CHAPTER II

The varying manifestations of Romantic instincts in the English poetry of the present century may be material enough for scores of dissertations. And, an orthodox account of them may bring into focus poets like Walter de la Mare, D.H. Lawrence, Stephen Spender, Dylan Thomas and Edwin Muir. The contributions of others like Edward Thomas and the later Yeats and Eliot, whose Romantic affinities have often been disputed, are apt to be overlooked in the process, although they have been largely responsible for the resuscitation of the Romantic tradition in the modern context.

The Romantic strain in the poetry of the twentieth century has been a common strand that links up the modernists with the less aggressive moderns. Romanticism in the new context has tended to grow close to realism allowing ample scope for contradictory assertions on the affiliations of individual poets. An element of scepticism characteristic of the modern mind seems to lend a new dimension to the Romantic achievements of the century, as it tends to establish a rapport with realism. The sceptical approach, however, does not appear to detract from the significance of Romantic perceptions, as it seems to work only at the conscious level.
of the mind. The impression, instead, is of Romanticism growing new teeth to chew and digest new realities. Such an approach, surely, was not wholly alien to the great Romantics of the earlier century. It was, in fact, characteristic of Keats. Jack Stillinger, for one, seems to commend it when he says:

It is a notable part of Keats's wisdom that he never lost touch with reality, that he reproved his hoodwinked dreamers who would shut out the world, that he recognized life as a complexity of pleasure and pain, and laid down a rule for action: achievement of the ripest, fullest experience that one is capable of. These qualities make him a saner, if less Romantic, poet than his contemporaries, and they should qualify him as the Romantic poet most likely to survive in the world.1

And obviously, along with Keats, the 'sceptical Romanticism' that he subscribed to, has also found favour in our times.

The Georgian endeavour, initiated by Edward Marsh in the early part of the present century, to impart "a new strength and beauty to English poetry", was certainly laudable. The Georgian poetry seems to have taken off fairly well. But, ironically enough, it was weighed down by the same high-sounding ideals which lent it motive force. It had perforce to fly low. And presumably, only when it went out of Marsh's hands, it

developed a precipitously downward curve. The Georgians thus turned into a butt of ridicule. As mentioned by C.K.Stead, what appeared revolutionary in 1910 turned reactionary by 1920.² No wonder, Robert Graves, a Georgian himself in his early years, teamed up with his wife to ridicule them.³

As is widely acknowledged, the qualities the original Georgian movement had aimed at were to be found in the poetry of Edward Thomas. Yet, the interest evinced by critics like F.E.Leavis and H.Coombes to disentangle Thomas from the Georgian fold is understandable. In fact, those who have claimed him for the Georgian school seem to have wronged him much. They tend to praise his poetry for its simplicity and charm as also for its narrow, provincial character. The latter tendency has been evidenced in recent times in the work of Jan Marsh.⁴ Thomas, obviously, owed something to the Georgian aesthetic. Yet, if he has to be branded a Georgian on that score, he was a Georgian with a difference.

Evaluating the contributions of his contemporaries and predecessors as a sensitive critic, Thomas was able to develop a historical perspective which formed the core of T.S.Eliot's idea of tradition. And, in his own poetry, Thomas succeeded

² M.E., p.110.
in avoiding the foibles he had noticed in others. His comment that Yeats would perhaps have made fewer mistakes in his poetry had he been a less curious critic, suggests the relevance of his own criticism to his poetry. The "verbosity" found in the early Morris, Yeats and Wordsworth was perhaps a thing he guarded himself against. He also drew lessons from "the exquisite unnaturalness" of Pater's style, and "the perversion of language and metre" by Swinburne. Thomas's comment that unless a man wrote with his whole nature concentrated upon his subject, "he was unlikely to take hold of another man", reminds us of Yeats's emphasis on the Unity of Being and Eliot's later insistence on the Unification of Sensibility. The Modernist meat, however, proved too strong for him as remarked by Edna Longley. Yet, if he did not have vinegar in his blood to the extent desired by Ezra Pound, he was, surely, not so mild as the latter believed. Thomas had, in fact, found the Georgian stuff rather insipid. He was hard put to the task of evolving a new form, as none of the available forms suited his taste.

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6. Ibid., p.76.
8. Ibid., p.160.
9. Ibid., Introduction by Edna Longley, p.XII.
10. Ibid., Introduction by Edna Longley, p.XII.
11. Ibid., Introduction by Edna Longley, p.XV.
experiments in versification might have interested him in the context. The "middle way between dead traditionalism and frenetic modernism" adopted by Robert Frost, he heartily approved of.\textsuperscript{12} But, he was conscious of Frost's tendency to be diffuse at times.\textsuperscript{13} Frost and Yeats had shown him how the speech of poetry could be that of life.\textsuperscript{14} It may, however, be unfair to suggest that he owed much to them. In any case it seems likely that he was much impressed by the way in which Yeats had stripped poetry of all adornments. Though Thomas was alive to the modern revolt against the picturesque and declamatory way of writing typified by the early Yeats, he loved to be picturesque without being declamatory.\textsuperscript{15} Edna Longley says:

Like Yeats, Thomas participated in the battle of early 20th century literature to expunge the later 19th century. It sometimes seems as if what he was doing, in his own theory and practice, was dismantling an ornate, outdated literary edifice brick by Pateresque brick, until it no longer blocked the way forward. Pound and Eliot were to come along with their bulldozers, but bulldozers can inflict a lot of incidental damage.\textsuperscript{16}

Thomas's contribution to the essential aspects of the native English tradition has also been significant. Apparently, he was traditional in the way in which Eliot was to use the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} Ibid., Introduction by Edna Longley, p.XII.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Ibid., pp.130-131.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p.85.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p.85.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Ibid., Introduction by Edna Longley, p.XV.
\end{itemize}
word later. Yet, he was not for blindly imitating even the best of his predecessors. He must have realised how the spiritual absorptions of the Romantics often hindered their physical vision. He observed:

The distance between Nature and other writers, even Wordsworth, is very great; they have as it were, a burning glass that puts fetters on the sun.  

Wordsworth's ability to see the objects of nature with the outer and the inner eyes at the same time has already been commented on. But, by the exacting standards set by Edward Thomas, Wordsworth's physical vision might seem rather weak.

A comparison of Wordsworth's "To the Cuckoo" with Edward Thomas's "Sedge-Warbler" is likely to bring home the distinction between their approaches. To Wordsworth the Cuckoo is more a wandering voice than a bird –

O BLITHE New-comer! I have heard,
I hear thee and rejoice.
O Cuckoo! shall I call thee Bird,
Or but a wandering Voice?

While I am lying on the grass
Thy twofold shout I hear,
From hill to hill it seems to pass
At once far off, and near.

Though babbling only to the Vale,
Of sunshine and of flowers,
Thou bringest unto me a tale
Of visionary hours.

18. ALSB., Introduction by Edna Longley, pp.XVI-XVII.
Thrice welcome, darling of the Spring
Even yet thou art to me
No bird, but an invisible thing,
A voice, a mystery.

The same whom in my schoolboy days
I listened to; that Cry
Which made me look a thousand ways
In bush, and tree, and sky.

To seek thee did I often rove
Through woods and on the green;
And thou wert still a hope, a love;
Still longed for, never seen.

And I can listen to thee yet;
Can lie upon the plain
And listen, till I do beget
That golden time again.

O blessed Bird! the earth we pace
Again appears to be
An unsubstantial, faery place;
That is fit home for Thee! 19

But though very much a physical presence, the Cuckoo here
does not seem to gain a concrete shape. In fact, the picture
looks rather hazy like that of Thomas's "Unknown Bird". 20
Though Wordsworth certainly cared for the physical aspects of
the objects he perceived, we find hardly anything in the poem
that helps us to identify the bird, except perhaps its name.
The description may suit any song-bird of the Spring. The
experience sought to be expressed in the poem is perhaps too

19. Wordsworth, William, "To the Cuckoo", The Poetical Works
   of Wordsworth (ed.) Thomas Hutchinson, A New Edition,
   revised by Ernest De Selincourt, (London, New York, Toronto:
   Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1904, Reprint
   1942), pp.183-64.
20. Thomas, R.G., (ed.) The Collected Poems of Edward Thomas,
   referred to as CTP.
mystical and mysterious to allow enough of concreteness in its imagery. The rapturous feelings aroused by the bird’s song are not sufficiently restrained, though that seeming lack of restraint perhaps creates an impression of spontaneity and sincerity in the feelings expressed.

The imagery of "Sedge-Warblers", on the other hand, appears too concrete to allow any trace of excessive sentiment. The poem is replete with sensuous details. Though the poet has apparently been overwhelmed by the beauty of the moment, his physical eye functions most efficiently. He describes the 'small brown birds' -

... clinging so light
To willow twigs, sang longer than the lark,
Quick, shrill, or grating, a song to match the heat
Of the strong sun, nor less the water's cool,
Gushing through narrows swirling in the pool.21

The precision and delicacy of the imagery would seem to suggest a firm intellectual grip over the situation. And, a sobering awareness of all that the song lacks, - "all words, all melody/all sweetness almost" - constitutes a guarantee against false or exaggerated sentiments.

The example of Richard Jefferies was apparently helpful to Thomas in his endeavour to match the clearness of the physical with the penetration of the spiritual vision.22

Robert Frost demonstrated to him how to ensure "absolute

21. (a) Ibid., p.211.
22. ALNB., p.174.
fidelity to the postures which the voice assumes in the most expressive intimate speech". And, he seems to have absorbed much that was Hardyan, though he could not wholly approve of what he, rather apologetically, called the 'rusticity' in Hardy. Thomas attributed the Hardyan 'obsession with the blindness of Fate and the carelessness of Nature' to this rusticity, though we find similar notions creeping into his own poetry later, despite his finer sensibility. His "February Afternoon", for instance, says:

God sits aloft in the array,
That we have wrought him, stone-deaf and stone-blind.

Such notions bring Hardy close to Thomas and the moderns, though Thomas does not seem to have taken it thus. Also, while Thomas finds the 'blessed hope' attributed to Hardy's darkling thrush rather untenable, his own sedge warblers are heard

Wisely reiterating endlessly
What no man learnt yet, in or out of school.

Thomas, like Hardy again, does not believe in any special affinity between man and Nature. He shows no inclination to attribute divinity to the presence of Nature either. Yet, we cannot afford to be as sure as F.R. Leavis, that the intimations that come to him are not of immortality, when we see

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24. ALNB., p.72.
25. Ibid., p.75.
26. Ibid., p.271.
27. Ibid., p.211.
them in the light of his comment

... it is in the country more often that we become aware, in a sort of majestic quiet, of the destiny which binds us to infinity and eternity.29

The fact that Thomas, unlike Wordsworth, did not set much store by them, cannot, surely, nullify the significance of his tendency to yield to them, momentarily though, and to yearn to "fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget."30

Such intimations finding expression in poems like "Ambition", "The Glory", "Haymaking", "The Brook", "Tears", "Beauty", "October", "Liberty" and "Old Man" may have to be traced to his mystical leanings, though Thomas apparently believed that he was no mystic. Thomas's lack of pretensions in this regard may have to be attributed to his unassuming nature. He can certainly be called a mystic in the limited sense of one who attains, or believes in the possibility of attaining, insights into mysteries transcending ordinary human knowledge. And, we have to regard the mystical element in his poetry as the essential aspect of his Romanticism.

Andrew Motion, in his study of the poetry of Edward Thomas, has not only acknowledged his mystical leanings but has also observed that his "preoccupation with the inexpressible" links him up with the earlier Romantics on the one hand and the modernists on the other.31

29. AME., p.200.
30. HMD., p.218
Thomas's inability to linger in his visions for long may well be proof of his inadequacy as a mystic, and not perhaps as a Romantic poet.

Some eminent critics have, however, sought to discount the Romantic inclinations of Edward Thomas. F.R. Leavis, who has made a signal contribution towards a reassessment of Thomas's poetic achievement, for example, says:

Edward Thomas is concerned with the finer texture of living, and here and now, the ordinary moments in which for him the "meaning" (if any) resides. If a man's capacity to perpetuate visionary moments to the total exclusion of the physical world earns him the title of a Romantic poet, poetry-writing may well turn into a profession of saints. For most of us, as remarked by Thomas, the visionary or God-like view is impossible except in a few particular and irrecoverable moments. We remember how the same sentiments are echoed in T.S. Eliot too.35

34. *ALNM*, p.200.
Michael Kirkham has lately made a more assertive bid to negate the Romantic affinities of Edward Thomas. He has sought to prove that in a good number of poems, Thomas has tried to expose the pride and delusion of the Wordsworthian Romanticism.36

What Thomas has attempted, as a matter of conscious strategy, is the creation of a balanced picture. Such an effort apparently involved a blending of the Wordsworthian solipsistic leanings with the Keatsian capabilities. We would do well to remember that Keats had long ago attempted the exposure of the pride and delusion of the Wordsworthian egotistical sublime, without ceasing to be a Romantic. Thomas's lines:

... But the end fell like a bell:
The bower was shattered; far off the train reared.37

would seem to have drawn their inspiration from the concluding stanzas of Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale":

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self.
Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is fain'd to do, deceiving elf.38

If, as remarked by H. Coombe, Thomas was ultimately in no


37. KTOP, p. 103.

need of Mr. Eliot's (rather grim) warning of "the deception of the thrush", Keats was not in need of it either. Thomas's comment on Frost, perhaps, reveals his understanding of the inadequacy of the Wordsworthian mode. He says:

Mr. Frost knows the life of which he writes rather as Dorothy Wordsworth did. That is to say he sympathizes where Wordsworth contemplates.

Thomas's bid to temper the Wordsworthian contemplation with a Keatsian sympathy would seem to be a matter of conscious poetic strategy. The resultant change, therefore, does not seem to affect the validity of his imaginative perceptions. His tendency to readjust his stance soon after the visionary moment is apparently accentuated by the burden of self-consciousness, with which he kept battling all through his life. And, his agnostic tendencies may perhaps account for the lack of profundity in his transcendental experiences. Wordsworth, in fact, has a clear edge over him in that regard. The belief Wordsworth had in himself as also in the divinity manifested through the presences of nature was beyond Thomas, largely because of his sceptical bent of mind. As R.G. Thomas takes it, his intellectual detachment perhaps shied away from the unidentified unknown. If we are favourably disposed towards Thomas, we may well call it an essential aspect of Thomas's "distinctively modern sensibility".

39. Edward Thomas, p. 211.
40. ALNB., p. 130.
41. ETCP., Introduction by R.G. Thomas, p. XX.
H. Coombe observes that there is always 'something' in Thomas that prevents anything like a full surrender being made. We may perhaps name it the sceptical element. Elsewhere, Coombe has also referred to 'something' that worked effectively against 'at-home-ness' in Thomas and has apparently identified it with the 'dread' aroused by the presences of nature. That sense of dread also perhaps has its root in the same sceptical element.

The sceptical approach has apparently promoted a wry humour in Thomas. It has already been expertly analysed by H. Coombe. A sense of humour, we are aware, was wholly absent in the earlier Romantics, thanks largely to their visionary absorptions. Even in Keats, presumably, the element of scepticism was not to the extent of allowing him to indulge in humour. Melancholic tendencies had indeed made matters difficult for Keats more than for Thomas. The ironic detachment that promoted a sardonic humour has obviously been accentuated in the modern context. The modernists tend to misprise the Romantics partly for their lack of it. Edward Thomas makes up for that deficiency in his own distinctive manner.

It may be worth pondering, whether the sceptical

43. Ibid., p. 206.
44. Ibid., pp. 237–38.
approach has made Thomas incapable of the Keatsian sense of
fulfilment. Thomas's endeavour to present a balanced
picture, mentioned earlier, seems to have been backed up both
by a conscious strategy and a sceptical bent of mind. In
his "Ode to Autumn" Keats has sought to present a placid
moment in all its intensity. Obviously, the feeling projected
therein could not have lasted long for Keats. Moreover,
a closer look at the poem may convince us that Keats's feelings
were perhaps too complex to subject themselves to such
a deliberate effort. For example, when he says:

Where are the songs of spring? Ay, where are they?
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too.

the rhetorical question suggests a yearning for the intenser
pleasures afforded by the Spring, and a disturbing awareness
of their inaccessibility at the moment. The poet's effort
in the context seems to be to make the best of a bad bargain.
Such hints, far from diluting the significance of the visionary effort, may bear testimony to Keats's distinctive sensibility.

Thomas's "July" suggests a fulfilled state of being
without the disturbing note of yearning we have perceived in
the Keatsian Ode:

45. Ibid., pp.199 & 201. In Coombes' opinion, it has.
Heighth moves but clouds and in the glassy lake
Their doubles and the shadow of my boat.
The boat itself stirs only when I break
This drowse of heat and solitude afloat.

To prove if what I see be bird or mote,
Or learn if yet the shore woods be awake.

Long hours since damn grew, — spread, — and passed on high
And deep below, — I have watched the cool reeds hung
Over images more cool in imaged sky.
Nothing there was worth thinking of so long;
All that the ring-doves say, far leaves among
Brims my mind with content thus still to lie. 47

If, however, ambivalence is a characteristic of Thomas more
than of Keats, it is perhaps the result of a conscious effort
on the part of the former to give it poetic expression.

Thomas’s complexity has at times not been properly
appreciated. John Freeman’s comment that Thomas felt “utterly
at home” in nature perhaps amounts to an unconscious self-
projection. 48 Thomas, presumably, could not have felt entirely
at home even in the cosiest of heavens. Like his two pewits,
Thomas tried to balance himself between the earth and the sky,
though he could not share the merry mood of the birds.

For a similar reason, Michael Kirkham’s comments on
Thomas’s ‘Melancholy’ sound rather odd. He says that the
poem induces and condones more than it presents and analyses
the strange sweetness of abandoning oneself to despair. 49
One could hardly have felt happy if the poem were to present
only a picture of acute melancholy. Presumably, Thomas’s

47. The Desert Places, p.201.
49. The Desert Places, p.264.
'Rain' is called by Coombes "perhaps the bleakest poem of all" for no other reason.\textsuperscript{50} Strangely enough, Michael Kirkham is much impressed by the painful expression of despair in it.\textsuperscript{51}

Thomas's effort to analyze his melancholy while giving it poetic expression evidently helped him to grapple with it to some extent. As in the case of Keats, his regard for nature was probably heightened by his melancholy disposition. And, along with his visionary leanings, his interest in natural phenomena must have helped in relieving his melancholy marginally at least.

The features of Thomas's poetry that distinguish it from the conventional Georgian stuff have been competently dealt with by Middleton Murry, P.R. Leavis, H. Coombes and others. Coombes has rightly observed that Thomas is a poet of human nature rather than nature. Thomas's eye misses nearly nothing. And he does not seek to colour the landscape like Thomas Hardy. He realizes how his distinguished predecessors, including even Wordsworth and Shelley, were at times "lured into universality".\textsuperscript{52} He observes that Keats, almost alone, "entirely lacks insatistic intention". His own effort has presumably been to approximate himself to the level of Keats. His fidelity to the observation of the moment does not, however,

\textsuperscript{50} Edward Thomas, p. \\
\textsuperscript{51} The Desert Places, p.285. \\
\textsuperscript{52} ALNB., p.181.
prevent him from using the outer scene for gliding back into the inner landscape with the ease and poise of a skilled athlete. Nevertheless, "his way of saying seems to depend largely on the way of seeing", as John F. Danby puts it. We remember how it has mostly been the other way round with the typical Georgians. The distinctive phrases employed by F.R. Leavis for highlighting this aspect of Thomas's achievement render a proverbial significance to his observations.

Thomas's desire to be true to the outer scene does not, however, conflict with his desire to be true to himself. The exquisite integrity of his postures and the psychological subtlety of his portraits impress us as much as the delicacy and intensity of his physical perceptions. He would appear to have stolen a march over the great Romantics including Keats in all these respects. Evidently, he considers "the borrowed posture or the unfelt word a betrayal". He was alive to the fact that Frost himself "shows us less of his own feelings and more of other people's ..." Perhaps, that is why their ways part. His approach has indeed been too subtle, delicate and minute for Frost. Apart from Thomas's

54. New Bearings, pp.61-64.
55. Danby, p.317.
56. ALNR, p.128.
"Great sensitiveness and integrity", it is his skyward urge that marks him out from the "begetter" of his verse.

The psychological subtlety characteristic of Thomas has given room for a certain amount of misunderstanding. John Pikoulis, for example, slips into the notion that Thomas was not capable of love. Possibly, Thomas's own words have encouraged such a notion. For he says:

My eyes scarce dare meet you
Lest they should prove
I but respond to you
And do not love

Yet, we have hardly any reason to believe that Thomas was by any means shallow in his affections. His love involved a complex awareness of the various factors that promoted the feeling, thanks largely to his characteristic self-consciousness. He was not simple-minded enough to dote on any one.

The deep humility that makes him identify himself with

... moon, sparrow and mouse what witnessed
what they could never understand or alter
or prevent in the dark house

might also have complicated matters for his critics. However, if true love is to be conceived of as an emotional self-indulgence that submerges all intellectual barriers, Thomas was plainly not capable of it.

59. Ibid., p.277.
60. Ibid., p.369.
Thomas's cravings, admitted or not, are seldom unqualified. His nostalgic moods, unlike Thomas Hardy's, get shattered in no time. He knew that

... Recall
was vain: no more could the restless brook
Ever turn back and climb the waterfall
To the lake that rests and stirs not in the nook. 61

His urge for the sky is sobered by his love of the earth. It is perhaps the solidity of the earth that prompts him to be less sceptical of it. And naturally, he shows a partiality for it. But he is aware that life on the solid earth is not everything, as mentioned by John F. Danby. 62 In the words of Andrew Motion, Thomas is convinced that the time and timeless are interdependent and moments of everlastingness "can neither exist nor remain in ignorance of their opposite for long." 63 He says:

I could not be as the sun
Nor should I be content to be
As little as the bird or as mighty as the sun. 64

Thomas himself has been aware of the probability of some people failing to appreciate such a seeming duplicity, for he says:

Those who have always lived on firm ground
Are quite unreal in the matter of the wind. 65

Thomas's love for the earth has secured him from misanthropic tendencies. Michael Kirkham has rightly pointed

61. Ibid., p.59.
64. Ibid., p.181.
65. Ibid., p.155.
out that "idealism—yearning for the infinite, singleness and sameness of being, free of the tangle and variety of finite life—entails misanthropy". Kirkham's effort to wish away the Romantic inclinations of Thomas is perhaps influenced by a well-meaning desire to stress Thomas's wide humanity. But Romanticism, as we understand it, is impoverished in the absence of humanity, though the resultant poverty is often sought to be made up for by other means.

"The Other" provides a clue to the working of Thomas's mind. Middleton Murry calls it "the most powerful and most susterely imagined poem". H. Coombes regards it as "the most extensive treatment in a single poem of the theme of self-searching". But he feels that the quest described is for the poet's deepest and real self. Andrew Motion also inclines towards such a view, when he deals with the "double vision" of Thomas.

Edna Longley's view of the poem sounds more perceptive. She observes that the poem is a prophetic microcosm of Thomas's whole scope and development as a poet. The quest, according to her, is for self-knowledge. She says that the complementary aspects of Thomas move towards integration. Her view that the

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69. PEP, pp.32-52.
whole action of the poem takes place inside one head sounds significant. 70

Michael Kirkham has made a serious bid to come to grips with the poem. 71 He analyses it in the light of D.W. Harding's view that the unadmitted craving for an adequate social group was behind Thomas's most characteristic moods. He seeks to prove that the poem deals with "the solitary's need, and his inability to satisfy his need for social connection."

H. Coombes's belief that 'the other' is the poet's real self is thus deemed untenable. Michael Kirkham carries conviction up to this point. But then, he appears to tread on slippery grounds. He says that the questing self is mistaken in supposing that the casual encounters of 'road and inn' are indeed the sum of what is not forest. For a man of agnostic inclinations, we feel, that 'road and inn' may make an apt symbol for social living as opposed to the field of activity of the Romantic artist represented by 'forest' and 'solitude'. The solitary's exploratory advance towards the world of noisy activity is apt to yield nothing but dissatisfaction. And, when the quester of Thomas's poem finds the people he meets in the inn dull boors, we have perhaps no reason to be shocked. The quest, we are sure, is doomed to fail, owing to the innate limitations of the quester. He says:

70. FLP, P.
I sought then in solitude,
The wind had fallen with the night; as still
The roads lay as the ploughland rude,
Dark and naked, on the hill.
Had there been ever any feud
'Twixt earth and sky, a mighty will
Closed it; the crooked dark trees,
A dark house, dark impossible
Cloud-towers, one star, one lamp, one peace
Held on an everlasting lease:

- And all was earth's, or all was sky's;
No difference endured between
The two. A dog barked on a hidden rise;
A marshbird whistled high unseen;
The latest waking blackbird's cries
Perished upon the silence keen.
The last light filled a narrow firth
Among the clouds, I stood serene,
And with a solemn quiet mirth,
An old inhabitant of earth.

Once the name I gave to hours
Like this was melancholy, when
it was not happiness and powers
Coming like exiles home again,
And weaknesses quitting their bowers,
Smiled and enjoyed, far off from men,
Moments of everlastingness.72

The Romantic artist's return to solitude seems to
baffle the critic. He observes:

I (the quester) says "returns", but this is
different from the forest; in some ways it is
a continuation of the original search, only
deflected from its human social goal. "I sought
then in solitude"; the logic of the statement
points to the continuity, but in what sense can
this be the same search merely redirected? We
deduce that the speaker is trying to repeat the
"happy mood" which had first prompted the quest.73

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72. ETCP., pp.29-31.
73. Ariel, p.67.
The quester's return is likely to make sense only when we identify the solitude, to which he returns, with the forest, from which he has initially emerged. When the quester turns from his anti-self to his self perhaps we have no reason to be upset. The return, in other words, is from the field of activity of a practical man to the realm of a Romantic artist. The obscure regions of human consciousness, with which the artist in isolation is primarily concerned, may be symbolised by 'forest' or 'solitude'. Such a view may be largely in consonance with the idea of forest appearing elsewhere in Thomas. In describing the forest of the present poem as 'the forest of prose' Andrew Motion has had to draw a needless distinction between the earlier and the later poems of Thomas.\footnote{\textit{Ariel}, p.69.} Michael Kirkham's difficulties seem to spring from his inability to be happy with the implications of the failure of the quest. Perhaps, that is why he feels that the quester's return forms part of another quest. And presumably, it is for the same reason that the sense of harmony purchased at the cost of "obliteration of life"\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, p.71.} disturbs the critic.

Kirkham's view that the poet's attempt here is to expose "Romantic habits of mind" to "critical analysis" is far from convincing. What is suggested is a tentative
exploration of the feasibility of realising the poet's anti-self. The exploration leads only to a reassertion of the Romantic instincts of the poet. The quest apparently convinces him that the social being he is after is not of his kind and that he would do well to avoid him.

Edna Longley has drawn attention to Thomas's reference, in prose, to a figure that followed him. The figure called 'The other man' reveals affinities with the poet's real self, unlike 'the other' of the poem. The poet seems to identify himself with 'the other man', when he says:

... he could gladly live no longer than a thrush if he could do some one thing as right, as crisp and rich, as the song was ... I mounted. He followed.

Significantly, 'the other man' followed the poet, whereas the quester followed 'the other'. We are reminded of a fervent longing Thomas has recorded elsewhere to be able to pay his son (as rent for the house he hoped to share with the latter in his old age) "a song/As sweet as a blackbird's and as long". While pointing out that the other man "is slow to open conversation, although not to recognise his replies" (thereby suggesting his affinity with the poet), Andrew Motion seems to equate him with 'the other' of the poem. The image confronted by the quester is thus regarded as the poet's own. The quester's failure to attain "union with his

77. _PDP_, p.
78. _ALNB_, p.255.
79. _ETCP_, p.293.
elusive goal" has been traced to the poet's self-consciousness. Though the poet's tormenting self-consciousness is undoubtedly a cause and a symptom of the quest recorded in the poem, the failure of the quest may have to be ascribed to other factors. Presumably, the "moments of everlastingness" that gave him "a solemn quiet mirth" failed to be more than momentary partly because of the impact of self-consciousness. Those ecstatic moments, in fact, mark the rare moments of triumph in an unrelenting war against self-consciousness waged by Thomas. And they constitute his imaginative endeavour to organize innocence in the manner of the great Romantics. If these moments reveal a relative lack of solidity, it may speak of a difference in degree rather than in kind promoted by the intenser self-consciousness of the new context.

What the quest symbolizes would thus seem to be an unavailing attempt on the part of the poet to reconcile himself with his antiself. Perhaps it also represents an earnest bid on his part to come to grips with the realities of life for giving them poetic expression. His ultimate decision to join the army may perhaps to be taken as a desperate — and disastrous as it turned out to be — effort on the part of a Romantic artist to realize his antiself, through living the life of a practical man. All the same, he seems to have been aware that

80. *FET.*, pp. 36 & 50.
his innate gifts lie elsewhere and that his attempts at realizing his antiself are bound to fail both in life and letters. "The Other" seems to embody that self-knowledge. A disturbing aspect of the quest is not so much the quester's ignorance as his incapacity or unwillingness to seek solace elsewhere. The choices available to the quester seem to have been presented in their negative aspects for the same reason. In other words, we may say that the attitude towards realism revealed by the poem is rather negative. Michael Kirkham has rightly drawn attention to the "unavailability" to the poet of all but the shallowest and most transient of social experiences. 81

The impact of agnostic tendencies on the work of Edward Thomas cannot, after all, be wished away. Indeed, in that respect he was sharing the ethos of the new century. His modern sensibility seems to reveal in uncertainties. The modern man lacks faith not only in God and Nature, but also in himself. Neither the past nor the future assures him of anything. He keeps waveriing both inwardly and outwardly. Thomas's "Aspens" seeks to give expression to that modern predicament most poignantly:

Whatevever wind blows while they and I have leaves
We cannot other than aspen be
That ceaselessly unreasonably grieues
Or so men think who like a different tree. 82

81. Ariel, p.76.
82. ETOP, p.235.
Perhaps, the truth is that even those who have much liking for Thomas are apt to feel that his ceaseless grieving is rather unreasonable. We are reminded of Thomas's remark that the sadness in Richard Jefferies came of his appetite for joy. We wonder whether it is the case with Thomas too. In any case, we are not likely to miss the essential distinction between the aspen and the poet. While the shivering of the aspen is more outward than inward, with Thomas it is perhaps the other way round. The tree seems to gain inner stability as it is anchored to the earth. But a similar anchoring to the earth perhaps proves inadequate for the stability of Thomas's mind. It has to be anchored to a faith of some sort or other - religious, social or political. Thomas offers no conclusive proof of an abiding attachment to any faith, whatever critics may say.

Nevertheless, in enhancing and enlarging our awareness through allowing us insights into his inner life, the outer nature and the life beyond, Thomas has certainly helped to make our existence on the face of earth meaningful. His achievement in this regard amounts to a contribution towards the enrichment of the Romantic tradition in the present century.

83. ALME., p.179.