme will be Thomas’s relationship with his children: his son Merfyn and his daughters, Bronwen and Myfanwy, but I will also show how his decision to write *The Childhood of Edward Thomas* – a short autobiographical memoir that he composed during the winter of 1913 – proved pivotal to the poetry that followed.

**I**

Edward Thomas wrote only one book specifically for children. Taking its title from the nursery rhyme ‘Sing a song of sixpence’, *Four-and-Twenty Blackbirds* (1915) is a series of vignettes inspired by popular songs and proverbs. It was written in close dialogue with Eleanor Farjeon, who offered advice on early drafts of the book and was ideally placed to do so, since she was engaged in writing *Nursery Rhymes of London Town* and would go on to forge a career as a children’s author.[[3]](#endnote-3) The ‘proverb book’,[[4]](#endnote-4) as Thomas called it, was partly a product of financial necessity. Yet it could not have been written without his extensive knowledge of forms like the nursery rhyme and the ballad, a resource which, as Richard Emeny has pointed out, stemmed from ‘years of travelling the English and Welsh countryside and of study and research into their folklore and songs.’[[5]](#endnote-5) When Thomas came to write the ‘household’ poems addressed to members of his family, he cast himself as a wealthy landowner bequeathing to his children the flora and folklore of his beloved south country, and those works show his fondness for the kind of ribald, freewheeling word-play usually found in nursery rhymes or tongue-twisters. His poem to Merfyn contains further allusions to ‘Sing a song of sixpence’, suggesting that it was a personal favourite, while his paean to Bronwen starts by reeling off a sequence of Essex place names:

 If I should ever by chance grow rich

 I’ll buy Codham, Cockridden, and Childerditch,

 Roses, Pyrgo, and Lapwater,

 And let them all to my elder daughter.[[6]](#endnote-6)

 Some accounts of Thomas give the impression of a man who was old before his time. There can be little doubt that, to his acquaintances, the very idea of him writing a children’s book would have seemed absurd. However, Emeny makes the valuable point that:

[T]o his friends, its publication would have been less surprising. Accounts by James Guthrie, for instance, in the *Sussex Magazine* of September 1939, show a Thomas who enjoyed the company of children whether he was singing old songs to them, swimming with them in the sea off the Sussex coast, or cycling and walking with them. Thomas became a friend to Guthrie’s children, and was clearly well-loved by them and others who remembered him. It was Robin Guthrie who, as a young teenager, made the linocut of Thomas which has been so much used and reproduced. The secret of the affection he engendered in children seems to have been that he never talked down to them or patronised them. Instead, he entered their world and welcomed them to his. Indeed, it may well be that his self-consciousness with adults contributed towards his pleasure in the company of children: their demands were different to those of adults and it was easier to be natural with them.[[7]](#endnote-7)

If that final observation sounds somewhat trite, it remains the case that, while Thomas married and succeeded in forging a series of enduring friendships, the only relationships that ever came close to matching the intensity of his feelings for the natural world were those he held with his two daughters, Bronwen and Myfanwy. When Bronwen was four, her father entered the following note in a file marked ‘Projects’:

Bronwen’s vivacity in talking, laughing, running, merely looking at you w[ith] wise eyes, or throwing her head right back so as to thicken her white neck in abandonment of laughing – her life is like a flame burning straight [as] dry wood so that one wonders how it can last – the joy of the flame tearing through obstacles, careless, unconscious, determined, vivacious – She flames along as she runs, her laugh is a flame, her eye is a flame and we must [marvel] at it.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Reading this passage leaves one in no doubt that Bronwen complemented Thomas ‘in a way neither his son nor his wife could’,[[9]](#endnote-9) for her beauty and exuberance reflected the hunger and depth of response to life that he felt too yet could rarely express in person. The language Thomas uses to describe Bronwen’s character is, unmistakably, that of sacrament – it brings to mind Gerard Manley Hopkins’s sonnet ‘As kingfishers’ catch fire, dragonflies draw flame’ – and, as we shall see, this notion of Thomas’s daughters as sources of creative fire is made manifest in those poems where they take on the role of muse.

 Before he met Robert Frost, Thomas’s interest in childhood experience was sustained by his friendships with Eleanor Farjeon and, in particular, Walter de la Mare. Jean Moorcroft Wilson points out that:

Thomas had first contacted de la Mare in the summer of 1906 for permission to include one or two poems by him in Thomas’s Pocket Book anthology. He had reviewed de la Mare’s *Songs of Childhood* in 1902, unaware that its author ‘Walter Ramal’ was a pseudonym for the poet he now approached. […] His request for ‘one or two’ poems from de la Mare becomes three – ‘The Child in the Story Awakes’, ‘Keep Innocency’ (Thomas’s personal favourite) and ‘Bunches of Grapes’ – as he rapidly responds to de la Mare’s ‘subtle honesty’ and his admiration for Thomas’s reviewing.[[10]](#endnote-10)

As its title suggests, ‘Keep Innocency’ is a call to hold fast to the truths conceived in childhood, both about oneself and the nature of the world. Even amid the carnage of war, suggests de la Mare, the individual in whom innocence runs deep remains incorruptible:

 […] a child’s eyes ‘neath bloody hair

 Gaze purely through the dingy air.

 And when the wheeling rout is spent,

 Though in the heaps of slain he lie;

 Or lonely in his lost content;

 Quenchless shall burn in secrecy

 The flame Death knows his victors by.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Thus conceived, the child is less a witness than a seer – akin to Wordsworth’s ‘seer blest’[[12]](#endnote-12) – and the poet is someone in whom such visionary power lives on into adulthood. De la Mare expanded upon the Romantic convictions that inspired his writing in a lecture he delivered at Rugby School in March 1919 entitled ‘Rupert Brooke and the Intellectual Imagination’. There he aligns certain poets (though not Brooke himself) with what de la Mare conceives as a distinctively child-like sensibility. Children, he says,

[L]ive in a world peculiarly their own, so much so that it is doubtful if the adult can do more than very fleetingly reoccupy that far-away consciousness. […] They are not bound in by their groping senses. Facts to them are the liveliest of chameleons. Between their dream and their reality looms no impassable abyss. There is no solitude more secluded than a child’s, no absorption more complete, no insight more exquisite and, one might even add, more comprehensive.[[13]](#endnote-13)

The struggle to re-capture the imaginative depth of childhood experience is the abiding theme of de la Mare’s work and he frequently took inspiration from those genres most closely associated with children. Thus, *Songs of Childhood* includes poems with titles like ‘Lullaby’ and ‘The Sleeping Beauty’. Surveying de la Mare’s short stories, Alison Lurie notes that:

[his] sense of time often recalls that of a child. Hours, days, and seasons seem to go on forever, or telescope suddenly. Many of his characters appear to live in an eternal present, where they are shown staring so intently at some landscape, person, or creature that they are unaware of time passing. What their elders might call ‘daydreaming’, de la Mare suggests, is in fact an intense, self-forgetful absorption in something outside the self: a condition of mind made famous by Keats, who called it ‘negative capability’.[[14]](#endnote-14)

In many ways, the poetry for which Edward Thomas is now so rightly celebrated could hardly be more different from that of de la Mare, which all too often fades into ethereal sentimentality. But it would be a mistake to think that Thomas’s regard for his friend’s work was without foundation. In time, Thomas would follow in the footsteps of de la Mare by tapping into the mythic power of forms like the nursery rhyme and the fairy tale. What he also detected was a rare sensitivity to the personality of place and, relatedly, an ability to communicate through sound as well as through the visual image. These are qualities which would become hallmarks of Thomas’s own writing and, importantly, for de la Mare, they are gifts bestowed in infancy:

 Words may create rare images

 Within their narrow bound;

 ’Twas speechless childhood brought me these,

 As music may, in sound.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Like de la Mare, Thomas regarded children as instinctively creative beings. In *Feminine Influence on the Poets*, he writes with characteristic insight on the poetry of John Clare, arguing that his verse:

[R]eminds us that words are alive, and not only alive but still half-wild and imperfectly domesticated. […] The magic of words is due to their living freely among things, and no man knows how they came together in just that order when a beautiful thing is made like ‘Full fathom five’. And so it is that children often make phrases that are poetry, though they still more produce it in their acts and half-suggested thoughts; and that grown men with dictionaries are as murderous of words as entomologists of butterflies.[[16]](#endnote-16)

What makes this passage so striking is Thomas’s conviction that poetry isn’t merely a matter of language. Rather, it is something drawn directly from life, and it is the intensity of the poet’s engagement with life that draws words to him. Hence Thomas’s sense of the poet being chosen by words:

 Out of us all
 That make rhymes
 Will you choose
 Sometimes –
 As the winds use
 A crack in a wall
 Or a drain,
 Their joy or their pain
 To whistle through –
 Choose me,
 You English words?[[17]](#endnote-17)

Children are the living embodiment of this aesthetic, in that they are capable of producing poetry without so much as putting pen to paper. When praising the vitality of J.M. Synge’s language, Thomas remarked that the Irish writer’s ‘quite unbookish phrases are like the speech of very young children of high courage’,[[18]](#endnote-18) and if he sometimes struggled with the practical demands of parenthood, it is also clear that he regarded his children as precious sources of authenticity who helped protect him from the dryness of his work as a reviewer.[[19]](#endnote-19) This notion of children as talismans of life is central to that wonderful poem ‘The Brook’, which is one of those works that were inspired by the closeness of Thomas’s relationship with his younger daughter, Myfanwy:

 Seated once by a brook, watching a child

 Chiefly that paddled, I was thus beguiled.

 Mellow the blackbird sang and sharp the thrush

 Not far off in the oak and hazel brush,

 Unseen. There was a scent like honeycomb

 From mugwort dull. And down upon the dome

 Of the stone the cart-horse kicks against so oft

 A butterfly alighted. From aloft

 He took the heat of the sun, and from below.

 On the hot stone he perched contented so,

 As if never a cart would pass again

 That way; as if I were the last of men

 And he the first of insects to have earth

 And sun together and to know their worth.[[20]](#endnote-20)

The dreamy mood of ‘The Brook’ is encapsulated in that uncharacteristically archaic word ‘beguiled’ at the end of the second line, which may well owe its presence to Thomas’s familiarity with Coleridge’s sonnet ‘To the River Otter’:

 Dear native Brook! wild Streamlet of the West!

 […] oft have ye beguil’d

 Lone manhood’s cares[.][[21]](#endnote-21)

Whereas Coleridge associates the river with memories of his own childhood, in Thomas’s case it is as if watching his daughter at play has enabled him to enter the same attentive ‘child-like’ mode of being. Indeed, as the poem progresses, the speaker’s consciousness starts to merge with the outward scene in a manner reminiscent of Keats’s ‘chameleon poet’.[[22]](#endnote-22) This transition, born of Thomas’s remarkable capacity to immerse himself in the atmosphere of his habitat, is at its most conspicuous when the narrator identifies with the insects and birds that populate the brook, including a butterfly that hovers nearby:

 I was divided between him and the gleam,

 The motion, and the voices, of the stream,

 The waters running frizzled over gravel,

 That never vanish and for ever travel.

 A grey flycatcher silent on a fence

 And I sat as if we had been there since

 The horseman and the horse lying beneath

 The fir-tree-covered barrow on the heath,

 The horseman and the horse with silver shoes,

 Galloped the downs last. All that I could lose

 I lost. And then the child’s voice raised the dead.

 ‘No one’s been here before’ was what she said

 And what I felt, yet never should have found

 A word for, while I gathered sight and sound.

Here the child’s sudden burst of speech stuns the narrator with its intensity and accuracy: it has, in short, the force of poetry. One notes how the caesura that precedes Myfanwy’s remark (which Thomas took down word for word in one of his field notebooks)[[23]](#endnote-23) ensures that her words are released under maximum pressure, as they work to express his sense of having stepped outside the bounds of time and mortality; death’s prospect having been raised earlier in the poem by the allusion to Shakespeare’s famous elegy, ‘Fear no more the heat o’ the sun’, since ‘Golden lads and girls all must, /As chimney-sweepers, come to dust.’[[24]](#endnote-24) Thus conceived, Myfanwy is an agent of the divine, whose presence is capable of raising the dead, including the mysterious horseman and his steed with the silver shoes. If that figure’s ghostly presence is indebted to Thomas’s knowledge of local folklore, then the horse also serves to evoke the spirit of Pegasus; a classical symbol of poetic inspiration. It is fitting, then, that Myfanwy should stand amid waters ‘That never vanish’, since according to myth the sacred spring of the Muses was created when Pegasus struck the side of Mount Helicon with his hoof, and by the end of the poem she has taken on the mantle of those much celebrated daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne.

**II**

Whereas Bronwen and Myfanwy always spoke warmly of their father – in interviews they recall how he would sing to them, take them on walks and read fairy tales before bedtime[[25]](#endnote-25) – Thomas’s relationship with his son was more tempestuous. Helen’s unplanned pregnancy had forced Thomas to shoulder parental responsibility much earlier than he would have wished, and Merfyn’s arrival led to the end of Thomas’s academic ambitions due to the immediate need to support the family. Those unhappy circumstances inevitably affected their relationship, despite the fact that Thomas believed Merfyn to be ‘very much like me’.[[26]](#endnote-26) Writing in an unpublished memoir, Merfyn said that, ‘I did not understand him nor he me, and while I did not appreciate his point of view he could not or would not see mine.’[[27]](#endnote-27) With grim irony, the relationship thereby repeated the pattern of mutual bafflement that characterised Thomas’s dealings with his own father, Philip Henry Thomas, the man he claimed treated him in so strict a manner that, at times, ‘I have a feeling of shame that I am alive’.[[28]](#endnote-28) ‘Parting’, written following Merfyn’s departure for America with the Frosts on 11 February 1915, shows that Thomas was well aware that history had repeated itself, with the narrator acknowledging that the day’s events have served to reawaken old ghosts:

 So memory made

 Parting today a double pain:

 First because it was parting; next

 Because the ill it ended vexed

 And mocked me from the Past again[[29]](#endnote-29)

Thomas evidently recognised in Merfyn the sense of frustration and downright resentment that he continued to feel towards his own father; feelings that eventually found searing expression in ‘P.H.T.’, a poem which Helen Thomas wisely held back from publication until after Philip Thomas’s death. It remains a shockingly raw piece of writing:

 I may come near loving you

 When you are dead

 And there is nothing to do

 And much to be said.[[30]](#endnote-30)

The tautness of the form ensures that the confrontational edge is sustained from those lacerating opening lines to the equally curt denouement, where the embittered narrator ruefully concludes that, ‘not so long as you live / Can I love you at all.’[[31]](#endnote-31) R. George Thomas has claimed that the relationship between father and son ‘was […] not as implacable as this poem suggests’,[[32]](#endnote-32) and on a practical level this appears to have been the case, with Thomas regularly staying at his parents’ house at weekends while completing his military training. Any prospect of genuine reconciliation was always likely to be remote however, given that Thomas believed that the influence of his father had led him to neglect ‘the feeling that belonged to my own nature and my own times of life’. [[33]](#endnote-33) As Matthew Hollis suggests, the rift ‘was fuelled by Philip Thomas’s disgust at what he saw as a kind of dandyism in his son: an aesthetic whim to pursue literary deadends rather than provide as a husband and father should provide’.[[34]](#endnote-34) Hence his dismissal of his son’s poetry as ‘pure piffle’.[[35]](#endnote-35)

 This temperamental clash between father and son explains why Edward Thomas became so fascinated by Wordsworth’s ‘Anecdote for Fathers’, a poem that he alludes to at the beginning of *The South Country* (1909) and the end of *In Pursuit of Spring* (1914). That last book finds Thomas re-tracing the steps of Wordsworth and Coleridge, embarking on a literary pilgrimage that will take him from London to Nether Stowey in the West Country, where *Lyrical Ballads* was conceived. At various intervals, Thomas’s quest is interrupted by the appearance of a fellow cyclist, who he refers to simply as ‘the Other Man’. His journey runs parallel to that of Thomas and brings a certain bathos to the endeavour. Rather than Nether Stowey, ‘the Other Man’ is heading for Kilve; one of the places mentioned in Wordsworth’s ballad. There a chance meeting takes place, with Thomas recalling how,

As I was leaving the church, entered the Other Man. Laughing nervously at the encounter, he explained that he had come to Kilve to see if it really had a weather-cock. He reminded me of Wordsworth’s ‘Anecdote for Fathers’, where the poet pesters his son of five to give his reason for preferring Kilve to Liswyn, until a broad, gilded vane catching his eye, the child gives the inspired answer –

 ‘At Kilve there is no weather-cock;

 And that’s the reason why.’

“There is no weather-cock”, said the Other Man, laughing a little more freely and disappearing for the last time.[[36]](#endnote-36)

Lucy Newlyn has set this passage within the context of Thomas’s surprising reluctance to pronounce upon Wordsworth. She makes the point that, although Thomas ‘had more in common with Wordsworth than any other writer’,[[37]](#endnote-37) he ‘wrote very little that was substantial about Wordsworth, and reviewed him only once, in a 1907 selection published by Stopford Brooke.’[[38]](#endnote-38) The fact that Thomas invoked ‘Anecdote for Fathers’ on two separate occasions is all the more noteworthy then, and suggests that the poem resonated with him at a deep level. One obvious reason for this is that the five year old boy who features in the poem is called Edward, which would have inevitably led to some degree of identification. Indeed, in *The South Country*, Thomas characterises himself as someone ‘given to making answers like, “In Kilve there is no weathercock.”’[[39]](#endnote-39) But more importantly, the stilted nature of the exchange that takes place between father and son in Wordsworth’s poem foreshadows (with uncanny accuracy if *The Childhood of Edward Thomas* is to be believed) the kind of tortuous conversations that took place around the Thomases’ dining table on Sunday afternoons, when Philip Thomas would invite his sons to share their thoughts upon that morning’s events in church. According to his eldest son’s account:

We hated hearing the sermon and now had to improv an essay on it. It was so loathsome that I could never seriously attempt the task, even to avert the Sunday dinner anger, which became almost a regular thing. […] I made an effort, but his anger and my shame only made me duller than ever. Probably I broke down in the middle of a sentence with, ‘Oh, I don’t know.’[[40]](#endnote-40)

Thomas’s anecdote shows the dangers of imposition that are inherent in relations between children and adults; a point that Wordsworth registers so subtly and movingly in his ballad. Unable to comprehend why his son might prefer their previous home, the father grows increasingly frustrated by his child’s reticence and pushes him for an explanation:

‘Now, little Edward, say why so:
My little Edward, tell me why.’ –
‘I cannot tell, I do not know.’ –
‘Why, this is strange,’ said I;

‘For, here are woods, hills smooth and warm:
There surely must one reason be
Why you would change sweet Liswyn farm
For Kilve by the green sea.’

 At this my boy hung down his head,

 He blushed with shame, nor made reply;

 And three times to the child I said,

 ‘Why, Edward, tell me why?’[[41]](#endnote-41)

The correspondence with the scene Thomas describes in his autobiography is plain, as the father’s insistent questioning causes the boy to hold his tongue. There is, though, a crucial difference between the two scenarios. Because in Wordsworth’s poem the father’s realization that his son’s preference is an issue of the heart rather than the head means that his incredulity swiftly gives way to a sense of admonishment and, ultimately, gratitude:

‘O dearest, dearest boy! my heart

For better lore would seldom yearn,

Could I but teach the hundredth part

Of what from thee I learn.’[[42]](#endnote-42)

Whether the boy conceals the nature of his preference to spare his father’s feelings or simply because he cannot put what he feels into words is impossible to say. But what is clear is that the boy’s sense of home – of place – is something that is felt.

 ‘Anecdote for Fathers’, then, gave Edward Thomas a form of poetic validation for the anger he continued to feel towards his father, as well as an instructive model for the dramatic interjection of Myfanwy in ‘The Brook’. ‘Baba’, whom Thomas characterised as his ‘daughter the younger’,[[43]](#endnote-43) provides his inspiration again in ‘Old Man’, as she explores the nooks and crannies of their garden at Steep:

 The herb itself I like not, but for certain

 I love it, as some day the child will love it

 Who plucks a feather from the door-side bush

 Whenever she goes in or out of the house.

 Often she waits there, snipping the tips and shrivelling

 The shreds at last on to the path, perhaps

 Thinking, perhaps of nothing, till she sniffs

 Her fingers and runs off. The bush is still

 But half as tall as she, though it is as old;

 So well she clips it. Not a word she says;

 And I can only wonder how much hereafter

 She will remember, with that bitter scent,

 Of garden rows, and ancient damson-trees

 Topping a hedge, a bent path to a door,

 A low thick bush beside the door, and me

 Forbidding her to pick.[[44]](#endnote-44)

Here the final line break evokes comparisons with another garden – Eden – and this theological reference makes one aware of the narrator’s role as a guardian; someone who must not only prohibit his daughter from decimating the plant, but protect her in a wider, metaphysical sense too.[[45]](#endnote-45) This allusion also has the effect of drawing attention to the innocence of the child and, by implicit contrast, the narrator’s own fallen state, thereby undermining the sense of unity that pervades the first half of the poem where the narrator ruminates over the plant’s name – ‘Old Man, or Lad’s love’ – and anticipates that his daughter will come to revere the enigmatic nature of the herb to the same extent that he does.[[46]](#endnote-46) Indeed, once Myfanwy has left the scene, Thomas’s thoughts become dominated by the fact that, while he relishes the plant’s bitter scent and is aware of the resonance it holds for him, he remains unable to pinpoint exactly what he is striving to recollect. The focus shifts accordingly from Myfanwy’s playful inquisitiveness to the narrator’s struggle to re-connect with his past, and by the time we reach the coda his mood has grown dark:

 I have mislaid the key. I sniff the spray

 And think of nothing; I see and I hear nothing;

 Yet seem, too, to be listening, lying in wait

 For what I should but never can remember:

 No garden appears, no path, no hoar-green bush

 Of Lad’s love, or Old Man, no child beside,

 Neither father nor mother, nor any playmate;

 Only an avenue, dark, nameless, without end.[[47]](#endnote-47)

It is possible to read this final stanza, with its evocation of the labyrinthine tunnels of the mind, as a manifestation of the Freudian uncanny, that disorientating psychological phenomenon which arises from what is ‘concealed, kept from sight.’[[48]](#endnote-48) However, what is even more striking is the way in whichthe narrator’s forgetfulness is expressed in terms of an absence of paternity; almost as if he digesting the implications that fatherhood has for his own mortality. Conceived this way, the title of the poem is an ironic form of self-reference – ‘old man’ being a common term of reference to one’s father – and if the narrator’s thoughts are ostensibly trained on his youth, the coda also registers the same fear of growing old as ‘The New House’, where the lonely narrator’s ears are ‘teased with the dread / Of what was foretold’.[[49]](#endnote-49) One notes too, how this sense of trepidation is reflected in the hesitant rhythm of the poem; its qualifications, repetitions and lack of flow, as Thomas echoes Wordsworth’s sense that:

 Turn wheresoe’er I may,

 By night or day.

 The things which I have seen I now can see no more.[[50]](#endnote-50)

 Viewed in this light, the words “I have mislaid the key” possess a resonance that extends far beyond the coda to ‘Old Man’; especially when one considers the following passage from *The Childhood of Edward Thomas*. Towards the end of the first chapter, Thomas mentions a book

[…] which had and has a charm impossible for me either to communicate or, I fear, to make credible. It was my first school prize. The words, ‘The Key of Knowledge’, occurred in its title or they stood out somewhere else. It was illustrated by coloured pictures. But it disappeared, I never had any idea how, before I had read far into it, and I never saw it again. From time to time down to the present day I have recalled the loss, and tried to recover first of all the book, later on the thread of its story, something that would dissipate from its charm the utter darkness of mystery. For example, fifteen years ago in Wiltshire two strangers passed me and I heard one of them, a big public schoolboy, say to the other, a gamekeeper, ‘What do you think is the key of knowledge?’ and back again came the old loss, the old regret and yearning, faint indeed, but real. There were times when I fancied that the book had held the key to an otherwise inaccessible wisdom and happiness, and the robbery appeared satanically sinister.[[51]](#endnote-51)

What Thomas suggests here is that, over time, the title of the lost book took on a symbolic quality within his mind which was bound up with the end of childhood and his own loss of innocence. The fairy tale motif of the lost key – pivotal to such classic works of children’s literature as Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden* (1911) – is amplified in ‘Old Man’ by the presence of a curved path leading to a door, and for Thomas, the key motif appears to have carried a psychological charge akin to that of Pandora’s Box or Bluebeard’s chamber, the mysterious vault which the bloodthirsty pirate’s wife is all too aware of yet remains forbidden to enter.[[52]](#endnote-52) Hence that yearning for something lost or just beyond reach that runs through Thomas’s poetry. In ‘Snow’ for example, a young girl is overwhelmed with grief at the death of a snow-white bird, her sorrow so strong that it is as if a whole world of cruelty and injustice has been opened up to her, while in ‘The Word’ Thomas says of the irrevocable nature of the past:

 There are so many things I have forgot,

 That once were much to me, or that were not,

 All lost, as is a childless woman’s child

 And its child’s children, in the undefiled

 Abyss of what can never be again.[[53]](#endnote-53)

Here again, the narrator’s grief is expressed in terms of a loss of innocence, a state of childlessness – an absence of paternity.

**III**

The friendship that developed between Edward Thomas and Robert Frost, whom he first met in the smoking room of the St George’s Café, London, in October 1913, has become the stuff of poetic legend.[[54]](#endnote-54) They were at a similar stage in life and had mutual interests that revolved around poetry, with Thomas anticipating Frost’s theory of ‘the sound of sense’.[[55]](#endnote-55) But there was something else that drew them together too. Guy Cuthbertson has noted that:

Many of the writers who had a significant influence on Thomas, and are quoted in his work, wrote about their own lives, especially their childhoods – writers such as William Wordsworth, Thomas De Quincey, George Borrow, and Richard Jefferies. He was attracted to the Romantic celebration of childhood as a golden age of liberty and light.[[56]](#endnote-56)

Yet remarkably, no mention is made of Frost, even though the figure of the child looms large in the American’s poetic landscape. The title of his first book, *A Boy’s Will*, published in England in the same year that Thomas and Frost met, was inspired by a haunting refrain from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s ‘My Lost Youth’:

 ‘A boy’s will is the wind’s will,

 And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts.’[[57]](#endnote-57)

Intriguingly, it is likely that when Thomas came to review *A Boy’s Will* he was already familiar with Longfellow’s refrain. His autobiography reveals that ‘[t]he only poems which I remember having read aloud to me at an early age were Longfellow’s. My father used to read or recite *The Children’s’ Hour* very often. The pathos, or his sense of it, touched me’.[[58]](#endnote-58) The connection could hardly be more apposite. Because if meeting Frost gave Thomas the courage to pursue his true calling, then it also strengthened the conviction, evolving from his conversations with the young psychoanalyst Godwin Baynes, that the key to unlocking his potential as a writer lay in his ability to harness his past. Any success in that respect was dependent upon Thomas’s powers of recall and his desire to make the same kind of imaginative returns to childhood that Wordsworth achieved when writing *The Prelude*; a feat that Frost triumphantly emulates in his great poem of childhood ‘Birches’.[[59]](#endnote-59) Not long after Thomas first became acquainted with Frost, he took a significant step in that direction when he sat down to write *The Childhood of Edward Thomas*.[[60]](#endnote-60) Letters to Eleanor Farjeon show that he was characteristically diffident about the book’s potential, describing it as

[…] the briefest quietest carefullest account of virtually everything I can remember up to the age of 8. I don’t trust myself to build up the self of which these things were true. I scarcely allow myself any reflection or explanation. […] I am trying to be true to the facts. There is no spirit (up to 9 years old) in connection with them. I extenuate nothing & set down naught in malice. […] I don’t know what I was. I only know what I did & later on, sometimes, what I thought. I hardly expect it to be published. It is pure experiment so far. […] My object at present is daily to focus on some period & get in all that relates to it, allowing one thing to follow the other that suggested it. It’s very lean but I feel the shape of the sentences & alter continually with some unseen end in view.[[61]](#endnote-61)

Thomas’s reticence is understandable due to the intimate nature of the project. But there is a clear contradiction between the simplicity of his professed aim – to set down the bare facts about his childhood – and the intuitive manner in which he had begun to ‘feel the shape of the sentences’. Far from being a dry record of events, the process of writing the autobiography was liberating his imagination and enabling his own distinctive voice to emerge, which had hitherto been buried under a mountain of commissioned prose. As Edna Longley has pointed out, Thomas’s letter to Farjeon,

[…] identifies therapeutic recall with stylistic breakthrough. And he describes a prose that anticipates his poetic strategies: close focus, little comment, no unitary ‘self’, sound and image taking the lead.[[62]](#endnote-62)

Longley’s reference to the sound of Thomas’s writing is worth dwelling on here. Because *The Childhood of Edward Thomas* is significant not just for what it tells us about the events of those years, but for the light it sheds upon his relationship with those aural forms most closely associated with childhood.

 At the start of his memoir, Thomas tells us that his earliest memories are of his mother, Mary, and her sister singing:

When I penetrate backward into my childhood I come perhaps sooner than many people to impassable night. A sweet darkness enfolds with a faint blessing my life up to the age of about four. The task of attempting stubbornly to break up that darkness is one I have never proposed to myself, but I have many times gone up to the edge of it, peering, listening, stretching out my hands, and I have heard the voice of one singing as I sat or lay in her arms; and I have become again aware very dimly of being enclosed in rooms that were shadowy, whether by comparison with outer sunlight I know not. The songs, first of my mother, then of her younger sister, I can hear not only afar off behind the veil but on this side of it also. I was, I should think, a very still listener whom the music flowed through and filled to the exclusion of all thought and of all sensation except of blissful easy fullness, so that too early or too sudden ceasing would have meant pangs of expectant emptiness.[[63]](#endnote-63)

The precise nature of the songs Mary Thomas sang to her children is not disclosed, but it is highly likely that they were lullabies; an oral form renowned for its soothing vowel music. This worked its way into the aural memory of her son and it makes itself felt in the sonic grace of one of his most exquisite lyrics, ‘Sowing’. There it is a mark of Thomas’s originality that the poem isn’t immediately recognisable as a lullaby, largely because he dispenses with the traditional verse and chorus form that was still favoured by contemporaries like de la Mare. Instead the poem gradually attains such status through its gentle yet insistent rhythm, soft vowels and slow burning atmospheric pressure. ‘It was’, says the narrator,

 […] the perfect day

 For sowing; just

 As sweet and dry was the ground

 As tobacco-dust.

 I tasted deep the hour

 Between the far

 Owl’s chuckling first soft cry

 And the first star.[[64]](#endnote-64)

Like tobacco, the heady atmosphere of ‘Sowing’ demands to be inhaled and savoured, to the extent that the reader may experience the same feeling of ‘blissful easy fullness’ that characterises Thomas’s earliest memories. The softness of the owl’s call evokes the sound of an infant at peace, and these connotations of a wider cosmic unity are sustained by the appearance of the first star. As for the narrator, he inhabits a heightened state of sensory awareness which is so acute that it pushes against the boundaries of time:

A long stretched hour it was;

 Nothing undone

 Remained; the early seeds

 All safely sown.

 And now, hark at the rain,

 Windless and light,

 Half a kiss, half a tear,

 Saying good-night.

Ostensibly, the feeling of fulfilment that emanates from these lines has little to do with paternity and more to do with the completion of a satisfying day’s labour. Yet the connotations of fecundity and nurture tell a different story. The claim that the early seeds have all been ‘safely sown’ suggests that an entire stage in life has been put to bed rather than merely a single day, while the blessing that the elements confer in the final lines resembles the kind of tender benediction which one would normally bestow on a child before sleep. By the end of ‘Sowing’, the narrator has become once more that ‘still listener whom the music flowed through’ and the poem provides a fine example of what Frost meant when he talked about the potency of the ‘hearing imagination’ (which he claimed to value even more than the ‘seeing imagination’).[[65]](#endnote-65) In his autobiography, Thomas says of his mother:

I cannot see her but I can summon up her presence. […] Her singing at fall of night, especially if we were alone together, soothed and fascinated me, as though it had been divine, at once the mightiest and the softest sound in the world.[[66]](#endnote-66)

Thomas’s sense of this memory as sacred raises an illuminating parallel with Blake’s lullaby ‘A Cradle Song’ from his *Songs of Innocence*. There, the infant sleeps ‘While o’er thee thy mother weep’.[[67]](#endnote-67) Her tears are tears of joy, since ‘Excess of joy weeps’.[[68]](#endnote-68) But this strain of feeling is clearly quite different from the kind of full-bodied ecstasy that is recalled by Wordsworth in the early books of *The Prelude* and later by Frost in ‘Birches’, because it is wrested from the duress that is attendant upon parenthood. Here the confluence with ‘Sowing’ can be felt, with Blake’s poem offering a timely reminder of the dual purpose of the lullaby, which serves as a salve for the singer as well as the child to whom the song is sung:

 Sweet babe in thy face,

 Holy image I can trace.

 Sweet babe once like thee,

 Thy maker lay and wept for me [[69]](#endnote-69)

Viewed in this light, ‘Sowing’ stands as a lullaby that Thomas composed to soothe himself, with a sonic depth that reflects the therapeutic nature of the ancient rite which the narrator has performed.

 As well as showing how certain poems evolved from specific memories, Thomas’s autobiography is also significant for what it tells us about his reading habits. Though he claims to remember very little of what he read at school, he does recall that:

[A]t home I read many books of travel, natural history and fiction. As birthday or Christmas presents I received *The Complete Angler*; *The Marvels of the Polar World*, about ice, snow, Esquimaux and seals, and other books containing picturesque descriptions of torrid or frozen lands; Dick’s holidays and what he did with them, an adult’s chronicle of a boy’s country holiday, with insidious information on every page; Hans Andersen, Grimm, Holme Leigh’s *Fairy Tales*, *The Swiss Family Robinson*, *Westward Ho!* … Thus I grew to think of places where jaguars lay in wait for men upon overhanging branches, and of times when houses were made of barley sugar and witches cooked children and ate them.[[70]](#endnote-70)

Of all these stories, it is a fairy tale from the Brothers Grimm that stands out by virtue of the influence that it subsequently exerted upon Thomas’s imagination. Reflecting on his awakening to the magic of literature, he says:

I cannot decide whether my life owed more to my books or my books more to my life. I slipped from one world into the other as easily as from room to room. I do not know how much I may have dwelt on the story in later years, but Grimm’s *Hansel and Gretel*, the children going out into the wood to be lost, dropping a trail of stones behind them and finding their way back, but failing to do so when they used breadcrumbs which the birds ate, came to be to my mind one of the great stories of the world.[[71]](#endnote-71)

The strength of Thomas’s recollection suggests that the story left a firm imaginative imprint, and this is borne out by the regularity with which the forest motif appears in his poetry. There it stands as a symbol of the unknown and, in ‘Lights Out’,

 […] the borders of sleep,

 The unfathomable deep

 Forest where all must lose

 Their way, however straight,

 Or winding, soon or late;

 They cannot choose.[[72]](#endnote-72)

The affinity that exists between images like this and Frost’s ability to generate atmospheric pressure through the brooding presence of woodland is plain. Famously, in ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening’:

 The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,

 But I have promises to keep,

 And miles to go before I sleep,

 And miles to go before I sleep.[[73]](#endnote-73)

What these speakers have in common is their sense of being ‘lost in the world’s wood’,[[74]](#endnote-74) a fate which echoes that of *Hansel and Gretel*. But more specifically, for Edward Thomas, the story of the abandoned children’s quest to find a way through the woods continued to resonate because it reflected his search for an identity – a mode of being – that would allow him to thrive; a search for an abiding home, ‘something chance would never bring’,[[75]](#endnote-75) which was bound up with the conviction that he did not belong within the suburban environment where he grew up on the outskirts of London.

 If Edward Thomas is the father of modern poetry, it is because his poems act as imaginative pathways, hidden tracks that have enabled others to find their own way through the woods. Shortly before his departure for the western front Thomas wrote ‘The Green Roads’. Composed in June 1916, the same month that he applied for a commission in the Royal Artillery, it belongs to the final phase of his remarkable outpouring of poetic genius:

 The green roads that end in the forest

 Are strewn with white goose feathers this June,

 Like marks left behind by some one gone to the forest

 To show his track. But he has never come back.

 Down each green road a cottage looks at the forest.

 Round one the nettle towers; two are bathed in flowers.

 An old man along the green road to the forest

 Strays from one, from another a child alone.[[76]](#endnote-76)

Given the trajectory Thomas’s life took, it is difficult not to identify him with the solitary male who has entered the wood never to return. Read this way, the poem is a prophetic self-elegy, in which Thomas reflects on what he will take with him and what he will leave behind. The trails of goose feathers invoke the story of *Hansel and Gretel*, and this is fitting, since the narrator, who sees himself reflected in the old man and solitary child, resembles a guardian spirit; a carrier of legend and lore, like the English oak that stands ‘like a castle keep, in the middle deep’.[[77]](#endnote-77) One notes too, how the presence of the word “host” within the seventh stanza works to raise its counterpart – ghost. Thus:

 […] all things forget the forest

 Excepting perhaps me, when now I see

 The old man, the child, the goose feathers at the edge of the forest,

 And hear all day long the thrush repeat his song.[[78]](#endnote-78)

In his essay ‘Myth and Education’, Ted Hughes talks about the way in which stories laid down in the imagination during childhood have the capacity to act as a kind of blueprint for one’s life, ‘light[ing] up everything relevant in our own experience’, with ‘new revelations of meaning open[ing] out of their images and patterns continually, stirred into reach by our growth and changing circumstances’.[[79]](#endnote-79) For Edward Thomas, the tale of Hansel and Gretel was just such a resource, and in ‘The Green Roads’ he draws upon the mythic force of that story to affirm an identity that is paternal in the profoundest sense.[[80]](#endnote-80)

1. Hughes’s exact words were: “[H]e is the father of us all”. Cited by Cuthbertson, ‘Introduction: Edward Thomas, Modern Writer’, *Branch-Lines*: *Edward Thomas and Contemporary Poetry*, ed. Guy Cuthbertson and Lucy Newlyn (London: Enitharmon, 2007) 17-28, 25. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For the story behind the book’s publication see Richard Emeny’s introduction to *Four-and-Twenty Blackbirds* (Cheltenham: The Cyder Press, 2001) i-vii. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Edward Thomas to Eleanor Farjeon, 19 August 1915. Cited by Emeny, *Four-and-Twenty Blackbirds*, v. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Emeny, *Four-and-Twenty Blackbirds*, iii. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. ‘Bronwen’, Thomas, *Collected Poems*, 106. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., i. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Note of 29 March 1907, Berg Collection, New York Public Library. Quoted by Jean Moorcroft Wilson, *Edward Thomas: From Adlestrop to Arras* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015) 115. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Moorcroft Wilson, *From Adlestrop to Arras*, 115. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Moorcroft Wilson, *Edward Thomas*, 159. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. *The Complete Poems of Walter de la Mare* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969) 70. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. ‘Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollectionsof Early Childhood’, Wordsworth, *Poetical Works* (London: Oxford University Press, 1950) 461. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Walter de la Mare, ‘Rupert Brooke and the Intellectual Imagination’. Cited by Forrest Reid in *Walter de la Mare: A Critical Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 1929) 89. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Lurie, *Boys and Girls Forever*, 49. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. ‘The Burning Glass’, *The Complete Poems of Walter de la Mare*, 463. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Edward Thomas, *Feminine Influence on the Poets* (London: Martin Secker, 1910) 85-6. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. ‘Words’, Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems*, 77. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Cited in *A Language Not to be Betrayed: Selected prose of Edward Thomas*, ed. Edna Langley (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1981) 143. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. A letter Thomas sent to RC Trevelyan in April 1914 anticipates that “my 2 elder children […] will keep me free from books” and Guy Cuthbertson highlights Thomas’s distrust of ‘bookishness’ in his introduction to Thomas’s autobiographical prose, noting in particular Thomas’s critique of Walter Pater, whose sense of “the great and the beautiful” is seen to come “from books, and pictures, not from life”. Thomas goes on to say that, “It is the statue, not the human form – the idea of youth, not youth – that Pater worships.” (Edward Thomas, *Walter Pater*, 96; 228). See Cuthbertson, ‘Introduction’, *Prose Writings*, xliv-xlv. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid., 83. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Poetical Works* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949) 48. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. *Keats*, Edward Thomas’s short critical biography, was written at the same time as his poetry began to flourish. The book was published by T. C. & E. C. Jack in 1916. His view of the poetic temperament was shaped by Keats: see R. George Thomas, *Edward Thomas* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1972), 20-22, 35. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. The entry is in Field Notebook 80 (Berg Collection, New York Public Library). Edna Longley has pointed out that the notebook makes reference to “the Bramdean tumulus”, which suggests that the poem’s setting is Bramdean Common, not far from Steep where the Thomases were living (See Longley, *The Annotated Collected Poems*, 251). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. The presence of such sombre sentiments is offset by the fact that *Cymbeline* – the play from which these lines are taken – is one of Shakespeare’s late so-called reconciliation plays, with the denouement witnessing the recovery of a seemingly lost daughter. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. These tape recorded interviews are held in the Edward Thomas archive at Cardiff University. I am grateful to the librarian for granting me access to them. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Cited by Moorcroft Wilson, *Edward Thomas*, 114. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Cited by R. George Thomas, *Collected Poems*, 227. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Letter from Edward Thomas to Robert Frost, 2 January, 1916, Dartmouth College Library, Hanover, New Hampshire. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems*, 99-100. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems*, 100. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems*, 221. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Cited by Moorcroft Wilson, *Edward Thomas*, 17. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Hollis, *Now All Roads Lead to France*, 43. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. This remark is recorded in a notebook kept by Edward Thomas’s brother Julian from 1914-18: “Tuesday, 23 March 1915 […] I read out a score of Edwy’s poetry to Mother and Maud [J.T.’s wife] the other night. Father calls them pure piffle and says no one will publish them, He may be right as to the last part of the sentence.” (Cited by R. George Thomas, *Collected Poems*, 222). [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Edward Thomas, *In Pursuit of Spring* (Holt: Laurel, 2007) 226. In the original, Kilve and Liswyn have been printed the wrong way round, so as to suggest that the boy prefers Liswyn. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Lucy Newlyn, ‘The Strange Romanticism of Edward Thomas’, *Essays in Criticism* (Vol 67, No. 4) 410-439, 410. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Ibid., 411. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Edward Thomas, *The South Country*, ed. R. George Thomas (London Dent, 1992) 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. *The Childhood of Edward Thomas*, 107. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Wordsworth, *Poetical Works*, 68. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Cited by Emeny, ‘Introduction’, *Four-and-Twenty Blackbirds*, i. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems*, 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Cf. Longley, *The Annotated Collected Poems*, 151. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. ‘Old Man’ has its roots in a piece of prose called ‘Old Man’s Beard**’** that Thomas set down in November 1914. See Manuscript poems and prose, Lockwood Memorial Library, State University of New York at Buffalo. Cf. Longley, *The Annotated Collected Poems*, 149-50. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems*, 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock with an introduction by Hugh Haughton (London: Penguin, 2003) 344. Cf. Sam Perry, ‘“In search of something chance would never bring”: The poetry of R.S. Thomas and Edward Thomas’, *The Review of English Studies*, Vol 59, No 241 (September 2008) 582-603, 596. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems*, 47. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Wordsworth, ‘Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood’, *Poetical Works*, 460. The title (and first line) of Thomas’s poem ‘There was a time’ alludes to the opening passage of the Immortality Ode. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Edward Thomas, *The Childhood of Edward Thomas: A Fragment of Autobiography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1938) 26. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Philip Larkin once said of his recurring fear of death that, “nothing really expunges the terror: it remains a sort of Bluebeard’s chamber in the mind, something one is always afraid of”. Philip Larkin to W.G. Runciman, 26 November 1978, *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin 1940-1985* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992) 591. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems*, 79. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. On the circumstances surrounding Thomas and Frost’s first meeting see Matthew Hollis, *Now All Roads Lead to France: The Last Years of Edward Thomas* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. Cf. Lucy Newlyn, ‘“The shape of the sentences”: Edward Thomas’s Tracks in Contemporary Poetry’, *Branch-Lines*, 65-82, 67. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Edward Thomas, *Prose Writings: A Selected Edition*, ed. Guy Cuthbertson, Volume I, *Autobiographies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) xvii. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. Cited by Jay Parini, *Robert Frost: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1999) 119. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. *The Childhood of Edward Thomas*, 59. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. In ‘Birches’, Frost’s sense of “going back to be” echoes Wordsworth’s sense of “something evermore about to be”. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. The book would not be published until 1938, well after Thomas’s death. Guy Cuthbertson points out that *The Childhood of Edward Thomas* “was not the title Thomas used; he simply called it ‘the autobiography’.” (‘Introduction’, Edward Thomas, *Prose Writings* Volume I) 183. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. Edward Thomas to Eleanor Farjeon, 8 December 1913. See Farjeon, *Edward Thomas: The Last Four Years* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958; rep. Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1997) 48; 51. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. Longley, ‘Introduction’, *The Annotated Collected Poems*, 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. *The Childhood of Edward Thomas*, 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems*, 49. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, ed. Lawrence Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964) 130. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. *The Childhood of Edward Thomas*, 18-19. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. Blake, *The Complete Poems*, 110. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. ‘The Marriage of Heaven and Hell’, Blake, *The Complete Poems*, 184. Cf. Blake’s ‘Introduction’ to *Songs of Innocence*: “So I sung the same again / While he wept with joy to hear” (*The Complete Poems*, 104). [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. Blake, *The Complete Poems*, 110. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. Thomas, *The Childhood of Edward Thomas*, 56. [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. Ibid., 57. [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
72. Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems*, 129-30. [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
73. Frost, *Selected Poems*, 41. [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
74. ‘Song at the Year’s Turning’, R.S. Thomas, *Collected Poems 1945-1990* (London: Dent, 1993) 59. [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
75. ‘Lob’, Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems*, 57. [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
76. Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems*, 121. [↑](#endnote-ref-76)
77. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-77)
78. Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems*, 121-2. [↑](#endnote-ref-78)
79. Ted Hughes, ‘Myth and Education’, (1976) *Winter Polle*n*: Occasional Prose*, ed. William Scammell (London: Faber, 1994) 141. [↑](#endnote-ref-79)
80. One of Edward Thomas’s deepest convictions about language, raised in the final lines of ‘The Green Roads’, is that “words outlive the life of which they seem the lightest emanation […] the things are forgotten, and it is an aspect of them, a recreation of them, a finer development of them, which endures in the written words”. See *Richard Jefferies*: *His Life and Work* (London: Faber and Faber, 1978) 298. [↑](#endnote-ref-80)