

“With Their Light Footsteps Press”: Edward Thomas, W.B. Yeats, and the Symbolism of Loss

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Abstract: Equally indebted to a pastoral tradition that projected the poet’s emotional interiority onto the natural world, W.B. Yeats’s and Edward Thomas’s nature poems rely on an affective symbolism. For Thomas, however, whose poetic landscapes are never wholly removed from his participation in WWI, there arises a contradiction between the Romantics’ transcendent mode and the psychological realities of war. Focusing on how two of his pastoral poems, “Roads” and “February Afternoon,” address symbolic and formal oppositions, this paper posits that Thomas reconfigures his symbolism to accommodate both spiritual absence and human loss, resolving the antinomy of transcendent vision and traumatic experience.

In his 1900 essay “The Symbolism of Poetry,” W.B. Yeats states that “all sounds, all colours, all forms, either because of their preordained energies or because of long association ... call down among us certain disembodied powers, whose footsteps over our hearts we call emotions” (“Symbolism” 879). Yeats’s call for emotional symbolism at the turn of the century reflected his growing interest in the symbolist principles of the Romantics and the nineteenth-century French poets he discovered in Arthur Symons’s *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899). Following these principles, the poet detects and dramatizes psychological states in landscape and natural forces. This practice is perhaps best illustrated by Yeats’s “The Sorrow of Love,” in which the motions, sights, and sounds of a windy evening reveal “earth’s old and weary cry” (12). This multisensory intimation of emotional distress in a personified earth aligns

with the symbolists' attempts to capture the ineffable conditions of human interiority through synesthesia. As a poet aligned with William Wordsworth's naturalistic-elegiac mode, the practitioners of which tracked the deterioration of England's rural culture and landscape (Middleton 313), Edward Thomas was similarly invested in developing a symbolism that could address humanity's shifting affective engagement with natural phenomena.

Thomas's nature poetry is characterized by many oppositions: heightened and vernacular language, eternity and immediacy, and the presence and absence of the human and the divine. Drawing on Lucy Newlyn's discussion of Thomas's derivations from the Romantics (as well as her claim that his work regularly displays Yeatsian antinomies)¹ and Edna Longley's observations on the affinities between his and Yeats's symbolism, I will address how Thomas's poem "Roads" (1920), supplemented by "February Afternoon" (1920), attempts to reconcile his transcendent vision of poetic inspiration with the pervasive psychological impact of loss during the WWI. In contrast to Longley, who posits that Thomas's natural symbolism effects "a diminution of man's importance in the landscape" (33), I contend that Thomas—through a series of identifications between the human, the avian, and the divine—constructs a natural, symbolic order that memorializes both the war's casualties and a receding numinous presence.

In the first lines of "Roads," the speaker qualifies his plain but emphatic opening statement, "I love roads," by identifying his object with a divine force: "The goddesses that dwell / Far along invisible / Are my favorite gods" (1–4). By introducing himself and his spiritual preference in the first person, he foregrounds individual perspective. Indeed, his description of the road disappearing in the distance, which doubles as a depiction of a receding divine

¹ As Yeats matured, he came to see all consciousness as the tension of psychic and spiritual opposites or antinomies (Ramazani and Ellmann 92). See, for example, the counterposed images of mastery/failure, life/legacy, and body/spirit in "Sailing to Byzantium" and "The Circus Animals' Desertion."

presence, imitates the sweeping gaze of a surveyor.² Later, Thomas's speaker develops his observations of the road into a radically subjective position, stating that it "would not gleam / Like a winding stream / If we trod it not again" (15–17). This assertion establishes that human perspective and presence are key to the magical quality of place. Through his shift from the singular pronoun of the beginning lines to the collective "we" and his focus on the visual rather than the "invisible," the speaker reframes his personal, sublime association as a broadly identifiable symbol of human absence and loss. His balancing of this collective experience and a distant spiritual presence in the one figure of the road illustrates Newlyn's assertion that Thomas instills symbolic markers with "a significance that hovers between the psychological and the numinous" (431). Thomas's symbolism, then, extends Yeats's uncertainty in attributing the emotional response evoked by the symbol to either "long association" or "preordained energies"—that is, either unconscious significances accrued over time and through experience or a *priori*, spiritual truths. As I will show, however, "Roads" resolves this long-held tension between the experiential and received determinants of the affective response that is so central to both poets' symbolism.

Along with the counterbalanced symbolism of the road, Yeatsian antinomies suffuse the syntax of "Roads," dramatizing the speaker's crisis of belief and uncertainty. In the third stanza, for example, the speaker depicts the road as a temporal paradox:

On this earth 'tis sure
We men have not made
Anything that doth fade
So soon, so long endure. (9–12)

Aided by his sudden change in register from the candid vernacular of the earlier stanzas to an archaic diction that revives "'tis" and "doth," he affects a mode of eternal wisdom. This passage, unlike its surrounding stanzas, transitions to

² Thomas was long familiar with this perspective: one of his common assignments as a freelance writer was to produce topographical descriptions

the following stanza with a colon, a mechanical device that enforces the atmosphere of eternity by drawing out our reading. The object in focus, however, balances the contradictory states of finitude and permanence. The chiasmus of “doth fade / So soon, so long endure” formalizes the speaker’s paradoxical observation of the road’s real and imagined qualities, manifesting his struggle to maintain a transcendent vision against the background of mortality and fading memory established in the preceding stanza (5–8). This equivalence between content and form is a common quality of Thomas’s work that parallels Yeats’s use of symbolism. As Longley notes, both poets “depend in theory on symbol and poem being coterminous; in practice, on a nexus of image, syntax and rhythm” (39). In “Roads,” the speaker’s contradictory statements often hinge around carefully placed caesura and enjambment like that in “Often footsore, never / Yet of the road I weary” (29–30). Here, the contrasting adverbs divide the speaker’s physical exhaustion from his unfaltering belief, but their isolated position together on the first line recalls the paradoxical balance of “fade” and “endure” in stanza three. By thus foregrounding the tension of the immediate (“often”) and the non-finite (“never”), the speaker heightens the uncertainty of his spiritual position. In so doing, he questions the adequacy of his transcendent vision.

At the centre of the speaker’s numinous vision is “Helen of the Roads” (33), a figure borrowed from the Welsh mythic cycle *The Mabinogion* and remembered for ordering the construction of roads throughout Wales. In the poem, however, Helen’s divine influence extends beyond the bounds of the road to include both the avian and the human world: “Abiding in the trees / The threes and fours so wise / The larger companies” (37–39). The speaker’s depiction of the goddess’s presence superimposes the image of a flock of birds at rest over that of an encampment of soldiers, rendering his vaguely defined collective subjects indistinguishable from one another. He carefully chooses his words to evoke military organization without undermining the double image; for example, “threes and fours” were familiar numbers

for British infantrymen during WWI, given that a standard infantry division contained three brigades, a brigade four battalions, a battalion four companies, and a company four platoons. This merging of the natural habits of birds and the organization of soldiers also appears in the poem “February Afternoon,” where such equivalence sparks the speaker’s realization of a universal law “that the first are last until a caw / Commands that last are first again” (4–5). After defining this order as indelible and eternal in the first stanza, he identifies it in the final lines with a God who “sits aloft in the array / That we have wrought him, stone-deaf and stone-blind” (13–14). His terrifying image of a wholly senseless and transcendent divine power undermines the organizing principle of the “array” and implicitly demands a symbolic order that accounts for the sensory and psychological realities of wartime.

Against the critique of a distant God in “February Afternoon,” Helen occupies an increasingly concrete position in the speaker’s perception in “Roads”:

And it is her laughter
At morn and night I hear
When the thrush cock sings
Bright irrelevant things. (45–47)

The thrush cock who mediates Helen’s voice here appears not only in Thomas’s poetry (i.e., “The Thrush” and “The Green Roads”) but also in Thomas Hardy’s “The Darkling Thrush” (1900) and Walt Whitman’s “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” (1865) as a figure that sustains beauty against mortality. The thrush’s tendency to sing in all weather earned it the epithet “stormcock” and made it an ideal symbol of the pastoral poet’s struggle with loss. In this passage, however, the bird’s singing is too abstract a symbol to reconcile the speaker’s spiritual vision with the immediate psychological reality of loss presented by the war. The speaker’s admission that the song is “irrelevant” supports Newlyn’s argument that, in Thomas’s poetry, “nature and naturalism are enhanced by a magical aura which is half-dismissed as whimsical, half-indulged as overpoweringly pervasive” (418). But in the next association he con-

structs, the speaker of "Roads" realizes a symbol that draws together the emotional weight of loss and the numinous presence. Shifting from the thrush's song to the rooster's call, he imagines "Troops that make loneliness / With their light footsteps' press, / As Helen's own are light" (49–51). By associating the goddess's footsteps with those of the lost soldiers and mediating both through a natural phenomenon, he finds a means to represent two absences through a single presence. Thus, the natural symbol becomes a memorial vessel for the departed and the fading divine.

By adhering closely to the affective quality of the symbol, Thomas aligns his symbolism with Yeats's heightened invocation fifteen years prior of "certain disembodied powers, whose footsteps over our hearts we call emotions." In "Roads," this image of affective response and Yeats's early vision for a symbolism that addressed unconscious and spiritual experience finds form in the combined footsteps of the goddess, the birds, and the war dead. The movement of the figures' feet as the poem nears its end resolves the condition that the speaker established in the third stanza of the necessity of human presence to his vision of nature's sublimity. Likewise, his identification of divine presence with human absence through the medium of the birds elides the opposition of the transcendent vision and the psychological realities of war presented in "February Afternoon." Far from causing "a diminution of man's importance," Thomas's symbolism merges numinous perception and emotional awareness in a form that forever recalls man and the divine in their absence.

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