

Homage to Edward Thompson, Part I

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OBITUARY / NÉCROLOGIE

Homage to Edward Thompson, Part I

Bryan D. Palmer

EDWARD PALMER (E.P.) THOMPSON, described in 1980 as “our finest socialist writer today — certainly in England, possibly in Europe,”¹ died at his home, Wick Episcopi, Worcester on 28 August 1993. Born 3 February 1924, he is survived by his wife of 45 years, fellow historian and political comrade, Dorothy, their daughter Kate, sons Mark and Ben, and numerous grandchildren. He left us — whom I define as those interested in and committed to the integrity of the past and the humane possibilities of a socialist future — a most enduring legacy, his *example*.

There are those who would disagree. For as long as I have been an historian there has been an uncomfortable respect for Thompson’s histories, a recognition that they occupy a special and influential place. But there has also been a nagging denigration of his accomplishments that runs through an honest and understandable articulation of critique and intellectual difference into less benign realms of malice. Much of this is developed as caricature, but its distortions and disfigurements are fundamentally political, even as they are, at times, trite. From some quarters this is so much to be expected that it can almost be regarded as a phenomenon of political nature; from others it is more disturbingly noteworthy. Seemingly ‘naturalistic,’ the antagonism to Thompson within elite circles of complacent scholasticism has been longstanding, whatever its softening in recent years. In England it often reached heights difficult to comprehend in North America.²

¹Perry Anderson, *Arguments Within English Marxism* (London 1980), 1

²In a review of *Customs in Common* (1991) in *The Independent on Sunday*, 5 January 1992, 26, Linda Colley noted that the English tradition of making iconoclasts and dissidents “national possessions” in their old age was almost certainly not going to overtake Thompson, who would continue to draw antagonism precisely because of his commitment to protest and irreverent mockery of established authority, academic and political.

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It must not be forgotten that the first academic response to Thompson's *William Morris: Romantic To Revolutionary* (1955) was a stifling silence, punctuated by a *Times Literary Supplement* review — a mere 600-words in length — titled "Morris and Marxism" that bemoaned the book's "splenetic" tone, castigated its ideological 'bias,' and identified the author's "remarkable feat" of sustaining a "mood of ill-temper through a volume of 900 pages." While *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) played to a more appreciative audience, the reviews were not without the shadows of this Cold War posture, which Gertrude Himmelfarb, for one, cast promiscuously across the pages of *The New Republic*. It is perhaps too easy to declare, in hindsight, that the book "was instantly recognized as a classic," as does E.J. Hobsbawm in an appreciative passage in his recent Thompson obituary; this is a voice that speaks through the obviousness of the book's importance over three decades. But in the early-to-mid 1960s, other voices spoke, shrill and often faltering with fear. In "A Tract of Secret History," Himmelfarb declared: "Thompson is not merely *engagé* ... [he] is positively *enragé*." This, apparently, was not good; nor did it produce history of value. Thompson's *Making* was "large deduction from very little evidence ... stance rather than substance." Many reviews carried their sneer in titles of condescension: "Hard Times," "Enter the Cloth Cap," and "The Common Man as Hero." There was obviously worry that Thompson's prose, unique in its almost sexual seductiveness, carried with it a libidinal charge capable of corrupting impressionable youth. J.D. Chambers, writing in *History*, thought it imperative that the "residue of ideological importation be laid bare" lest it lure the unsuspecting innocents of scholarship into its nefarious lair of "sheer fantasy." Dazzled by "the apocalyptic vision of a minority of desperate men," obsessed by "the colour of a bloody revolution," Thompson was an author who, in certain quarters, conjured up the symbolism of the black-coated, anarcho-communist writer-as-bomb-thrower. Worse, there was an audience for this curdling stuff. Students were not only "reading his book — they [were] sometimes buying it." Maybe they were "punch-drunk" like the miserable hand-loom weavers and others who formed the insurrectionary core of Thompson's imagined revolutionary underground. The dangers were clearly great. To use words such as "psychic masturbation," applying them to a reading of aspects of Methodism's history, or to metaphorically (and perhaps problematically) allude to Francis Place's cautious constitutionalism and ultra-respectability as posing for the portrait of "the White Man's Trusty Nigger," disturbed academic proprieties, freezing the professional disciplinary countenance in a look of shocked disbelief. Decades later, as Thompson's historical researches took him back into the eighteenth century, on to ground less immediately politically threatening and less littered with the anti-communism of the 1950s academy, the reaction to his *Whigs and Hunters* (1975) and the edited volume *Albion's Fatal Tree* (1975) appeared slightly more generous. The crude ideological dismissals of Cambridge's J.C.D. Clark were offset by the more knockabout casuistries of the *New York Review of Book's* Lawrence Stone, the latter taking great pleasure in pointing out

that, "And so the old Marxist turns out to be a new Whig after all." Revolutionaries of the *NYRB*, unite! But the mainstream, by and large, gave little to Thompson, and that begrudgingly. By the early-to-mid-1980s, the reinvigorated New Right refocussed generalized conservative sights on Thompson. His peace journalism prompted one Conservative member of the House of Lords to pontificate: "I think this passes the bounds of decency in journalism (Cheers). It was not a thing which anyone, not even Mr. E.P. Thompson, should have written, and having written it, it is not a thing which a great newspaper, read throughout the world, should have been willing to print (Cheers)." Roger Scruton opened his 'philosophical' case against the sentimentality of Marxism with a treatment of Thompson, including him in his diatribe against "thinkers of the New Left."³

³On the academic response to the Morris volume see E.P. Thompson, "Postscript," in *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (New York 1977), esp. 768-71; *Times Literary Supplement*, 15 July 1955, 391; Edmund Penning-Rowsell, "The remodelling of Morris," *Times Literary Supplement*, 11 August 1978, 913-14. On the more extensive and engaged commentary on *The Making of the English Working Class*, see Thompson's reply to his critics in Thompson, "Postscript," *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth 1968), 916-39; my own comments on and citations of various reviews in Bryan D. Palmer, *The Making of E.P. Thompson: Marxism, Humanism, and History* (Toronto 1980), esp. 65-7, 78; F.K. Donnelly, "Ideology and early English Working-Class History," *Social History*, 2 (May 1976), 219-38; Gertrude Himmelfarb, "A Tract of Secret History," *The New Republic*, 150 (11 April 1964), 24-6; "Enter the Cloth Cap," *Economist*, 210 (February 1964), 622; John Gross, "Hard Times," *New York Review of Books*, 2 (16 April 1964), 8-10; Herman Ausubel, "The Common Man as Hero," *New York Times Book Review* (26 April 1964), 44; J.D. Chambers, "Making of the English Working Class," *History*, 1 (June 1966), 183-9; R. Currie and R.M. Hartwell, "The Making of the English Working Class?" in Hartwell, *The Industrial Revolution and Economic Growth* (London 1971), 361-76. A unique review is Tom Nairn, "The English Working Class," in Robin Blackburn, ed., *Ideology in Social Science: readings in critical social theory* (New York 1973), 187-206, which originally appeared in *New Left Review*. Hobsbawm's comment is in "Obituaries: E.P. Thompson," *The Independent*, 30 August 1993. Place as "the White Man's Trusty Nigger," appears in *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York 1963), 155, but in the 1968 edition this has been altered to "the White Man's Uncle Tom." (170) For the eighteenth-century studies note, especially, J.C.D. Clark, "The Namierism of the Left," *Cambridge Review*, 22 October 1976; Lawrence Stone, "Whigs, Marxists and Poachers," *New York Review of Books*, 23 (5 February 1976), 25-7. Other statements include Keith Thomas, "Folk Law," *New Statesman*, 90 (10 October 1975), 443-5; George Rudé, "Poachers and Protesters," *Times Literary Supplement*, 30 January 1976, 104. Thompson has replied to critics of *Whigs and Hunters* in "Postscript," *Whigs and Hunters: The Origins of the Black Act* (London 1977), 301-11. Finally, note the response to "The War of Thatcher's Face," *The Times*, 29 April 1982, acknowledged in E.P. Thompson, *Zero Option* (London 1982), 197-8; Roger Scruton, *Thinkers of the New Left* (London 1985), 10-19, 212, an account marked by a cavalier disregard for accuracy and a breezy insubstantial style, typified in the following biographical note: "Thompson is no longer connected with any university, and in recent

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As the obituaries rolled off the press in late August and September 1993, proclaiming Thompson "the foremost historian in the English-speaking world," "the most eloquent historian of his English generation," "the most widely-cited 20th-century historian in the world," it is necessary to recall that within established historical and academic circles Thompson was an opposing force, and the counter-strikes against him were persistent and often petulant. As Christopher Hill rightly reminds us, "He was not universally appreciated by lesser minds in the English historical establishment: to its shame and disgrace the British academy delayed electing him to a fellowship until 1992." Hobsbawm, writing with less of a political edge and slightly less sympathy, comments that while Thompson "derived some comfort from not wearing the badges of the Establishment," it was nevertheless the case that these were "unjustly withheld from him."⁴

When I suggest that Thompson's legacy is his example, then, I do not imply a uniform embrace. Clearly he will be rejected by many, among them that species of *academicus superciliosus*, consumed by the enormous pomp and self-important propriety of the University, the preening and mating habits of which Thompson satirized tellingly in *Warwick University Ltd.*⁵ From the "philistines" of both the capitalist right and the Stalinist left, whose understanding of human need was and is ordered by "things" to the point that the creative, intellectual, and moral foundations of life are exiled,⁶ Thompson would expect no warm reception. As a

years has given his time, and some of his considerable wealth, to the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, upon whose platforms he appears regularly, his white hair blowing romantically about his leonine features." Thompson was personally miffed at the reference to his "considerable wealth," which he has never really had. He told me it prompted him to look up his tax returns, which confirmed a rather less than modest personal income.

⁴For representative obituaries see W.L. Webb, "A thoroughly English dissident," and Christopher Hill, "From the awkward school," *The Guardian*, 30 August 1993; E.J. Hobsbawm and Mary Kaldor, "E.P. Thompson," *The Independent*, 30 August 1993; "Obituaries: E.P. Thompson," *Daily Telegraph*, 30 August 1993; "Obituaries: E.P. Thompson," *The Times*, 30 August 1993; Neal Ascherson, "E.P. Thompson: defender of the faithful few," *The Independent*, 5 September 1993; Greg Kealey, "E.P. Thompson: more than a historian," *Evening Telegram* (St. John's), 5 September 1993; Rick Salutin, "E.P. Thompson: ornery and humane," *Globe*, 10 September 1993; Fred Inglis, "Thompson Invictus," *The Nation* (20 September 1993), 265-8; Michael Kazin, "The Last Socialist," *Washington Post*, 19 September 1993; Sheila Rowbotham, "E.P. Thompson: a life of radical dissent," and Boyd Tonkin, "Stay Angry," in *New Society*, 3 September 1993, 14-5, 41; Bryan Palmer, "E.P. Thompson: In Memoriam," *In These Times*, (20 September - 3 October 1993), 34-5.

⁵See Thompson, ed., *Warwick University Ltd: Industry, Management, and the Universities* (Harmondsworth 1970), esp. 153-5.

⁶See, for example, E.P. Thompson, "Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines," *New Reasoner: A Quarterly Journal of Socialist Humanism*, 1 (Summer 1957), 105-43; Thompson, "An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski," in Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory & Other Essays* (London 1978), 92-192.

figure who knew that he had jeopardized friendships and exaggerated differences so that he could face into an opposition the better to define his own thought, Thompson himself would not likely have held his own *example* up to anyone as a statement of anything, let alone a legacy to future generations.⁷

Yet his example is there to think through. He took from Marx and Morris and Blake the absolute *necessity* of countering "intellectual error," of refusing to abstain from battle: "Where is the battlefield," asked a *New Reasoner* editorial, "if it is not within the human reason and conscience?" Blake's dictum, "He who desires but acts not, breeds pestilence," was a powerful injunction, which Thompson was early to quote against those who let the revolutionary impulse of romanticism rot in the sentiment of solitude. Ironically, given his historical reading of Methodism's place in English class formation, his father's missionary Methodist past reinforced his commitment to commitment. "He groaned sometimes under [this] sense of duty," recalled his friend Sheila Rowbotham.⁸

It weighed on him heavily, especially when the often-painful choices that he knew he had to make ran up against the usually fickle face of historical process:

Crime and compassion, then, statistics, ecstasy,
 Struck like a match from chaos. It's all an accident:
 This town beneath me meaning no more than a stonecrop,
 Lichen of banks and offices: fungus on a stone wall,
 Spawning into the night a pretty stitchwork of lights
 Like swarming midge spiders, bringing someone money.
 Widows and acrobats, clowns, suicides:
 It's all in the luck of the draw. Man makes what he can get.
 The kids play at bandits. Blood issues on the speedway.
 The gunmen point from the hoardings, indicating manhood:
 Virility slouching in a soft hat and an oil-stained
 raincoat,

⁷Thompson, "Letter to Kolakowski," 186.

⁸Saville and Thompson, "Editorial," *New Reasoner*, 3 (Winter 1957-1958), 1-4; Blake quote in Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (New York 1977), 126, and again in Thompson, "Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines," *New Reasoner: A Quarterly of Socialist Humanism*, 1 (Summer 1957), 125; Rowbotham, "Thompson: a life of radical dissent," 15. Note as well the discussion in Michael Francis McShane, "'History and Hope': E.P. Thompson and *The Making of the English Working Class*," PhD dissertation, McMaster University, 1990, esp. 30-69. Raphael Samuel discusses the general place of liberal dissent, radical nonconformity and, suggestively, Methodism, in the religious making of communist intellectuals in "British Marxist Historians, 1880-1980: Part One," *New Left Review*, 120 (March-April 1980), esp. 42-55, as does Rodney Hilton, "Christopher Hill: Some Reminiscences," in Donald Pennington and Keith Thomas, eds., *Puritans and Revolutionaries: Essays in Seventeenth-Century History presented to Christopher Hill* (Oxford 1977), 7. "I'm a Methodist, what's your heresy," was Hill's recollection of an ironic introduction common among communist historians of the Popular Front period.

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Getting girls at a bargain, going loaded to the cash-tills,
Educating the young in the ethics of business.
The weak get cracked like grapeseed, chewed into digits.
On the corner by the Palace
Without malice or logic
Death waits in a slumped indifferent posture,
Sticking his knuckles in the eyes of all comers.

I once took Edward and Dorothy to see a Kingston showing of Rick Salutin's *The Farmer's Revolt*, a dramatization of the Upper Canadian rebellion of 1837. Edward's favoured line from that evening's theatre came toward the end of the play, as the blacksmith, Samuel Lount, was asked, on the gallows, what had brought him to this sad end. "I do not know exactly how we came to this," he replied, "Except by a series of steps, each of which seemed to require the next." This was not all that far removed from what Thompson had long ago identified as "the central theme" of Morris's *A Dream of John Ball*: "I ... pondered how men fight and lose the battle, and the thing they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name." For Thompson, this echoed passages in Engels's *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, and it would ring loudly in his own declarative statements on socialist humanism and agency and choice in the *New Reasoner*. Choice itself was struggle, uncertain in its outcomes, related to past choices and campaigns, but in ways that were not always simply a matter of logical progression. It was driven by the possibility of possibility, not by any promises or assurances of success or laws of historical motion:

It's time to speak one's mind.
I'm sick of an 'anxious age.'
I am fed to the teeth with the cant
Of 'guilt' and original sin.
From all the fires that raged
In England's youth I find
A grocer's timid candle
Is all that is left behind:
And life being unassuaged
By the fuel of cant and cash
Consumes us in the flames
Of unfulfilled desire
Down to sarcastic ash
And threatens to disown
Fire with terrible fire,
Air, water, and stone
Resume what was their own.

Whatever evil there is
 I declare was first let in
 By timid men with candles
 And abstract talk of sin.
 Man is what he has made,
 Chipping bone with bone,
 Shaping the teaching spade:
 Urged by his human needs
 Changes the world, and then
 Transfigured by his deeds,
 Changes necessity,
 Becoming whole and free.

I stand upon the earth
 And watch the hursts of space,
 And at last I raise my voice
 In the teeth of the swarming wind:
 I declare that man has choice
 Discovered in that place
 Of human action where
 Necessity meets desire,
 And moors and questioning wind,
 Water, stone, and air,
 Transfigured in the soul,
 Can be changed to human fire
 Which man, becoming whole,
 Will order and control.

These lines of verse, penned in 1950 under the title "The Place Called Choice," summarize much of what Thompson's *example* is about.⁹

It was an example that never wavered in its insistence that choice had to be made, and that such choice entailed action. It was an example that never lived to become "whole and free," but it was, equally, an example that was never timid. Edward Thompson carried no candles for the causes of humankind; his sense of human need and commitment was too great. He shouldered more than mere light; his blasts of intervention were powered by rage as well as by love. Even when whispering for effect his voice was loud, his presentation dramatic, his every word and gesture theatrically explosive. When Thompson sighted in an evil, it was with

⁹Thompson, "The Place Called Choice," in Thompson, *The Heavy Dancers* (London 1985), 247-60; Rick Salutin and Theatre Passe Muraille, *1837: William Lyon Mackenzie and the Canadian Revolution — A History/A Play* (Toronto 1976), 264; William Morris, *A Dream of John Ball* (New York nd), 19-20 and Fredrick Engels, "Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy," in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works* (Moscow 1968), 623, both quoted without citation in Thompson, *Morris*, 722; and Thompson, "Agency and Choice," *New Reasoner*, 4 (Summer 1958), 106.

a cannon, and he would never let it slip by: wrongs and dangers that pressed moral commitments and the unrealized potential of humanity into misshapen containments or worse he could never let stare him in the face and drift freely away in a breeze of abstraction. His place of choice, like that of Lount, was one of opposition, a tone of unfulfilled political engagement registered in refusals that were as consistently powerful as they were unfailingly impolite. As Perry Anderson acknowledged more than a decade ago, "his has been the most declared political history of any of his generation. Every major, and nearly every minor, work he has written concludes with an avowed and direct reflection on its lessons for socialists of his own time."¹⁰

Even in moments of seeming desperation — 1973 appears to have been one such period — he never turned the cheek of apostasy to accept willingly the slaps of accommodation and acquiescence to capitalism and its doctrine of government by market values.¹¹ To Kolakowski he acknowledged prematurely that, "The voice of the bore is doomed in the end to tail off into silence. And that, in a nutshell, is my own history as any kind of political voice." In "My Study" he expressed a sense of futility:

The mills that grind my own necessity.
Oh, royal me! Unpoliced imperial man
And monarch of my incapacity

...

I rush out in this rattling harvester
And thrash you into type. But what I write
Brings down no armoured bans, no Ministers

Of the Interior interrogate.
No-one bothers to break in and seize
My verses for subversion of the state:

Even the little dogmas do not bark.
I leave my desk and peer into the world.
Outside the owls are hunting. Dark

Yet, "no matter how hideous the alternative may seem," he continued to Kolakowski, "no word of mine will wittingly be added to the comforts of that old bitch gone in the teeth, consumer capitalism. I know that bitch well in her very

¹⁰Anderson, *Arguments*, 1.

¹¹Note E.P. Thompson, "Outside the Whale," in *the Poverty of Theory & Other Essays* (London 1978), 1-34; Thompson, "Disenchantment or Default? A Lay Sermon," in Conor Cruise O'Brien and W.D. Vanech, eds., *Power and Consciousness* (New York 1969), 149-81.

original nature; she has engendered world-wide wars, aggressive and racial imperialisms, and she is co-partner in the unhappy history of socialist degeneration." This first and fundamental step in Thompson's choice insured that he would again walk in oppositional politics, striding out of silence and into major theoretical and historiographic debates and on to the stage of international public mobilizations:

Standing above the lamplit town I watch this crime,
 Cruel and beaked, crushing all comprehension,
 Killing whole streets of men, sticking his horny knuckles
 In the eyes of whoever comes. Man, who is changed by his hands,
 Evolved the man of business, within whose mind
 The clawed beast of possession gnawed all bonds until
 Man fell apart, and split from self to self,
 The acquisitive brain cutting off the creative hands.

Now crime, compassion, have reached the place called choice.
 I hear at last the voice of resolution, loud
 From the flagstones and setts, the commons engrossed for sheep,
 From the mullioned windows, the lighted bulk of the mills,
 And the living killed in their streets. In the frost-blue flames
 Of the handloom weaver's rushlight the heroic shadows leap:
 Mellor at Cartwright's mill: Jones on the hustings: names
 That merge with anonymous shadows, shaping that man who crowds

Every room of the human house, opens the windows, stands
 Warming the winds of space at his compassionate hands.¹²

Within the moving relationships of opposition and choice, Thompson looked to the past to renew the present, the better to recover possibility in the future.

Thompson's example, then, is one of consistent refusals. It is a legacy worth nurturing and passing on, yet again. But there are signs that understanding of this will be lost in the very political spaces where it is needed most. Among a fragmented and fragmenting left, the voices one hears, speaking at the legacy of Thompson, are, however subdued, often voices of quiet reproach: his 'trope' was

¹²Thompson, "Letter to Kolakowski," 101, 182; Thompson, "My Study," and "The Place Called Choice," in *The Heavy Dancers*, 338-9, 259-60. Gertrude Himmelfarb has castigated Thompson, among others, for not writing the history of communism, offering comment on Stalinism's crimes. See Himmelfarb, "'The Group': British Marxist Historians," in Himmelfarb, *The New History: Critical Essays and Reappraisals* (Cambridge 1987), 70-93. Thompson, in fact, has offered more comment on this issue than any other member of the Communist Party Historians Group, much of his writing in issues of *The New Reasoner* constituting such a critique of Stalinism. Himmelfarb obviously prefers academic publication, but Thompson has answered this challenge in his "Letter to Kolakowski," 182: "You will have noticed, if you have followed my footnotes, that my criticisms of socialist reality have always been made in socialist journals."

not 'ours'; his tone was not congenial; his prose, whatever its power, lacked discipline; his understanding did not extend to 'us'; his idiom was parochial; his method lacked theoretical moorings ...¹³ This, too, can be refused, with *reasons*. Those reasons take us into a history that encompasses internationalism and insight, forcing appreciation of a body of historical writing guided by a politics of socialist humanism and embattled engagement, insistent integrity and the imagination of the poet. They are reasons that changed how many of us approached the very project of seeing a past layered in depths of obscurity, reasons that, at certain points, made history when it seemed that its future was at risk. Understanding Thompson's own history is pivotal in understanding ourselves.

Internationalism/Imagination/Insight: Family Tree as 'Liberty Tree'?

THERE HAS LONG LINGERED on the left a conception of Thompson as a parochial populist, narrowly nationalistic in his understandings and style. To be sure, this owes much to the sharp polemics of the mid-1960s, in which Thompson and Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn squared off in acidic and personalistic debate over the question of Englishness, its 'peculiarities' or 'mythologies.' Anderson took decided aim at "the astonishing contrast in Thompson as a socialist intellectual, between the brilliance and richness of his imagination as a historian, and the poverty and abstraction of his intelligence as a political analyst." This gulf was attributed to Thompson's populist idiom and its corollary, "*messianic nationalism*." Whatever the olive branches extended by the opposing camps of the 1960s, the charge of "cultural nationalism" continued to stick as an assessment of Thompson's political character and even sympathetic comment at the time of his death tended to collapse his essence into a "thoroughly English" container: "he wrote about history or anything else," noted Eric Hobsbawm, "in the persona of a traditional English (not British) country gentleman of the Radical Left." For his part, Thompson refused such readings, claiming an unambiguous allegiance to socialist internationalism, confessing that his own awkwardness marked him as always

¹³This is not easily documented, for much of this remains less on the printed page and more in the atmosphere of discussion. Still, note E.J. Hobsbawm's *Independent* obituary, which mentions Thompson's "star quality," his "unconvincing" "persona of a traditional English country gentleman of the Radical left," "his fluctuating moods," "an uncertain relation to organisations and organisation men," the "occasional hit-and-miss quality in the excursions of his powerful and imaginative intellect into theory," his "rolling, intuitive course, moving with the winds and currents of private and political currents." "A lone wolf of the Left," Hobsbawm's Thompson failed adequately to "plan his life's work," but he had the gifts of genius and for this his "admirers forgave him much. ... His friends forgave him everything." Hobsbawm's review of *The Making*, "Organised Orphans," *New Statesman*, 66 (29 November 1963), 787-8 identified Thompson as "a historian of striking gifts, though hampered by a lack of self-criticism from which this book also suffers." Much of this no doubt relates to the quite different choices that marked each historian's relation to 1956 and the Communist Party.

“alien,” however much his idiom was, understandably, “English.” Survival as a socialist, he once wrote, was a constant struggle in “this infinitely assimilative culture.” It necessitated putting “oneself into a school of awkwardness,” making “sensitivity all knobby — all knees and elbows of susceptibility and refusal.” That alien awkwardness was forged within the friction occasioned as English experience and traditions of radical dissent collided with the oppressions, record of exploita-



tion, and challenges of international developments, both theoretical *and* practical. Thompson never denied that he had learned much from an increasingly sophisticated international theoretical discourse; on the contrary, this dialogue he embraced. But he was adamant that it was as an exchange that theory would prove productive — between concept and evidence, among divergent analytic trajectories. Nothing was to be gained by mere imitation, by lying prostrate before the theorist of the month; this was to evacuate “the real places of conflict within our own intellectual culture.” Just as the main enemy was at home, so too were possibilities of socialist renewal: “Talk of free-will and determinism, and I think first of Milton. Talk of man’s inhumanity, I think of Swift. Talk of morality and revolution, and my mind is off with Wordsworth’s *Solitary*. Talk of the problems of self-activity and creative labour in socialist society, and I am in an instant back with William Morris — a great bustard like myself, who has never been allowed

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into the company of such antiquated (but 'reputable') eagles as Kautsky or Plekhanov, Bernstein or Labriola — although he could, if given the chance, have given them a peck or two about the gizzards." Such a passage can be construed as nationalistic only if other passages of Thompson's are in fact ignored:

we are not at the end of social evolution ourselves. In some of the lost causes of the people of the Industrial Revolution we may discover insights into social evils which we have yet to cure. Moreover, the greater part of the world today is still undergoing problems of industrialization, and of the formation of democratic institutions, analogous in many ways to our experience during the Industrial Revolution. Causes which were lost in England might, in Asia or Africa, yet be won.

It was on Spain and Indian independence, after all, that Thompson cut his teeth of political consciousness, as he noted in a "Foreword" to *The Poverty of Theory*. His internationalist arguments were never distanced from moments of engagement and mobilization: World War II, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, the Korean War and the campaigns for peace and disarmament that developed out of and beyond this initial hot flash in the Cold War, 1956, Suez, Cyprus, Algeria, Cuba, Vietnam, Chile, the implosions of "actually existing socialism"¹⁴

Thompson was in fact born at the fault line of this England/not England divide, his internationalism and his imaginative capacities products, in part, of his own negotiations with his family tree. One branch, ironically enough, given an entrenched view of Thompson's anti-Americanism,¹⁵ had deep roots in the United

¹⁴See Perry Anderson, "Socialism and Pseudo-Empiricism: The Myths of Edward Thompson," *New Left Review*, 35 (January-February 1966), 33-5; Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain* (London 1981), 303-4. Olive branches include Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism*, although the chapter on "Internationalism," 131-56 casts the discussion of socialist internationalism in entirely theoretical terms and avoids engagement with the internationalist origins of Thompson's imagination; "E.P. Thompson: Interview," in MARHO, *Visions of History: Interviews* (New York 1983), 17. On "Englishness" see Harvey J. Kaye, "E.P. Thompson, the British Marxist Historical Tradition and the Contemporary Crisis," in Kaye, *The Education of Desire: Marxists and the Writing of History* (London 1992), 98-115, and the obituaries by W.L. Webb, *Guardian*, 30 August 1993; E.J. Hobsbawm, *The Independent*, 30 August 1993; Neal Ascherson, "E.P. Thompson: defender of the faithful few," *The Independent*, 5 September 1993; and on awkwardness the obituary by Christopher Hill, "From the Awkward School," *Guardian*, 30 August 1993, as well as much in Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London 1978), esp. iii-iv, 109-10. The passage on causes lost that could be won in Asia or Africa is, of course from Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1968), 13, and it was often attacked in academic reviews. See, for instance, John Gross, "Hard Times," *New York Review of Books*, 2 (16 April 1964), 8-10; Chambers, "Making of the English Working Class," *History*, 1 (June 1966), 188.

¹⁵Anderson, "Socialism and Pseudo-Empiricism," 26, which cites Thompson, "William Morris and the Moral Issues To-Day," *Arena*, 2 (June/July 1951), 25-30.

States. His mother, Theodosia Jessup Thompson, could trace her lineage back to seventeenth-century New England. Judge William Jessup, Thompson's great-great-grandfather, was prominent in the early Republican Party, chairing the platform committee of the Chicago Convention that nominated Abraham Lincoln, and the family was favoured with offerings of diplomatic posts.¹⁶ His son Henry founded the American Mission in Lebanon. A writer as well, he penned a rambling paternalist tract, *Fifty-Three Years in Syria*, confident in its proselytizing zeal. Quoting Matthew 10:34, "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace but a sword," Jessup was a man of uncomplicated religious certainty: "Light dissipates darkness. Truth antagonizes error." Islam he was capable of seeing as a "gangrene." "Oh, the depths of corruption in Islam!" he wailed. Thankful that two-thirds of the world's Muslims were under Christian imperialist rule, Jessup could acknowledge some positive traits of the peoples of the Middle East, but many, such as the Bedouin, were little more than "robbers and murderers." Their salvation lay in compelling them "to abandon their nomad life and internecine wars, settle down, and cultivate the soil and live in peace. This will come when there is a strong and honest government in Syria, Palestine, and Mesopotamia." Without Christ and Empire Muslims, it seemed, were destined to be "lost."¹⁷ Theodosia, who would become a Methodist missionary in India,¹⁸ spent her childhood in the Middle East, undoubtedly moving off the nineteenth-century ground of evangelical colonialism of her predecessor, Henry Jessup, and became a tough-minded liberal critic of imperialism. She was not likely one of those itinerant Christians bent on a simple-minded westernizing of 'the natives.'¹⁹

First introduced to the United States at the age of five in 1929, Thompson regarded the faces and gestures of the American people as "reassuring and

¹⁶Henry Harris Jessup, *Fifty-Three Years in Syria*, 2 Vols. (New York 1910), I, 16, 233. Thompson's brother Frank read Lincoln's Second Inaugural two weeks before being parachuted into Yugoslavia in 1944, considering it, within the context of its times, "one of the most remarkable speeches in human history." See Freeman Dyson, *Disturbing the Universe* (New York 1979), 43.

¹⁷Jessup, *Fifty-Three Years in Syria*, II, esp. 570-1, 581-2, 767-8. I cannot agree with Thompson's reading of *Fifty-Three Years in Syria*: "there were Americans in those days who did not regard the Islamic world as being made up of 'wogs,' 'gooks' or targets for bombardment." See Thompson, "Letter to Americans," in Thompson and Mary Kaldor, eds., *Mad Dogs: The US Raids on Libya* (London 1986), 11; Thompson, "An Open Letter to Uncle Sam," *Observer*, 27 April 1986. Note Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York 1979).

¹⁸On Methodist missionary women in a slightly earlier period see, for instance, Leslie Flemming, ed., *Women's Work for Women: Missionaries and Social Change in Asia* (Boulder, Colorado 1989); Ruth Compton Brouwer, *New Women for God: Canadian Presbyterian Women and India Missions, 1876-1914* (Toronto 1990); Rosemary R. Gagan, *A Sensitive Independence: Canadian Methodist Women Missionaries in Canada and the Orient, 1881-1925* (Montréal 1992).

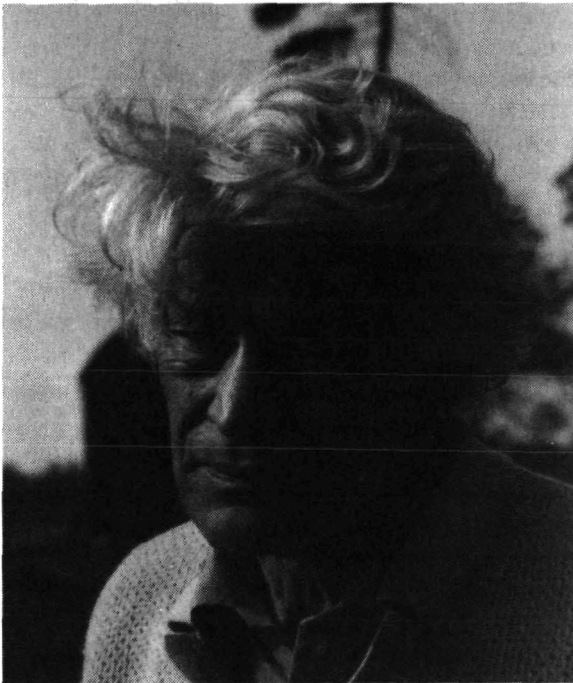
¹⁹See, for instance, the views of M. K. Gandhi, *Christian Missions: Their Place in India* (Ahmedabad 1941).

familiar." (More than once I noticed Edward's penchant for observing the 'collective countenance' of a geographical region or socio-economic locale.) Seventeen years later, fresh from his war service, having secured an introduction to the American communist poet, Tom McGrath, a young Edward Thompson put up in Manhattan. It seemed "electric with life." He attended one of the Madison Square Garden rallies, and heard Robeson, Marcantonio, and Harlem's communist councilman, Ben Davis; International Ladies Garment Workers Union banners flew in defiance of the congealing climate of the Cold War. New York he remembered as "a great city with an internationalist consciousness; a great anti-Fascist city, its diversity churning into a common torrent of solidarities." It was a time when "the causes and arguments of New York" mattered in an internationalist world.²⁰

So too did those of India. Thompson's father, Edward John, was born in 1886, the son of Methodist missionaries who had worked in southern India. He spent thirteen formative years (1910-22) in the Far East, travelling educationally in the footsteps of his parents. Professor of English and then Principal of Bankura Wesleyan College (two institutions really: a high school where Thompson came in close contact with Indian teachers, students, and parents and a college that served as a preparatory back-door to Calcutta University), his labours at the educational institution were interrupted by distinguished war service in Mesopotamia from 1916-19. Thereafter he married Theo Jessup, and they lived four more years in India, a son, William Frank, arriving in Darjeeling in 1920. Shortly before their second son Edward was born, the Thompsons left India, settling into their Boar's Hill, Oxford home, where E.J. Thompson, now resigned from the ministry (he apparently contemplated becoming a Buddhist), was appointed lecturer in Bengali. An occasional Professor of Greek and Latin at Vassar College for Women at Poughkeepsie, New York (where he would write *The Reconstruction of India* in 1930, declaring "I am in America, and have been drawn into defence of the Indian government and my own people."), Thompson eventually became Leverhulme Research Fellow at Oxford and then Research Fellow of Indian History, Oriël College, a post which he filled until his death in 1946. A learned man with a University of London degree, Thompson published dozens of volumes that ranged broadly and eclectically across the disciplinary boundaries of fiction, poetry, literary criticism, biography, history, political commentary, polemic, and even social anthropology. A staunch and outspoken liberal critic of British imperialism,

²⁰The above paragraph draws on Webb, "A thoroughly English dissident"; Thompson, "America's Europe: A Hobbit Among Gandalfs," *The Nation* (24 January 1981), 68-72; Thompson, "Letter to Americans," in Thompson, Mary Kaldor, et al., eds., *Mad Dogs: The US Raids on Libya* (London 1986), 11-5; Thompson, "Homage to Thomas McGrath," *TriQuarterly*, 70 (Fall 1987), 117; "E.P. Thompson: Interview," *Visions of History*, 11. On the New York City of the Popular Front era see Maurice Isserman, *Which Side Were You On? The American Communist Party During the Second World War* (Middletown 1982); Martin Bauml Duberman, *Paul Robeson: A Biography* (New York 1989).

eloquent and volatile, he offered qualified (followed, later in life, by more categorical endorsement) support to the cause of Indian independence and maintained personal relations and critical dialogue with leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Nehru and other Indian poets and activists were favoured visitors to the Thompson home, where they contributed to a young Edward's stamp collection and schooled him in his cricket batting technique. (Decades later, Thompson would impishly close a brief appreciative note on C.L.R. James's eightieth birthday with the words, "I'm afraid that American theorists will not understand this, but the clue to everything lies in his proper appreciation of the game of cricket.") His love for India expressed best in his poetry, novels, and translation, as well as in his admiration for the 1914 literature Nobel Prize winner, Rabindranath Tagore, Thompson deplored the crimes of British imperialism at the same time that he refused to pander to what he considered the backwardness of communalism, caste inequality, bigotry, and violence. He was revered among a segment of Indian literary society, acknowledged to be "the human bridge of understanding between India and England." But his "sharp criticisms" of close friends within the nationalist movement "pained" some, such as Tagore. Quoting Thomas Hardy, "Nought remains/But vindictiveness here amid the strong,/And there amid the weak an impotent rage," Thompson often seemed to cast a plague on both the leadership houses of Empire and Independence: "The angry ghosts of nationalism and



imperialism must be exorcized from a region where they have stalked so long." The British he saw for many years as "the only guarantee of ... ordered progress ... If India would kill communal hatred, would overhaul her systems of thought and social practice, and would bring into the full stream of national effort her despised minorities and her women, she would be rid of nine-tenths of her miseries." But he could not close his eyes to the dishonour of British shame, especially the racially-edged brutality with which his country — "the last in which free and unregemented thinking is still possible" — had historically suppressed uprisings such as the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny. When Tagore, knighted in 1915, resigned this British stature in protest against the terror with which the Punjab disorders of 1919 were put down, Thompson commented, "Knighthoods are not for poets." From all of this an impressionable Edward Thompson remembered that, "I grew up expecting governments to be mendacious and imperialist and expecting that one's stance ought to be hostile to government." This was no doubt part of what he inherited from his father.²¹

But the subtle ways in which the legacy of a father such as Edward John Thompson, a man of cosmopolitan reach, cultured intellect, passionate 'Englishness,' Methodist mission, attracted to the spiritualism and civilization of Indian accomplishment but repelled by the gulf separating East and West in matters of liberal humanitarianism, was assimilated by a 'non-believer' son who would join the Communist Party at age eighteen are by no means straightforward. The Thompson household was obviously one in which the power of rhetorical persuasion and poetic imagination were not so much extolled as lived. Poetry was no mere amusement, but humanity's "best effort down the ages to distill some wisdom from the inarticulate depths of [its] soul." Belief in human potential and the transformative possibilities of genuine respect for difference, which alone could bring down the walls of racial separation in recognition of common needs and origins, clearly drove the elder Thompson's pen. It structured his faith in the deity of possibility, the weapon of verse:

²¹The above paragraph draws upon K. Mukherjee, "In Memoriam: Professor Edward Thompson," and Kalidas Nag, "Introduction," in Edward J. Thompson and Kalidas Nag, *Rabindranath Tagore: His Life and Work* (Calcutta 1948), 92-5, xii-xiv; Edward Thompson, *Rabindranath Tagore* (1925), 3; Webb, "A thoroughly English dissident"; E.P. Thompson, "C.L.R. James at 80," back cover of *Urgent Tasks: Journal of the Revolutionary Left*, 12 (Summer 1981), and, for context, C.L.R. James, *Beyond a Boundary* (New York 1983); Edward Thompson, *The Reconstruction of India* (London 1930), esp. 11, 130-6, 258, 276, 302; Edward Thompson and G. T. Garratt, *Rise and Fulfilment of British Rule in India* (London 1934), esp. 447-59; "E.P. Thompson: Interview," *Visions of History*, 11. The most useful concise overall statement on Edward John Thompson is Benita Parry, *Delusions and Discoveries: Studies on India in the British Imagination, 1880-1930* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1972), 164-202, although there is also considerable comment on Thompson's India-focussed fiction in Allen J. Greenberger, *The British Image of India: A Study in the Literature of Imperialism, 1880-1960* (London 1969).

This sword of verse I bear within my hand
 The years have fashioned; thus, and thus, I bade;
 But they, for higher mandate that they had,
 With patient eyes elsewhere to may command
 Not hearkened, neither wrought it as I planned
 But damascened with shining joys and clad
 The hilt with gems that make the gazer glad,
 And plunged in hissing griefs the bitter brand.

Yet men, that dream not of the heats which made,
 Chide the sure poise and beauty of the blade,
 Till cold its master seems and wrapt apart.
 The brightness blinds. — To you this truth appears:
 No warrior wields it, but a child, whose heart
 Is weak and troubled oft with causeless tears.

As important as remaking the present was to Edward John Thompson, it was the dream of a new future, liberated from the entanglements of messy, disputatious change, that was ultimately paramount. That future could be made out of generosity and a renewed appreciation of history rooted in “free grace and love of truth.” This drew the elder Thompson rather more to the poet (and the poetic side of) Tagore than to those, like Gandhi, for whom the immediate end was of ultimate importance. And as Benita Parry has commented this “conquest of estrangement by goodwill” figures forcefully, if increasingly ambivalently, in Thompson’s fictional trilogy, a search for meaning in the British-Indian encounter: *An Indian Day* (1927); *A Farewell to India* (1931); and *An End of the Hours* (1938). That same exploration was central in Thompson’s most notable excursion into social anthropology, a hostile discussion of *suttee*, the Hindu rite of widow-burning. In other writings, which included criticism and biography, Thompson stepped outside of his concern with India, but he sustained a democratic temperament through periodic outbursts of blunt denunciation. Of the years of Jacobite repression to which his son would later be drawn, Thompson snorted: “The reader cannot remind himself too often that this half-century was the most contemptible and venal in English parliamentary history.” While a man of letters and apparent gentle grace, Thompson’s father never believed in keeping his convictions to himself or quieting his principled voice. As he wrote to Nehru in 1936, once his “brain [was] convinced” he could be “relied on to stand firm.” “I cannot do this when I disagree and will not pretend to do it,” he stated with finality. To grow into one’s teenage years in this kind of milieu — which regularly welcomed Poet Laureates such as Robert Bridges and breathed a “tolerant, international sympathy” that encouraged a “steady flow of Indian visitors” alongside of principled refusal to compromise when integrity, truth, and justice were at stake — must have been, at times, a daunting experience. Edward was undoubtedly in awe of much that went on and passed through this remarkable house. But it could not have left those living within it untouched. The Thompsons’

Boar's Hill home cultivated poetic aspiration and commitment to the principles and causes of freedom, as well as gruff denials of the importance of individual indulgences. As his father lay dying from cancer in 1946, Edward asked him if Jawaharlal Nehru should be told of the state of his health. "He told me to mind my own business," Thompson recalled in 1978, that "Nehru had far more important matters to attend to." Thompson sent the letter anyway; Nehru replied immediately.²²

It is not hard to see the sensitivities and style of his father, their grounding in internationalism and the imagination, in Thompson's later politics, polemics, and historical prose. Indeed, Amit Chaudhuri's assessment of the elder Thompson as a personality always "awkward but receptive ... with a caricaturist's gift for exaggeration and a realist's eye and ear for the true and human," fits the Edward I have known and read with uncanny accuracy.²³ But it is possible that, in his remembrance of his father, Thompson opted for an appreciation of Edward John Thompson's general commitment to India and independence which, over the course of the 1920s and 1930s, placed the lapsed missionary and Oxford Fellow firmly to the left of British intellectual and political thought on colonialism and 'the question of India.' This was a longstanding entrenched 'anti-imperialism,' to be sure, but it was more complicated than that, and the matter was made more complex by historical context and chronology and the elder Thompson's shifting locales and concerns. When actually resident in India Thompson's strength was his capacity to learn from what the culture had to offer; his weakness was a tendency to filter his vision of India through a sieve that, for all its capacity to bleach the 'races' clean of animosity and misrepresentation in the reciprocal solution of universal humanity's commonalities, failed to appreciate the profound and overriding authority (both as practice and perception) of imperialism's exploitative essence. This failure blinded him to the impossibility of his liberal program of 'atonement,' in which the sheer goodwill of Britain, combined with the advantageous efficiency of administration it could,

²²Quotes and references in the above paragraph come from: Freeman Dyson, *Disturbing the Universe* (New York 1979), 35, referring to Frank Thompson; Edward J. Thompson, "This Sword of Verse," *100 Poems* (London 1944), 19; Thompson, *Reconstruction of India*, 256; Parry, *Delusions and Discoveries*, esp. 182-200; Thompson, *Suttee: A Historical and Philosophical Enquiry into the Hindu Rite of Widow-Burning* (Boston 1928); Thompson, *The Life of Charles, Lord Metcalfe* (London 1937); Thompson, *Sir Walter Raleigh: The Last of the Elizabethans* (London 1935); Thompson and Garratt, *Rise and Fulfilment of British Rule in India*, 170; Thompson, *Robert Bridges, 1844-1930* (Oxford 1944); Stowers Johnson, *Agents Extraordinary* (London 1975), 16-7; Webb, "A thoroughly English dissident"; Edward Thompson to Nehru, 30 October 1936, in Jawaharlal Nehru, *A Bunch of Old Letters: Written Mostly to Jawaharlal Nehru and some written by him* (London 1960), 209; E.P. Thompson, "The Nehru Tradition," in Thompson, *Writing by Candlelight* (London 1980), esp. 142.

²³Amit Chaudhuri, "Bankura's Englishman," *London Review of Books*, 15 (September 1993), 10-1.

for a time, offer an India in need of preparation for home rule, might reverse generations of misunderstanding and mistrust. An honest, impassioned idealist who could have one of his fictional characters proclaim, "Idealists do a lot of mischief," Edward John Thompson demanded, for much of his life, British repentance and Indian patience, insisting that ruler and ruled alike open up in sensitive embrace of the civilizing tendencies of the culture of 'the other.' It was a dream that, given the hard realities of power, was doomed to drift in the direction of nightmare for the culture of those subjected to domination. Displaced from India, settled at Oxford, Thompson engaged throughout the 1920s and early 1930s with the politics of Indian independence, but he was, as Parry indicates, and his letters to Nehru show, temperamentally radical but moderate in his programmatic attachments: he was actually estranged from Gandhi and distanced from Nehru politically for much of the later 1930s, friendships and respect aside, and he was no advocate of the Indian National Congress until very late in life. By 1936 Thompson's dream of an Indian independence fueled by liberal humanitarian modernization among Indians and an invigorated commitment to respect and atonement on the part of the British — which he himself proclaimed "pure 'Liberal'" — was fading. A character in one of his novels states: "We neither govern nor misgovern. We're just hanging on, hoping that the Last Trump will sound 'Time!' and save us from the bother of making a decision." He was losing faith in both sides of the independence equation, troubled not only by Indian tactics and the tendency to impose silence on those like himself, but also by a British state that was sacrificing any sense of 'fairplay' at home, upping its intolerance to 'sedition' by monitoring and opening his own correspondence. Toward the end of the year he wrote two letters to Nehru:

Being now old and profoundly disillusioned and depressed by everything, in India as well as the West, I am going to concentrate, for the little time left to me, on my own country's affairs. I now know, after 26 wasted years in trying to help forward what seemed to me truth and decency, that any Englishman who troubles himself about India is a fool. ... I take away no anti-Indian feeling whatever. But I know we are a poor kind of animals, in India or England; and I feel profoundly pessimistic. I think at the back of your mind, as of other Nationalists' minds, is the demand that no Englishman, if he wishes to be considered a friend, should ever criticize. Our own Labour Party (which has behind it such a deplorable record of betrayals, desertions, and anti-democratic stiffness) makes the same demand. I cannot meet it. You must consider me an enemy, if you feel I must never say I think any action mistaken. ... As to your own socialism, I have no doubt that superficially viewed, it is bad tactics. But here I believe your instinct will be proved right in the long run. The whole economic and social (and, especially in India, religious) structure is monstrous.

Letters were now signed E.F.I., Emeritus from India. While some have interpreted Thompson's *You Have Lived Through It All* (1939) as a totalizing interrogation and rejection "of the fact and concept of Empire," in 1943 he was able to begin a book with unqualified acceptance of independence and close it with praise for the early nineteenth-century colonizers: "The work they achieved was to stand the test

of over a century, and when all empire and dominion at last are finished their work will still win toleration and sympathy, and not in their land only."²⁴

As Edward W. Said has recognized, Thompson's liberal anti-imperialism was an idealism that did, historically, cloud understanding of the English/Indian relation. For all the admirable artistry of Thompson's exploration of imperialism as a "cultural affliction for colonizer as well as colonized," it could ultimately only reproduce the representational dichotomies that it was struggling to overcome. In *The Other Side of the Medal* (1926), Thompson's genuine humane revulsion at the historical act of brutal repression of the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 extends usefully beyond a mere recovery of the savagery of the event itself (no inconsiderable accomplishment) to address the *meaning* of history's presentation as suppression. Writing to a missionary friend, Thompson identified the impulse behind his book:

I cannot bring myself to believe that hanging of — say ten thousand, I believe it was nearer to twenty thousand — blowing to pieces of hundreds, burning of hundreds of villages, and a war without quarter, has passed unremembered and unresolved. The Indian government has suppressed all the evidence of resentment. I'm afraid I feel too bitterly about it. I'd like as an individual Englishman, to do my bit of prayaschitta [ed: a Sanskrit term for gesture] ... It's obsessed me of recent months. I've thought of little else ... You and I hitherto have both been very distinct moderates ... But now I'm becoming a left-winger very fast, and I feel how patronising nearly all propaganda, political *and* religious, and education must seem to an Indian. I can hardly imagine an Indian accepting Christianity — an educated and thinking Indian that is — as it comes to him to-day, from missionaries who've got *all* their knowledge of India from books written by British. ... I marvel that they bore with me in my India days. We *are* a gauche, crass lot.

But in his battle to transcend misrepresentation, in which the unfeeling superiority of the English and the seeming squalor of uncivilized India are pitted relentlessly against one another, Thompson could only fight on a consistent independence plane for so long. As a moderate mediating between the inflammatory misrepresentations of both sides, Thompson aspired to "help root out of the Indian mind some of its 'inferiority complex.'" This he knew was regarded by the pro-colonial forces surrounding him at Oxford as highly subversive, to the point that it could threaten his University posting. "They think I have done a very shocking thing," he wrote to a friend just after the publication of his account of the mutiny. Eventually, however, this narrative of outrage collapsed inward in "atonement," returning us to a relationship of inequality. *The Other Side of the Medal* makes the case for colonized want and paternalist gift: Indian men and women "want their self-respect given back to them. Make them free again, and enable them to look us and everyone

²⁴Parry, *Delusions and Discoveries*, 164-202, esp. 166; Edward Thompson, *These Men Thy Friends* (New York 1928), 17; Michael Edwardes, *The Last Years of British India* (London 1963), 16; Thompson, *Atonement* (London 1924); Nehru, *A Bunch of Old Letters*, esp. 209-11, 311; Edward Thompson, *The Making of the Indian Princes* (London 1943), esp. v, 287.

in the eyes, and they will behave like free people and cease to lie." As Said notes, Thompson's limitation was that he was "bound to the notion that there [was] 'a truth' to events involving both sides that transcends them. Indians 'lie' because they are not free, whereas he (and other oppositional figures like him) can see the truth because they *are* free and because they are English." But, Said concludes, the empire "cannot give Indians their freedom," which must be extracted from it by protracted struggle. British attitudes, moreover, whatever their merits, can, in such circumstances, be defended and proposed as possible values, only at the point that their imperialist supports are dashed in defeat. Thompson's "atonement" was, in the face of a century and more of imperialist deformations, the last gasp of liberalism's dream of Empire's redemption. By the 1930s and 1940s, other dreams, in the growing nationalist, socialist, and communist movements, were being voiced and in the process Edward John Thompson was too often vulgarly dismissed as little more than an 'apologist of imperialism.'²⁵

This was ironic for Thompson apparently moved more decisively to the side of categorical support for Indian independence as Britain declared the country "a belligerent" in 1939. There was the expectation of nationalist acts of civil disobedience, and fear of the subsequent imperialist repression. Thompson travelled to India on a kind of unofficial mission of mediation: he hoped that if protest could be called off by Indian leaders, the British would commit themselves to independence after the war. Bound to Nehru by friendship and the politics of opposition to appeasement and anti-fascism, Thompson also gravitated more warmly toward Gandhi. He was treated with great respect by the nationalist leadership and gentle cordiality by ordinary Indians. Two decades of thought were opening out into reconsideration. But the war proceeded; it elevated ugliness everywhere. Thompson returned to England. And India came apart: the declaration of civil disobedience; the British reaction of repression. Nehru, of course, was jailed. There were meetings of protest in Oxford: Edward went; his father was thrown into the cause in a more public and prominent way, especially with the publication of *Enlist India for Freedom!* (1942). Eventually Thompson was banned from visiting India until war's end and his letters to the subcontinent were intercepted. The English

²⁵Quotes from Edward Thompson, *The Other Side of the Medal* (London 1926) and from a December 1925 letter are drawn from Parry, *Delusions and Discoveries*, 176-7; Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York 1993), 206-7. For discussions of the representation of the 1857 mutiny see Ralph J. Crane, *Inventing India: A History of India in English-Language Fiction* (London 1992), 11-54, and the older G.T. Garratt, *An Indian Commentary* (New York 1928), 116-7. Nehru presents some critical commentary on *The Other Side of the Medal* in *Toward Freedom: The Autobiography of Jawaharlal Nehru* (Boston 1961), 49-50. For a reference to "apologists for imperialism," referring to Thompson and Garratt, *Rise and Fulfilment of British Rule in India* (1934) see the Communist Party's R. Palme Dutt, *India To-Day* (London 1940), 245; and, as well, Dutt, *The Problem of India* (New York 1943), 41. Non-communist support for resisting nationalism in India is outlined in Reginald Reynolds, *The White Sahibs in India* (Westport 1970, original 1937).

voices raised against this repression spoke as liberals, socialists, and communists. Among the Indian voices, the message was firm. No paternalist gift was wanted; what was demanded was liberty itself. "We are not asking you to 'give us freedom.' We will take it when we want to. I am not here to ask you for your help but to remind you of your duty."²⁶

Just how this was digested by an Edward Thompson barely out of adolescence will never, I suspect, be adequately known. But young people grew up quickly in those days, when a trip to Europe came for nineteen year olds as anything but a holiday. There can be no mistaking that his family nurtured a particular kind of appreciation of "the liberty tree." Planted in this soil of internationalism, imagination, and insight, its branches would grow in different directions, but they would remain rooted in a common base. India, after all, figured centrally in the Marxist reading on imperialism that young Edward Thompson must have done to be in a position to quote Marx on the destructive progressivism of British colonialism on the subcontinent, where human advance often seemed fated "to resemble that hideous pagan idol, who would not drink the nectar but from the skulls of the slain."²⁷ One of E.P. Thompson's last projects was an attempt to try to come to grips with his father's tempestuous relationship with Tagore, which one reviewer

²⁶This paragraph draws on Thompson, "The Nehru Tradition," in *Writing by candlelight*, 135-48. See, as well, Edward Thompson, *Enlist India for Freedom!* (London 1942).

²⁷Thompson quoted this passage from Marx's writing on India in the 1850s in E.P. Thompson, "Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines," *New Reasoner*, 1 (Summer 1957), 143. This citation and Marx's position on Britain's conquest of India as "the annihilation of old Asiatic society, and the laying of the material foundations of Western society in Asia" would have drawn an ambivalent response from Thompson's father, but he would likely have appreciated a part of this destructive/constructive paradigm. The full quote is from Marx, "The Future Results of the British Rule in India," *New York Daily Tribune*, 8 August 1853, in Karl Marx, *Surveys From Exile* (Harmondsworth 1973), 325: "Bourgeois industry and commerce create these material conditions of a new world in the same way as geological revolutions have created the surface of the earth. When a great social revolution shall have mastered the results of the bourgeois epoch, the market of the world and the modern powers of production, and subjected them to the common control of the most advanced peoples, then only will human progress cease to resemble that hideous pagan idol, who would not drink the nectar but from the skulls of the slain." For useful, if not entirely congruent, discussions see V. G. Kiernan, *Marxism and Imperialism* (London 1974); Anthony Brewer, *Marxist Theories of Imperialism: A Critical Survey* (London 1980); Bill Warren, *Imperialism: Pioneer of Capitalism* (Lodon 1980); Said, *Orientalism*. India was a formative experience for a number of members of the Communist Party of Great Britain's Historians' Group (Kiernan, Saville, Pearce). See E.J. Hobsbawm, "The Historians' Group of the Communist Party," in Maurice Cornforth, ed., *Rebels and Their Causes: Essays in Honour of A.L. Morton* (London 1978), 24. Note Dorothy Thompson interview with Sheila Rowbotham, "The Personal and the Political," *New Left Review*, 200 (July-August 1993), 94: "That India had got its freedom was one of the great triumphs in our lifetime, and yet these antagonisms have led to thousands of people being killed today and yesterday."

considers to be a window looking out over the intimate relations of 'humane' colonialism and ordinary Indians.²⁸ Toward the end of Edward John Thompson's life Edward worked with his mother to offer criticism and advice on the selection for publication of 100 poems written by the aging Oxford Fellow over the course of 40 years. A year before, Edward John Thompson's last substantive historical writing went to press. In it he remained true to humanist principles even as they were seemingly swamped by 'realist' politics and philosophies, popularly discredited as a weakness of will or a failure of energy. If his subject continued to be the reciprocities and dualities of England/India, Thompson also chose to allude to the internal class frictions of English society. "The discrepancy in England, between the highest and the ordinary levels of our civilization, has always been immense," he wrote, "I doubt if there is anything like it in any country with which we should wish to be compared, and it is a discrepancy that lessens so slowly that it often seems hardly to lessen at all." These words appeared in 1943, in a book entitled *The Making of the Indian Princes*.²⁹

Breaking from the limitations of his father's liberalism, then, was by no means a process of totalizing repudiation; as he moved in more radical directions in the late 1930s and 1940s Edward's branches of the family tree remained connected to a particular intellectual genealogy. Both he and his older brother, William Frank, as well as Oxford friends and neighbours, were sent as children to the Dragon, one of the most esteemed preparatory schools in England. Later Frank would attend Winchester and go on to Oxford, while Edward went to his father's school, Methodist Kingswood, in Bath, and then found his way to Corpus Christi, Cambridge. There he was elected President of the University Socialist Club, and read with interest Christopher Hill and Christopher Caudwell. If his attraction to

²⁸E.P. Thompson, *'Alien' Homage: Rabindranath Tagore and Edward Thompson* (Oxford 1993), and two reviews: Amit Chaudhuri, "Bankura's Englishman," *London Review of Books*, 15 September 1993, 10-1, and the more abbreviated (and patronizing), Raleigh Trevelyan, "Twain Meeting?" *Times Literary Supplement*, 24 September 1993, 34. See, as well, E.P. Thompson and E.J. Thompson, "Memories of Tagore," *London Review of Books*, 22 May 1986, 18-9. Tagore scholarship is voluminous, although not without its silences and failures to probe available sources, including those generated in the Thompson-Tagore relationship. See, as an introduction, Mary M. Lago, *Rabindranath Tagore* (Boston 1976); Mary Lago and Ronald Warwick, ed., *Rabindranath Tagore: Perspectives in Time* (London 1989); Prabhat Kumar Mukherji, *Life of Tagore* (New Delhi 1975); K.S. Ramaswami Sastri, *Sir Rabindranath Tagore: His Life Personality and Genius* (Delhi 1988); Mohit Chakrabarti, *Rabindranath Tagore: Diverse Dimensions* (New Delhi 1990).

²⁹Thompson, *100 Poems*; Thompson, *The Making of the Indian Princes*, 264-5; and the comment on this passage in Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (New York 1946), 286-7, in which Nehru argues: "The two Englands live side by side, influencing each other, and cannot be separated; nor could one of them come to Indian forgetting completely the other. Yet in every leading action one plays the leading role, dominating the other, and it was inevitable that the wrong England should play that role in India and should come in contact with and encourage the wrong India in the process."

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these authors reproduced his father's aesthetic, in which history, verse, and engagement overlapped, it did so on decidedly Marxist ground and, in the case of Caudwell, also addressed frontally the theoretical dimension of language, with which his Classicist brother Frank, drawn to linguistics, Romance and Eastern European tongues, and poetry, was much concerned.³⁰

Three-and-a-half years older than Edward, Frank was the bridge from their father's liberal limitations to the potentials of communism. Remembered by a former Winchester dormitory mate as "the largest, the loudest, the most uninhibited, and the most brilliant" of his group, Frank was dubbed "College Poet." Hobsbawm claims he "was supposedly more brilliant and certainly more favoured" than his younger sibling, a view also suggested in a 1980 *Times Higher Education Supplement* "Profile" of Edward, but if this was the case little has survived to indicate anything resembling a rivalrous resentment. Thompson may, of course, have been overshadowed by his brother: "I grew up firmly convinced I was stupid," he once confessed. Out of a good-humoured mischievousness and romantic attachment to the mythical T.E. Lawrence (long a subject of conversation at Boar's Hill), drawing on his father's willingness to face into the wind of orthodoxy and convention, and governed by the necessity of acting to better the world, Frank began to be attracted to the Communist Party. By 1936 he was reading the CP poet, Cecil Day Lewis, and the *Daily Worker*, but it was Spanish atrocities and Hitler's persecutions that pushed him hardest to the left. A friend and neighbour, Anthony (Bill) Carritt, lost his life in the Spanish Civil War and when his younger brother Brian joined the Young Communist League at Eton, Frank, too, began to adopt a more open political stance:

I see a man
Last heard of alive on a hill-crest
In Spain, expecting to die at his gun,
Alone, his youth and work over,
His stars and planets
Reduced to yards of ground,
Hoping others will harvest his crop.

In Frank's case the harvest began with symbolic, personal, and poetic acts. He wore red ties, jerseys or shirts, drawing the ire of Establishment boys. When Chamberlain bowed in appeasement to Hitler late in 1938, Frank donned a black tie and mourned the disgrace:

³⁰"E.P. Thompson: Interview," *Visions of History*, 19; E.P. Thompson, "Caudwell," in Ralph Miliband and John Saville, eds., *Socialist Register 1977* (London 1977), 228-76; Webb, "A thoroughly English dissident"; Johnson, *Agents Extraordinary*, 17 and 31, which notes that Edward sent Frank a copy of Caudwell's *Studies in a Dying Culture* (1938) for Christmas 1942.

Our last chance and that vanished. In the night
 A rumour like an east wind chilled the land,
 Of cowardly betrayal calmly planned.
 The pass was sold. It was no use to fight.

But he remained, into his first year at Oxford in 1938, in the Officers' Training Corps, joining not the Communist Party, but the Oxford Labour Club, which he would later find "needlessly bohemian." By May Day 1939 he was a Communist, marching in what he must have felt was a new and disciplined procession. A schoolmaster commented that he had come to this political decision out of "intellectual conviction and frustration at what to him seemed the helplessness of other political parties to deal effectively with the problems of the time." Fascism, Frank obviously thought, would triumph unless it was stopped.³¹

Edward was likely thinking similar thoughts, living through the same times, looking up to his older brother as much as, perhaps more than, his father. This was a moment of political maturation that obviously divided father and sons. "To join the Communist party was, for my older brother, a cause of conflict in the family," Thompson noted in understatement. "He broke open the way," he remembered in gratitude, "and when I did the same there was less conflict."³²

Frank, like many young communists, "staggered" under the news of the Hitler-Stalin non-aggression pact, but he was an implacable anti-fascist and he volunteered for military service when war was declared a month later, in September 1939. His early service was spent in England, in an officers' training unit. Commissioned in March 1940, he was beset with ambivalence about his class place as a commissioned officer and the possibility of fighting fascism as a communist when the Soviet Union had already signed off into abstentionism. He volunteered for service in Greece, ended up in North Africa on intelligence assignment, and eventually found his way to Persia, crossing, no doubt, many ancestral paths, including those of his father, who had been stationed in the region throughout World War I. He chafed under the inaction of a desert campaign, but the implosion of the Nazi-Soviet pact in 1941 reinvigorated him and he soon connected with James Klugmann in Cairo. An intelligence officer who headed the Yugoslav Section responsible for liaisons with Tito's partisans, Klugmann was a former

³¹On Frank Thompson see Murray Hogben, "E.P. Thompson, Historian, Peace Activist," *Whig Standard Magazine*, 4 June 1988; Dyson, "The Blood of a Poet," *Disturbing the Universe*, 33-7; Hobsbawm, "E.P. Thompson: Obituary," *The Independent*, 30 August 1993; Johnson, *Agents Extraordinary*, 16-24; Peter Scott, "Voluntary exile from history's mainstream," *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 27 June 1980, 7. The lines of verse relating to Spain refer to the young Marxist critic who went to his death fighting fascism in the Spanish Civil War, Christopher Caudwell, and come from R.F. Willets, "Homage to Christopher Caudwell," *Envoi*, 15 (1962), cited in E.P. Thompson, "Caudwell," *Socialist Register*, 1977 (London 1977), 272.

³²"E.P. Thompson: Interview," *Visions of History*, 11.

secretary of the Communist Students' League at Cambridge, and he would later be prominent in the British Communist Party. Late in 1943 Frank was accepted for training in the Balkan section responsible for reconnaissance activity behind enemy lines. Frank's language skills, as well as Klugmann's assessment that he was an ideal officer who could work sympathetically and productively with anti-fascist partisans, secured him the opportunity to be air-dropped into war-torn Bulgaria. In January 1944 Captain Frank Thompson parachuted into the Mission of 'Mulligatawny.' He was to contact the underground resistance movement in Bulgaria, serve as British liaison officer, suggest possible supply options, and establish radio communications with the Allied Command in Cairo.³³

As he left Cairo, however, Thompson became an "official secret." His Mission, like many others, has never been acknowledged by the British state. Secrecy covered many things: uncertainties; chaos; incompetence; the cross-purposes of politically oppositional operations (there was even reported to be a Fascist contingent, with its own Mission); betrayal. It gave those committed to maintain capitalism in Europe and Britain's slice of the imperialist pie, especially those who worked hard at this project through the intrigues of Whitehall or the posh Shephard's Hotel in Cairo, all the cover they needed. These were the people who abandoned those they had sent into exposed positions or, worse, double-crossed them when there, under fire. They used their own cloistered inner circle to shield their superiors from the knowledge they needed about the state of popular resistance to fascism. Such resistance carried with it the odour of unthinkable outcomes, not at all pleasant in the already scented atmosphere of "the secret state within the state." Churchill's own representative to Tito, Sir Fitzroy Maclean, for instance, was thwarted by these moles of monopoly capitalism. There was a planned and deliberate effort in Cairo to refuse him transport and slander him in the officers' messes as "consistently cowardly and unreliable." The 'dirty trick' campaign's ace-in-the-hole was to be the final allegation that Maclean was a "hopeless drunk, an active homosexual." This was, too often, the stuff of secrecy.³⁴

Maclean was at least not a communist; Thompson was, and his beliefs were by no means hidden. Ultimately, secrecy denied an official accounting of 'Mulligatawny,' which faltered in tragedy and courageous loss: Thompson's superior officer was killed and he assumed command, temporarily promoted to the rank of Major. He witnessed brutal butcheries of village populations and the heorism of his partisan comrades; to survive he led his own 'long march.' In the end Thompson and others were captured by the Bulgarian state forces: brutally interrogated, beaten, and subjected to public humiliation, Thompson responded with declara-

³³I have drawn on Johnson, *Agents Extraordinary*, although it sometimes lapses into a patronizing tone. Also, Dyson, *Disturbing the Universe*, 37.

³⁴Thompson, "The secret state within the state," *New Statesman* (10 November 1978), 618, drawing on P. Auty and R. Clogg, *British Policy Towards Wartime Resistance in Yugoslavia and Greece* (London 1975), 221-8.

tions of his communist commitments and insistence that he and others be treated as prisoners of war. After ten days of captivity, weakened by malnutrition and a festering wound, Frank Thompson was subjected to a mock trial. He stood firm, speaking in Bulgarian: "The most vital thing in the world today is the struggle of anti-Fascism against Fascism. ... I am proud that I die together with my comrades, partisans of Bulgaria." His clenched fist salute in the name of the partisan Fatherland Front was struck down by a gendarme. As he led the condemned men to the firing squad, all raised their fists in defiance. "I give you the salute of freedom," said Thompson before he and twelve others were executed:

Write on the stone no word of sadness,
 Only the gladness due
 That we, who asked the most of living
 Knew how to give it too.

"When a democrat dies — that is, a man who has shown, as they [the partisans of Yugoslavia] have, by word and action that he cares more than anything for democratic freedom — then one, or ten, or a hundred new ones are created by his example," wrote Frank Thompson in the very year of his death, concluding, "one or ten or a hundred existing ones are strengthened in their resolve. But when a fascist dies the effect on his confederates is the reverse. Only in the most confused and darkest periods of history does this not appear to be the case."³⁵

As these words were being written, Frank's younger brother was a tank troop commander in Italy, part of the slow march of the Allies up 'the Italian boot.' It was an 'advance' that pressured the beleaguered German rearguard, to be sure, and in the process, like Major Thompson's Bulgarian Mission, it bought time and resources needed elsewhere. But the cost was great: weekly, if not daily, the leading tank, infantrymen, and engineers were sacrificed, not to mention any and all who happened to find themselves in the midst of the incessant shelling. Thompson chose to make as little as possible of this experience of war service, his sensibilities offended by the crass self-promotion of those who have made a business of equating loyalty, patriotism, and war service with the cause of lawless repression of the left. But he had the scars of war, like any veteran. Many were in his mind. First, he remembered, above all else, *the death*: the never-ending battle to cheat it; its constant presence; the ways in which it could come, without logic or warning; the dozy unreality of it all, which lulled many into a kind of personal acceptance that it would get you next, no matter what you did; even the smell of it. "Save some in England all of Europe knows/So I'll not tell you how a dead man smells/Nor what five days of sun can do to flesh." Second, in the minute-by-minute unfolding of

³⁵Dyson, *Disturbing the Universe*, esp. 37-8; Johnson, *Agents Extraordinary*, esp. 167-8; E.P. Thompson, "The secret state within the state," *New Statesman* (10 November 1978), 616; T.J. Thompson and E.P. Thompson, eds., *There is a Spirit in Europe: a Memoir of Frank Thompson* (London 1947), 20-1, quoted in Thompson, "Letter to Kolakowski," 160.

War's actual war, Thompson recalled the living failure, not of courage, conviction, and comradeship, but of *reason*. In his overture to the battle of Cassino, which he lived through, penned in 1947 or 1948, the first installment of a 'war novel' never to be written, Thompson acknowledged that amidst all of the death and destruction, war's foot soldiers were occupied with the struggle to live through the intensified minutes that made up, day after day, the moment of survival's sudden possibility:

Few of them remember what is their objective. They give no thought to history and they have lost count of time. These twelve minutes have severed them from the past, and this new pattern seems to stretch out in all dimensions and to encompass them forever. Time-future and time-past have been exchanged into an everlasting now in which the anguished consciousness throbs until time-never falls.

Third, however, Thompson placed these scarred memories in the space between necessity and desire, where human agency found a resting place of honour, however despoiled by later events and machinations. "We were disgusted by war but we assented to its political necessity, a necessity which might — although we hoped most ardently that it would not — entail our own deaths," he wrote, adding, like his brother:

Then as now there was an active democratic temper throughout Europe. There was a submission of self to a collective good. Then as now there was a purposive alliance of resistance to power, a 'popular front' which had not yet been disfigured by bad faith. And there was also an authentic mood of internationalism which touched the peasants in the Umbrian villages and the troopers in our own tanks.

1944 was this, and more. It was the tide, ebbing already by 1945, that brought Labour to power in Britain, an electoral victory that was often a cautious parliamentary reflection of a more "leftish volatility." The future head of the Foreign Office saw this as presaging "a Communist avalanche over Europe, a weak foreign policy, a private revolution at home and the reduction of England to a 2nd class power." There was a new theatre of democratic, socialist, and internationalist symbolism: it made the powerful defensive; political manners were mindful of class inequalities and the need for welfare provisioning. And then, in the partition of Europe and the sclerotic Cold War hardening of the arteries of democracy, internationalism, heroism, and sacrifice, these human achievements that were fought for against the press of war were turned into "a pile of shit." But that did not erase them from the past. Many who fought in World War II, Thompson was convinced for all of his life, were conscious anti-fascists and anti-imperialists, infused with socialist ideas and purpose. "Our expectations may have been shallow," he noted in 1978, "but this was because we were overly utopian, and ill-prepared for the betrayals at our backs." His own brother, he thought, could have been "bargained ... out of captivity if only the first frosts of the cold war had not begun to glint in Sofia." "I was too bloody innocent by half," Thompson would later remark. But innocence was and

is not a hanging offence, and it can be learned from in ways that duplicitous treachery and disregard for human life cannot. What Thompson took from his own war service was a fierce commitment to those who fell in battle for freedom and the defeat of fascism. A part of his life's work would be to liberate "the intentions of the[se] dead," one of whom, of course, was his own brother.³⁶

In September 1944, mere months after Major Thompson's death and Edward's tank troop participated in the misconceived Italian campaign, the Red Army liberated Bulgaria, the Fatherland Front took over the government, and Frank was proclaimed a national hero. Prokopnik, a rail stop where the partisans had fought a particularly fierce battle, was renamed Major Thompson Station. But the darkness was quick to come. Five years later, Stalinism's regime having sunk the hopes and heroism of the resistance fighters in show trials, repression, and hypocrisy, Thompson was for a time unceremoniously removed from the edifice of National Heroes, there being room within the new cult of personality building for only so many politically expedient rivals to the Great Leader. He became, instead, an "agent of Anglo-American imperialism," not unlike his recently deceased father.³⁷

But before this shameful reversal, two related "agents" travelled to Bulgaria in 1947 at the invitation of Georgi Dimitrov and the government. After re-enrolling at Cambridge with the close of the war, Edward and his mother paid homage to Frank, Edward retracing his brother's war march and visiting the villages where partisans remembered the Major with affectionate comradeship. Later in the summer Edward served as the commandant of the British Youth Brigade on the Yugoslav Youth Railway construction project, in which socialist peasants, workers, soldiers and students built a 150-mile railway from Samac to Sarajevo. Finished ahead of schedule, the railway was made without supervision and with only the most primitive of tools. "It was not built by underpaid Irish navvies or by unemployed drawn from a pool of 'labour reserves,'" noted the British-Yugoslav Association pamphlet account. "It was not built slowly, shoddily, and at great expense, by a foreign company, remaining as a tentacle to suck more wealth out of the impoverished peasantry." Edward's companion and future wife, Dorothy, recalls the work routine and the socialist meaning that lay behind it:

³⁶The above draws on various pieces in E.P. Thompson, *The Heavy Dancers*, 169-246, most especially "The Liberation of Perugia," "Overture to Cassino," "Cassino: Coda," and "Mr Atlee and the Gadarene Swine." Note, as well, Thompson, "The secret state within the state," esp. 618; Fred Inglis, "Thompson Invictus," *The Nation* (20 September 1993), 265. Thompson's first published prose would be a short story, "Drava Bridge," that centred on the experience of World War II. First appearing in *Our Time* (December 1945), it was later reprinted in the American Marxist journal *New Masses*. It appears in *The Heavy Dancers*, 231-7. See also E.P. Thompson, "Homage to Thomas McGrath," *TriQuarterly*, 70 (Fall 1987), 116-7.

³⁷Thompson, "The secret state within the state," 618; Dyson, *Disturbing the Universe*, 39.

There were Fabians, there were Communists. We saw people as good workers or bad workers. ... We didn't really look at people's politics very much if they were good workers. ... Mostly the youth workers were from different parts of Europe [ed: Soviets excepted] and they all worked together, they had camp fires together, they sang songs, shouted, went to meetings, or slept through meetings, together. ... there was a great sense of international cooperation and of course an enormous sense of hope. We got up at half past five, washed in cold water, then went off to work at the rock face at six o'clock. We had a break at half past eight, then we had a sandwich of black bread and that apple jam stuff and some acorn coffee, and then we worked on till about midday. At midday we went back and had the main meal of the day which was eaten on the campsite, you know big dishes of tea and vegetables and things. In the afternoon everyone could do what they liked. ... In the evenings we had camp fires and political speeches and singing and dancing.

Thompson could be quick, in later years, to deflect gruffly what he took to be a scholastic — as opposed to socialist — interest in the Yugoslav project. "The Railway will not interest the great transatlantic academia," he wrote to me early in our relationship, his words carrying a particular sting: "it is about building a railway, with wooden wheelbarrows, which is not a proper academic subject." Yet for Thompson this was an experience of immense importance, pointing directly to the alternative values of a cooperative and collective social order, a socialism bound up in "a new emphasis on man's obligations to his neighbours and society." In a Bosnian Valley, E.P. Thompson saw hard labour and democratic leadership co-exist co-operatively; it was an "excellent school" in which "imagination and decision, resourcefulness and patience, were demanded at every level." He would carry the experience of this transformative revolutionary possibility with him for the rest of his life, citing it against the cynicism of Kolakowski, drawing on it in the 1980s in a call for a new "vocabulary of mutual aid and of plain duty to each other in the face of power." This was, one senses, what Frank had come to mean to Edward, who would, as W.L. Webb has noted in a moving obituary, revere his "admired and beloved elder brother" as "a touchstone ... an emotional and moral reference point in all his writing and political thinking."³⁸

As World War II came to a close, then, Thompson's own family tree had been ruthlessly assailed by death, but its consciousness and conscience, as liberty tree,

³⁸Bryan D. Palmer, *The Making of E.P. Thompson: Marxism, Humanism, and History* (Toronto 1980), 33-4; "E.P. Thompson: Interview," *Visions of History*, 12; E.P. Thompson, *The Railway: An Adventure in Construction* (London 1948), esp. viii, x, 3, 24; Thompson, "An Open Letter to Kolakowski," 160; Thompson, "America and the War Movement," in *The Heavy Dancers*, 42; Webb, "A thoroughly English dissident"; Dorothy Thompson interviewed by Sheila Rowbotham, "The Personal and the Political," *New Left Review*, 200 (July-August 1993), 94-5. Thompson's comment on "The Railway" was in response to my attempt to track down the pamphlet he edited on the experience. At the point that it was written I had met Edward once and corresponded once. He was helpful, but impatient, and not at all convinced that I was the proper person to even be thinking about such matters. He later relented, softened, and grew supportive. Thompson to Palmer, 18 June 1978.

was deeply rooted. Thompson translated his father's and mother's experience into a personal narrative of uncompromising anti-imperialism, his brother's martyrdom into a resolute anti-fascist stand. Thirty years later he would refuse to paper over the failures of the labour movement in these areas, challenging Tony Benn's unduly complacent presentation of the virtues of British trade unionism. Thompson never stopped thinking, as he did in 1947, that "We must place our bodies between fascism and our freedom." These were the politics of the past, present, and future, the refusals that were ordered, again, by a family aesthetics of internationalism, poetic imagination, and historical insight. Barely into his twenties, Edward Thompson knew that his place was the choice of resistance, refusal, even, at this juncture, revolution. His die was cast as a heretic who could never forget the centrality of imperialism, the need for internationalism. Inspired by the insurgent popular anti-fascist mobilizations of 1943-47, Thompson was guided by the unfolding human possibilities of struggle, by the ways in which resistance could become *the* Resistance. His "popular front" had little to do with the program and practice of Stalinism, although he was at this time a loyal member of the Communist Party of Great Britain:

In liberated Italy I would mooch around the town, find the blacksmith's shop — the oxen lifted on a hoist to be shoed — notice the PCI posters, introduce myself as a comrade, and in a trice I would be seated on a bench, incongruous in my British officer's uniform, sampling the blacksmith's wine. It was the same with my comrades in India, Iraq, Egypt. (One good friend of mine, masquerading as a sergeant-major, was able to second himself to work for some weeks with the Communist Party in Calcutta — against British rule!) It was the same also with many of our American comrades, who were moved by the same internationalism and optimism. A million informal transactions and discourses were going on in those years, which historians will never recover and which the hard-nosed party organizers knew nothing about.

Thompson would never renounce this historical act of creation, however much he was repelled by the parallel, and ultimately triumphant, history of betrayal and traitorous complicity, a history that buried not only his brother but the ideals and sacrifices of a significant sector of an entire generation. History — as lived through power's dictates and as written by that authority's handmaidens — might well have boiled this all down to a "lost episode," perpetuating a "foul historical con," but Edward Thompson would keep the watch of loyalty to this moment of human possibility for the rest of his life. Not to be forgotten was the role of the Labour Government:

Labour's leading Ministers were active — and, in the case of Ernest Bevin, eager — accomplices in these developments. ... A zealous ideologically-motivated anti-communist already, this able forceful, and philistine bully [Ernest Bevin] ... was perhaps the leading actor on the Western side in that foul interactive process which led to the Cold War. ... Bevin had archaic imperialist impulses which out-Churchilled Churchill [,] ... an architect of

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NATO, and also ... a member of the secret Cabinet committee (GEN 163) which (unknown to the rest of the Cabinet) took the fateful decision to manufacture British nuclear weapons.

That Thompson kept this watch the way he did — through metaphor and memory, as well as the poetics of historical imagination — owes much to the liberty tree that was his family.³⁹

Romanticism and Marxism, I: The Years of Cold War Containment, 1945-1955

THOMPSON JOINED THE COMMUNIST PARTY in 1942 while studying history at Cambridge. His war service years were ones in which his Party membership apparently officially lapsed, but he rejoined upon leaving the army. There was no doubt of his political commitment: everything suggests a young communist proud of the heroism and accomplishment of the anti-fascist war, cognizant of the immense importance of the Red Army and Soviet sacrifice in the victory over Hitler, secure in his allegiance to the leadership of the Communist Party. There were reasons why civilization was not destroyed, learning and art throttled, and history “scrubbed out”:

We know that we have ourselves to thank that this did not happen — ourselves, and the Red Army and the resistance movements. What happened instead was glorious and inspiring. Deserted often by their leaders, with traitors in their midst, the common people of the world took up the challenge. In the great expanse of China and the dry sierras of Spain men and women took up arms. The slogan ‘They Shall not Pass’ greeted the fascists on the walls of Madrid and in the streets of Bermondsey where the Blackshirts tried to march. The fascist tide reached out as far as Stalingrad, Indonesia, El Alamein — and then the people hurled it back. Surely we have not forgotten already the days of the great Red Army offensives, when we clustered round the wireless to hear Marshal Stalin’s Orders of the Day, and the people

³⁹This paragraph draws upon “E.P. Thompson: Interview,” *Visions of History*, 12; Thompson, “Homage to Thomas McGrath,” 116; E.P. Thompson, *The Fascist Threat to Britain* (London 1947), 16; E.P. Thompson, “Response to Tony Benn,” in Ken Coates and Fred Singleton, eds., *The Just Society* (Nottingham 1977), 36-7; Thompson, “The secret state within the state,” 618; Neal Ascherson, “E.P. Thompson: defender of the faithful few,” *Independent on Sunday*, 5 September 1993; Thompson, “Mr Attlee and the Gadarene Swine,” in *The Heavy Dancers*, esp. 243. The sergeant-major in India was John Saville. See Tariq Ali, *Street Fighting Years: An Autobiography of the Sixties* (London 1987), 71. Hobsbawm’s *Independent* obituary, 30 August 1993, comments that: “Tradition and loyalty, within and outside the family, were important to Edward Thompson.” Terry Eagleton has identified the importance of “metaphor, image, poetry,” to Thompson in a review of *The Poverty of Theory* (1978) in Eagleton, “The Poetry of E.P. Thompson,” *Literature and History*, 5 (Autumn 1979), 139, but he then fails to explore these areas adequately. It comes as something of a shock to see historians of imperialism attributing Thompson’s comments on the British Empire in the aftermath of the Falklands War as striking “a new note in his work.” See Ben Shephard, “Showbiz Imperialism: The Case of Peter Lobengula,” in John M. Mackenzie, ed., *Imperialism and Popular Culture* (Manchester 1986), 94.

of Moscow celebrated with salutes from a hundred guns? Or the final assault on the fascist blockhouses of Cassino, the bloody wrestling for Caen, and the great leap over the Rhine? Or yet the first news which came through to us from Yugoslavia, of how the peasants had taken to their wooded mountains, fighting without boots or equipment, and with only the arms which they tore from the enemy's hands?

Edward Thompson travelled in a milieu where such allegiances were deep and unmistakable. There was a "ready-made network of contacts and friends ... a circle of comrades."⁴⁰

His lifelong partner would be one such figure. Finishing his degree at Cambridge, reading mainly in literature and history, Edward met Dorothy Towers. A third-generation Londoner, displaced to a village in Kent, Dorothy was the only daughter of shopkeeper/teacher parents schooled in the arts, especially music. Adept at modern languages, immersed in the mythologies and oral traditions of an artisanal family that encompassed Huguenot East End London silkweavers and seafaring patrons of the theatre and the music hall, Dorothy was drawn to History as "being at the interface" of "literature, politics, and family traditions." Educated by strong-willed women who never married, brought up in a household where women's talents were recognized and encouraged, Dorothy faced few gender barriers blocking her aspirations and intellectual/political development. The family leaned noticeably to the left, reading progressive journals and newspapers, backing the Labour Party, but was not composed of joiners or fervent advocates of radical causes. Dorothy, by the age of fourteen, changed all that. Quick to join the Young Communist League in 1939 she was, like Edward and Frank Thompson, part of a generation that saw no options in the stale politics of traditional electoralism and appeasement. She remembers the mammoth demonstrations at Trafalgar Square, and the intense atmosphere of politicization which sustained huge socialist clubs and large communist groups. And, like Edward, this commitment would be sealed in a sense of loss, Dorothy appreciating the great sacrifice of the anti-fascist war effort. After two years at Cambridge she was conscripted for the war effort herself, opting to train as a mechanical draughtswoman — the first such woman to work at the firm she ended up with — so as to get industrial employment. With Dorothy long involved in socialist and communist seminars on working-class history, shared political and academic interests brought her and Edward together; their circles crossed in the post-war politics of the University and by the end of 1945 they had moved in with one another. Because Dorothy had been married during the war and remarriage could not take place for three years, she and Edward were not married until 1948, one week before the birth of their first son, Ben. For almost 50 years they were partners in an amazing array of movements and political causes, their personalities, temperaments, and styles complementing one another, writing their

⁴⁰Thompson, *The Fascist Threat to Britain*, 5. The words on the post-war communist culture of contacts and friends actually come from Dorothy Thompson, but they could just as easily be Edward's. Dorothy Thompson, "The Personal and the Political," 90-1.

histories of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain separately but relying on each other's support, encouragement, ideas, criticism, and shared research, sustaining a relationship that Richard Hoggart considered "a model." No political couple on the English-speaking left, since the Webbs, registered more of a *combined* influence; no academic historical couple, since the Hammonds, dominated the field of social history as decisively.⁴¹

Edward and Dorothy worked together on the Yugoslav Youth Railway, seeing and living a rare equality of the sexes. Upon their return to England they had no intentions of working within the academic establishment, which was rigidly excluding communists by 1948 in any case. Neither took advanced degrees. Edward was as much interested in literature as he was in history and was adamant that he "never 'took a decision' to be a historian" (he would, rather, adopt Lount's appreciation of the series of steps, one leading from the other, that moved him in specific ways). He and Dorothy did decide that they wanted to live in the north country and raise a family. Settling in Halifax, they saw working in adult education as an "obvious choice," and Edward secured a full-time tutorship in English at the Department of Extra-Mural Studies of the University of Leeds, where he would teach for 17 years; Dorothy took part-time employment in the same area and also did research, often of a sociological sort, for various university departments. In and around the University, they were just not of it. With much of their work concentrated in the evenings, there was time for shared childcare and domestic

⁴¹The above paragraph draws on Dorothy Thompson, unpublished typescript of an "Introduction" to a collection of her published essays forthcoming with Verso, 1993, under the title *Outsiders*; Dorothy Thompson interview, "The Public and the Private," 87-100; Amy Friedman, "A Woman to Admire," *Whig-Standard Magazine*, 4 June 1988; and Richard Hoggart, "Death of a Tireless and True Radical," *Observer*, 29 August 1993. Of course there are those who consider that Dorothy was exploited by Edward. For particularly offensive statements, which Dorothy Thompson replies to with restrained intelligence in her "Introduction," see Marion Glastonbury, "The best kept secret — how working class women live and what they know," *Women's Studies International Quarterly*, 2 (1979), 29; Dale Spender, *The Writing or the Sex? or why you don't have to read women's writing to know it's no good* (New York 1989), 142, 146. I once heard a feminist historian in the United States castigate the gender-specific language of the preface of *The Making of the English Working Class*, and then add, for good measure, that Dorothy was the only one in the family to have ever held "a real job." Aside from the untruth of this statement, it reeks of complacent elitism, defining implicitly jobs of real worth as University posts, and it panders to the very gender stereotypes one would think feminists should be opposing, implying that men *should* be the breadwinners and households where women earn an income and men assume other responsibilities (some paid, some unpaid) are somehow dubious. These matters are all addressed thoughtfully in Dorothy Thompson, "The Public and the Private." On the communist milieu see John Saville, "May Day, 1937," in Asa Briggs and John Saville, ed., *Essays in Labour History, 1918-1939* (London 1977), 232-84. For a later new left and Edward's and Dorothy's importance see David Widgery, "Foreword," in Widgery, ed., *The Left in Britain, 1956-1968* (Harmondsworth 1976), esp. 14-5.

responsibilities during the days, although Dorothy no doubt shouldered the burden of such labours. Money was tight — Edward's annual salary was £425 — but they managed, in part because there was a familial "safety net," relatives helped out with toys and children's clothes for Christmas, and the household was something of a democratic centre of political socializing. Integrated into the West Riding community, the Thompsons lived in a whirlwind of activism and generosity. Visitors remembered "huge cakes ... after pay-day while cats scampered about and slid through a hole cut in the solid front door; sometimes an attempt would be made to press a kitten into a ... pocket as a parting gift." Dorothy recalls that they lived "in a shambles, house and garden were rarely far away from complete chaos, one project only ever got completed by putting off something equally important and what money we had tended to get absorbed into political activities instead of into clothes, furniture, or re-decoration of the house."⁴²

The political activities were communist activities. Both Edward and Dorothy were involved in the Communist Party Historians' Group, Dorothy more so than Edward, who was the single member of the group influential enough to get himself elected to his District Party Committee. They were equally inspired by Dona Torr, a lifelong communist with academic training in history, literature, and music, a woman who, more than anyone else, provided an example and a push for Edward and Dorothy to move increasingly in the direction of historical research. Yet at this time Edward also remained the communist activist, spending half of his busy days and nights in Party work. He was chair of the Halifax Peace Committee, secretary of the broader Yorkshire Federation of Peace Organizations, editor of a regional peace journal, and a member of the Yorkshire District Committee of the Communist Party. He is still remembered, 'all elbows and knees,' as the "tall rangy sort of fellow" heading up the peace marches of Leeds and elsewhere, his speeches "devoid of dogma." (His writing, however, was gaining note for its "polemical and even abrasive style.") In hindsight Thompson has suggested the ambivalent current within which he found himself: participating in an affirmative, grass-roots movement of protest and opposition, he was also growing wary of the manipulative practices of London's King Street officials of the CPGB, who seemed to want to squeeze the broad peace movement within their own controlling grip. Intellectually he has noted in passing that, "There were a good many frustrated proto-revisionists in the Communist Party in those days; in my own circle we designated the enemy as 'King Street' and as 'Jungle Marxism,' of which we increasingly came to see

⁴²E.P. Thompson, *The Railway*, 20-1; Hobsbawm, "The Historians' Group of the Communist Party," 25; Christopher Hill, "Foreword," in Harvey J. Kaye, *The Education of Desire: Marxists and the Writing of History* (London 1992), ix-x; "E.P. Thompson: Interview," *Visions of History*, 13; Dorothy Thompson, "Introduction," *Outsiders*; Peter Searby, Robert W. Malcolmson, and John Rule, "Edward Thompson as a Teacher: Yorkshire and Warwick," in Malcolmson and Rule, eds., *Protest and Survival* (London, forthcoming 1993); Peter Scott, "Voluntary exile from history's mainstream," *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 27 June 1980, 7.

The Modern Quarterly as the leading ... organ." But in the intense anti-communist climate of the early 1950s, politics seemed frozen in the polarities of the Cold War. "So far from dismaying one," Thompson has commented with respect to another context, "it was a tonic to one's fighting-blood: ... self-righteous sectarian errors were confirmed within the circular field of antagonism":

And Order sent its orderlies about
Lest any disaffected innocents might still be hid -
Not the Old Testament said so much grace
Before and after meat as those guns did.

So many souls were liberated on that day
Out of their cage of skin and freed into the airs
It is curious that a buzzard ate the speeches
And odd that flies should have blown on the prayers.

It was remarked upon. But the turnout was splendid.
'Quite like old times,' the vizor and goggles said.
Now, children, hallowed be this memorable service,
Which you may meditate upon until you are dead.

When Morality, that immaculate lady, came in season,
And Nobadaddy mounted her in rut,
And she was conceived by him of a white millenium
When all are cleansed of sin, their throats being cut.

What mattered to Edward Thompson was the desperate need to avoid a repetition of the fascist carnage of the 1940s, to protest, to survive: "Never has there been a time in the history of the world when the real moral issues before man have been clearer. Perhaps the issues are so clear and so big that we sometimes fail to grasp them. We are offered Life or Death." If he remained incarcerated, in part, in an overly reverent notion of Marxism as a particular received orthodoxy, linked, in part, to the Communist Party of Stalin, it was because the pressuring congealments of the Cold War and loyalties to the memory and meaning of 1944 kept him there. William Morris would begin the process of his liberation.⁴³

⁴³Hobsbawm, "The Historians' Group of the Communist Party," 28; Bill Schwarz, "'The People' in history: The Communist Party Historians' Group, 1946-1956," in *Making Histories: Studies in history-writing and politics* (London 1990), 44-95; Thompson, "William Morris and the Moral Issues To-Day," *Arena*, 2 (June-July 1951), 27; "E.P. Thompson: Interview," *Visions of History*, 13; Dorothy Thompson, "Introduction," *Outsiders*; Michael D. Bess, "E.P. Thompson: The Historian as Activist," *American Historical Review*, 98 (February 1993), 20-1; Searby, *et al.*, "Edward Thompson as a Teacher," in *Protest and Survival*; Scott, "Voluntary exile," 7; E.P. Thompson, *William Morris* (1977), 769; Thompson, "Romanticism, Moralism, and Utopianism: The Case of William Morris," *New*

Thompson was never the 'pure-and-simple' communist. Listen to the language of urgency in his 1947 exhortation to fight fascism:

If the jackboots are not to march again; if the tormented weight of human flesh is not to hang from the trees of our parks; if the voices of those who love freedom are not to be heard through prison walls; if we are not to meet in secret, distrusting our families, our children, our friends; if we are not to listen for the footsteps at night; if we are to save civilisation.

This is a communism driven less by economic necessity and the logic of determinative forces than by moral passion and desire, as Thompson's attraction to Morris's May Day 1896 article for *Justice* indicates: "Now at last we will it; we will produce no more for profit but for *use*, for *happiness*, for *LIFE*." To divorce these seeming oppositions of 'hard' economics and 'soft' aspiration, of course, is a fatal error, for they were always twinned in Thompson's own political and intellectual understanding of the impulses behind socialist transformation. But Thompson's tone was *always* drawn most substantially from the side of the moralities of opposition: by 1950 he had read Marx and experienced 1944; teaching as much literature as history, and obviously drawn to culture and its analysis rather than to economics (where he saw his comrades Hobsbawm and Saville as "very sound" and more able to write effectively on the topic than he could), he knew capitalist immiseration and ideology through *Hard Times* and Mr. Gradgrind, which he *did* teach, as much as through Engels's *The Housing Question* and Adam Smith, which he probably alluded to only in passing in his extra-mural work. Against 'official' Communist Party Marxism's tendency to shy away from 'sentimentalism' and rhetorical flourish, Thompson reached neatly into the very body of an impoverished tradition to extract support for a new aesthetics of communist presentation. The pioneers of British communism, Thompson stressed, always carried "strong moral conviction." Quoting Harry Pollitt's *Serving My Time*, Thompson made the point that, "We have all become so hard and practical that we are ashamed of painting the vision splendid — of showing glimpses of the promised land. It is missing from our speeches, our Press and our pamphlets ... [yet] it was this kind of verbal inspiration that gave birth to the indestructible urge ... to keep ... fighting for freedom."⁴⁴

Left Review, 99 (September-October 1976), 84; Thompson, "The Massacre of the Innocents," adapted from "On the Liberation of Seoul," *Arena* (1951), in *Infant and Emperor: Poems for Christmas* (London 1983), 12; Thompson, "Caudwell," 273, n15, where the problematic phrase "Jungle Marxism" appears.

⁴⁴Thompson, *The Fascist Threat to Britain*, 15; Searby, *et al.*, "Edward Thompson as a Teacher," *Protest and Survival*; Thompson, "William Morris and the Moral Issues To-Day," *Arena*, 2 (June-July 1951), 27, 29; and, for a forceful statement on the reciprocities of collective Marxist scholarship: "E.P. Thompson: Interview," *Visions of History*, 22. 'Literature' is almost absent from Stuart Macintyre's discussion of "Literature and education," in *A Proletarian Science: Marxism in Britain, 1917-1933* (London 1980), 66-90.

It is now commonplace to argue the influence of Morris on Thompson: the relationship figures centrally in a virtual industry of Thompson commentary, which draws, of course, on Thompson's own statements in various interviews and publications. Morris, in Thompson's words, "claimed me." Thompson was "seized" by Morris, driven deeper and deeper into the source materials. In what would prove a recurring pattern, what started out as an article on Morris, aiming polemically to settle scores with two books "so dreadful and so ideological ... that I thought I *must* answer these," ended up as an 800-page book. In the process Thompson became both an historian and a dissident communist, developing a "fascination in getting to the bottom of everything," a compulsion that would lead to the archives and away from King Street. This is now conventional wisdom.⁴⁵

But to be claimed and seized in this way requires a certain receptiveness, temperamentally, politically, and intellectually. In Thompson's case this came, no doubt, from his own interrogation of Romanticism and its moral critique of capitalism. Yet, he was prepared to receive the moral message of aesthetic rejection of capitalism associated with the 1790s by his particular embeddedness in the 'liberty tree' that was his own family and history. Morris's passionate *refusal* of the hideousness of 'progress,' his insistence that a past of poetic imaginative possibility could be liberated from the limitations of history to inform consciousness and conflict in the present so as to create a future of socialist beauty was, in form, if not necessarily in political content, congruent with the otherworldliness of Thompson's father as well as his own experience of the transformative potential of the resistance of the 1940s. K. Mukherjee's memoriam to Edward J. Thompson noted that he "had the spiritual loveliness of a poet in his heart, the loveliness of a far other world from ours." And E.J. Thompson ended his 1921 treatment of Tagore with allusions to the forerunners "of such types of *beauty* and of *goodness* as Athens

⁴⁵"E.P. Thompson: Interview," *Visions of History*, 13; Scott, "Voluntary exile," 7; Thompson, *William Morris* (1977), 810; Thompson, "Romanticism, Utopianism, and Moralism," 83-111. The importance of Morris was early alluded to in Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism*; Palmer, *The Making of E.P. Thompson*, 36-40; John Goode, "E.P. Thompson and 'the Significance of Literature,'" in Harvey J. Kaye and Keith McClelland, eds., *E.P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives* (Philadelphia 1990), 183-203. It is necessary to dissent from the overly schematic commentary on Morris/Thompson that perhaps owed much to the debate around *The Poverty of Theory*. See Richard Johnson, "Three problematics: elements of a theory of working-class culture," in John Clarke, Chas Critcher and Richard Johnson, eds., *Working-Class Culture: Studies in History and Theory* (London 1979), esp. 213-4; Gregor McLennan, "E.P. Thompson and the discipline of historical context," *Making Histories: Studies in history-writing and politics* (London 1982), 108. More offensive, perhaps, is the depoliticized scholasticism of Michael D. Bess, "E.P. Thompson: The Historian as Activist," 21, which manages to avoid the Cold War context of Thompson's mid-1950s defence of Morris in Stalinist terms. The most thorough-going discussion of Thompson and Morris is Michael Francis McShane, "'History and Hope': E.P. Thompson and *The Making of the English Working Class*," PhD thesis, McMaster University, 1990, 70-103.

never knew," seeing in the Bengali poet a reconciliation of East and West: "Neither he nor we have entered into the greatness of our heritage." Thus Morris's youthful Romantic rebellion "of value, of aspiration, against actuality," parted paths with Thompson's father only at the point of struggle and revolt. Even after he joined the CPGB, Frank Thompson, in training as a potential gunnery officer in 1939-40, spent much of his evening time reading classical verse. As Morris moved from the Romanticism of *The Defense of Guenevere* (1858), "The knights come foil'd from the great quest, in vain, / In vain they struggle for the vision fair," through the despair of mid-century, into his age of socialist commitment, he crossed the class politics of a river of fire that alone could build Blake's Jerusalem. It was the failure to make this political leap into the possibilities of working-class revolution that had soured the romantic critique of capitalism of Wordsworth and Coleridge, Ruskin and Carlyle, returning them to the "forms of paternalist sensibility." Morris made no such return, but revolutionized Romanticism. "I can't help it," he told his friend Georgie Burne-Jones, "The ideas which have taken hold of me will not let me rest. ... One must turn to hope, and only in one direction do I see it — on the road to Revolution." Morris's transformation of Romanticism worked within Thompson's communism because "the moral critique of capitalist process was pressing forward to conclusions consonant with Marx's critique, and it was Morris's particular genius to think through this transformation, effect this juncture, and seal it with action." In the words of Morris himself, "what romance means is the capacity for a true conception of history, a power of making the past part of the present." Like the artisanal romantic Blake, who distinguished himself among the Jacobin radicals of the 1790s by his avoidance of disenchantment, Morris's *refusals* were unmistakably anti-capitalist: "Shoddy is King," he roared, "From the statesman to the shoemaker all is shoddy!" John Bull he saw as "a *stupid, unpractical* oaf." "That's an impossible dream of yours, Mr. Morris," a religious figurehead once said to the old socialist, "such a society would need God Almighty Himself to manage it." Morris offered the complacent clergyman his fist: "Well, damn it, man, you catch your God Almighty — we'll have Him." Morris's revolutionary romanticism was driven by *anger*, but it was an anger, again like Blake's, that was cut with satire, polemic, mockery, hyperbole, abuse, provocation, framing a personality "humorous, brusque, shy, meditative, vehement by turns." This didn't just *claim* Edward Thompson; it *was* Edward.⁴⁶

⁴⁶Thompson, *William Morris* (1977), 1,273, 699-700, 714, 809; Thompson, "Romanticism, Utopianism, and Moralism," esp. 90, 109; Edward Thompson, *The Communism of William Morris: A Lecture Given on 4 May 1959 in the Hall of the Art Workers' Guild* (London 1965), esp. 1, 11; Thompson, "Disenchantment or Default: A Lay Sermon," in Conor Cruise O'Brien and William Dean Vanech, eds., *Power and Consciousness* (London 1969), 149-82, esp. 175-6; Edward J. Thompson, *Rabindranath Tagore: His Life and Work* (1948), 94, 84; Johnson, *Agents Extraordinary*, 24; and, on Blake, and his form, E.P. Thompson, "Blake's Tone," *London Review of Books* (28 January 1993), 12-3; Thompson, "London," in Michael Phillips, ed., *Interpreting Blake* (London 1978), 1-31.

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Morris seized Thompson, then, because he filled the silences in Marx that Edward had listened to in his father's and mother's homes, silences that he had heard, loudly, echoing from Cassino to the Po Valley, silences that were sung as the railway snaked its way slowly to Sarajevo, silences that Thompson would recognize in Althusserian theory:

The injury that advanced industrial capitalism did, and that the market society did, was to define human relations as being primarily economic. Marx engaged in orthodox political economy and proposed revolutionary-economic man as the answer to exploited economic-man. But it is also implicit, particularly in the early Marx, that the injury is in defining man as 'economic' at all. This kind of critique of industrial capitalism is found in Blake and Wordsworth very explicitly and is still present in Morris.

Thompson drew on Morris to argue, in 1951, that,

If we wish to save people from the spreading taint of death, then we must win them for life. We do not wait for a new kind of person to appear until after Socialism has been won, any more than we wait for Marxism to arise within a Communist society. We must change people *now*, for that is the essence of our cultural work. And in this work, all the forces of health within society are on our side: all those who, in whatever way, desire a richer life, all those who have warmer ambitions for Britain than those of tedious insolvency and rearmament, all those, indeed, who desire any life at all, can be won to our side if we take to them the message of life against that of the slaughter-house culture.

In a distinctly non-revolutionary age, Morris, similarly, reminded the young Marxist tradition that "a Communist community would require a moral revolution as profound as the revolution in economic and social power":

Though every battle, every augury,
Argue defeat, and if defeat itself
Bring all the darkness level with our eyes —
It is the poem provides the proper charm
Spelling resistance and the living will,
To bring to dance a stony field of fact
And set against terror exile or despair
The rituals of our humanity.

To this end the Victorian socialist stood before audiences of working people and, defiant in the face of the political climate, struggled to instil in them a sense of discontent: "It is to stir you up *not* to be content with a little that I am here tonight," he once proclaimed. He needed labour to know, collectively, with all of its potential power, that "all these uglinesses are but the outward expression of the innate moral baseness into which we are forced by our present form of society." That appreciated, intelligence, courage, and power — the coming together of consciousness and labour power — would insure "the thing will be done," and revolution

accomplished. Increasingly, Thompson himself came to see this as a comment, not only on the bounded consciousness of the insurrectionary working class, but on his own Communist Party orthodoxy as well. Stalinism was too little morality, too much inhumanity.⁴⁷

But in the climate of the mid-1950s the "muffled revisionism" of Thompson's Morris text could not break out of the Stalinist straightjacket. To do so, at the height of the Cold War, seemed an act of apostatic default too disturbing to contemplate. The lessons of Morris, then, were often drawn in stark political strokes whitewashing the failures and crimes of a degenerating socialist state. It would take two decades for Thompson to negotiate his way through the searing rapids of his own particular river of fire, breaking finally and decisively from the CPGB. Morris was, according to Thompson, his guide: "When, in 1956, my disagreement with orthodox Marxism became fully articulate, I fell back on modes of perception which I'd learned in those years of close company with Morris, and I found, perhaps, the will to go on arguing from the pressure of Morris behind me."⁴⁸

No doubt this is true, as far as it goes. But I would like to suggest that Thompson's particular Stalinist political stasis at the zenith of the Cold War is explainable at the juncture of structure and agency. On the one side, the boundaries of his experience were the imposed constraints of rabid anti-communism, capitalism's ascendant ideological confidence, and the aggressive acquisitive individualism that was reflected in philistine consumerism and a possible nuclear holocaust waged in the name of global conquest. These imposing barriers made repudiation of actually existing communism seem a dirty stain on the memory of 1944, or, worse, a material contribution to human destruction: "Beneath all the nice quibbles about means and ends, all the clever things which Orwell or Koestler or Eliot or their American counterparts have to say, will be found the same facts: napalm, the Hell Bomb, and the butchers of Syngman Rhee." Yet, on the other side, as Morris increasingly told Thompson, the means did matter: in an age of shoddy,

⁴⁷Thompson, *Poverty of Theory*, esp. 247-62; Michael Merrill, "An Interview with E.P. Thompson," *Radical History Review*, 3 (Fall 1976), 23-4; "E.P. Thompson: Interview," *Visions of History*, 22; Thompson, *William Morris* (1977), 729, 786, 806; Thompson, *The Communism of William Morris*, esp. 8, 18-9; Thompson, "William Morris and the Moral Issues To-Day," 30; For a different reading see Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism*, esp. 157-75. The verse is from Tom McGrath, quoted by Thompson in "Disenchantment or Default," 180-1.

⁴⁸Many sources comment on the relationship of Thompson's 1955 and 1977 studies of Morris, looking at what Thompson himself refers to as "casuistries explaining away what one should have repudiated in the character of Stalinism." (Thompson, *William Morris* (1977), 769, 806; Merrill, "An Interview with E.P. Thompson," 10, 23.) See, for instance, Palmer, *Making of E.P. Thompson*, 36-40; McShane, "'History and Hope': E.P. Thompson and *The Making of the English Working Class*," 93-6; Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism*, esp. 171-2; McLennan, "E.P. Thompson and the Discipline of Historical Context," *Making Histories*, 108.

they were often all that socialists could actually touch, a revolutionary end being beyond reach. And those means included commitment to an end that was more than simple quantitative economic change. "I hold that we need not be afraid of scaring our audiences with too brilliant pictures of the future of Society," Morris thundered, "nor think ourselves unpractical and utopian for telling them the bare truth, that in destroying monopoly we shall destroy our present civilization." Against those "one-sided Socialists" who were always "preaching to people that Socialism is an economic change pure and simple," Morris placed himself and the cause of larger possibilities.⁴⁹ As Thompson grappled with the Morris example in the early-to-mid-1950s, then, he was tugged in one direction by structure, another by his invigorated Morrisian appreciation of agency, which began the process of severing the heroic accomplishments of popular front resistance from the programmatic squeeze of Stalinism. Thompson, I suggest, negotiated this balancing act between structure and agency, containment and cultural renewal, largely through his own experience of the 'education of desire.' It allowed him to refuse Cold War accommodations at the same time as it presented a space more free and open, where King Street Marxism could be, with some subtlety, sidestepped.

Education and Experience: Mediating the Marx/Morris Encounter

FOR THE BETTER PART of two decades, Edward Thompson was employed in adult education. His students were workers, housewives, and a broad mix of the 'middling' sort: teachers, commercial travellers, social workers, clerks, even the odd bank official. The Leeds Extra-Mural Department emerged in the post-war period of welfare and educational extension, a bridge between the University and the old commitments of the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) dedicated since 1903 to practical training for workers, "healing the divorce between the institutions of higher education and the centres of social experience." One of the largest extra-mural departments in the country, Leeds was headed by Sidney Raybould, a dour economist well-known as an administrator and publicist in the field of adult education. Concerned to bring the purpose of the WEA in line with the 'standards' of the University, securing for extra-mural work status and accreditation, Raybould was a staunch advocate of what his itinerant tutors (who travelled throughout the North and West Ridings, teaching four or five tutorial classes, with anywhere from eight to twenty students, who were enrolled in three-year programs) could bring to the intellectual inadequacies of their students.⁵⁰

⁴⁹Thompson, "William Morris and the Moral Issues To-Day," 27, 30.

⁵⁰Much of what follows in this section draws on Peter Searby's discussion of Thompson's Yorkshire years in adult education in Peter Searby, Robert W. Malcolmson, and John Rule, "Edward Thompson as a Teacher," in Malcolmson and Rule, eds., *Protest and Survival*, forthcoming October 1993. I am extremely grateful to Professors Searby and Malcolmson for making this manuscript available to me. Searby has done important work in the Leeds Archives and interviewed a number of Thompson's students. See as well Roger T.

Raybould hired Thompson at a time when anti-communism was rife in circles of higher education. He could not have been comfortable when, at an early staff meeting, the young Marxist tutor announced that his aim in adult teaching was "to create revolutionaries." There were also less rhetorical moments of skirmish, as Thompson and other left-wingers such as J.F.C. Harrison clashed with Raybould and their colleagues over whether the purpose of adult education was to 'elevate' the student to University levels. Thompson and Harrison saw themselves as being true to the original purpose of the WEA: they wanted to offer those blocked by material circumstances from access to higher education the opportunity both to learn *and* to bring their experience to bear on the environment of the classroom. There was no question that Thompson refused any notion of paternalism within the learning experience. He chose adult education precisely because it offered the Morris-like possibility of "making socialists" at the same time as it opened out into new avenues of learning for himself: "I went into adult education because it seemed to me to be an area in which I would learn something about industrial England, and teach people who would teach me. Which they did." "Give me the chalk Mr. Thompson," WEA instructor Sheila Rowbotham recalls a student in one class on the history of mining saying before he proceeded to draw a series of intricate diagrams on the board. "One discovered as much as one taught," Thompson insisted. And one part of what was learned was, again, a specific tone. Reviewing a study on Methodism and the Durham miners, Thompson closed the book with a curt, "And *fookin'* Amen to that!" *The University* was never simply a privileged space, and its language and detachment were not always to be elevated above other, class-based, expressions of evaluation. Adult education may well have seemed, for a young Edward Thompson, one of those "places where no one works for grades or for tenure but for the transformation of society; places where criticism and self-criticism are fierce, but also mutual help and exchange of theoretical and practical knowledge; places that prefigure in some ways the society of the future." To be sure, adult education was, by the 1950s, in the throes of change, and its unambiguous class purpose and character, clearer in earlier times, was breaking down with the shifting socio-economic and ideological contours of British society. Thompson saw this at work in his extra-mural tutoring, but he nevertheless felt strongly that there was enough class reason left to hold to the original aims of the WEA, in which the experience of workers was valued and drawn upon rather than denied and dismissed. In a 10,000-word paper circulated to colleagues in 1950, Thompson quoted Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, resisting Raybould's reification of the disinterested superiority of University learning: "For a moment there fell on Jude a true illumination: that here in the stone yard was a centre of effort as worthy

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as that dignified by the name of scholarly study within the noblest of the colleges." Living, Thompson believed, was learning.⁵¹

It would have been easy to translate this conviction into a passive, receiving encounter with adult education students; polite condescension is often the flip side of paternalism. Thompson refused this as well. Peter Searby's interviews with former students and excavation of Thompson's own annual reports on their tutorial classes provide an illuminating glimpse into the years of Yorkshire teaching. Whatever he was with his superiors and colleagues, Thompson was apparently an extraordinary teacher. Always willing to let his own sympathies be known, choosing topics that reflected his sense of historical relevance (largely, at this time, relating to the Industrial Revolution), Thompson was, with students, far more balanced and restrained than he was known to be in polemical battle. His own reports, totally 30,000 words and covering 60 tutorial classes, present, in Searby's words, a "commentary that is wry, self-critical, pragmatic, and above all generous and enthusiastic." A sample from a history class in Batley, 1953-1954 conveys a great deal:

This class — part original, part added — has an excellent core to it, of about ten or eleven members, and a further five or six students on the register who blow in and out irregularly, take a vigorous part in discussions, but are not fulfilling stipulated requirements of reading, writing, or attendance. While three of the latter will be taken off the register next year, there seems to be no good reason for excluding any of them from the meeting room, since everyone likes to see them and they manifestly have no ill effect on the morale or quality of work of the rest. Batley is a small town where everyone knows everyone else: the community sense extends to the W.E.A. and to the class, and is reinforced by it: the most admirable regulations of the most enlightened administrators must bend before the facts of life in Batley. Anyway, how can the tutor exclude the President of the Branch — so busy with his voluntary work for his union, school, chapel, and the W.E.A. itself that he cannot write an exercise when it is required? Class discussions have been extremely vigorous, but one very old member (thundering the table in defence of Gladstone's integrity) has tended always to lead them into the swamp of local reminiscence. Nevertheless, both the tutor and the class feel that this is the kind of thing we have got to expect and put up with, and no one would dream of asking the old gentleman to stop describing his speech at the School Board election of 1877. After all, we cannot have our cake and eat it. If we want academic tidiness, we will not also have the variety of experience and the informal non-vocational spirit to which we give lip-service. Between the Ideal and the Reality falls the shadow of Compromise. And if Compromise be accepted, then Batley is a fairly good tutorial class.

⁵¹Thompson, *William Morris* (1977), 366-426; "E.P. Thompson: Interview," *Visions of History*, 13, 23; Dorothy Thompson, "The Personal and the Political," 91; Rowbotham, "E.P. Thompson: a life of radical dissent," 14; Hogben, "E.P. Thompson," *Whig-Standard*, 9; E.P. Thompson, "On history, sociology, and historical relevance," *British Journal of Sociology*, 27 (1976), 396, 402. The Hardy quote, from Thompson's paper, "Against University Standards," appears in Searby, "Thompson as a Teacher," in Malcolmson and Rule, eds., *Protest and Survival*.

Students taught by Edward Thompson in these years, be they in literature or history classes, were never allowed to be contented with a little. Thompson understood the value of experience and, as the Batley report shows, gave it its due, even when that meant sacrifice. But he expected students to use that experience to reach beyond it. Shakespeare was preferred in English tutorials: "the distance stimulates application, the in-bred respect keeps philistinism at bay, and it is difficult to graft onto Falstaff a discussion on the Morely local elections." Reasoned argument and intellectual difference were valued, encouraged by bringing in outside lecturers. "There is too little rebellion in the class," Thompson once complained, "and ... [it] looks as if the whole course of the class might be run without one good earnest row between the students." Pushing students to write, meticulous in his criticism, Thompson's lectures were inspiring and his example cherished for years to come. Dorothy Greenald (to whom *The Making of the English Working Class* would be dedicated) and Peter Thornton, members of Thompson's first 1948-1951 Cleakheaton class, remembered that Edward made history come alive for students and, in particular, in Greenald's words, that "your background wasn't something to be ashamed of." "That changed me really," she said, in what must be the ultimate tribute to any teacher. For Thompson, his years in adult education were also not without their rewards. Writing of one literature class, he stressed that he had "learnt as much as he ha[d] imparted." The class found its way "to work in the spirit so desirable in the WEA — not as tutor and passive audience, but as a group combining various talents and pooling differing knowledge and experience for a common end."

Years later Thompson would reflect on this theme, drawing it toward his intellectual preoccupation of the mid-1950s, revolutionizing Romanticism. In the Mansbridge Memorial Lecture at Leeds he addressed the uniqueness of adult education which, in refusing the passivity of much teaching, was capable of transforming learning. He saw in the statement of a Goethe character in 1774 a comment on the rigidities of contemporary education: "Persons of rank tend to keep their cold distance from the common man, as if they fear to lose something by such intimacy." In contrast to his own father's teaching experience in India, and countered by the Jacobin romantics of the 1790s, this gulf separating experience and education was impoverishing to both living and learning, as evident in Wordsworth's *Prelude*:

When I began to inquire,
 To watch and question those I met, and held
 Familiar talk with them, the lonely roads
 Were schools to me in which I daily read
 With most delight the passions of mankind,
 There saw into the depths of human souls,
 Souls that appear to have no depth at all
 To vulgar eyes. And now convinced at heart

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How little that to which alone we give
The name of education hath to do
With real feeling and just sense

Wordsworth's compassion and his capacity to hear "From mouths of lowly men and of obscure/A tale of honour" would help steer Thompson through the Marx/Morris encounter, providing, in his own adult education experience, a touchstone to which, one suspects, he could return as he looked with increasing disillusionment on the Stalinism of his own CPGB. "To strike the balance between intellectual rigour and respect for experience is always difficult," Thompson acknowledged. He confessed to having himself accommodated those students who valued themselves too complacently: "My fellow tutors here will, I suspect, take the point: they know, only too well, the student to whom I refer. They may also know the tutor who has made himself accomplice to the giving-up, and who has been happy to accept the moral worth of his students in place of their essays. They may even have seen him, as I have, late in the evening, in the mirror." But the real balance needed redressing in other ways: "Democracy will realize itself — if it does — in our *whole* society and our *whole* culture: and, for this to happen, the universities need the abrasion of different worlds of experience, in which ideas are brought to the test of life." Universities as syndicates of experts presented the danger of expropriating "the people of their identity." As he lived this awareness in the 1950s, Thompson was also coming to intellectual and political grips with the extent to which Stalinism was crushing the identity of the left.⁵²

Romanticism and Marxism, II: Exit from King Street and the Rise (and Fall) of New Lefts

THE MORRIS VOLUME had occupied Thompson throughout the first half of the 1950s, but his reading in the Romantic tradition was by no means confined to its relationship to Victorian socialism. Nor was it left on the desk. Years later Thompson would equate the positive intellectual and political accomplishments of respected thinkers and writers in the CPGB, many of whom contributed to the *Left Review* (1934-38), and some of whom were actually Morris scholars, with their "hard moral decisions." They gave much to the movement of opposition and the urgencies of their political times sometimes meant "the death or the suspension of their own creative identity." This, Thompson claimed, recalled the "settled tenacity of eighteenth-century dissenters." Such people, from the 1790s and the 1930s, kept the idea of social transformation alive.⁵³ In a 1952 attack on censorship he drew

⁵²E.P. Thompson, *Education and Experience: Fifth Mansbridge Memorial Lecture* (Leeds 1968), esp. 1, 2, 6, 18, 22-3. On Thompson's father, Indian education, and connection with ordinary people, see Chaudhuri, "Bankura's Englishman" and Thompson and Thompson, "Memories of Tagore."

⁵³[E.P. Thompson], "Organizing the Left," *Times Literary Supplement*, 19 February 1971, 203-4.

close to John Milton, deploring the "gross conforming stupidity, a stark and dead congealment of wood and hay and stubble, forced and frozen together," that resulted from the suppression of ideas. Like the seventeenth-century poet he demanded "liberty to know, to utter and to argue freely according to conscience above all liberty."⁵⁴ Most importantly, it seems, the Morris/Marx encounter was giving way to the Blake/Marx encounter. As an early editorial statement in the *New Reasoner* declared, Thompson now made no apology "for giving up so large a part of our space to the vision of William Blake and the thought of Karl Marx. We believe that this vision, this theory, influencing the minds and actions of living men and women, are among those human forces which — in the end — ... can keep the bombers grounded and which can make the fruits of men's ingenuity into sources of human enrichment." The fight for Thompson remained on the political and industrial ground of traditional Marxist activity, but battles now needed to be fought against those "whom William Blake denounced in his own strange and forceful way" as those who "would, if they could, forever depress Mental & Prolong Corporeal War."⁵⁵

This increasingly intense engagement with Blake and the revolutionary current of Romanticism's moral critique of capitalism as a socio-economic system was bringing Thompson to a new point of recognition: "If I devised my own pantheon I would without hesitation place within it the Christian antinomian, William Blake, and I would place him beside Marx." Drawn to the tenacious persistence of Blake's refusals to accommodate to "the Beast," Thompson would later sum up the substance of the London craftsman's engagement with the disciplining structures of Church and State:

I see a firm consistency in a strong antinomian tradition, derived from a 17th-century vocabulary and discourse, which extends in Blake's work from the 1780s (or earlier) to the year of his death. The signatures of this include the radical suspicion of Reason, the repudiation of adulterous relations between Church and State, the vocabulary of the 'Everlasting Gospel' and the 'New Jerusalem,' the refusal of any worship entailing self-abasement and professed humility, and above all, the absolute rejection of 'the Moral Law.' ... In

⁵⁴Milton is quoted in E.P. Thompson, *The Struggle for a Free Press* (London 1952), 8, and this quote would resurface in a series of writings: "Winter Wheat in Omsk," *World News*, 3 (30 June 1956), 408-9 (Thompson's first public criticism of the Communist Party); "Revolution Again! Or Shut Your Ears and Run," *New Left Review*, 6 (November-December 1960), 20 (Thompson's reply to critics of the book he edited in 1960 *Out of Apathy*); and as the last unacknowledged line in "Postscript," *Whigs and Hunters: The Origin of the Black Act* (London 1977), 311. Part of this I reconstructed myself (Palmer, *Making of E.P. Thompson*, 53), but I was also guided by McShane, "History and Hope": E.P. Thompson and *The Making of the English Working Class*, 137.

⁵⁵Thompson and Saville, "Editorial," *New Reasoner: A Quarterly Journal of Socialist Humanism*, 2 (Winter 1957-58), 1-4. The next issue also carried a lengthy piece that made explicit the Marx/Blake encounter: Kenneth Muir, "Marx's Conversion to Communism," *New Reasoner*, 3 (1957-58), 57-64.

discarding the prohibitive Moral Law of 'Thou Shall Not' Blake could put trust only in an active affirmative 'Thou Shall Love.'

Blake, Thompson now saw as one of the critical activist tongues, that, within the limitations of its time, "spoke for *humanity*": "Rent from eternal brotherhood we die and are no more/Man exists by brotherhood and universal love." Stalinism lacked such a "moral tongue," anything approximating a brotherhood of love. Blake's visionary genius was to locate the threat to humanity's affirmative potential in the relentless divisive march of acquisitive individualism, a reading somewhat distanced from the conventional academic wisdom:

We can now see *London* not simply as a terrible *catalogue* of unrelated abuses and suffering; but, rather, as a poem with a clearly conceived, developing emotional logic around the central unifying theme of bourgeois morality. Blake does not only describe the *symptoms*; within the central image which underlies and unites the whole poem, there is the discovery of the *cause*. From the first introduction of the word 'charter'd' Blake never loses hold of this image of buying and selling — not only goods, but of human values, affections and vitalities. The street cries are the cries of people buying and selling, the 'mind forg'd manacles' are manacles of self-interest, childhood (the chimney sweep) is bought and sold, life itself (the soldier) is bought and sold, and to complete the poem, youth, beauty, and love, the *source* of life, is bought and sold in the figure of the diseased harlot. In a series of concrete, unified images of enormous power Blake compresses an indictment of the acquisitive ethic which divides man from man, leads him into mental and moral captivity, destroys the sources of joy, and brings, as its reward, death.

As Thompson began to chart his way through the political seas of the 1950s, struggling to try to create a new left, he in some ways commenced with Blake, who inspired an antinomianism of refusal that allowed a decisive break from the destructive failures and broken promise of both capitalism and Stalinism. "The Beast is real," Thompson would write in 1960, "but its reality exists within our own conformity and fear. We must acknowledge ourselves in the Beast of history, for only so can we break the spell of fear and reduce it to our own size. And then we must meet it as it is."⁵⁶

⁵⁶Thompson, "Open Letter to Kolakowski," 106; Thompson, "Socialist Humanism," 124-5; Thompson, "The New Left," *New Reasoner*, 9 (Summer 1959), 1; Thompson, "Winter Wheat in Omsk," 408, quoted in McShane, "'History and Hope': E.P. Thompson and *The Making of the English Working Class*," 141. Thompson's actual written commentary on Blake has been limited, but his four-decade engagement with the radical craftsman will culminate in the late 1993, posthumous publication of *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law*. A preview was offered in Thompson, "London," in Phillips, ed., *Interpreting Blake*, 5-31, which develops ideas that first surfaced in *New Reasoner*, 3 (1957-58), esp. 68; and a series of lectures in North America, which included the distinguished Northrop Frye Lectures at the University of Toronto (1978), public lectures on Blake at Brown University (the last of which, given 5 November 1980, was taped and graciously

Thompson's disgruntled ambivalence with the CPGB may well, by the mid-1950s, have been longstanding, but it was also, at the level of public pronouncement, subdued. With Stalin's death in 1953 the world communist order was somewhat shaken, and the next years would witness a series of incidents, beginning with the suppression of an East German revolt, that indicated the destabilizing currents running through official Marxism. The "elect of King Street" managed to keep overt opposition in check, but seemed largely immune to the message that significant numbers of loyal communists were approaching disillusionment, preparing for a departure. 1956 forced the issue away from a Cold War polarization of commitment, pitting capitalism against socialism, into a cauldron of redefinition, in which the fundamental point of identification came to be socialism of what sort, marxism of what kind, and a party for what ends, practicing what means. First came Khrushchev's February 1956 revelations of Stalin's atrocities which, in spite of attempts to suppress the speech and confine it to "secrecy," spread through the Communist parties of the world and pushed information of repression and coercion further into the public arena. When tanks rolled into Budapest on 4 November 1956, they crushed not only the rebellious anti-Stalinist aspirations of the Hungarian working class, but the view that official communist parties, such as that ensconced in King Street, could be renewed. Edward and Dorothy Thompson and John Saville were among many shocked and disturbed communists who nevertheless had long believed that a renewal of the Communist Party's moral authority could be achieved, provided that the crisis within the party was recognized and acted upon by the leadership. This, most emphatically, was not happening. The Thompsons and Saville thus came together to put out a mimeographed journal of 32 pages which would appear independent of the Party press, but would not reach outside of Party circles. Much stress was placed on reestablishing the moral credibility of communism, and the masthead, quoting Marx, proclaimed with purpose: "To leave error unrefuted is to encourage intellectual immorality." King Street wanted no part of it: Thompson and Saville, as editors, were soon instructed to cease publication. They defied the order, suffered suspension, and, then, with the Hungarian intervention, resigned in protest, "believing that the Party was now wholly discredited." The dam had broken: 7,000 members (almost one in five) left the CPGB in 1956 and the old guard at King Street hardened their stance against any and all dissent. Thompson and Saville moved out of the Party, not to abandon working-class

provided to me by Paul Buhle), and a series of talks given to Thompson's seminars at Queen's University over the winter term, 1988. See, as well, Thompson, "Blake's Tone," a review of Jon Mee's *Dangerous Enthusiasm: William Blake and the Culture of Radicalism in the 1790s* (1992), which appeared in *London Review of Books*, 28 January 1993, 12-3; and Heather Glen, *Vision and Disenchantment: Blake's Songs and Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads* (Cambridge 1983). The final quote on the Beast is from E.P. Thompson, "Outside the Whale," in Thompson, ed., *Out of Apathy* (London 1960), 191, reprinted in *The Poverty of Theory*, 32.

revolution, but to build it in new ways. This was the moment of "socialist humanism" that Thompson would return to again and again in the latter half of the century, a turning point balanced on the two-edged sword of possibility and defeat, directing its political gaze outward to the frustrated aspirations of dissident comrades in Eastern Europe and inward to the state of the communist 'nation' in Great Britain. "We hope to grow more dangerous as we grow more old," Thompson wrote, affirming his commitment to the possible.⁵⁷

Within certain circles this history of 1956 and the implosive rupture of British communism is now well known. As event it has received consideration; its texts, almost unknown in North America fifteen years ago, are now routinely cited, largely as a consequence of the intellectual furor in the late 1970s and early 1980s around Thompson's *The Poverty of Theory* (1978), where all four essays either grow directly out of the moral imperative of "1956" or return to it. Yet in spite of the movement toward encounter with the political writings associated with Thompson's exit from King Street, an interrogation of these works and their relationship to the historicized making of his own thought is largely absent.⁵⁸

⁵⁷See, among many possible sources, John Saville, "The XXth Congress and the British Communist Party," Malcolm MacEwen, "The Day the Party Had to Stop," Margot Heinemann, "1956 and the Communist Party," Mervyn Jones, "Days of Tragedy and Farce," all in Ralph Miliband and John Saville, ed., *The Socialist Register, 1976* (London 1976), 1-57, 67-88; Ralph Miliband, "John Saville: A Presentation," in David E. Martin and David Rubenstein, eds., *Ideology and the Labour Movement* (London 1979), esp. 24-7; Neal Wood, *Communism and the British Intellectuals* (New York 1959), 182-213; Dorothy Thompson, "Introduction," *Outsiders*; Kate Soper, "Socialist Humanism," in Harvey J. Kaye and Keith McClelland, eds., *E.P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives* (Philadelphia 1992), 204-32; Palmer, *Making of E.P. Thompson*, 45-63; David Widgery, ed., *The Left in Britain, 1956-1968, 19-72*. The Thompson quote is from "Editorial," *New Reasoner*, 10 (Autumn 1959), 7-8.

⁵⁸As late as 1976, Thompson was able to refer in a United States interview to "a side of my writing that is less known in the United States, which is a very distinctly political engagement." "E.P. Thompson: Interview," *Visions of History*, 10. This changed. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory* was composed of four essays. "Outside the Whale," first published in 1960 was an attempt to address the drift to complicity among once committed intellectuals (with an emphasis on Auden and Orwell), insisting that "socialist humanism" had to define ways of using existing human strengths and values to "break simultaneously with the pessimism of the old world and the authoritarianism of the new." "The Peculiarities of the English," a polemic against the *New Left Review*'s Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn, offered strong refusals of what Thompson conceived of as the second New Left's ruthless theoretical tidiness, in which bolts were "being shot against experience and enquiry." Against this, Thompson declared, "there are some of us who will man the stations of 1956 again." "An Open Letter to Kolakowski," refers to "the moment of common aspiration: '1956'," while "The Poverty of Theory: or, an Orrery of Errors," declares, "My dues to '1956' have now been paid in full."

We can begin to speak through this silence by excavating some simple genealogies of meaning. Thompson's and Saville's journals of dissident communism, *The Reasoner* and the *New Reasoner*, for instance, took their title from John Bone's publication of the same name, which first appeared in the opening decade of the nineteenth century in an attempt to renew and reinvigorate a flagging Jacobin radicalism. Thompson would later note in *The Making of the English Working Class* that "this honourably named periodical failed through lack of support." These journals, like Bone's, were attempts to rekindle the dying embers of a spent opposition, posing the critique of Stalinist communism always at the point of its moral decay: "When we commenced publication, in our duplicated form in 1956, the Communist movement was in a shambles of intellectual disgrace and moral collapse. ... we sought to re-habilitate the rational, humane, and libertarian strand within the Communist tradition, with which men of great courage and honour ... have been identified; a tradition which the elect of King Street have brought into shifty disrepute." While the *Reasoner* and *New Reasoner* fused many streams of dissident communist thought and sensibility, there is no question that the journals bore the imprint of Thompson's engagement with Blake and Morris and his insertion of the poetic imagination into the discourse of Marxism. International voices of communist dissent, such as that of the murdered Hungarian Imre Nagy, echoed throughout the pages of the *New Reasoner*, insistent on the need to create a new, humane socialist moralism, in staunch resistance to the depraved Machiavellianism and degenerate Bonapartism of the Stalinist states. They resonated well with Thompson's own often tortured settling of moral accounts with his Stalinist past:

How much more honour then
To all those dedicated men
Who saved society
By rope and calumny!

So giving honour, we
Who moralise necessity,
With slats of sohistry erect
A gibbet of the intellect,

And from its foul and abstract rope
Suspend all social hope,
Until with swollen tongue
Morality herself is hung

In whose distended dedicated eyes
All honour dies.

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Or with Thompson's increasingly poetic turn to affirmation of birth and life in the face of Empire's push to devastation and death, captured nicely in "Mother and Child," written at the time of the Hungarian and Suez crises:

It is her calm that drives the Emperor mad.
Why is she looking down? Look to the all-in-one,
High up aloft ineffable, the abstract drum!
She smiles, holding within the circle of her arm
Omens of innocence, a flight of birds,
Insurgent provinces, revolt within the State.
Over the bowels of a bull the priests deliberate ...
She has held the child too long to take alarm.

And in what seemed strikingly reminiscent of his father's stand, Thompson co-authored a 1959 editorial on colonialism that deplored the moral corruption of public life in Great Britain following in the wake of "the betrayal of human rights and the rule of law" in British-occupied Cyprus. Quoting Mill, Thompson and Saville asked for the kind of 'atonement' E.J. Thompson would have embraced: "Is there no body of persons willing to redeem the 'character of our country.'"⁵⁹

We are, in the eyes and minds of some, back to the question of parochial nationalism. This is not, however, where the *New Reasoner* was. Reasoning began as internationalism, the political interrogation of Stalinism commencing with Thompson peering through "The Smoke of Budapest." Its ten issues bristled with contact and concern with global events and possibilities — practical, artistic, and conceptual. Thompson's lengthy essay, "Socialist Humanism," around which debate centred for months, was primarily a coming to grips with Stalinism *as theory*, but alongside this attempt to reformulate the project of Marxism were accounts of workers' councils in Yugoslavia, discussion of African national congresses, denunciations of phony state trials in Bulgaria, the reproduction of South African art, letters from America, Thompson's own translation and adaptation of Adam Wazyk's poem, "The Railway Carriage," and documents and debate relating to Gramsci. All of this coexisted with attempts to situate historically the experience of the nineteenth-century English working class, the arguments and evidence of *The Making* appearing — like the earlier study of Morris — in a

⁵⁹Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth 1968), 497; Palmer, *Making of E.P. Thompson*, 25-6; Thompson, "In Praise of Hangmen," in "Open Letter to Kolakowski," 131-2; "Imre Nagy: Murdered, June 1958," *New Reasoner*, 5 (Summer 1958), 88; "Editorial," *New Reasoner*, 7 (Winter 1958-1959), 11; Imre Nagy, *On Communism: In Defence of the New Course* (London 1956), 49, 43, cited in McShane, "'History and Hope': E.P. Thompson and *The Making of the English Working Class*," 147; Thompson, "Mother and Child," in *Infant and Emperor*, 10. Thompson's desires and frustrations around poetry are the subject of some comment in the 1956 Saville-Thompson correspondence, touched on in Saville, "The XXth Congress and the British Communist Party," 18-9.

polemical broadside aimed at books that drew Thompson's ire because they dismissed the necessity of a moral judgement of constituted authority, an abdication that managed to go unnoticed in the "soggy" reviews of *Tribune* and *New Statesman*. What the books, which dealt with the Peterloo massacre of 1819, in which the Manchester yeomanry violently rode down a reform meeting, failed to do was even ask the larger questions posed by Peterloo: "Why has the word echoed ever since in our history? How far was it a defeat, how far a moral victory?" Behind the detached, cautionary non-commitment of such scholarship Thompson detected the key shortcoming of ostensibly objective historiography: "oppressive class relationships, exploitation, and suffering are *facts* of history and not subjective judgements upon history. ... True objectivity will lead the historian to the heart of this real human situation; and once he is there, if he is worth his salt, he *will* make judgements and draw conclusions." After all, this had been done in the past, "the massacre arous[ing] a hatred among the people ... What a world of savage humour, contempt and confidence is packed into the word itself: 'Peterloo!'"⁶⁰

Over the course of the next years Thompson's project of building a new left overshadowed all other aspects of his life. The institutional contours of this contentious period in the history of the British left are reasonably well known. Against the threat of nuclear war the first Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament emerged, with Saville and Thompson throwing themselves into the mobilization, part of a committed core that joined a 140-mile march from Withernsea on the East Yorkshire coast to Liverpool. The *New Reasoner* and *Universities and Left Review*

⁶⁰On international themes see, for a brief selection only: Thompson, "Through the Smoke of Budapest," *The Reasoner*, 3 (November 1956, supplement), 1-7, reproduced in Widgery, ed., *The Left in Britain*, 66-72; *New Reasoner*, 2 (Autumn 1957), esp. 56-64, 99-102; 3 (Winter 1957-58), 87-93; 4 (Spring 1958), 107-13; 6 (Autumn 1958), 32-4; 7 (Winter 1957-58), 1-11; 9 (Summer 1959), 141-4. Thompson's major statements were: "Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines," *New Reasoner*, 1 (Summer 1957), 105-43; "God and King and Law," 3 (Winter 1957-58), 69-86; "Agency and Choice: A Reply to Criticism," 5 (Summer 1958), 89-106; "The New Left," 9 (Summer 1959), 1-17; "An Pseessay in Ephology," 10 (Autumn 1959), 1-8. For responses to Thompson, many replied to in his "Agency and Choice," see Harry Hanson, "An Open Letter to Edward Thompson," Charles Taylor, "Marxism and Humanism," *New Reasoner*, 2 (Autumn 1957), 79-98; Jack Lindsay and John St. John "Socialist Humanism," Tim Enright, "Materialism or Eclecticism," 3 (1957-58), 94-112; and, in some senses, Alasdair MacIntyre, "Notes from the Moral Wilderness, I," 7 (Winter 1958-59), 90-100; "Notes from the Moral Wilderness, II," 8 (Spring 1959), 89-98. There were those on the Trotskyist side of the debate who were excluded, complaining that, "Pre-Khrushchev anti-Stalinists are too 'dogmatic,' too fond of raising questions of principle to be permitted to rub shoulders with William Blake, Harry Hanson, and Kornil Zilliacus." See Peter Fryer, "Lenin as Philosopher," *Labour Review*, 2 (September-October 1957), 136-47; "Rejected by the *New Reasoner*," *Labour Review*, 3 (May-June-July 1958), 92-3; "An Unreasonable Reasoner," *Labour Review*, 3 (March-April 1958), 34-6.

merged to establish the *New Left Review*, where Thompson battled for the minds and bodies of the fractured left, writing on revolution and Raymond Williams, bringing to both subjects an insistence on the essential proletarian divide that made an accommodation with reformist labourism or classless culturalism unthinkable. The new journal was to be but a part of the project of left renewal: "there will be Left Clubs, discussion groups, conferences, educational and propagandist activity." This, Thompson thought, might well be "the most serious and sustained attempt in the history of British socialism for those who are actively producing the ideas to also organize their distribution and propagation." For years Thompson threw himself into this building of a new left, "making socialists" as well as remaking socialism. He remained true to his commitment to working-class revolution and was staunch in his rejection of Labour Party reformism; convinced that the primary task of all socialists was to counter the drift to armageddon, he was ceaseless in his efforts to take Britain out of the "Natopolitan nuclear alliance"; with Blake and Morris at his back, and a sobering sense of the ways in which historical experience did not always conform to the models of socialist intellectuals, he struggled to instil in the British left an understanding that the much-cherished site of class conflict — *the point of production* — encompassed the industrial environment but reached past it into other locales:

But the private ownership of the means of production is not a physical act of robbery taking place only at the point of production. It is built-in to our institutions, legal code, customs and possessive morality. When young Tom Mann joined an improvement society at a London engineering works which discussed Shakespeare he began to become an agitator.

The point of production, by the early 1960s, was the new left. There and only there were a politics of activism and alternative possible. Historical experience and the failures of orthodox communism and social democratic reformism left Britain "over-ripe" for revolution, if only left consciousness, theory, and practical activity could catch up with the meanings of the modern world:

The reasons why capitalism has been left to rot on the bough are complex. First, in the context of dominant imperialism it was possible for liberal reformism (sometimes mistaking itself for 'socialism') to continue to win substantial benefits for the people. Second, the experience of the Russian revolution made the concept of a revolutionary transition — *any* transition — to socialism appear to be synonymous with bloodshed, civil war, censorship, purges, and the rest — a confusion which the apologists of indigenous Communists did a good deal to perpetuate. Third, this experience hardened the doctrines of reformism into dogma, to the point where the British Labour Movement has become largely parasitic upon the capitalist economy, with deep vested interests in its continuance, since all local reforms (whether for more wages or more welfare) are seen as dependent upon its continued health and growth. Finally, the capitalist economy was given a fresh lease on life in war, post-war recovery, and next-war preparations, while the flagrant corruptions of post-war Communism diminished still further within Britain the desire to consider any revolutionary alternative. So that British

people find themselves today, with the assent of orthodox Labour, within the grand alliance of international capitalism, and exposed on every side to the ideology of apathy.

"How much longer can the Labour Movement hold to its defensive positions and still maintain morale?" Thompson asked in obvious anguish. "Is the aim of socialism to recede for ever in the trivia of circumstances? Are we to remain for ever as exploited, acquisitive men?" In the refusal of this, the final accommodation, Thompson pointed to the need to revive "the long and tenacious revolutionary tradition of the British commoner":

It is a dogged, good-humoured, responsible, tradition: yet a revolutionary tradition all the same. From the Leveller corporals ridden down by Cromwell's men at Burford to the weavers massed behind their banners at Peterloo, the struggle for democratic and for social rights has always been intertwined. From the Chartist camp meeting to the dockers' picket line it has expressed itself most naturally in the language of moral revolt. Its weaknesses, its carelessness of theory, we know too well; its strengths, its resilience and steady humanity, we too easily forget. It is a tradition that could leaven the socialist world.

It is perhaps not unfair to say that Thompson's vision of the new left, and the practical creation of the institutions which it desperately needed, rose or fell on his insistence that this 'tradition' be engaged.⁶¹

It was not; the vision lived, but not at the point of production. The story is well, if incompletely, known. Allegiances drive interpretations and colour the contours of understanding in oppositional hues: the 'old Guard' — John 'Stonebreaker' 'Sergeant-Major' Saville and the Old Marxist Fraction, the Petty-Humanist

⁶¹See, for instance, E.P. Thompson, "The New Left," *New Reasoner*, 9 (Summer 1959), 1-17; Thompson, "A Pessay in Ephology," *ibid.*, 10 (Autumn 1959), 1-8; Thompson, "Nato, Neutralism, and Survival," *Universities and Left Review*, 4 (Spring 1958), 49-51; Thompson, "At the Point of Decay," and "Revolution," in Thompson, *Out of Apathy*, 3-18, 287-308, esp. quoted passages on 10-1, 15, 308; and the following articles from the *New Left Review*: "The Long Revolution, I," 9 (May-June 1961), 24-33; "The Long Revolution, II," 10 (July-August 1961), 34-9; "The Point of Production," 1 (January-February 1960), 68-70; "Comments on Revolution," 4 (July-August 1960), 3-11; "Countermarching to Armageddon," 4 (July-August 1960), 62-4; "Revolution Again! or Shut Your Ears and Run," 6 (November-December 1960), 18-31. See, as well, Thompson, "Remembering C. Wright Mills," in *The Heavy Dancers*, 261-74; McShane, "'History and Hope': E.P. Thompson and *The Making of the English Working Class*," 169-212, which has much useful comment on the *Universities and Left Review*; and Soper, "Socialist Humanism," 217-21. For views somewhat at odds with those of Thompson see Perry Anderson, "The Left in the Fifties," *New Left Review*, 29 (January-February 1965), 3-18, which tilts toward the condescending, and Raymond Williams, "The British Left," *New Left Review*, 30 (March-April 1965), 18-26. For comment on the first Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament see Richard Taylor and Nigel Young, eds., *Campaigns for Peace: British Peace Movements in the Twentieth Century* (Manchester 1987).

Thompsonite Devisionists, and their comrades, Peter Worsley, Mervyn Jones, and others — was banished; a new and energetic crew, headed by Perry Anderson and attuned to theory and the colonial question assumed the helm of a sinking ship, brought it out of the rough waters of political uncertainty, charting the parochial empiricist English left into the fresh sea of ideas unleashed in Western Marxism's French and Italian rebirth. The sides traded blows in the mid-1960s and returned to the fray in the later 1970s. Thompson's depiction of events has the virtue, not of charitable balance, but of satirical bite:

Early in 1962, when the affairs of *New Left Review* were in some confusion, the New Left Board invited an able contributor, Perry Anderson, to take over the editorship. We found (as we had hoped) in Comrade Anderson the decision and the intellectual coherence necessary to ensure the review's continuance. More than that, we discovered that we had appointed a veritable Dr. Beeching of the socialist intelligensia. All the uneconomic branch-lines and socio-cultural sidings of the New Left which were, in any case, carrying less and less traffic, were abruptly closed down. The main lines of the review underwent an equally ruthless modernisation. Old Left steam-engines were swept off the tracks; wayside halts ("Commitment," "What Next for C.N.D.?", "Women in Love") were boarded up; and the lines were electrified for the speedy traffic from the marxistentialist Left Bank. In less than a year the founders of the review discovered, to their chagrin, that the Board lived on a branch-line which, after vigorous intellectual costing, had been found uneconomical. Finding ourselves redundant we submitted to dissolution.

The "first" new left was dead as a potent political force, although its ideas and inspirations remained; the "second" new left had no aspirations to be a mobilizing force on the left, seeing its role as preparatory, cultivating the dying, redundant theoretical garden of British Marxism with the importation of new and exotic species of vegetation, on which the left could dine in order to build up its strength as an organic community of oppositional intellectuals. There was, in this "second" new left, little of the vision of Blake, and much of the "science" of continental Marxist theory. Little was to be learned from a British working-class that had long stood captive before imperialism and dogged resistance to Marxist theory. A divide had come.⁶²

A gulf now separated Edward Thompson, for the first time in his life, from the possibility of engagement. It was an experience of isolation that could have

⁶²On this rupture see the original combative texts: Perry Anderson, "Origins of the Present Crisis," *New Left Review*, 23 (January-February 1964), 26-53; Anderson, "Socialism and Pseudo-Empiricism: The Myths of Edward Thompson," *New Left Review*, 35 (January-February 1968), 2-42; Tom Nairn, "The English Working Class," *New Left Review*, 24 (March-April 1964), 43-57; E.P. Thompson, "The Peculiarities of the English," *Socialist Register, 1965* (London 1965), 311-62. See, also, Palmer, *Making of E.P. Thompson*, 55-64; Peter Sedgwick, "The Two New Lefts," in Widgery, ed., *The Left in Britain*, 131-53. The humorous self-characterizations of Thompson and Saville appear in *New Reasoner*, 5 (1958), 152.

registered in default. He was now of a movement that had little place for him, where he could find no space to be *in*. By 1963 he realized that the new left he had worked tirelessly to build was dispersed organizationally and intellectually. "We failed to implement our original purposes, or even to sustain what cultural apparatus we had," he recognized. "Defeats happen," he said later, alluding to the failure to sustain the momentum thrown up by 1956 of a possible independent left: "It was a precious historical moment, and, in so far as we have lost it, it is an unqualified defeat." There stretched before him almost a decade of isolation:

What happened was the creation of a New Left that I and my colleagues in England were very active in, at the time of Wright Mills, who was one of our closest colleagues here in the States. And then the transition to a second New Left. At the same time certain intellectual transitions occurred that to my mind were unfortunate. Expressive activity was raised above more rational and open political activity, and simultaneously a highly sophisticated set of Marxisms developed, particularly in Western Europe, which increasingly, it seemed to me, became theological in character — however sophisticated — and therefore broke with the Marxist tradition with which I had been associated. This was followed by a peculiarly tormented period in the late sixties when an intellectual leftist movement existed that was divorced from larger popular movements and that, in some sense, made a virtue of this isolation and did not take measures to communicate with the labor movement and other, larger, popular movements. On the one hand — and surely I don't have to remind you of this in the States — this New Left had elements within it that could be seen at once by a historian as the revolting bourgeoisie doing its own revolting thing — that is, the expressive and irrationalist, self-exalting gestures of style that do not belong to a serious and deeply rooted, rational revolutionary tradition. On the other hand, there was a sense that enough of the causes that this movement was associated with remained causes of the Left, particularly the struggle against the Vietnam War, and, in general, the struggle to democratize the institutions of education. One could certainly not attack or criticize this movement publicly, except within the movement itself — and even this was difficult. So my sense of isolation resulted from the movement's going in a direction that I in many ways deplored and at the same time was, perforce, silent about. I couldn't join the outcry, or the flight from Columbia, or whatever was going on on the Right or in the comfortable social-democratic 'middle.'

Having made his exit from King Street with the intention of continuing the struggle for socialism in a new left, Thompson found himself exiled and voiceless. To be sure, there were others with him, and they would found *The Socialist Register*. Thompson would have outlets for his writing. But this had never, whatever its importance, been enough.⁶³

Throughout these years of difficult distance Thompson was sustained by intellectual currents and political commitments that he had forged over twenty

⁶³Thompson, "Remembering C. Wright Mills," *Peace News*, 22 and 29 November 1963, quoted in Sedgwick, "The Two New Lefts," 131; Thompson, "The Peculiarities of the English," *The Socialist Register 1965* (London 1965), 348; "E.P. Thompson: Interview," *Visions of History*, 10.

years. Many were the product of his back going up in acts of refusal. His departure from King Street and its brand of Marxist orthodoxy had helped him to see socialist humanism as something counter to Stalinism. The latter he had come to regard as theory that poisoned practice, governed as it was by anti-intellectualism, moral nihilism, and the denial of the creative agency of human labour and the value of the individual as an agent in historical process. In the mechanical idealism of Stalinism's appropriation of the base/superstructure metaphor, all of humanity's being could be reduced to a mere reflection of *the* economic substance of society, which brought actually existing socialism's world view in line with that of the reifications and possessive individualism of capitalism and imperialism. Against the dehumanizing impersonality of these reigning ideologies of East and West, Thompson argued for the need to develop a sense of socialist community, at best, or, in times when this was simply not attainable, to at least acknowledge the lived potential of labouring men and women. He still believed in revolution. But the revolution would not necessarily replicate the Bolshevik experience of 1917. Rather than concentrate on a vanguard party "seizing power" to create the context in which mass, democratic self-activity might take place, the job of revolutionaries was to work everywhere they could — in mines, factories, daycare centres, tenants' associations — to appropriate authority and sustain workers' and other popular forms of control. "A break-through at any one of these points," Thompson believed, "would immediately help in precipitating a diffuse aspiration into a positive movement." It was a matter of the structures of subordination being assailed by the creative potential and practice of human agency. Stalinism, which was "socialist theory and practice which [had] lost the ingredient of humanity," was incapable of grasping this or fostering a practice that took this new left perspective into account. In the process it subordinated the moral and imaginative faculties to political and administrative authority, eliminated values from the sphere of political judgement, feared independent thought, encouraged anti-intellectual trends and, finally, personified class experience in ways that belittled its living inner conflicts in a privileging of the lawed unconscious class base over and above the so-called superstructural spheres of consciousness and agency. This was King Street. It was more than a mistake: it could lead directly to death, destruction, immense human suffering, and the obliteration of socialist ideals and vision that were themselves the most cherished foundations of political change. For Thompson the moment of ultimate ironic disappointment came when he looked around at his successors of the "second" new left, men who now occupied editorial posts on the *New Left Review*, and saw the dark shadow of this same destructive denial cast across the desk of what had once been his own promising point of production.⁶⁴

⁶⁴Note, in particular, Thompson, "Through the Smoke of Budapest," *The Reasoner*, 3 (November 1956), which is reprinted in Widgery, ed., *The Left in Britain*, 66-72, esp. 69; Thompson, "Socialist Humanism," and "Agency and Choice," and the comment on these statements in Palmer, *Making of E.P. Thompson*, 48-51; and Thompson, "The Peculiarities

This must have been more than difficult. Undoubtedly there were private moments of doubt. But Thompson, like others, remained an *example of resolute commitment*. With King Street now closed to even the most languid traffic from Thompson, and with his way to the offices of the ascendant "second" new left blocked by the virile bodies of a new leadership, those of lesser political integrity and principled commitment might well have made their peace with social democracy and reformism, embracing the Labour Party as the solution to the socio-economic ills of the nation. Stranger turnarounds have occurred on the left. Thompson was not suited to such a volte-face. In the aftermath of the 1959 Labour defeat at the polls he had written:

Most of the people at the top of the Labour Party are professional politicians, very much at home in the conventions of capitalist politics. These are a very bad and untrustworthy sort of people. We all know this, but some fetish about 'unity' prevents us from saying it. We should say it now since — being professional politicians and sensing which way the wind blows — some of them may start to try out a leftish 'image' in their speeches. We should not believe them until we see some Aldermaston mud upon their boots. People who proclaim their adherence to principle 'though in muted terms' are people without principle. Such people tell us that we must start to 'fight the next election now.' But we hope that we may never have to fight their kind of election again.

He would not change his mind: in two edited volumes in the 1960s — *Out of Apathy* and the *May Day Manifesto* — he and his collaborators confronted and polemicized against the capitulations of reformism. To be sure, Thompson and his wife Dorothy did apply to join the Labour Party in 1962, but their reasons had little to do with a sense that Labour and its leadership represented a way forward. They were originally rebuffed by "a high-level screening committee" which "demanded that we say if we were Marxists or not." Pressure from their locale mounted within the Labour Party, protesting this ideological exclusion, and the Thompsons were eventually admitted to the Halifax Labour Party. It was cause for little political rejoicing. "I'm a member of the Labour Party," Thompson replied to an interviewer's question twenty years later, "that's just like being a member of the human race. You accept it without enthusiasm." In one of his last letters to me, eight months before he died, Edward reported, "No politics worth mentioning in this country, except that the miners seem once again to have given the Tories a

of the English," as appearing in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, 35-91, esp. 87-8. For statements on revolution see Thompson, "Revolution," in Thompson, ed., *Out of Apathy* (London 1960), 287-308; Thompson, "Revolution Again! or Shut Your Ears and Run," *New Left Review*, 6 (November-December 1960), esp. 31. On class and base and superstructure see Ellen Meiksins Wood, "The Politics of Theory and the Concept of Class: E.P. Thompson and His Critics," *Studies in Political Economy*, 9 (Fall 1982), 45-76; Wood, "Falling Through the Cracks: E.P. Thompson and the Debate on Base and Superstructure," in Kaye and McClelland, eds., *E.P. Thompson*, 125-52.

black eye. Without help from Labour, of course," he snorted, closing the letter with a caustic: "They are fantastic people!"⁶⁵

It is possible, approaching the century's turn, with the political climate on the left so hostile to Marxism's harder analytic and political edges, with fashion flying so dramatically in the face of class as a central human identity, with pressures to abandon any but the most wilted forms of reformism, with revolution just a dirty word fouling the mouths of utopian babes, for this example to be quietly and cutely chastized, as it is by *History Workshop's* Raphael Samuel, himself once a young member of the Communist Party Historians' Group:

The weight of the past was particularly apparent in the New Reasoners who were, comparatively speaking, old political hands. Recruited to communism for the most part in the late 1930s or early 1940s, they prided themselves on their 'staying power,' having survived the persecutions of the Cold War with their loyalties and beliefs intact. ... This was especially true of E.P. Thompson, though he had been perhaps the fiercest critic of Stalinism and moved furthest, in his intellectual loyalties, from anything which might be called Marxism. An almost Cossack sense of honour, refusing to yield an inch to enemy attack, and a fierce attachment to the vocation of the intellectual as an oppositionist, made him eager to proclaim himself a 'Communist,' interpreting the term not as card-carrying membership of the Party but as commitment to the revolutionary idea.

But there are other, more generous, recollections. The novelist Clancy Sigal, a "rootless socialist American" in the England of the 1950s, has recently expressed his gratitude to "the people who were running that almost forgotten magazine, *The New Reasoner*, which was absolutely brilliant." They were part of the energy, the comradeship, and the possibility of the "first" new left. "Suddenly the heart of Marxism, which had been stultifying, was broken wide open," he enthused. "I thought we were all engaged in a kind of collective endeavour to recapture that

⁶⁵Thompson, "A Pessay in Ephology," 3; Thompson, ed., *Out of Apathy*, esp. the essays "At the Point of Decay" and "Revolution" by Thompson, and "The Supply of Demand" (Stuart Hall) and "Breaking the Chains of Reason" (Alasdair MacIntyre); E.P. Thompson and Raymond Williams, eds., *May Day Manifesto 1968* (Harmondsworth 1968), and the comment on the 1960s in Kate Soper, "Socialist Humanism," 217-21; Fred Inglis, "A difficult country," *New Universities Quarterly*, 32 (Spring 1978), 224, 226-7; E.P. Thompson to Michael Bess, 2 April 1989, quoted in Bess, "E.P. Thompson: The Historian as Activist," 25; "European Nuclear Disarmament: Interview with E.P. Thompson," *Socialist Review*, 58 (July-August 1981), 33; Thompson to Palmer, 1 February 1993. The miners occupied a special, affectionate place in Thompson's understanding of the importance of class struggle in England. See, for instance, Thompson, "On History, Sociology, and Historical Relevance," *British Journal of Sociology*, 27 (1976), 387-402; and, most importantly, the evocative tribute in Thompson, "A Special Case," *New Society*, 24 February 1972, reprinted in Thompson, *Writing by candlelight* (London 1980), 65-76.

essential idealism, freshness, originality of an idea which had been taken away from us by the enemies of promise, by the enemies of socialism."⁶⁶

At this same point in time, C. Wright Mills classified Thompson as "a plain Marxist," a communist who had been through the Party but who resisted its assimilating grasp. Such plain Marxists "confronted the unresolved tension in Marx's work — and in history itself: the tension of humanism and determinism, of human freedom and historical necessity." They worked in "Marx's own tradition," but recognized the importance of historical specificity. Such plain Marxists were, in the political battles of their time, most often losers. Yet Mills refused to treat them with the disdain common in academic circles of the time. These plain Marxists "confronted the world's problems; they are unable to take the easy ways out." There would soon be other losers, caught as a world problem, also incapable of facile escape, who would come to be associated closely with E.P. Thompson.⁶⁷

⁶⁶See Raphael Samuel, "Born Again Socialism," and Clancy Sigal, "A Rootless American," in Oxford University Socialist Discussion Group, ed., *Out of Apathy: Voices of the New Left Thirty Years On* (London 1989), esp. 49, 133. For a fictional portrait of Dorothy and Edward from Sigal see *Weekend in Dinlock* (London 1960), 82-3.

⁶⁷C. Wright Mills, *The Marxists* (New York 1967), 97-9.

Part II of this essay will appear in Labour/Le Travail, 33 (Spring 1994).