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The Abounding Honeysuckle: Edward Thomas, S. T. Coleridge, and the Quantock Hills

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IN MARCH 1913, Edward Thomas set off on a bicycle tour from London to the Quantock Hills. This journey was a kind of literary pilgrimage, through a West Country landscape deeply enriched by literary associations. To see the landscape of Coleridge's poetry was the main purpose of this pilgrimage. He recalls how he would see 'Nether Stowey, the native soil of "Kubla Khan," "Christabel," and "The Ancient Mariner"' (*IPS* 30).² This journey marked an important moment for Thomas. After a long harsh winter of personal and literary struggles, he found his spring, and his new self as a poet. In the concluding chapter of this book he announces:

... I had found Winter's grave; I had found Spring, and I was confident that I could ride home again and find Spring all along the road. (*IPS* 301)

These words can be read also as a declaration of his new-found self-confidence as a poet. In this essay I explore what Edward Thomas found in his pilgrimage to Coleridge's country, how imaginatively and sensuously he responded both to the landscape of the Quantock Hills and to the poetry of Coleridge, and how his intense response bore fruit in his own poetry.

Leaving London on Good Friday, the 21st of March, 1913, Thomas arrived at Bridgwater in the evening of the 26th. The next day, on Thursday, the 27th, he entered Nether Stowey and then went up into the Quantock Hills, where he was immediately fascinated by the landscape. His response to it was both sensuous and imaginative.

On seeing 'Honeysuckle [ramping] on the banks of the deep-worn road in such profusion as [he] had never before seen' (*IPS* 272), Thomas imagined that these flowers full in bloom might have provided 'the honeydew for nourishing [Coleridge's] genius' (*IPS* 273). At this time of the year the honeysuckle was not yet in bloom. What he saw there was only the entangled bush. But just to imagine 'the abounding honeysuckle' (*IPS* 273) full in bloom, just to smell them imaginatively was enough, for Thomas, 'to suggest the poet' (*IPS* 273). We may recall his poems, 'Digging' and 'The Old Man', where smell stimulates his imagination:

Today I think
Only with scents, [...]
[.....]
It is enough

¹ This is a revised version of my paper presented at the Coleridge Summer Conference in July 2008, where I enjoyed helpful discussions of Thomas and Coleridge. It draws on my research towards an essay for the volume *English Romantic Writers and the West Country* edited by Nicholas Roe and forthcoming from Palgrave.

² Edward Thomas, *In Pursuit of Spring* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1914)

To smell, to crumble the dark earth, ('Digging', 1-2, 13-14)³

But why was 'the abounding honeysuckle' enough to summon Coleridge? In Thomas's mind were those famous lines from 'Kubla Khan':

For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise. ('Kubla Khan', 53-54)

Honeysuckle and honey-dew—Thomas enjoyed a kind of word play. Sensuously and imaginatively responding to the landscape of the Quantocks, he associated it with Coleridge's poetry.

For Thomas, the honeysuckle was important because it seemed to produce 'an effect of wildness and richness, purity and softness' (*IPS* 272), which he thought suggested an important double aspect of Coleridge's imagination; that is, the imagination responding to mildness and homeliness on the one hand, and to wildness and ghostliness on the other.

Actually, however, there are not many honeysuckles or woodbines in Coleridge's poems, though Thomas saw this flower as a key image for understanding them. There are only two, 'The Keepsake' and 'An Angel Visitant', of which he cites in *Pursuit of Spring* the former as an example showing the double quality of Coleridge's imagination perfectly:

In the cool morning twilight, early waked
By her full bosom's joyous restlessness,
Softly she rose, and lightly stole along,
Down the slope coppice to the woodbine bower,
Whose rich flowers, swinging in the morning breeze,
Over their dim fast-moving shadows hung,
Making a quiet image of disquiet
In the smooth, scarcely moving river-pool. ('The Keepsake', 18-25)

What attracts Thomas here is probably the combination of sweetness, the homeliness of the swinging flowers of honeysuckle, and their ghostly dim shadows cast underneath; or the merging of the 'fast-moving shadows' and the 'scarcely-moving' water. In this 'quiet image of disquiet', he saw the uniting of sweetness and ghostliness, richness and wildness, and serenity and restlessness, which he considered the essence of Coleridge's imagination. And Thomas thought this dualistic quality of Coleridge's imagination had a topographical aspect:

Coleridge loved equally mildness and wildness, as I saw them [...] in the warm red fields, the gorse smouldering with bloom, the soft delicious greenery of the banks; and [...] in the stag's home, the dark, bleak ridges of heather or pine, the deep-carved coombs. (*IPS* 275)

³ Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems*, ed. George Thomas (London: Faber and Faber, 2004)

Thomas speculated that Coleridge's tender and effusive imagination had been nourished by the mild climate and the pastoral landscape, while the 'wildness' of his imagination had been drawn to the bleakness of the windswept moorland. In the topography of the Quantock Hills, he literally mapped the sensuous contours of Coleridge's imagination.

From another viewpoint, however, it could be said that Thomas saw the Quantock topography through Coleridge's poetry. Perhaps he saw nothing but an imaginary landscape which was enshrined in Coleridge. Thomas himself confesses that 'except for Coleridge, [he] had the road to [himself] between Nether Stowey and Holford' (*IPS* 280). He walked on the Quantock Hills thinking of nothing but Coleridge, and seeing nothing but scenes from Coleridge's poetry. For him nothing seemed real but Coleridge, as is shown in the following passage:

Sheep were feeding on some of the slopes, and in one coomb woodmen were trimming cordwood among prostrate regiments of oak trees; but these [...] were ghosts by comparison with the man who wrote "The Ancient Mariner;" the very hills, their chasms and processions of beeches, were made unforgettable by his May opium dream of—

That deep romantic chasm which slanted
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!
A savage place as holy and enchanted
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon lover. (*IPS* 280-81)

Here the physical landscape is replaced by an imaginary, magical one, mediated through the poem. Thomas no longer saw Quantock beeches or oaks before his eyes, but—improbably in the Quantocks—he saw dark processions of cedars covering the hills.

On first coming to Coleridge country, what attracted Thomas's attention, even before 'the abounding honeysuckle', was the contrasting scenery: 'Below on the right was chiefly *red* ploughland; above on the left wilder and wilder heights of sheep-*fed* moorland' (*IPS* 272, emphasis added). He responded to the landscape already in terms of the 'mildness and wildness' that he thought characteristic of Coleridge's imagination; the rhyming words 'red' and 'fed' suggest both contrasts and symmetries in this landscape of the mind. Or it could be said that this double quality is also true of Thomas's own imagination. On the other hand, when Thomas read Coleridge's poems, he could not help but spot Quantock scenes there. Here I would like to cite an example from *A Literary Pilgrim in England*,⁴ in which Thomas interprets various writers in association with the places important for them. And here he remarks that

⁴ Edward Thomas, *A Literary Pilgrim in England* (London: Methuen, 1917)

Coleridge's work 'retains a stronger flavour of the West Country than any other greater poet's' (*LPE* 181):

[...] that wood
Which slopes down to the sea.
(*'The Ancient Mariner', Part VII, 514-15*)

In these eight words from *'The Ancient Mariner'*, Thomas sees the Quantock Hills, which he himself describes as 'fading down to the sea' (*IPS* 262) and whose slope he raced down on his bicycle, as if to a goal (*IPS* 281).⁵ Thomas's topographical imagination quickly responds to Coleridge's description of the hills jutting out into the western sea. And again, in these three lines of the next stanza, he sees the coombs of the Quantocks:

[...] a cushion plump:
It is the moss that wholly hides
The rotted old oak-stump.
(*'The Ancient Mariner', Part VII, 520-22*)

As we have seen above, Thomas's imagination, stimulated by the honeysuckle, evoked the double qualities of Coleridge's poetry. Here again, a single line or even a single word takes him back to the Quantock scenes. A single image of moss covering the oak-stump catches his imagination, and he cites three passages that include the image of moss from *'Christabel'* and *'The Ballad of the Dark Ladie'*:

[...] naught was green upon the oak
But moss and rarest mistletoe
(*'Christabel', 33-34*)

[...] the jugged shadows
Of mossy leafless boughs,
(*'Christabel', 282-83*)

Beneath yon birch with silver bark,
And boughs so pendulous and fair,
The brook falls scattered down the rock:
And all is mossy there!

And there upon the moss she sits,
The Dark Ladies in silent pain;
(*'The Ballad of the Dark Ladie', 1-6*)

⁵ For Thomas the West Country is first of all the hills sloping down to the sea, as he put it: 'Westward, for men of this island, lies the sea; westward are the great hills. In a mere map the west of Britain is fascinating. The great features of that map [...] are the great promontories of Caernarvon, of Pembroke, of Gower and of Cornwall, jutting out into the western sea, like the features of a grim large face, such a face as is carved on a ship's prow. These protruding features, even on a small-scale map, thrill the mind with a sense of purpose and spirit. They yearn, they peer out over to the sea, as if using eyes and nostrils to savour the utmost scent of it, as if themselves calling back to the call of the waves' (*The South Country* (London: J. M. Dent, 1909), 8-9).

Moss can be seen everywhere, but for Thomas the mossy seat covering trees and rocks is ‘more likely to have come from the Quantocks than from nowhere’ (*LPE* 178). Not only mossy seats. The owls crying from cliff and tower (‘Christabel’), the ‘fruit-like perfume of the golden furze’ (‘Fears in Solitude’, 204), ‘the one red leaf, the last of its clan’, hung on a tree (‘Christabel’, 49)—the moss, the flower, the leaf, and the owl—to these minute details of the natural world presented in Coleridge’s works, Thomas’s imagination responds sensitively and intuitively.

Thomas even sees the Quantock Hills and the Bristol Channel in these lines from Coleridge’s drama, *Osorio* or *Remorse*, which sets its scene in the Iberian Peninsula in the 12th century:

Yon hanging woods, that touched by autumn seem
As they were blossoming hues of fire and gold;
The flower-like woods, most lovely in decay,
The many clouds, the sea, the rock, the sands,
Lie in the silent moonshine; and the owl,
(Strange! Very strange!) the screech-owl only wakes!
Sole voice, sole eye of all this world of beauty!
(*Remorse*, Act 5, Scene 3)

Here Thomas’s inward eyes are haunted by the autumnal colours of the Quantock Hills and his ears are disturbed by the screech of owls and by the silence of the moon.

In this way, in Coleridge’s poetry Thomas saw the sea, the hills, the wood and the coombs of the Quantocks, decked with mosses, flowers and birds. And in the actual landscape of the Quantocks, he found an enchanted land enriched by Coleridge’s poetry. It was through his own imaginative response to the landscape that Thomas interpreted Coleridge, and it was through his sensuous response to Coleridge’s poetry that Thomas enjoyed the landscape. And in these Quantock scenes, Thomas found sustenance for the poetry he would write for the remainder of his life.

What then did Thomas find in this pilgrimage to Coleridge’s country, ‘upon smooth Quantock’s airy ridge’? As I have suggested above, he perceived in the Quantock scenes both a mild, benign aspect and a wild, bleak one, and his own poetry is similarly attuned. In ‘The Other’, which is a direct harvest from this journey to the West Country, we can see this double quality of his imagination. The poem opens in a light-hearted mood:

The forest ended. Glad I was
To feel the light, and hear the hum
Of bees, and smell the dying grass
And the sweet mint, because I had come
To an end of forest [...]
(‘The Other’, 1-5)

Here we can see the sensuous quality of Thomas's imagination, with which he responded to Coleridge's poetry, with touch, hearing, sight, and smell all subtly blended. We could imagine Thomas himself as a solitary traveller 'upon smooth Quantock's airy ridge', just coming out of a woody coomb, who describes his way as 'a glorious sunlit road without hedge, bank, or fence on either side, proceeding through fern, gorse, and ash trees scattered over mossy slopes' (*IPS* 300).

But this sweet freshness, 'the happy mood / When [he] first tasted sunlight there' is soon encroached upon by something more eerie. The traveller is informed that his double has taken the same way as he does, and from now on the poem is pervaded by uneasiness, except for two stanzas in the middle, where he enjoys a short interval of serenity, though darkness still lingers even here.

This mixture of sweetness and strangeness, or sensuousness and spectrality can be seen in a more balanced way in 'The Child on the Cliff', which refers to the legendary drowned land, Lyonesse, off the south-western coast of Britain. The narrator of the poem is a boy, who is sitting with his mother on the grassy cliff jutting out into the sea, where the sun shines brightly. The mother is reading a book and the son is watching and listening to grasshoppers. It is a homely picture of the mother and the son, but there is also a subtle sense of strangeness mingled here—a little yellow flower tasting like quinine and a grasshopper sounding like a sewing-machine. The image of the foam of the sea that 'curls and stretches a white arm out like a girl's' is both beautiful and uncanny. Then the boy hears the sound of the bell 'somewhere under the sea or up in the heaven', although there is no church or chapel around there. It is ghostly, but at the same time the sound is described as 'sweet'. The mother rationalizes it as the bell tied to a buoy, but again this rational explanation is shadowed by the child's calm but ominous words, which conclude the poem:

Sweeter I never heard, mother, no, not in all Wales.
I should like to be lying under that foam,
Dead, but able to hear the sound of the bell,
And certain that you would often come
And rest, listening happily.
I should be happy if that could be.

('The Child on the Cliffs', 19-24)

The sense of lying under the sea and hearing the sound of the bell of the drowned church is both serene and eerie. This kind of balance between sweetness and strangeness, calmness and ghostliness, which Thomas found in Coleridge's poems, can be seen in Thomas's poetry, too.

Although 'The Other' and 'The Child on the Cliffs' have their setting in the West Country, none of Thomas's poems takes its scene directly from the Quantocks. Nevertheless the topography of the Quantocks apparently

stimulated his imagination, just as he thought it had nourished Coleridge's. Here is a passage from *In Pursuit of Spring*, recording his impression of the Quantock Hills:

[The west of the Quantocks] was a wall coloured in the main by ruddy dead bracken and dark gorse, but patched sometimes with cultivated strips and squares of green, and trenched by deep coombs of oak, and by the shallow, winding channels of streams—streams not of water but of the most emerald grass. Seagulls mingled with the rooks in the nearer fields. The only people on the road were road-menders working with a steam-roller; the corduroys of one were stained so thoroughly by the red mud of the Quantocks, and shaped so excellently by wear to his tall, spare figure, that they seemed to be one with the man. (IPS 291)

The contrast to be seen here is not necessarily between mildness and wildness, but a more subtle one. He responds to the vivid colours and textures of the Quantock Hills—ruddy brown bracken and dark yellow gorse, red soil and green grass. This sensitive perception of the natural world is often seen in his poems; for example in 'After Rain', where he enjoys the luscious colours of grey grass, green moss, and burnt-orange fern, glittering wet after the rain; and in 'The Path', where he is delighted with the gorgeous colours of the path and the moss—silver, gold, olive and emerald. And this is from 'I Never Saw That Land Before':

The blackthorns down along the brook
 With wounds yellow as crocuses
 Where yesterday the labourer's hook
 Had sliced them cleanly; [...]
 ('I Never Saw That Land Before', 11-14)

Here the crocus-yellow of the fresh-cut blackthorn has the same effect as the red mud of the Quantocks on the corduroys of the road-mender. When Thomas describes colours his sight is mingled with some other physical sense. The yellow cut of the blackthorn is perceived with the sense of pain, and the red stain on the corduroys is described with the muddy touch of the ploughed land.

The touch and the smell of the soil are also important in Thomas, as can be seen in such expressions as 'O sweet was the mud turned to dust by the sun' ('Early one Morning') or in 'As sweet and dry was the ground / As tobacco-dust' ('Sowing'). These earthy expressions seem reminiscent of this passage from *In Pursuit of Spring*: 'The sun had both dried the turf and warmed it. The million gorse petals seemed to be flames sown by the sun' (IPS 300). The sense of the sun's genial life force, even as it turns 'mud' to 'dust', is perhaps recalled in the more sombre tones of Wilfred Owen's battlefield elegy,

'Futility'.⁶ In Thomas's 'Digging', as quoted above, we see the poet who thinks sensuously. As he evokes the experience of 'thinking with scents', several physical senses, and also the sensory and intellectual faculties, are blended:

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

Odours that rise
 When the spade wounds the roots of tree,
 Rose, currant, raspberry, or goutweed,
 Rhubarb or celery; (‘Digging’, 1-8)

The sense of smell is again accompanied by the sense of physical pain, much as Thomas's admired precursor Keats suggests pleasure and pain, joy and melancholy, are entwined together.⁷ And the odours are captured here as something kinetic, responding to the poet's movement, as can also be seen in 'Haymaking', where we discover Thomas's version of honeysuckle:

Only the scent of woodbine and hay new-mown
 Travelled the road. In the field sloping down,
 Park-like, to where its willows showed the brook,
 Haymakers rested. (‘Haymaking’, 19-22)

The scent of honeysuckle (and of new-mown hay) is entwined with the sense of the poet's own movement, accompanying the poet along the sloping road in the field. This sense of moving on the road, walking on a well-trodden way through fern, gorse, mosses, flowers and trees, is the very essence of Thomas's imagination; it must have been nourished through the pilgrimage to the West Country, though of course it was not only this journey but also his life-long habit of walking on the roads and the paths in the English countryside, that inspired his poetic imagination, much as it did those two earlier poet-walkers, Coleridge and Wordsworth.

When Thomas left Nether Stowey heading for the Quantock Hills, what tempted him was not only Coleridge, but also the road itself; and when he observed the honeysuckle, he never failed to notice 'the deep-worn road' along which it flourished. Then when he went back toward London, over these hills, he again gave attention to the honeysuckle and the road.

[...] and honeysuckle still interwove itself in the gorse and holly of the

⁶ Move him into the sun —/ Gently its touch awoke him once, / At home, whispering of fields unsown. / [...]//Think how it wakes the seeds, —Woke, once, the clays of a cold star' ('Futility', 1-3, 8-9).

⁷ In Thomas's 'Liberty' can be seen these lines: 'I still am half in love with pain, / With what is imperfect, with both tears and mirth, / With things that have an end, with life and earth' (24-26), which refer to Keats's line in 'Ode to a Nightingale': 'I have been half in love with easeful Death' (52).

roadside. A parallel, deep-worn, green track mounted the hill, close
to my right, [...] (IPS 297)

The honeysuckle and the deep-worn road are entwined, making a key image in this pilgrimage into Coleridge country. If the honeysuckle provided the honeydew for nourishing Coleridge's imagination, it could be said that the well-trodden road twining over the Quantock Hills did the same for Thomas's. The Quantock landscape was not the only poetic source for Thomas, of course. But the ancient road over the airy and windy ridge of the Quantocks, through the mild and wild climate, walked by thousands of people, including Wordsworth and Coleridge, must have given a correspondingly deep impression to his imagination. At least we could say that the Quantock ways, along which the smell of flowers and grasses, the song of birds and the wind, and the warm sun drying the mud into the dust, travelled with him, indeed brought him a new self-awareness as a poet, and encouraged him to begin writing poems that were to be sustained by the sensuous and imaginative response to the landscape revealed by *In Pursuit of Spring*.