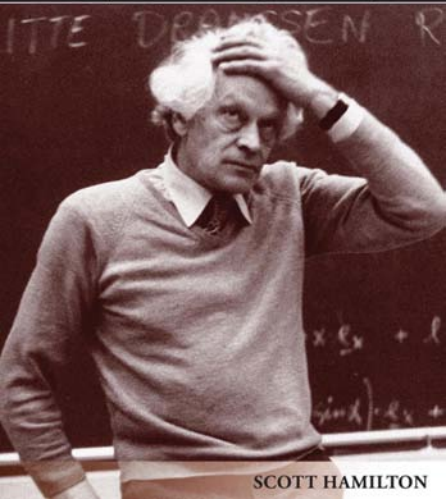


# The CRISIS of THEORY

E. P. Thompson, The New left and postwar British politics



SCOTT HAMILTON

# The crisis of theory

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EP Thompson, the New Left  
and postwar British politics

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‘Qui est-ce?’

– Louis Althusser, after being shown a copy  
of *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*



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‘To cross a field, sometimes that’s not easy.’  
– Kendrick Smithyman



# Introduction

EP Thompson was a man of many enthusiasms and wide expertise. Thompson's scholarly work covers a remarkable range of subjects. He was as comfortable writing about food riots as the manuscripts of William Blake, and he was fascinated by the Soviet Union as much as Wordsworth. Thompson was famous for his books about eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England, but late in his career he delved skilfully into the twentieth-century history of the Balkans and India. Up until the 1960s, at least, Thompson considered himself primarily a poet, and his literary legacy includes scores of poems, a number of short stories, and a science fiction novel.

Thompson was a man of action as well as a man of books, as self-assured on a soapbox as in an archive. Thompson's political career began in the late 1930s, when he was almost expelled from his Methodist boarding school for propagandising on behalf of the Communist Party of Great Britain. Thompson turned the party's anti-fascist rhetoric into action when he led a tank group up the Italian peninsula during World War Two. After leaving the Communist Party in 1956, Thompson became a public face of the first New Left, a brief, dynamic movement that questioned the political orthodoxies of both sides of the Cold War. In the early 1980s, Thompson became well known to a new generation as the most eloquent leader of Britain's revived anti-nuclear movement. Thompson's activism always involved writing, as much as speaking and protesting.

There has been a tendency for scholars to consider Thompson in a 'selective' way – to take one aspect of his work, and discuss it without reference to other aspects. Thompson himself would not have appreciated such a view of his life and work. He saw all his activities and writings as organically connected, and repeatedly refused to

‘specialise’ in one or another field. In the early 1950s, Thompson defied pressure to immerse himself in the day-to-day business of Communist political activism, diving into the study of William Morris and the nineteenth century instead. At the beginning of the 1970s Thompson rejected the lure of a permanent academic career by resigning from Warwick University.<sup>1</sup> Thompson plugged away at his literary work throughout his life, continuing to consider himself a poet, despite a lack of encouragement, and in some cases active discouragement.

This book examines and relates the different aspects of Thompson’s life and work, and argues that they are bound together, albeit rather uncomfortably, by a set of beliefs that Thompson adopted as a young man, during what he called the ‘decade of heroes’ between 1936 and 1946. The vision that captured the young EP Thompson would guide all his work until the end of the 1970s, and continue to influence him right up until the end of his life. Thompson’s vision unified his work, but it was not free of contradictions. Indeed, much of Thompson’s career can be considered an attempt to relate the beliefs he had adopted as a young man to the events and ideas of the second half of the twentieth century. Thompson’s attempts were ultimately unsuccessful, but they stimulated some of his finest writing.

This book can be considered an exercise in intellectual history, or in the sociology of knowledge.<sup>2</sup> We will consider not just Thompson’s ideas and arguments, but also the question of why he adopted those ideas, and made those arguments. Inevitably, we will move between Thompson’s biography, the social and political history of his time, and close readings of his work. As we travel through Thompson’s remarkable life, we will see that it affords a series of windows on twentieth-century British intellectual and political life.

We will use Thompson’s 1978 book *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* to focus our enquiries.<sup>3</sup> The volume is an especially useful one for two reasons. In the first place, its composition spans nearly twenty years, including some of the most important years of Thompson’s life. Its opening text, ‘Outside the Whale’, was written in 1959, at the height of the first New Left, when it seemed like Thompson’s dreams of radical political and cultural change might be realised. The book’s long, bitter conclusion was written in 1978, when Thompson was about to abandon all hope of realising the vision that had sustained him since his youth.

*The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* is also important because its texts bring together many of Thompson’s preoccupations, and

many of his modes of writing: discussing the poetry of Auden and the Marxology of Stalin, the invasion of Hungary and the career of Darwin, they are alternately polemical and scholarly, urgent and contemplative, autobiographical and detached.

In the first part of this book, we will examine Thompson's family and social background, and the early experiences that helped determine the path his life would follow. In part II, we look at the turbulent years Thompson spent in Britain's New Left, and see how his political frustrations were converted into academic triumphs. In the third part of the book, we will follow Thompson through the crucial decade of the 1970s, and see how the crisis of his political thought drove him close to despair, but also stimulated him to think in highly innovative ways. The fourth and final part of the book considers Thompson's last years, which were marked by both unprecedented public fame and intellectual decline. The book's conclusion argues that Thompson's political and intellectual failures were inextricably connected to his successes, and that both his failures and his triumphs make him an urgently relevant figure in the twenty-first century.

I began researching this book in the middle of 2002, about the time that millions of protesters took to the streets of Caracas and other Venezuelan cities to deliver an unprecedented defeat to a CIA-backed coup against their left-wing government. I wrote my first, fumbling draft of a chapter at the beginning of 2003, when Anglo-American troops were massing on the southwestern border of Iraq, and anti-war protesters were taking to the streets around the world, and I finished revising the text in 2009, as a global financial crisis unprecedented for eighty years destabilised nations as different and distant as Iceland and Fiji. The spectacle of neo-colonial wars in the Middle East, the new popularity of socialist ideas in several South American nations, and chaos on financial markets have all helped to undermine the belief in the superiority of American-style capitalism over any possible rival which was so popular in the decade after the end of the Cold War. This book may be a study of a man who died in 1993, but its themes and its arguments are unavoidably influenced by the world of the twenty-first century.

As I read my way through Thompson's oeuvre, I was continually impressed by the relevance of his preoccupations to our own age. When I read Thompson's denunciations of the impact of right-wing 'modernisation theory' on the Third World in the 1960s and 1970s, I thought about the contemporary anti-globalisation movement's

complaints against the ideology of bodies like the International Monetary Fund. When I found Thompson decrying the attacks on the jury system of 1970s British governments, I knew what he would make of the curtailing of civil liberties in his homeland during the age of the 'War on Terror'. When I pondered the scores of articles Thompson wrote against the deployment of American and Soviet nuclear weapons in Europe during the Cold War, I remembered that a new generation of American and Russian leaders are engaged in an arms race in Eastern Europe and in central Asia. Thompson's sympathetic but critical treatments of intellectuals like Auden and Wordsworth, who became spokespeople for power and privilege after becoming disillusioned with the left, have continuing significance in an era when 'recovering Marxists' like Christopher Hitchens, David Horowitz and Norman Geras act as cheerleaders for imperialist military adventures in the Middle East. Thompson's oft-repeated concerns about the growth of philistinism, and his belief that poetry is as important to human progress as economics, are more relevant than ever in an era when the market and the mass media treat works of literature and art as commodities to be flourished and consumed, rather than opportunities for thought and debate.

But it is not only Thompson's preoccupations which make him a contemporary figure. As a young man, Thompson left the relative comfort of the Communist Party of Great Britain in protest at the outrages of Stalinism. Cut off from the vast majority of Britain's militant workers, and without the certainties of a party line to guide him, Thompson had to piece together a new, viable left-wing politics out of various, frequently fragmentary sources. The poetry of William Blake, the sociology of C Wright Mills, the utopias of William Morris, the fugitive texts produced by the dissidents of Eastern Europe, and the heroes of the early British labour movement were only a few of the examples Thompson turned to, as he struggled to find a politics which might concretise the values he had learned as a young man from his radical liberal father and his anti-fascist brother.

It seems to me that, in the twenty-first century, every socialist faces the predicament the young EP Thompson chose for himself in 1956. The collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellites between 1989 and 1991 and the decline of Western social democracy into the neo-liberalism of the 'Third Way' have meant that the old sources of left-wing orthodoxy have vanished. For a generation that has grown up in the era of Putin and Blair, claims about the inevitable triumph

of socialism, or even the inevitable amelioration of the worst features of capitalism by social democracy, seem absurd. The once-orthodox belief that socialism could save humanity by massively increasing the planet's industrial output also seems anachronistic to a generation aware of the dangers posed by global warming, deforestation and other side effects of industrialism. Like EP Thompson, today's socialists are forced to search in diverse places for alternatives to the dogmas of both Stalinism and old-fashioned social democracy.

Although I made a research trip to Britain in 2005, where I excavated the papers of Thompson's old comrade John Saville and found many relevant unpublished texts,<sup>4</sup> this book was written in Aotearoa/New Zealand, and is no doubt influenced by the history and cultures of the South Pacific, a region far from the centres of political and economic power in the modern world. The South Pacific seems to me a good place to write about EP Thompson, because it is a region that demands the sort of critical alertness to the complexity of tradition that Thompson possessed and advocated. In Aotearoa/New Zealand and in other South Pacific societies like Tonga, intellectuals have faced the challenge of reconciling European concepts with an ancient and intricate indigenous intellectual tradition. Ideas and practices which might seem 'natural' and unquestionable in Europe, where they have existed for hundreds or even thousands of years, have to be adapted and justified.

It can also be argued that the sociology of many South Pacific societies is directly relevant to one of Thompson's great preoccupations. In the preface to *The Making of the English Working Class*, Thompson noted that, for 'the greater part of the world', industrialisation with its associated tragedies and transformations was an ongoing process, not an historical memory. Thompson was writing in 1963, but his observation still holds true for large parts of the world, including much of the South Pacific, where a Polynesian mode of production founded upon collective land ownership and labour coexists unstably with imported capitalism.

Thompson himself was drawn to marginal places and peoples. He felt uncomfortable in metropolitan centres of power like London and New York City, and chose to live in unglamorous provincial cities like Halifax, Worcester and Pittsburgh. As a scholar, Thompson was drawn to the stories of people on the dangerous margins of modernity, like the workers in the factories of the West Riding early in the nineteenth century, or the Indian peasants facing expropriation at the



hands of Indira Gandhi's ruthless technocrats in the 1970s.

Thompson's interest in marginal people and societies was motivated by more than sympathy. Like Marx in his last decade, Thompson believed that it is in the peripheries of capitalism that some of the most potent alternatives to the system can be found. Thompson would not be surprised to learn that it is the 'semi-developed' South American nations of Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador that have seen the emergence of the first large-scale anti-capitalist movements of the twenty-first century. If twenty-first-century socialists want to avoid repeating the errors of the twentieth century, then they have much to learn from EP Thompson.

### Notes

- 1 David Montgomery puts it well when, after describing Thompson's fraught relations with both the Communist Party and academia, he notes that his friend 'refused to be one of those who make their careers on the inside of an institution while cynically denouncing that institution's hypocrisy' (David Montgomery, 'Across the Atlantic', *Labour History Review*, 59, 1, Spring 1994, p. 5).
- 2 I see the two sub-disciplines as contiguous.
- 3 *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* includes 'Outside the Whale', 'The Peculiarities of the English', 'An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski' and 'The Poverty of Theory'. In the American edition, which was published simultaneously by Monthly Review Press, the title essay occurred at the beginning of the book, before 'Outside the Whale', 'The Peculiarities of the English' and 'An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski'. 'The Poverty of Theory' covers pages 193–406 of the 1978 British edition. In 1995, Merlin Press republished 'The Poverty of Theory' without the other three essays. When I mention *The Poverty of Theory* in this book I am referring to the 1978 edition of the Thompson book, unless I indicate otherwise.
- 4 I began seeking out Thompson's unpublished work after reading Saville's autobiography John Saville late in 2004 (John Saville, *Memoirs from the Left*, Merlin Books, Monmouth, 2004). In his book Saville mentions that Edward's letters to him are preserved in the Saville papers at the University of Hull's Brynmor Jones library, and that Thompson's own papers are being catalogued at the Bodleian Library (p. 105). The Bodleian papers have been embargoed, but Saville's archive includes several important unpublished Thompson manuscripts, as well as a large number of letters and a lot of intriguing Thompson-related material from third parties. There are several other accessible sources of unpublished writing by Thompson, besides the Saville papers. Peter Searby and Andy Croft have made

separate expeditions to the archives of the Department of Extra-Mural Studies at the University of Leeds, where Thompson was based during the decade and a half that he spent as a roving tutor for the Workers Education Association in the West Riding (see Peter Searby and the Editors, 'Edward Thompson as a Teacher: Yorkshire and Warwick', in *Protest and Survival*, The New Press, New York, 1993, pp. 1–24; and Andy Croft, 'Walthamstow, Little Gidding and Middlesbrough: Edward Thompson the Literature Tutor', in *Beyond the Walls: 50 Years of Adult and Continuing Education at the University of Leeds*, ed. Richard Taylor, University of Leeds, Leeds, 1996, pp. 144–156). When he wrote his authoritative study of the first British New Left, Michael Kenny excavated some useful unpublished texts from the papers of Thompson's old comrade Lawrence Daly at Warwick University's Modern Records Centre (Michael Kenny, *The First New Left: British Intellectuals after Stalin*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1995). In 2007 Carey Davies, a postgraduate student at Sheffield University, discovered more than a score of documents written by or about Thompson in the archives of the Communist Party of Great Britain at the Museum of Working Class history in Manchester. After Thompson left its fold, the party sometimes sent spies out to monitor his political activities, and Davies' discoveries include detailed reports of Thompson's appearances at political meetings and rallies scribbled in the back rows of windy London halls.



## Part I

From the 1930s to the Cold War



## The Making of EP Thompson: family, anti-fascism and the 1930s

EP Thompson is best known as the author of *The Making of the English Working Class*, one of the great feats of twentieth-century historical scholarship. In *The Making* and a string of related 'histories from below', Thompson explores the lives of ordinary people in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England with such finesse and sympathy that many of his readers assume that he had deep family roots in the world's first working class. In truth, Thompson grew up in a comfortable suburb of Oxford.

Yet EP Thompson's roots are not irrelevant to his life and writing. His family and the milieu it moved in gave him sympathies and interests he would retain all his life. It may not be going too far to say that the lives and thoughts of Thompson's father and brother, in particular, constitute a sort of preface to works like *The Making of the English Working Class*. There is a continuity, if not a simple identity, between the lives and opinions of the three men.

### To Bethnal Green and Bankura

Edward John Thompson was born in 1886, the eldest son of Reverend John Moses, who had served as a Methodist missionary in India for many years before returning to England. A period of financial difficulties followed John Moses' early death, and Edward John was compelled to sacrifice his ambitions for the sake of his mother and his siblings. Despite winning a university scholarship, he left the Methodist-run Kingswood School to work as a clerk in a bank in the East End of London. After six unhappy years in Bethnal Green, the sensitive young man escaped to the University of London, with the understanding that he would secure a Bachelor of Arts degree

before following in his father's footsteps and entering the Methodist missionary service.<sup>1</sup>

In 1910 Edward John arrived at the Methodist-run Bankura College in West Bengal. Bankura was a secondary school which would acquire a small tertiary wing, an outlier of the University of Calcutta, in 1920. The years Edward spent in India were a mixture of professional frustration and personal growth. Work at Bankura often seemed no more satisfying than work at the bank in Bethnal Green. With its emphasis on the rote learning of its Anglophilic curricula, the college struck him as little more than a factory. Edward John felt that he was unable to pass on his love of literature and history to many of his students, and he doubted both the wisdom and effectiveness of the attempts of the school authorities to proselytise amongst their largely Hindu charges. In a letter he sent to his mother in 1913, Edward John commented wryly on the difficulties of bringing the word of God to heathens:

[O]ne boy said that at the Transfiguration Jesus had four heads ... At the Temptation, 'Shaytan was sent by God to examine the Jesus ... and gave him his power. By the power of Satan he was able to [sic] many wonderful acts.' Jesus wept over Jerusalem, and said 'how often I would have gathered thy children together, as a cat gathereth her chickens'.<sup>2</sup>

Despite or because of his frustrations, the young teacher quickly began a study of Indian society and culture that would last the rest of his life, spawn a dozen books, and make him one of Britain's most respected authorities on the subcontinent. In 1913, Thompson made a visit to Rabindranath Tagore, the Bengali writer and educationalist who had just won the Nobel Prize for literature. Thompson, who was himself a fledgling poet, soon began to translate Tagore's poems and stories. By 1913 Thompson had become fluent in Bengali; he would eventually master Sanskrit, too.

In '*Alien Homage*', his study of his father's relationship with Tagore, EP Thompson would suggest, with typical hyperbole, that by 1913 'the missionary was beginning a conversion of some sort by heathen legend, folklore and poetry'.<sup>3</sup> It is probably more reasonable to say that Edward John had begun to consider himself a sort of bridge between Indian and English culture. It is clear that Thompson quickly lost whatever sympathy he had ever had for the Methodist vision of an Anglicised, Christian India. He did not, however, simply turn his back on British and Christian culture. Instead, he came to believe that

India and Britain could complement and enrich each other. Elsewhere in '*Alien Homage*', EP Thompson describes his father's contradictions with more subtlety:

It proves to be less easy than one might suppose to type Edward [John] Thompson when he first met Tagore. His association with the Wesleyan Connexion was uneasy ... His distaste for the introverted European community at Bankura made him eager to seek refreshment of the spirit in Bengali cultural circles, where he was even more of an outsider who sometimes misread the signals. But even if he was not fully accepted on any of the recognised circuits, he constructed an unorthodox circuit of his own ... He was a marginal man, a courier between cultures who wore the authorised livery of neither.<sup>4</sup>

Thompson's attitude may have been enlightened, by the standards of the Methodist missionary service in the second decade of the twentieth century, but it was by no means radical. An appreciation of some aspects of Indian culture did not imply opposition to the domination of Indian society by Britain. The bridge the young Thompson wanted to build would connect an imperial Britain with a political outpost of the empire. Robert Gregg has described the limits of Edward John's enterprise:

Thompson certainly did attempt to cross boundaries and make 'homages' to Indians and Indian culture that relatively few Britons at the time were making ... in doing so he nevertheless replicated imperial models ... he was a great believer in the imperial system ...<sup>5</sup>

### An aside about British intellectuals

Edward John Thompson's optimistic liberal imperialism was hardly exceptional in the generation of British intellectuals to which he belonged. The decidedly non-revolutionary behaviour of British intellectuals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has often been remarked upon by historians and sociologists, because it seems so contrary to the mood amongst the intelligentsia of other key European countries during the same period. Russia's intelligentsia was notorious for producing rebels and critics of society. In France, the Dreyfus affair brought intellectuals together against the government and public opinion. In France, Germany, and to an extent Russia, intellectuals formed their own institutions, which played an important role in public debates, as well as in internecine academic



struggles. It is little wonder, then, that the failure of the intelligentsia to develop the institutions and self-consciousness worthy of distinct stratum of British society in the nineteenth century has also raised eyebrows amongst scholars.<sup>6</sup>

To understand the oddities of the British intelligentsia, we need to understand other peculiarities of British society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The modern British intelligentsia began to take shape in the mid-nineteenth century. Its emergence was encouraged by the growth of the British Empire and state, the expansion of the reading public, and controversy over the nature of the university system.<sup>7</sup>

The intelligentsia drew most of its members from the middle-class professions and from the prosperous petty bourgeoisie. Many of its members had nonconformist and Evangelical backgrounds. The 'reforming' wing of the aristocracy was represented. Intermarriage and patronage eventually led to the emergence of what Noel Annan has called an 'intellectual aristocracy'.

Conflict provided the stimuli for the emergence of a modern British intelligentsia. The British state grew to control the consequences of industrialisation. The Foreign Service grew as inter-imperialist rivalry led Britain to take direct political control of the territories it exploited economically. The debate over the role of universities was prompted by challenges to the exclusion of non-Anglicans from Oxbridge, challenges which were part of a wider call for the reform of the British elite's institutions by an emergent industrial capitalist class.

British capitalism was stronger than its rivals throughout the nineteenth century. British pre-eminence helped limit social and cultural conflict in British society, and is ultimately responsible for the peculiar nature of the nineteenth-century British intelligentsia.

The British intelligentsia did not enjoy a great deal of institutional and cultural autonomy – it was informally integrated with the country's political and economic elites. The elite of the intelligentsia enjoyed an 'Old Boys'-style relationship with the British ruling class. Old school ties, friendship and marriage were more important integrating devices than 'public' institutions with more or less meritocratic criteria for membership. Dissident fringes exempted, the British intelligentsia was not culturally alienated from its ruling class.

This 'informal integration' had its political corollary in a 'high liberalism' which was characterised by a belief in the progressive nature or progressive potential of British capitalism and imperialism. Economic

dynamism and social cohesion made gradual social improvements possible. Intellectual influence was a matter of a word in the right ear of the elite, not a manifesto. Noel Annan summed up the peculiarities of the English intelligentsia:

Stability is not a quality usually associated with an intelligentsia, a term which, Russian in origin, suggests the shifting, shiftless members of revolutionary or literary cliques who have cut themselves adrift from the moorings of family. Yet the English intelligentsia, wedded to gradual reform of accepted institutions and able to move between the worlds of speculation and principle, was stable.<sup>8</sup>

### Sheets of flame

When World War One suddenly broke out in August 1914, Edward John Thompson's optimism and patriotism were not at first affected. Like so many young Europeans, he felt stirred to help his country's war effort. It was not until 1916, though, that he was able to become a chaplain in the British army. He spent time in Bombay, working with the wounded in the huge army hospital there, before shipping out for Mesopotamia, where British forces were engaged in a series of campaigns against the disintegrating Ottoman Empire. Moving up the Tigris River from Basra, Thompson's unit was caught up in some heavy fighting. Thompson's courage under fire earned him a Military Cross. After Mesopotamia, Thompson spent time in Lebanon, where he witnessed a severe famine.<sup>9</sup>

It was while he was in Lebanon that Edward John met and courted Theodosia Jessup, the daughter of American expatriates. Theodosia and Edward John married in 1919.<sup>10</sup> After the war, Thompson returned to Bankura College and resumed his teaching duties.<sup>11</sup> His experiences in the army had greatly affected him, though, and they ensured that he would not stay in his old job for long. Like so many European intellectuals, Thompson had found his faith in the progressive nature of Western civilisation had been badly knocked by the years of slaughter. Edward John was angry at the sacrifice of life he had witnessed, and believed that it must have been caused by some deep failing in the warring societies. Although he lay most of the blame for the war with the German side, he did not excuse Britain from culpability. In a letter to his mother, written near the end of the war, Thompson made his feelings clear:

If I live thro this War, I will stand, firmly and without question, with the Rebels. What we need is entire *Reconstruction* of Society. The old order is gone, & it was inestimably damnable when here. The East does things better, in a thousand things, than we do ... this war has shown with sheets of flame that the whole system of things is wrong, built on blood and injustice (emphasis in original).<sup>12</sup>

Thompson believed that events in Europe and the Middle East had endangered the British project in India, by associating the ‘advanced’ Christian civilisation Britain represented with death and destruction on an unparalleled scale. In a 1919 article for a Methodist magazine, Thompson insisted that:

The War has shocked India unspeakably, has seemed a collapse. It is felt by many that Christianity is discredited ... for India now, everyone agrees, the overmastering sense and atmosphere is passionate nationalism.<sup>13</sup>

Thompson’s opinion of Indian civilisation was boosted by his partial disillusionment with the Western nations. He may well have been influenced in this respect by Tagore, who spent much of the war touring the world delivering lectures critical of nationalism, imperialism, and Christianity to audiences keen to hear an Eastern verdict on the state of Western civilisation.<sup>14</sup>

As Edward Thompson noted, the end of the war coincided with an upsurge of Indian nationalism. Colonial authorities responded to calls for home rule, and even fully-fledged independence, with a mixture of incomprehension and brutality. The Amritsar Massacre of 1919, which saw British troops firing machine guns into a crowd of unarmed Indians, came to symbolise all that was wrong with the British presence on the subcontinent.

In Europe, the end of the war came amidst a series of revolutionary upheavals created by economic chaos and disgust with ossified political systems, as well as war-weariness. Instability spread to Britain, where unemployed war veterans staged huge demonstrations in the late teens and early 1920s.<sup>15</sup>

Edward John Thompson’s disillusionment and anger worsened when he returned to Bankura College. EP Thompson notes that his father had, by 1920, ‘become a misfit in the Methodist Connexion.’<sup>16</sup> Edward John’s experiences in the ‘war to end all wars’ made the jingoism and religious zealotry of many of his colleagues at Bankura intolerable. He showed his rejection of their worldview by simply

refusing to talk with many of them.<sup>17</sup> Thompson's relations with Tagore also became troubled. The great poet disliked the long-gestating study of his work Thompson published in 1926, thinking it patronising and insufficiently sensitive to Bengali culture:

Thompson's book ... is one the most absurd books I have ever read dealing with a poet's life and writings ... being a Christian missionary his training makes him incapable of understanding some of the ideas that run through my writings ... I am certain he would have been much more careful if his subject was a continental poet of reputation in Europe.<sup>18</sup>

In the 1920s Thompson felt trapped between the poles of increasing Indian assertiveness and purblind British jingoism. Bryan D Palmer has summarised his situation:

Critical of brutal repression, he could lapse into a defensive posture concerning the benevolence of British rule and the care that some Englishmen, such as himself, had for Indian culture; drawn to the literary accomplishment of Eastern writers, Thompson extended them in his commentary the critical compliment of being 'truthful'. Such a stand – for and against what was at stake in an England fractured along the lines of obvious oppositions – won Edward Thompson few allies.<sup>19</sup>

### From Bankura to Boar's Hill

In 1923 Edward John Thompson left Bankura College and returned to Britain. His first child, whom he named Frank, after a brother who was killed at the Somme, had been born in Bengal the previous year; his second and last child would be born in Oxford, where Edward John and Theodosia settled after Edward John secured a job lecturing in Sanskrit as part of the fledgeling Department of Oriental Studies.

New frustrations were waiting at Oxford, as Thompson discovered that some of the attitudes which had infuriated him at Bankura had followed him home. Oriental Studies had little status at Oxford, where many of the Dons regarded Indian culture and Indian students with contempt. In a letter written in 1924 Thompson complained that:

There is no one to fight for Oriental Studies ... every thing is a mess here. The library is in a mess, the Indian students are as un-understood *and* as much of a breeding place of discontent as ever, *and* there is no attempt to make the University and the public take India seriously (emphasis in original).<sup>20</sup>

In 1924, Thompson's friends at Oxford campaigned for him to be awarded an honorary Master of Arts degree, which would help him get a permanent position at the university, instead of the one-year contract he then had. When his friends were rebuffed, Thompson felt 'more an outsider than ever'.<sup>21</sup> In 1925 he did become an honorary fellow of Oriel College, which made him feel a little more secure, but through the rest of the 1920s he would continue to rely on short-term lecturing contracts.

In 1925 Edward John and Theodosia began to build a house in the Oxford suburb of Boar's Hill for their young family. Boar's Hill was a stronghold of the slightly Bohemian, literary side of Oxford society, and the Thompsons lived a stone's throw from the poets Robert Graves and Robert Bridges. Their new house became a meeting place for writers, for scholars of India, and for both Britons and Indians interested in the political situation on the subcontinent. In the 1930s, as Edward John became an active, if sometimes reluctant and equivocal, supporter of Indian independence, Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi would both be visitors. EP Thompson would remember the 'hushed, reverent' atmosphere in the normally boisterous household when Gandhi visited, and the batting lessons that Nehru gave him on the Thompsons' backyard cricket pitch.<sup>22</sup>

In 1918 Edward John Thompson had promised to 'stand with the rebels' of the post-war world, but he did not seem to know exactly who the rebels were. Through the 1920s, Thompson struggled to turn the anger and disillusionment the war had given him into a coherent political credo. He felt repulsed by the memory of war, and by the ongoing excesses of British rule in India, but he could find sympathy for neither the full-blooded nationalism sweeping post-war India nor the revolutionary socialism that seemed to threaten Britain, at least until the defeat of the General Strike of 1926. He was disgusted by the ignorant attitudes and ossified rituals of Oxford, but nonetheless craved acceptance and a permanent position there.

### An aside about disillusioned British intellectuals

Thompson's rather incoherent sense of disillusion was representative of the feelings of many British intellectuals in the 1920s. The bitter experience of war and the knowledge of revolution in continental Europe had disrupted the cosy liberal consensus of the late Victorian and Edwardian eras, but most intellectuals had not adopted or

evolved any new worldview. Different ideological tendencies had appeared amongst intellectuals in the years since the war, but none had become hegemonic, or even popular, and none acted as a bridge between the intelligentsia and the British ruling class, in the way that pre-war liberalism had done.

The 1920s did not see a large-scale migration of intellectuals to the left. A few did join the new Communist Party of Great Britain, and others tinkered with pre-war doctrines to come up with the 'New Liberalism' associated nowadays with John Maynard Keynes, but many others, including some of the most famous writers of the decade, espoused right-wing, quixotically reactionary ideas, as a clumsy response to the widely perceived 'crisis of civilisation' that war and revolutions seemed to have announced.

The reactionaries tended to be creative artists, rather than scientists or bureaucrats. Key reactionaries included TS Eliot, who empathised with the Anglo-Catholic section of the ruling class and with a vision of a pre-industrial capitalist Britain and Europe; Evelyn Waugh, who espoused a sort of foppish Catholic semi-feudalism; and Wyndham Lewis, whose sympathy for fascism was really a sort of ultra-elitism.<sup>23</sup>

There is no contradiction in the fact that many of the most important modernists, in the United States and Europe as well as Britain, were reactionaries. Faced with crisis in Europe and malaise in Britain, many artists and writers felt they needed to create new forms to contain and transmit the cultural inheritance they valued. Innovation often had conservative motives. 'These fragments I have shored against my ruin,' Eliot wrote near the end of *The Waste Land*.

### An ambivalent rebel

The incompleteness of Edward John's radicalisation was reflected in the books he wrote during the 1920s. Perhaps the most important of these was *The Other Side of the Medal*, a study of the 'Indian Mutiny' of 1857 that helped him win a reputation as a historian of the subcontinent.<sup>24</sup> *The Other Side of the Medal* condemned the brutal behaviour of the British-led forces that repressed the Mutiny, and linked these deprivations to the massacre at Amritsar. But Thompson's condemnations were not accompanied by a call for British withdrawal from India. He wanted Britain to curb its excesses in India so that it could restore the confidence of Indians in the Empire. Robert Gregg has noted that, far from being an advertisement for Indian nationalism, Thompson's

book was designed to counter an explosive anti-imperialist history of the Mutiny published semi-secretly by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar.<sup>25</sup>

It was not until 1930, when he wrote a book called *Reconstructing India* to coincide with a roundtable conference in London on the future of India, that Thompson asserted the country's right to independence. Even then, he hedged his bets by hoping that an independent India would form a permanent close alliance with Britain. Despite his qualified advocacy of independence and developing friendships with Indian nationalists like Nehru, Thompson retained a certain affection for British imperialism. In his long 1935 book *British Rule in India: Its Rise and Fulfilment*, Thompson argued that:

Many special virtues, as well as failings, went into the building up of the British Empire ... A high sense of duty, incorruptibility, a recognition of social responsibility, these may be remembered ... [though] the moral and social prestige lost to the West by the war can never be removed.<sup>26</sup>

EP Thompson has suggested that from the end of World War One his father felt an 'ambivalence' about his Britishness, and that this ambivalence would 'confuse his most radical writing'.<sup>27</sup> What Edward John seems unable to reconcile, in his writing on India and on certain other subjects, is his deep love for English culture and history, on the one hand, and the repugnance he feels for many of the policies of contemporary British governments, on the other. It was always the Britain of Shelley and Shakespeare, not the Britain of Baldwin and Lloyd George, that Thompson wanted Indians to embrace.

Despite his halting movement to the left after World War One, Edward John never came to see the working class – and in India the peasantry – as a potential agent of progressive change. Despite his disappointment with successive post-war governments, Thompson remained wedded to the pre-war liberal notion that enlightened intellectuals could persuade the British establishment to follow progressive economic and political policies, if only the intellectuals framed their arguments well. This belief was generalised to other societies. Near the end of *British Rule in India* Thompson argued that:

Whatever degree of democracy may be conceded ... India's immediate future will depend, as in other countries, upon the wealthy and the educated. It must be many years before the villager gains a direct and decisive voice in provincial and federal affairs.<sup>28</sup>

A year after he wrote these words, Edward John sent a stern letter to his youngest son about the boy's alleged lack of manners, claiming that 'it is one of the things that mark the Englishman of class, that he is careful and proper always.'<sup>29</sup> The former missionary could not slough off all the snobbery and national chauvinism he had learned as a young man.

### 'Past all usefulness'

After a new world war broke out in 1939 Edward John showed his ambivalent, conflicted attitude towards Britain and its Empire by rejecting the political positions of the Quit India movement established by his friends Nehru and Gandhi. Nehru went to prison for opposing the war on the grounds that Britain would not grant India immediate independence. Thompson, though, was eager to support the war effort, and soon became a YMCA worker attached to Royal Artillery Troops undergoing training in Britain.

Despite his strong desire to see a British victory, Edward John was plagued by continued doubts about the direction of his country, and of Western civilisation in general. In a 1940 letter to 'Palmer', as he called his youngest son, the former missionary argued that the world needed the sort of new direction that that only a 'blazing faith' could supply.<sup>30</sup> The Soviet Union and Nazi Germany had that faith, even if it took a negative form, but 'democracies' like Britain did not – they were 'self-indulgent and dithering'.<sup>31</sup>

Thompson's experiences in the YMCA seemed to bring back some of the frustrations he had felt decades earlier at Bankura. He gave lectures and religious counsel to the young soldiers, but claimed that neither did much good. When he gave a barracks hall lecture on 'Greece and Its Importance to the World', his audience was 'one man who had wandered in by mistake'.<sup>32</sup> The army, he complained, treated the YMCA as 'well-meaning chumps who do a fine job in the tea and bun line'. Despairing of his efforts to help defeat Hitler, Thompson decided that he had lived 'till past all usefulness'.<sup>33</sup> He would die of cancer in 1946, shortly after receiving a letter of sympathy and thanks from Nehru, who was about to become the first Prime Minister of independent India.<sup>34</sup>



### The making of Frank Thompson

In *Beyond the Frontier*, a book which investigated the last weeks of his brother's life, EP Thompson described the atmosphere in the home that Edward John and Theodosia established at Boar's Hill:

That Frank Thompson was my brother tells us something: we shared the same parents and the same Oxford home which was supportive, liberal, anti-imperialist, quick with ideas and poetry and international visitors.<sup>35</sup>

We have seen that by the 1930s Edward John Thompson had become an established part of Oxford's social and intellectual scene. A string of well-reviewed books had helped make him feel self-confident, and his home was a watering hole for writers, for liberal dons, and for Indian nationalists. Both Frank and Edward Palmer Thompson were powerfully influenced by their parents' interests and attitudes. They soon came to share their father's great love of literature, as well as some of his political views. In a 1992 interview, EP Thompson explained how he had seen his father's beliefs:

I acquired from my father the view that no government was to be trusted ... that all governments were, in general, mendacious and should be distrusted.<sup>36</sup>

What comes through in this remark is EP Thompson's awareness of his father's deep but also unfocused disillusionment with British society and politics. Edward John's failure ever to discover an alternative to what he deplored is reflected in his belief that governments 'in general', and not just governments representing one or another political ideology, are mendacious.

Edward John's feelings must be understood in their context. Like other Western countries, Britain was affected badly by the Great Depression that began with the Wall Street crash of 1929. A minority Labour government elected in 1929 collapsed after only two years in power, whereupon both the Labour and Liberal parties split, with a minority of Labour MPs and about half the Liberal MPs joining the Conservatives in a new 'National Government' which held power for the rest of the 1930s. This government has long been symbolised in the popular imagination by its last leader, Neville Chamberlain. Chamberlain's name has become a byword for cowardice and incompetence, yet his government never looked vulnerable electorally. Neither the Labour Party and its trade union allies nor the radical left

succeeded in advancing a credible alternative to the National Government's combination of economic austerity at home and appeasement of fascism abroad.

The bold 'experiments' of the Soviet Union's five-year plans and Roosevelt's New Deal contrasted starkly with the British bourgeoisie's tepid response to the Great Depression. No British Roosevelt or Hitler emerged to reorder British capitalism, and the hopes of some left-wingers for 'an English Lenin' proved forlorn. Harry Pollitt disappointed Stephen Spender, and Oswald Mosley disappointed Lord Rothermere.

A peculiar mixture of frustration and impotence was felt in the 1930s not only by intellectuals like Edward John Thompson, but by sizeable numbers of people from all classes. Britain in the 1930s did not experience the sense of crisis common in many parts of Continental Europe, where the Great Depression and the polarisation of left and right opened up the prospect of social transformation, for good or bad. There were obvious deep-seated problems in 1930s Britain, but there was no sense that these differences would be resolved by social conflict. After the defeat of the General Strike of 1926 the threat of working-class revolution had receded, and under the cynical and dull National Government that ruled for most of the 1930s a sort of unhappy apathy reigned.

Frank Thompson was aware of the malaise afflicting British and European society by the time he reached the end of his years at Winchester College in Hampshire, where he had proved a superb classical scholar and linguist. Freeman Dyson has given an account of Frank at Winchester:

Among the boys in our room, Frank was the largest, the loudest, the most uninhibited and the most brilliant ... One of my most vivid memories is Frank coming back from a weekend in Oxford, striding into our room and singing at the top of his voice, 'She's got ... what it takes.' This set him apart from the majority in our cloistered all-male society. At fifteen, Frank had already won for himself the title of College Poet. He was a connoisseur of Latin and Greek literature and could talk for hours about the fine points of an ode of Horace or of Pindar. Unlike the other classical scholars in our crowd, he also read medieval Latin and modern Greek. These were for him not dead but living languages. He was more deeply concerned than the rest of us with the big world outside, with the civil war then raging in Spain, with the world war that he saw coming.<sup>37</sup>

In the middle of 1936 war broke out in Spain, after a half-successful military coup against the country's democratically elected government. The struggle in Spain would soon become a cause célèbre for the left across Europe. With their contempt for democracy and brutal tactics, the forces led by General Francisco Franco showed the mendacity of the creed that had already won state power in Italy and Germany.

The war in Spain also revealed the ineptitude and cynicism of the government in London, which refused to sell arms to the Republican government fighting Franco, and made it difficult for Britons who supported the fight against fascism to travel to Spain to offer their own assistance. To patriotic liberals like Edward John Thompson, who saw their country as an incubus for democracy, liberty, and civilised values, the attitude of the National government felt like a betrayal of Britain as well as Spain. The old wounds of World War One were reopened, as Britain once again seemed complicit in the needless slaughter of young men.

Some of Edward John's neighbours on Boar's Hill shared his opinions. Two young members of the Carritt family, which had lived next door to the Thompsons for years, took matters into their own hands and went to Spain as ambulance drivers attached to the British section of the International Brigade. Noel Carritt returned wounded, but his brother Anthony was not so lucky. Frank and Edward Palmer had grown up with the Carritt boys, whose father was a professor of philosophy at Oxford, and Frank had often discussed politics with Anthony.<sup>38</sup>

By 1937 Frank was already an accomplished writer, and two poems that he wrote to mark Anthony's departure and his death record the impact of the war in Spain on his consciousness. In the first poem, written in mid-summer, Frank is aware of the distance between the pleasant life he is living in southern England and the situation in Spain. He is able to admire, but not share, Anthony Carritt's urgent convictions:

Here, in the tranquil fragrance of the honeysuckle  
The gentle, soothing velvet of the foxgloves,  
The cuckoo's drowsy laugh, – I thought of you,  
The ever-whirring dynamos of your will,  
Body and brain, one swift harmonious strength,  
Flashing like polished steel to rid the world  
Of all its gross unfairness. – But the grossest

Unfairness of it all is that tomorrow,  
When both of us are gone, my sloth, your energy,  
The world will still be cruelly perverse.  
– Why not enjoy the foxgloves while they last?<sup>39</sup>

By the time he records Carritt's death in the depths of December 1937, Frank feels the horror of the real world encroaching on his pastoral England. He understands that his friend's decision to fight in Spain might have been rational, as well as courageous. Yet he still cannot share Anthony Carritt's creed:

A year ago in the drowsy Vicarage garden,  
We talked of politics; you, with your tawny hair  
Flamboyant, flaunting your red tie, unburdened  
Your burning heart of the dirge we always hear –  
The rich triumphant and the poor oppress'd.  
And I laughed, seeing, I thought, an example of vague  
Ideals not tried but taken on trust,  
That would not stand the test. It sounded all too simple.

A year has passed; and now, where harsh winds rend  
The street's last shred of comfort – past the dread  
Of bomb or gunfire, rigid on the ground  
Or some cold stinking alley near Madrid,  
Your mangled body festers – an example  
Of something tougher. – Yet it still sounds all too simple.<sup>40</sup>

### The changing face of communism

It is not surprising that Frank Thompson initially found Anthony Carritt's politics hard to comprehend. The Communist Party had little presence in the cloistered worlds of Oxford and Cambridge in the 1920s and early 1930s. Those Oxbridge students and academics who were attracted to the party often found it a hostile place. Their class origins and their culture made them suspect, in the eyes of the party's leadership. During the ultra-radical 'Class Against Class' period of the early 1930s, when they followed Stalin's lead by denouncing other organisations on the left and predicting imminent revolution, communist parties often demanded that student members give up 'worthless' academic pursuits, become 'proletarianised', and devote virtually all of their time to political work.<sup>41</sup>

The general failure of the 'Class Against Class' policy has become symbolised by the accession of Adolf Hitler to power in 1933.

Together, Germany's Communist and Social Democratic parties won more seats in the Reichstag than the Nazis in elections held at the end of 1932, but the Communists refused to work with their rivals against the threat of fascism. Declaring the Social Democrats 'social fascists' and coining the slogan 'First Hitler, then us', the party ensured its own destruction. Communists in other countries experienced less calamitous declines in their fortunes as a result of pursuing Class Against Class policies. In Britain, for instance, party membership declined, despite the onset of the Great Depression and mass unemployment.<sup>42</sup>

In 1934 Stalin responded to the failure of Class Against Class and the complaints of communists by endorsing a policy of political regroupment which aimed to create very broad 'Popular Fronts'. The new policy, which was formally adopted at the seventh and last congress of the Communist International in 1935, saw communists attempting to work not only with social democrats, but with almost any political tendency opposed to 'fascism and war'. Eric Hobsbawm has spelt out some of the assumptions that underlay the Popular Front strategy:

[T]he working class had been defeated [in Germany] because it had allowed itself to be isolated; it would win by isolating its main enemies ... The policy assumed that fascism was a lasting phase of capitalist development, that bourgeois democracy was permanently abandoned as no longer compatible with capitalism, so that the defence of bourgeois democracy became objectively anti-capitalist.<sup>43</sup>

The Popular Front turn in party policy implied quite a different orientation toward once-scorned 'bourgeois intellectuals'. Academics, writers, and artists who might be sympathetic to the party's call for a broad anti-fascist alliance were courted. Margot Heinemann has described the logic behind the party's new attitude:

To reclaim the best in past cultural traditions needed a broader and more flexible Marxist approach to history and the arts. What indeed would be the point of defending the cultural heritage against the Nazi book burners if it contained nothing but illusions and errors?<sup>44</sup>

James Klugmann, who trained as a historian before becoming a leading member of the Communist Party of Great Britain, used rhapsodic language to describe the effects of the Popular Front policy on communist intellectuals:

We became the inheritors of the Peasants' Revolt, of the left of the English revolution, of the pre-Chartist movement, of the women's suffrage movement ... It set us in the right framework, it linked us with the past and gave us a more correct path for the future.<sup>45</sup>

In his history of the Communist Party of Great Britain, Francis Beckett notes that Willie Gallacher, a leading party member, visited Cambridge shortly after the turn to the Popular Front and told communist students there that 'it's pointless to run away to factories.' Gallacher urged students to do well in their studies, announcing that the party needed 'good scientists, historians, [and] teachers.'<sup>46</sup> Beckett notes that, after the beginning of the Popular Front policy:

[T]he Communist Party and intellectuals felt close to each other ... Poets, novelists, playwrights, actors and musicians, as well as economists and political philosophers, tried to make themselves comfortable in the Communist Party.<sup>47</sup>

In several European countries, Communists deployed the Popular Front with considerable success, in the short term at least. In France, for instance, the Communist Party helped forge a very broad anti-fascist alliance, incorporating political forces from the 'patriotic right' as well as the moderate and radical left, that set the stage for the accession of the Socialist Party's Leon Blum to power in 1936. In Britain, by contrast, the Popular Front never managed to unite even a sizeable minority of Britons. Except for a left-wing minority led by Stafford Cripps, the Labour Party was indifferent to Communist blandishments. The party did attack the National government over its attitude to Spain, but it showed little interest in immersing itself in a Popular Front like the one that existed in France. Labour would not even wholeheartedly support the Aid for Spain campaign the Communists established. The Liberal Party was even less interested, and 'patriotic' Tories proved hard to find.

The very failure of a Popular Front to take hold in Britain made the Communist Party an attractive proposition to young men and women who would never previously have considered joining it. With its calls for the defence of democracy across Europe, its invocation of Britain's radical traditions, and its new-found enthusiasm for intellectuals and the arts, the party seemed to be defending territory ceded by more traditional parts of the British left. Walter Pierre put it well when he wrote that:

[W]ith the rising tide of the Depression and the collapse of the Labour Party ... there seemed nothing to put between Europe (including Britain) and a generalised fascism except solidarity with the only remaining organised opposition, and that meant the still untarnished Communist *Party*.<sup>48</sup>

The 'new' communism of the Popular Front era had an additional, subtler appeal for some intellectuals. In his 1937 book *Forward from Liberalism*, Stephen Spender explained why he and others like him had become sympathetic to the Soviet Union and its local allies:

[T]he liberal bourgeois individualist ... suspects – and may suspect rightly – that this class to which he is confined and which possesses the treasury of all the world's greatness, is nevertheless dead and unproductive, partly no doubt because its members are spiritually dried up by their common isolation. The real life, the real historic struggle, may, in fact, be taking place outside this country of fantastic values ... he must express himself in the symbolic language of the existing culture, which is bourgeois ... [yet] the future of individualism lies in the classless society. For this reason, social revolution is as urgent a problem for the [bourgeois] individualist as it is for the worker.<sup>49</sup>

For Spender, the liberal democratic discourses initiated by Godwin and Paine had foundered on the rock of capitalist class relations. Liberalism had atrophied because it was not possible to revolutionise the political and cultural superstructure of British society without changing the economic base of that society. Yet the bourgeoisie and many of its intellectual defenders were not unnaturally unwilling to undermine the basis of their own power.

Spender cautions that the workers' movement may not always be a force for civilisation and a potential ally for intellectuals – he explains fascism as a symptom of the disappointment of the hopes of 'the people'. Spender also warns about the potential for a philistine communism. It is important for intellectuals to show workers the correct use of the cultural resources their coming accession to power will give them. The workers' movement and the Communist Party offer a place where bourgeois intellectuals and the best parts of the culture they represent might survive.

In his memoir of Cambridge in the 1930s, Marxist historian Victor Kiernan remembered a 'very uncritical, almost mystical' belief in 'the working class and its mission to transform society' – in the interests of intellectuals, as well as workers.<sup>50</sup> Kiernan recalled the appeal of the Communist Party:

That capitalism was in its final stage appeared self-evident; the question was whether it would drag civilisation down with it in its collapse ... The party was a twentieth century ark.<sup>51</sup>

Like many intellectuals of his generation, Edward John Thompson had struggled to reconcile the slaughter of World War One and the stagnation of inter-war Britain with the optimistic, nationalistic liberalism he had learned during the Edwardian era. Edward John felt that all he had loved was in grave danger, but he could identify no force capable of defending it. For thousands of young British intellectuals in the second half of the 1930s, though, the Communist Party and its international allies suddenly appeared to be the defenders of all that was healthy in British and European civilisation.

### The crisis comes to Oxford

In *Beyond the Frontier*, EP Thompson notes that by the time Frank went up to Oxford in 1937 he 'had become very aware of the crisis of European politics'.<sup>52</sup> The spectres of fascism and war hung over the comfortable, sometimes frivolous life Frank enjoyed at Oxford; eventually, the threat these spectres posed would persuade him to defy his parents and many of his friends by abandoning his studies.

At Oxford, Frank continued to show his outstanding ability as a classical scholar and a linguist; he also stepped up his production of poetry and performed in a series of amateur theatricals. A significant part of his time, though, was taken up by political activism. Frank developed a circle of close friends, including Iris Murdoch and the future historian MRD Foot, who shared both his intellectual appetite and his anti-fascist convictions. Although some of these friends supported organisations further to the left, Frank initially chose to join the Liberal Party's university club. When he was made club secretary he tried hard to use the position to raise members' awareness about Spain and the danger of fascism, but he soon became disillusioned, believing that campus Liberals were 'too frivolous'.<sup>53</sup> The dinner parties, dances and polite debates that party members enjoyed contrasted starkly with the relentless political activism of Oxford University's Communist cadre. The Communists were a major force in the university's Labour Club, which they had been allowed to join a couple of years earlier, in a rare Labour concession to Popular Front politics.



In September 1938 the ‘Munich Crisis’ brought Europe to the brink of war, and exposed the cynicism and cowardice of Neville Chamberlain’s government, which was prepared to allow Hitler to swallow Czechoslovakia rather than ally itself with the hated Soviet Union. Chamberlain’s policy of appeasement suddenly ignited political debate across Britain.

In October, Oxford became the centre of the struggle over Chamberlain’s foreign policy, as AD Lindsay, the liberal former vice chancellor of the university, took on the Tory appeaser Quentin Hogg in a bitter by-election. Lindsay stood as an ‘Independent Progressive’ candidate, but his platform of opposition to Munich and support for a military alliance with the Soviet Union won him the backing of the Labour, Liberal and Communist parties, as well a few anti-Chamberlain Tories like Winston Churchill. It seemed as though a Popular Front might be coming into existence, in Oxford at least.

Both Edward John and Frank Thompson were strong supporters of AD Lindsay.<sup>54</sup> Frank and his friends threw themselves into the short but intense election campaign, canvassing and distributing leaflets across Oxford, and watching while Lindsay and Hogg spoke to large and impassioned crowds on street corners. The ‘most hectic ten days in Oxford since the Saint Scholastics’ riots in the fourteenth century’ ended with a win for Hogg.<sup>55</sup> The Tory majority had been halved, but Frank and his friends were devastated. In a memoir called ‘Snapshots of Oxford’, Frank remembered the night Hogg’s victory was announced:

We felt glum that night ... we were like rags soaked in cold vinegar. Someone grew bitter: ‘I hope North Oxford gets the first bombs’ ... Michael [MRD Foot] looked fiercely at the ground ... ‘There are only two alternatives now – to join the Communist Party or abdicate from politics. I can’t swallow communism so I’ll abdicate and take up psychology.’<sup>56</sup>

Frank Thompson was in no mood to abdicate from politics, even when the defeat of Lindsay was followed a few months later by the final collapse of Republican Spain. In a poem written early in 1939, Frank sees Franco’s victory as merely ‘the first round’ in a struggle that he will soon join:

We shall enter, the new protagonists,  
Not forgetting, not forgiving:  
This time the winds may whisper across the sierras

'At last they are coming to give you the freedom they owe you.  
Very late, very late they remember to help their friends.'<sup>57</sup>

By the time he had written these defiant lines, Frank Thompson had joined the Communist Party of Great Britain. Iris Murdoch, whom he had nicknamed 'Madonna Bolshevika', had suggested he join after hearing him complaining about the other left groups on campus at a drunken party. Frank threw himself into work for the communists, attending meetings, selling the *Daily Worker*, and helping recruit other students. Joining the party did not, however, imply any sudden conversion to Marxism. In *Beyond the Frontier* EP Thompson makes the nature of his brother's politics clear:

Frank Thompson can scarcely be defined as an orthodox communist ... in 1939–40 ... [t]he basis for the commitment [to the party] lay in an internationalist anti-fascist contestation, in an era of Western ruling class appeasement, non-intervention (but effective complicity with reaction) in Spain ... [and] inertia in the face of depression, unemployment and severe hardship of every kind ... The commitment to something called Communism was political and internationalist. In Britain at least it entailed ... rather little commitment to any doctrinal orthodoxies ... There are few references to Marx and Marxism in Frank Thompson's letters, and more than one of these is ironic.<sup>58</sup>

Like many young Oxbridge students, Frank joined the party not because he believed in the tenets of 'dialectical materialism' or the political economy of *Capital*, but because the party seemed like an 'ark', in which the best aspects of the Old World might be protected, even as the New World came into being amid apocalypses of economic collapse and war. The ark would be staffed by 'the people', a shifting ensemble recruited from all classes and all nations, but led, nominally at least, by an idealised working class. The revolutionary role of the 'the people' derived not from some 'objective' economic position that they occupied in capitalist society, but from an awareness of the struggles for freedom in the past and a knowledge of the necessity of defeating fascism in the present.

### 'I simply want to fight'

On 2 September 1939 – a day after the Nazi invasion of Poland, and a day before the British declaration of war – Frank Thompson shocked his friends and family by enlisting in the army. Frank's parents argued

that he was too young to fight, and ought to finish his degree, while Iris Murdoch pointed out that the Soviet leadership and – after a week of confusion – the local Communist Party had characterised the war as ‘social imperialist’, and ordered members not to fight in it. Frank explained himself in a poem called ‘To Madonna Bolshevika’:

Sure, lady, I know the party line is better  
I know what Marx would have said. I know you’re right  
When this is over we’ll fight for the things that matter  
Somehow to-day I simply want to fight.  
That’s heresy? Okay. But I’m past caring.  
There’s blood in my eyes, and mist and hate.  
I know the things we’re fighting now and loathe them.  
Now’s not the time you say? But I can’t wait.<sup>59</sup>

In ‘Snapshots of Oxford’ Frank gave an account of his last night at Oxford which captures the contradictions in the life he had led there:

In Corpus [Christi, Frank’s college] everyone stands one’s drinks and I was pretty whistled ... After I had two tulips in the quad and bust a window, they dragged me into Leo’s room and sat on me. I calmed down and they thought I was safe enough to take on the river. The red clouds around Magdalen tower were fading to grey, when we met two people we didn’t like. We chased them and tried to upset their canoe. We got slowed up at the rollers, and then I dropped my paddle. With the excitement all the beer surged up in me. Shouting the historic slogan ‘All hands to the defence of the Soviet fatherland!’ I plunged into the river. They fished me out but I plunged in again. By a series of forced marches they dragged me back and dumped me on the disgusted porter at the Holywell gate.<sup>60</sup>

After quoting this passage in his biography of Iris Murdoch, Peter Conradi adds that:

After Frank had burst into an ‘important meeting of the college communist group’ Comrade Foot, by unanimous vote, was given ‘the revolutionary task of putting him to bed’.<sup>61</sup>

### **‘The blackthorn will soon be out’**

Frank continued to support the Communist Party, and was naturally pleased when it fell in behind the war effort after the invasion of the Soviet Union in May 1941, but his commitment to a radical liberal politics rooted in his reading of English history and literature trumped

his commitment to the party line. For Frank, the new war was a colossal struggle between the forces of civilisation and democracy, spearheaded after May 1941 by the Soviet Union, and the forces of tyranny and obscurantism. Communism was simply the culmination of the struggle to preserve all that was best in European civilisation from the fascist monster. To the extent that it was valuable, Marxism was not a break from liberalism, but a development of it.

It should be clear from our earlier discussion of Popular Front communism that Frank Thompson's views were by no means eccentric at the end of the 1930s and in the early 1940s. Eric Hobsbawm, who was an undergraduate at Oxford at the same time as Frank, has described the same type of thinking in the young members of what would eventually be called the Communist Party Historians Group:

We were always ... instinctively 'popular fronters'. We believed that Marxist theory was ... the spearhead of a broad progressive history ... We saw ourselves as trying ... to push forward that tradition, to make it more explicit.<sup>62</sup>

After he was posted abroad in 1941, Captain Frank Thompson sent home a stream of letters and poems which showed that his core political beliefs had not changed. Patriotism, anti-fascism and staunch support for the Soviet Union often rubbed shoulders in these communications. A letter written during a pause in the campaign to liberate Sicily showed how intensely romantic Frank's sense of Englishness could be:

It's humiliating, just sitting round while the Yanks, the Chinks and the Russkies teach us how to fight ... At home the blackthorn will soon be out. Blackthorn symbolises for me, more than any other flower, the loveliness of the English spring. It symbolises, too, the light-hearted strength and cleanliness of spirit which has been one of England's best features, and will, I hope, be so again. That sounds rather stilted, but I guess you know what I mean.<sup>63</sup>

### For communism, and for liberty

In the middle of 1944 Edward John wrote to his youngest son, who was fighting his way up the Italian peninsula as commander of a tank brigade:

This is a sad letter to write to you, Palmer, old chap. Yesterday we read a wire that Major WF Thompson has been 'missing' since May 31 ...

We do not even know where Frank was ... He deliberately did the most dangerous and adventurous job there was, and he did it magnificently.<sup>64</sup>

The Thompson family eventually learned that Frank had disappeared while serving as an Intelligence Officer amongst a group of partisans in Bulgaria. Frank had volunteered to act as a link between the British army and the anti-fascist fighters of the Balkans, and had already fought bravely in southern Yugoslavia before crossing the border into Bulgaria. The war was nearly over in Europe by the time that Edward John and Theodosia received the news that Frank had been executed by a fascist firing squad in a remote part of Bulgaria, after being captured with a few partisans and given a show trial. After the war, an eyewitness to Frank's last days was able to flesh out the bare report offered by the British army:

When he was called for questioning, to everyone's astonishment he needed no interpreter but spoke in correct and idiomatic Bulgarian. 'By what right do you, an Englishman, enter our country and wage war against us?' he was asked. Major Thompson answered, 'I came because this war is very much deeper than a struggle of nation against nation. The greatest thing in the world now is the struggle of Anti-Fascism against Fascism ... I am ready to die for freedom. And I am proud to die with Bulgarian patriots as companions' ...

Major Thompson then took charge of the condemned and led them to the castle. As they marched off before the assembled people he raised the salute of the Fatherland Front which the Allies were helping, the clenched fist. A gendarme struck his hand down. But Thompson called out to the people, 'I give you the salute of freedom.' All the men died raising this salute. The spectators were sobbing.<sup>65</sup>

It is characteristic that Frank Thompson, a Communist Party member who had been fighting alongside Bulgarian party members, should present his beliefs as anti-fascist, rather than communist or Marxist. It is not that Frank would have been ashamed of his membership of the party, or the beliefs of his comrades in arms. It is simply that, for him, communists were the vanguard of the global struggle of the forces of liberty against the forces of fascism. The fight for communism was understood as a part of the fight against fascism. A similar sentiment is found in one of the last poems of John Cornford, another Oxford Communist who died fighting fascism:

Raise the red flag triumphantly  
For communism and for liberty.<sup>66</sup>

### EP Thompson's inheritance

Let us try to draw together some of the threads of the stories of Edward John and Frank Thompson, and relate them to the story of Edward Palmer Thompson. Edward John had been a fairly typical liberal British intellectual, until he was radicalised by his experience of British imperialism in India and the World War One. His own difficulties as a junior lecturer at an ossified Oxford and a jobbing writer in a philistine culture reinforced his discomfort with key aspects of British society. But Edward John's awareness of the deep malaise in British society was not matched by a commitment to a radical alternative to the status quo. The former missionary had little faith in Britain's political elite, but he had even less faith in the ordinary people of Britain and India.

Edward John remained a liberal, albeit an embittered, radicalised liberal. His youngest son inherited many of his attitudes and sympathies. Even before he left school, Frank Thompson was aware of the threat that fascism posed to the values and culture he had been raised to love. At Oxford Frank came to realise that Britain's political establishment and its traditional left-wing parties were unwilling to face down the fascist threat. The Munich crisis of September 1938 stirred debate in Britain about the threat, and briefly pushed the Labour and Liberal parties leftward, but the defeat of AD Lindsay in Oxford's by-election showed that much of the population still supported Chamberlain's policy of appeasement.

We have seen that Frank's disillusionment with the miserable Britain of the inter-war years did not stop him from being a patriot. Like his father, Frank cherished Britain's liberal political tradition, as well as the cultural tradition represented by names like Shakespeare, Wordsworth, and Ruskin. Like many young men and women in the 1930s, Frank came to feel that the best parts of British and European civilisation could no longer be defended by either the liberal or conservative ends of the traditional political establishment. It was in the Communist Party of the Popular Front era, which presented itself as the guardian of British culture and British radical history, and the local vanguard of the international fight against fascism, that Frank Thompson eventually found a political home.

It would be wrong to conflate the characters, interests and abilities of Frank and Edward Palmer Thompson. A comparison of the brothers' early poems shows that Edward Palmer's are demotic and full

of down to earth imagery, while Frank's are characterised by rococo rhyme schemes, Latinate phrases and allusions to classical literature. The different styles reflect important differences of character. Edward Palmer lacked his older brother's passion for antiquity and aptitude for languages. He was ill at ease with Frank's over-refined Winchester friends, doubted whether university would suit him, and in the middle of 1939 briefly alarmed his parents by announcing he wanted to drop out of school and work on a farm.<sup>67</sup>

Despite these differences, there is no doubt that Frank exerted a profound influence on his younger brother, before and after his departure to the war. EP Thompson himself has remembered respecting his elder brother 'as one can only respect a genius.'<sup>68</sup> The two men shared a commitment to the politics of the Popular Front, and to the conception of the Communist movement as the outgrowth of a long indigenous tradition of radical liberalism. Both men saw the Popular Front as a way of renewing the optimistic liberalism that Edward John had lost long ago, by marrying a radicalised liberalism to a belief in the power of ordinary people to determine the course of history.

Edward Palmer's respect for his elder brother was not unreciprocated. In a 1941 poem called 'Brother', Frank leaves no doubt that he considered his seventeen-year-old sibling a comrade and co-thinker:

To keep aloof, my comrade, my brother from you  
And others, not of our blood, but brothers too  
With whom our roots are locked. Why is the hill  
Larch-lovely, split with hostile coppices?  
Why is there limit set on our goodwill?  
Make this our task – out of a time-stained world  
Often invoked but rarely true, to weld,  
A slogan that will galvanise the world.<sup>69</sup>

In one of the last letters he sent home, Frank tells Iris Murdoch that at the end of the war, 'whether I'm here or not', she should collaborate with his younger brother on a work of political theory. The clear implication is that Edward Palmer holds many of the same ideas that Frank and Iris have shared.<sup>70</sup>

The seventeen-year-old EP Thompson came up to Oxford early in 1941 and was quickly involved in left-wing politics there, though he does not seem to have joined the Communist Party until 1942.<sup>71</sup> A few months earlier the Chamberlain government had finally imploded under the weight of its ineptitude and cowardice, and Winston

Churchill had formed a new administration that aimed to unite the whole country against the Nazi war machine that had rolled to the edge of the English Channel. By bringing Labour politicians and trade union leaders closer to the centre of power and agreeing, albeit reluctantly, to recognise the Home Guard militia that had sprung up around the country, Churchill fulfilled some of the demands that advocates of a Popular Front against fascism had made of the Chamberlain government. When Hitler invaded the Soviet Union a couple of months after Edward Palmer reached Cambridge, the Communist Party had no hesitation in dropping its anti-war stance and throwing itself completely behind the Churchill administration.

By 1941, the 'frivolity' that had annoyed Frank had vanished from Oxbridge. Students like Edward Palmer were aware that their studies would soon give way to military service, and they took a keen interest in international politics and the course of the war. Cambridge boasted a thousand-strong Socialist Club which united Labourites, left-wing Liberals, and Communists.<sup>72</sup>

If anything, the politics of the Popular Front were stronger in the Communist Party during the war years than they were during the second half of the 1930s. The party still identified itself as the continuator of an indigenous British tradition of radicalism with roots in the seventeenth century, the young Wordsworth and Chartism. It saw victory against fascism as a precursor to a post-war social transformation that might now be achievable without violence. Strikes were discouraged, party factory branches were abolished, and Trotskyists who preached opposition to the Churchill government were denounced as Fifth Columnists and beaten up. The party became so wedded to the idea of a Popular Front government that during the 1945 election campaign they argued that a new Labour-led government should share power with Tories as well as Communists.<sup>73</sup>

In 1940, Christopher Hill had brought the Popular Front into academic discourse by publishing the first draft of his reinterpretation of English history. Hill's notion of the English Civil War as a revolutionary struggle against obscurantism and tyranny had a powerful appeal for a generation of intellectuals facing the menace of fascism. In the last interview he gave, EP Thompson remembered being inspired by Hill's study when he was still a schoolboy.<sup>74</sup> Thompson was also strongly influenced by *A Handbook of Freedom*, an anthology of radical writing edited by Jack Lindsay and Edgell Rickword. In 1979 he would pay tribute to the text:



This extraordinarily rich compendium of primary materials was selected from twelve centuries of 'English Democracy'. It is impressive for its length of reach (one hundred pages, or one quarter of the book, precedes 1600); the diversity and catholicity of the sources drawn upon, bringing, with a sense of recognition, unlikely voices into a common discourse ...

I think that the *Handbook of Freedom* was among the two or three books which I managed to keep around with me in the army. Certainly I know that others did so.<sup>75</sup>

It is significant that Rickword and Lindsay were both poets, and that their book drew on poetry as much as political economy. EP Thompson had learned a deep love of both literature and his British heritage from his father and brother, and he would have been impressed by the Popular Front-era Communist Party's attentiveness to both.

When he returned from the war in 1945, EP Thompson set to work editing a collection of Frank Thompson's poems, letters and journals. *There Is a Spirit in Europe* was published by Victor Gollancz in 1947, with an introduction, conclusion and extensive notes by Frank's younger brother and an afterword written by Edward John Thompson on his deathbed.<sup>76</sup>

By 1947, many of Frank Thompson's hopes for the post-war world had been betrayed. The Cold War was beginning, Europe was being divided, Britain and the other old imperial powers still clung to most of their empires, and new wars were brewing in the Far East. Inside the Communist parties of the West, the Popular Front policy was in disarray, and intellectuals were being subjected to Zhdanovism, the new Kremlin dogma which insisted on a sharp divide between 'bourgeois' and 'proletarian' culture and science. In an unforgettably poignant passage in 'The Poverty of Theory', Thompson would remember the 'decade of heroes' and its aftermath:

Marxism [had been] infiltrated by the vocabulary (and even the premises) of economic and technical 'progress' – which in Britain meant the vocabulary of utilitarianism – and of an evolutionism which borrowed improperly from the natural sciences and Darwinism ... I think there were ways in which the decade, 1936–46 gave it a sharp check. Marxism, in the decisive emergencies of Fascist insurgence and of the Second World War, began to acquire the accents of voluntarism. Its vocabulary took on ... more of the active verbs of agency, choice, individual initiative, resistance, heroism, and sacrifice ... It seemed, as the partisan detachment blew up the crucial railway bridge, that they were 'making history' ... It was a decade of heroes, and there were

Guevaras in every street and in every wood. The vocabulary of Marxism became infiltrated in a new direction: that of authentic liberalism (the choices of the autonomous individual) and perhaps also of Romanticism (the rebellion of spirit against the rules of fact). Poetry, rather than natural science or sociology, was welcomed as a cousin ... Voluntarism crashed against the wall of the Cold War. No account can convey the sickening jerk of deceleration between 1945 and 1948 ... 'History', so pliant to the heroic will in 1943 and 1944, seemed to congeal in an instant into two monstrous antagonistic structures.<sup>77</sup>

*There Is a Spirit in Europe* was not just a memorial to Frank Thompson and the ideas which were so cruelly mocked by the post-war world. For Frank's brother, the book was also a manifesto. For decades, Edward Palmer Thompson would remain loyal to the ideas he had learned from his father, his brother and from the Communist Party of the late 1930s and the first half of the 1940s. Thompson would take these ideas into a succession of political organisations and campaigns, refine and rename them in a score of polemics and meditations, and apply them with enormous success to the study of history and literature, but they had their origin in the first era of the Popular Front, when the Communist Party of Great Britain briefly seemed to offer a bridge between the radical liberal tradition of the 'freeborn Englishman' and the twentieth-century struggle against fascism and decrepit capitalism.<sup>78</sup> Only in the 1980s, under the pressure of insuperable intellectual and political contradictions, would Thompson withdraw from the battle for the ideas he acquired in the 'decade of heroes' between the mid-1930s and the mid-1940s, and search half-heartedly for a new synthesis of ideas capable of integrating his political and scholarly work, and of giving his life meaning.

#### **Afternote: describing the legacy of the 'decade of heroes'**

Loosely adapting the terminology of Imre Lakatos' model of theory formation and change, we can speak of 'hardcore' and 'softcore' parts of Thompson's thought. The 'hardcore' was the set of guiding ideas he adopted during the 'decade of heroes'; the 'softcore' was a series of dispensable ideas and claims designed to protect the indispensable ideas from refutation at the hands of events.<sup>79</sup> It is possible to identify five 'hardcore' ideas Thompson adopted as a young man and held until the 1980s. We cannot arrange these hardcore beliefs in any hierarchical way, because each is dependent on the others.

The first ‘hardcore’ idea we will mention is a belief in the continuity between England’s liberal and Romantic traditions of thought and culture, which were established in the nineteenth century, and the imported tradition of Marxism, which only came into its own after the ‘Russification’ of local communists and socialists in the 1920s.

A second hardcore idea is the liberal and Popular Front-communist belief in the necessity of a political unity that transcends the barriers of class. Popular Front rhetoric habitually invoked ‘the people’, a shifting ensemble of forces that was led by the working class but usually included the middle classes, the intelligentsia and ‘progressive’ members of the bourgeoisie, too.

We expose another ‘hardcore’ feature of Thompson’s thought when we note that ‘the people’ were to be motivated, not by appeals to their ‘objective interests’ or similar economic language, but ‘subjective factors’ – that is, by a vision of a better world and by ideas like justice and liberty. Thompson was a confirmed voluntarist during the ‘decade of heroes’, and remained so afterwards.

Another ‘hardcore’ feature of Thompson’s thought was his belief in the essential unity of political, scholarly and imaginative work. In the Popular Front era, the Communist Party repudiated its old philistinism, rhetorically at least. Writers, artists and academics were courted assiduously. The *Left Review*, the Left Book Club and the People’s Theatre were all symbols of the cultural Popular Front that the party fostered, even as it failed to create a political Popular Front. For EP Thompson, literary and scholarly work was just as important, if not more important, than political agitation. All were part of a single project, and they might intersect in the most interesting and useful ways. It is notable that Thompson’s first great work of scholarship, his biography of William Morris, began life as a short polemic intended for a political publication.

The importance of England and of English culture and history to Thompson must also be emphasised. Thompson absorbed the Popular Front view of English progressive history, and iconoclastic English cultural movements like Romanticism, as a sort of treasury of radical democratic struggle, and a living model and inspiration for the present.

England was also, of course, the site of the world’s first industrial revolution, and Marx had, for a time at least, invested tremendous hopes in its working class. In the 1930s London was still the centre of the world’s most important imperial power, and the Communist

Party of Great Britain hoped to play a leading role in overturning global capitalism. The party often took a tutelary attitude toward parties in the colonies, advising them to base their ideas and strategies on English experiences.

It should be apparent that Thompson's various 'hardcore' ideas intersected and supported one another. Thompson's belief in the special significance of England, for example, is closely linked to his enthusiasm for the country's democratic and radical traditions. Thompson's voluntarist perspective was well-suited to the advocacy of a grand alliance of 'the people' that united classes with seemingly irreconcilable interests. Thompson's belief that poems were as important as posters was in tune with his enthusiasm for the Romantic critique of industrialism he found in the work of Blake and the young Wordsworth.

Thompson took part of his method as well as many of his ideas from the tradition of social commentary and critique that found a home in English literature in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.<sup>80</sup> Thompson once praised Raymond Williams for refusing 'to permit questions of knowledge and questions of value and political choice to be segregated in specialist enclosures.'<sup>81</sup> Mocking reviewers who had quibbled with one or another claim by Williams, Thompson insisted that 'thinking of the most serious kind' can be judged only with reference to the sensibility doing the thinking.

Thompson was a formidable historian, but texts like *The Making of the English Working Class* cannot be judged properly within the boundaries of the discipline of history. Although he has been clumsily grouped with a swathe of other scholars under the banner of 'History from Below', Thompson owed no methodological debt to either the number crunching of the likes of Maurice Dobb or the 'thick description' of Raphael Samuel and his ilk. Thompson did not even venture an estimate of the size of the English working class in his most famous book, and in the 1970s he angrily repudiated the econometrics that had entranced friends like Eric Hobsbawm and John Saville. Although he was a master of archival research, Thompson sniffed at the sort of overwhelming detail and abnegation of interpretative authority that Samuel and *History Workshop Journal* at times promoted. In a review of Hugh Thomas' slavishly footnoted *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, Thompson protested that there was no point in historians piling example upon example when making a point, because sooner or later readers have to trust in a scholar's sensibility and his ability to make correct judgments on their behalf.<sup>82</sup>

Thompson's historiographical positions ultimately defer to moral and political arguments which he pursued outside as well as inside the discipline of history. His success or failure as a scholar cannot be wholly separated from his success or failure as a social critic and political activist.

In the remaining chapters of this book we will see how the guiding ideas and the methodology that Thompson adopted during the years of his youth were repeatedly challenged by events and new ideas; how Thompson strove to defend the legacy of the 'decade of heroes' by both preserving creatively adapting his thinking to new circumstances; and how the burden of the past finally became too heavy to bear.

### Notes

- 1 Mary Lago, *India's Prisoner: A Biography of Edward John Thompson 1886–1946*, University of Missouri Press, Columbia, 2001, p. 4.
- 2 EP Thompson, *'Alien Homage': Edward Thompson and Rabindranath Tagore*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1993, p. 7.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- 5 Robert Gregg, *Inside out, Outside In*, Macmillan Press, London, 2000, p. 42.
- 6 We will shortly encounter NG Annan's paper 'The Intellectual Aristocracy', which worries about this English exceptionalism (NG Annan, 'The Intellectual Aristocracy', in *Studies in Social History: A Tribute to G. M. Trevelyan*, ed. JH Plumb (Longman, London, 1955), pp. 241–287). Another famous discussion of the problem is Perry Anderson's essay 'Components of the National Culture', *New Left Review*, 50, July/August 1968, pp. 3–57.
- 7 For a good account of this process see Randall Collins, *The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory Of Intellectual Change*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1998, pp. 664–667. Collins' monumental book synthesises much of the research on the development of intelligentsias. For a guide to the comparative study of intelligentsias, see Aleksander Gella's 'An Introduction to the Sociology of the Intelligentsia', in *The Intelligentsia and the Intellectuals*, ed. Aleksander Gella, Sage Publications, Beverly Hills, 1976, pp. 9–34.
- 8 Noel Annan, 'The Intellectual Aristocracy', in *Studies in Social History: A Tribute to G.M. Trevelyan*, ed. JH Plumb 1955, p. 244.
- 9 For a detailed narrative of Thompson's war, see Lago, *India's Prisoner*, pp. 124–129. Dorothy Thompson has described Edward Palmer as 'half-American', remembering that 'his mother came from a rather posh WASP

- family' with links to the diplomatic service and the elite of the Democratic Party (email to the author, 21/20/05). Thompson admitted to being 'half-American' in the 'Letter to Americans' he wrote in response to the US air raids on Libya in 1986. See Mary Kaldor and Paul Anderson ed., *Mad Dogs: The US Raids on Libya*, Pluto Press, London, 1986, p. 11.
- 10 Lago, *India's Prisoner*, p. 140.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 139.
- 12 Quoted in *Alien Homage*, p. 72.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 Near the end of his life, EP Thompson would edit and introduce a collection of these lectures. See Rabindranath Tagore, EP Thompson ed. and introd., *Nationalism*, Macmillan, London, 1991.
- 15 This period in British history has been very powerfully described in Hugh Purcell's biography of Tom Wintringham (Hugh Purcell, *The Last English Revolutionary*, Sutton, Stroud, 2004, pp. 18–51).
- 16 Thompson, 'Alien Homage', p. 6.
- 17 Lago, *India's Prisoner*, pp. 140–141.
- 18 Quoted in Thompson, 'Alien Homage', pp. 40–41.
- 19 Bryan D Palmer, *EP Thompson: Objections and Oppositions*, Verso, London, 1994, pp. 22–23.
- 20 Lago, *India's Prisoner*, p. 198.
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 EP Thompson would remember these visitors more than half a century later in 'The Nehru Tradition', an article he collected in *Writing by Candlelight*, Merlin, London, 1980, pp. 135–149.
- 23 John Carey's acidic *The Intellectuals and the Masses* charges key British intellectuals of the early twentieth century, and literary modernists in general, with reactionary politics. Carey's generalisations are a little too broad, and his conflation of literary merit with political correctness is itself reactionary, but his portraits of the politics of writers like TS Eliot, Wyndham Lewis and Ezra Pound are compelling (John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice amongst the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880–1939*, Faber, London, 1992).
- 24 Edward Thompson, *The Other Side of the Medal*, Hogarth Press, London, 1925.
- 25 Gregg, *Inside Out, Outside In*, pp. 54–55.
- 26 Edward Thompson, *British Rule in India: Its Rise and Fulfilment*, Macmillan, London, 1935, p. 655.
- 27 Thompson, 'Alien Homage', p. 73.
- 28 Edward Thompson, *Rise and Fulfilment of British Rule in India*, p. 653.
- 29 Lago, *India's Prisoner*, p. 293.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 309.
- 31 *Ibid.*

- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 308.
- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 Thompson, *Writing by Candlelight*, p. 142.
- 35 EP Thompson, *Beyond the Frontier: The Politics of a Failed Mission*, Merlin Press, London, 1997, p. 47.
- 36 *Interviews with historians*, 'Penelope Corfield and EP Thompson', Institute of Historical Research videowork, 1992.
- 37 Freeman Dyson, *Disturbing the Universe*, Harper and Row, New York, 1979, pp. 34–35.
- 38 EP Thompson discusses the Carritt brothers in *Beyond the Frontier: The Politics of a Failed Mission*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1997, pp. 48–49.
- 39 Frank Thompson, *Selected Poems*, Trent Editions, Nottingham, 2003, p. 18.
- 40 *Ibid.*
- 41 Margot Heinemann discusses the hostile attitude of the Third Period Communist Party to intellectuals in 'The People's Front and the Intellectuals', in *Britain, Fascism, and the Popular Front*, ed. Jim Fyrth, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1985, p. 160. For an account of the Russification of British Marxism after 1917, see Jonathan Ree, *Proletarian Philosophers*, Clarendon Press, Oxford and New York, 1984, pp. 71–78.
- 42 For a survey of the period in Britain, see the chapter on 'Class Against Class' in Francis Beckett's *The Enemy Within: The Rise and Fall of the British Communist Party*, John Murray, London, 1995, pp. 36–45.
- 43 Eric Hobsbawm, 'Fifty Years of People's Fronts', in *Britain, Fascism, and the Popular Front*, ed. Jim Fyrth, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1985, p. 241–242.
- 44 Margot Heinemann, 'The People's Front and the Intellectuals', in Fyrth, *Britain, Fascism, and the Popular Front*, pp. 160–161.
- 45 Quoted in Bill Scharwz, 'The 'People' in History: The Communist Party Historians' Group, 1946–56', in *Making Histories: Studies in History-writing and Politics*, Hutchison, University of Birmingham, 1982, pp. 55–56.
- 46 Quoted in Beckett, *The Enemy Within*, p. 66.
- 47 *Ibid.*
- 48 Walter Pierre, 'Auden's Political Vision', in *WH Auden: The Far Interior*, ed. Alan Bold, Barnes and Noble, New Jersey, 1985, p. 53.
- 49 Stephen Spender, *Forward from Liberalism*, Victor Gollancz, London, 1937, pp. 70–71.
- 50 Victor Kiernan, *Poets, Politics, and the People*, Verso, London, 1989, p. 184.
- 51 *Ibid.*
- 52 Thompson, *Beyond the Frontier*, p. 49.

- 53 Peter Conradi, *Iris Murdoch: A Life*, Norton, New York, 2001, p. 93. Conradi's book is an excellent source of information about Frank and his Oxford circle.
- 54 *Ibid.*
- 55 *Ibid.*
- 56 Quoted in Dorothy Thompson's introduction to the *Selected Poems* of Frank Thompson, ed. Dorothy and Kate Thompson, Trent Editions, Nottingham, 2003, p. viii.
- 57 Frank Thompson, *Selected Poems*, 2003, p. 12.
- 58 EP Thompson, *Beyond the Frontier*, 1997, pp. 55–56.
- 59 Quoted by Conradi, *Iris Murdoch*, p. 111.
- 60 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 99.
- 61 *Ibid.*
- 62 P. Thane, E. Lubbock and Eric Hobsbawm, 'Interview with Eric Hobsbawm', in *Visions of History*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1993, p. 33.
- 63 Frank Thompson, *There Is a Spirit in Europe*, Victor Gollancz, London, 1947, pp. 49–50.
- 64 Quoted in Lago, *India's Prisoner*, pp. 312–313.
- 65 Quoted in Dyson, *Disturbing the Universe*, p. 38. In *Beyond the Frontier* EP Thompson argues that this account may have been contrived for political purposes after the war.
- 66 John Cornford, 'Full Moon at Tierz: Before the Storming of Huesca', in *Understand the Weapon, Understand the Wound: Selected Writings of John Cornford*, ed. Jonathan Galassi, Carcanet, Manchester, 1996.
- 67 We will discuss this episode at the beginning of chapter 2.
- 68 EP Thompson, *Beyond the Frontier*, p. 49.
- 69 Frank Thompson, *Selected Poems*, p. 44.
- 70 Frank's words are quoted in Conradi, *Iris Murdoch*, p. 194.
- 71 In a letter written in June 1956, Thompson talks about his 'fourteen years of membership' of the Communist Party (EP Thompson, unpublished letter to the editor of *World News* 9/6/56, Communist Party Archives).
- Edward Palmer was certainly drawn towards the Communist Party well before he arrived at Cambridge. In his obituary for the poet, critic and exhibition designer Arnold Rattenbury, who went to Kingswood with Thompson, Andy Croft reveals that the two youngsters, who had been 'inspired and excited' by the struggle against fascism in Spain, were nearly expelled for selling the *Daily Worker* in their dormitory (Andy Croft, 'Arnold Rattenbury', *The Independent*, 3/05/07).
- 72 Dorothy Thompson gives the figure of a thousand during a 1993 interview with Sheila Rowbotham ('The Personal and the Political', *New Left Review*, 200, July–August 1993, p. 89).
- 73 Beckett, *The Enemy Within*, pp. 98–99.



- 74 Christopher Hill, *The English Revolution 1640*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1940. Thompson's remarks were made in the interview with Penelope Corfield quoted earlier in this chapter.
- 75 EP Thompson, *Persons and Polemics*, Merlin, London, 1994, pp. 241–242. Jack Lindsay and Edgell Rickword, *A Handbook of Freedom*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1939.
- 76 Frank Thompson, *There Is a Spirit in Europe*, Victor Gollancz, London, 1947.
- 77 EP Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, Merlin, London, 1978, pp. 264–265.
- 78 David Renton perhaps makes this point when he writes that, for Thompson, 'the decisive moment was the Second World War'. The older Thompson would again and again 'return to this period, and find in it a set of lessons, which would guide his hand' through 'turmoil' (David Renton, *Dissident Marxism*, Zed, London, 2004, p. 109).
- 79 For a good introduction to Lakatos' theory of knowledge-claims and theory development, see Imre Lakatos, *Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, 1978.
- 80 As Perry Anderson and Raymond Williams have in different ways explained, the peculiarities of the English society meant that literature became the site where much social commentary and criticism was practised in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. In another country, philosophy or sociology might perform the same function. See Williams' *Culture and Society*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1958, and Perry Anderson, *English Questions*, Verso, London, 1991, pp. 96–103.
- 81 EP Thompson, *Persons and Polemics*, Merlin, London, 1994, p. 246.
- 82 See EP Thompson, 'Anthropology and the Discipline of Historical Context', *Midland History*, 1, 3, 1972.

## Part II

# New Left, old problems



## Yesterday the struggle: 'Outside the Whale' and the fight for the 1930s

In her biography of Edward John Thompson, Mary Lago describes how in 1940 the sixteen-year-old Edward Palmer Thompson alarmed his family by announcing that he was considering leaving school to work on a farm. Many young men and women were taking similar jobs in 1940: as a blockaded Britain struggled to feed itself, 'farm service' was seen as an important part of the war effort.<sup>1</sup> Edward John Thompson, who was chaplaining in the army in 1940, wasted no time in writing 'Palmer' a stern letter. Edward John worried that Palmer might become trapped in the sort of frustratingly menial work that he had endured at a Bethnal Green bank in the first years of the century.

Perhaps feeling the need to mend bridges with father, Palmer wrote a long letter about his love of poetry. By 1940 Edward John Thompson had published half a dozen collections of verse, as well as two studies of the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore. But father and son seemed destined to quarrel even about poetry. Edward John was delighted by his son's enthusiasm for the art, but perplexed by his words of praise for WH Auden. Auden was the most talented of a generation of writers who had rebelled against middle or upper class backgrounds and became critical of British and European society in the 1930s. As we saw in chapter 1, the epic struggle against fascism in Spain had helped to galvanise many of these young writers.

Like many of his peers, Auden had travelled to Spain and expressed his solidarity with the anti-fascist cause. His poem *Spain* had come to symbolise, in the minds of many left-wing Britons, the struggle to defeat fascism and make a better world. In a review of the poem in the *New Statesman*, John Maynard Keynes had called it 'an expression of contemporary feeling' about 'heart-rending events in the political world', and claimed that Auden 'spoke for many chivalrous hearts.'<sup>2</sup>

In 1939, though, Auden and his friend Christopher Isherwood had fled Britain for the safety and relative prosperity of the United States. Their departure had caused an outcry in the press and debate in parliament. Auden's rejections of his old political commitments in the new poems he wrote in America only rubbed salt into the wounds of those who had seen *Spain* as a symbol of the struggle against a fascist ideology that now menaced Britain itself.

Even before he left for America, Auden had been a controversial figure in Britain. George Orwell, a journalist and budding novelist with bitter memories of the intra-left struggles that were part of the Spanish Civil War, had used an article in the journal *The Adelphi* to attack Auden and *Spain*. According to Orwell, Auden and his friends Stephen Spender and Cecil Day-Lewis were 'fashionable pansies' who romanticised the horrors of war and apologised for the crimes of the Soviet Union and its agents in Spain.<sup>3</sup> In 1940 Orwell would repeat and deepen these criticisms in the title essay of his collection *Inside the Whale*.

Orwell's broadsides did not protect Auden from the criticisms of Britain's pro-Moscow left. Despite its large sales and its frequent recital at anti-fascist public meetings, *Spain* had been condemned by the Communist Party's *Daily Worker* newspaper for its 'reflection of the poet's continuing isolation' from important political events.<sup>4</sup>

Edward John was hardly breaking new ground, then, when he wrote to warn his son that Auden's flight to America invalidated poems like *Spain*, and advised him to read a poet with more 'moral courage'. But the elder Thompson seemed to feel a curious ambivalence about Auden: at the bottom of his letter he took some of his words back by suggesting that, in an 'unworldly' way, Auden might be 'one of the supreme lovers of mankind'.<sup>5</sup>

Not for nearly twenty years would EP Thompson fashion a reply to his father's criticisms. By 1959 Edward John had been dead for thirteen years, and his rejection of WH Auden had long been out of fashion. Along with the Orwell of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the 'American Auden' had become an object of admiration for intellectuals who had rejected the left-wing commitments of the 1930s as 'romantic' concessions to 'Stalinism'. Auden himself had decided that *Spain* was a 'wicked' poem. A reaction against the 'Natopolitan' intelligentsia of the post-war world had taken hold amongst a minority of younger intellectuals, but these angry young men and women had little interest in reviving the politics of the 1930s, a decade they scarcely remembered.

In 'Outside the Whale', the text he would place at the beginning of *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, EP Thompson set out to rescue the Auden of *Spain* and his 1930s comrades from the condescension of both left and right. An old argument had become more complicated, and perhaps more urgent.

### After the 'decade of heroes'

The decade between the end of the end of World War Two and the first stirrings of the New Left was a hard one for EP Thompson. After the war he spent an unhappy couple of years in London, watching Attlee's Labour government disappoint the hopes of its socialist followers. As a Communist Party member and aspiring writer, Thompson found himself under attack from ex-communist intellectuals turned Cold Warriors, and equally from party bureaucrats who thought that the task of poetry was to increase tractor production.<sup>6</sup> Neither an academic post nor a party job looked possible, let alone desirable.

By 1948 Thompson had had enough. He packed up and headed north, taking a job teaching for the Workers Education Association in Yorkshire.<sup>7</sup> The move north was as much a pilgrimage as a flight. Thompson hoped that a job teaching miners and railwaymen in an old stronghold of the Chartists and the Independent Labour Party would remove him from the influence of both Communist Party orthodoxy and Cold War conservatism and put him in direct contact with authentic English socialism. The middle class Cambridge graduate was following in a tradition made famous by Orwell's *Road to Wigan Pier*.<sup>8</sup>

Thompson's hopes were sometimes disappointed. He was a talented teacher and was well-liked by many of his students, but he discovered a Yorkshire very different from the one he had sought. In the late 1940s and in the 1950s the effects of a global economic upturn, the replacement of rationing with the delights of American-style consumerism, and an urban renewal programme all helped change the culture of many workers. Although he did encounter some eager, class conscious workers, Thompson the teacher was often confronted by apathy and philistinism. An assiduous writer of internal documents, Thompson has left us with a record of his discontent. In 1949, analysing a year of literature classes, he wrote that:

It has been hard work keeping this class alert and interested ... Several of them ... are confused by any unorthodox or frank approach to personal or sexual morality ... one persists ... in praising Shakespeare

as ‘high-brow stuff’ ... The same students are puzzled and offended when presented with exercises.<sup>9</sup>

In one class Thompson was particularly disappointed with a group of female students who:

desired entertaining performances from the tutor (covering with equal authority the details of a writer’s private life and questions of literary value) culminating in literary gossip in the discussion period.<sup>10</sup>

But the male trade unionists in the class were no better – Thompson complained that they ‘persisted in regarding poetry as a luxury the labour movement could do without.’<sup>11</sup> The advocate of Blake and Morris had his work cut out. In a letter to his friend Randall Swingler, Thompson complained that ‘most of living is driving through fog to badly attended classes to give ill-prepared lectures.’<sup>12</sup>

Like 1917 or 1968, 1956 is a year that leaps out from historical narratives. In British history, the year is especially important, because it saw events that profoundly destabilised both the left and the right of the political spectrum. Khrushchev’s speech exposing the crimes of Stalin opened the floodgates of dissent in Eastern Europe and the Western Communist Parties. Later in 1956, the Soviet Union’s invasion of Hungary blew apart illusions in Stalinism, and saw the Communist Party of Great Britain lose around a quarter of its membership, including the vast majority of its intellectuals. At the same time, the bumbling Anglo-French adventure in Egypt put the Conservative government onto the defensive, and underlined the United States’ usurpation of Britain’s old status as number one imperialist power.

The invasion of Hungary had a calamitous effect on the Stalinised Communist Parties of the West. One of the organisations most affected by Hungary was the Communist Party of Great Britain, which lost seven thousand members – more than a quarter of its total membership – in 1956 and 1957.<sup>13</sup> The dearly departed included some of the most outstanding intellectuals in Britain, people like EP Thompson, Christopher Hill, Rodney Hilton, John Saville and Doris Lessing. Others like Eric Hobsbawm remained inside the party as ‘internal émigrés’ furtively hostile to the party leadership. The Communist Party Historians Group, whose work in the decade after World War Two transformed the study of English and world history and still inspires reverence today, never recovered its lustre after 1956.

But out of the ruins of 1956 a New Left, hostile to both Stalinism and NATO, was able to emerge in Britain, as dissident communists

teamed up with a generation of young people disgusted with the hypocrisy represented by the neo-imperialist adventure in Egypt. Members of both groups had suddenly become politically homeless, and the fledgeling journals and chaotic discussion groups of the New Left offered a halfway house, if not a secure home.

Thompson always looked back on 1956 as a crucial year in his political life. Twenty-two years later he began his foreword to *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* with the words 'I commenced to reason in my thirty-third year ... in 1956'.<sup>14</sup> Along with John Saville, a historian from Hull and long-time party member, EP Thompson established a cheap, cyclostyled journal called *The Reasoner* to focus and foster discussion about the crisis in the Communist Party.<sup>15</sup> The first issue was published in July 1956 in an edition of one thousand, and sold out in three weeks.<sup>16</sup> After Thompson and Saville were forced from the party for producing *The Reasoner*, they established the quarterly *New Reasoner* to promote a left-wing politics independent of both the Communists and Labour.<sup>17</sup> The journal soon became a key component of the New Left.

### The question of commitment

In the second half of the 1950s an unfocused but intense debate about 'commitment' gripped the New Left. In an extended commentary on the debate published in 1961, John Mander explained that the word 'commitment' came from Sartre, but that it had acquired new overtones in a British context. Mander noted that by 1956 the word had begun to be used by a 'freshly articulate branch of the English left: the post-Hungary and post-Suez regroupings that have since become known as the New Left'.<sup>18</sup>

The debate on commitment took place in a variety of forums. The *New Statesman*, which along with the *Manchester Guardian* was the most popular left-wing publication aimed at intellectuals, was one important theatre of argument. The most accommodating venue for discussion, though, was *Universities and Left Review*, which had been established by a circle of radicalised southern students in 1956. In the three years before the journal fused with the *New Reasoner* to become the *New Left Review*, it regularly set aside swathes of print for a wide variety of opinions on the subject of 'commitment'.

The debate on commitment got considerable impetus from a Fabian Society pamphlet that Kingsley Amis published early in 1957



under the title *Socialism and the Intellectuals*.<sup>19</sup> Amis, who had a reputation as a political radical as well as a talented young novelist, claimed that many intellectuals were guilty of ‘romanticism’, which he defined as an ‘irrational’ tendency to embrace ‘causes that have nothing to do with your own’. In the 1930s, Amis suggested, romanticism had led British intellectuals into the Communist Party and the Spanish Civil War in surprisingly large numbers. In the second half of the 1950s, by contrast, romanticism expressed itself in non-political, albeit sometimes scandalous ways – in an ‘identification with juvenile delinquents’, for instance.<sup>20</sup>

Amis had been identified with a loose group of ‘Angry Young Men’ who had written poems, novels and plays critical of the conservative mores of post-war British society. Many leftists, including EP Thompson, had laid claim to the Angry Young Men, but Amis’ pamphlet made it clear that he, at least, was not interested in left-wing political activism. His wildly popular first novel *Lucky Jim* might have mocked the prudishness and ignorance of post-war Britain, but he was not interested in radically reconstructing that society.

In *Socialism and the Intellectuals* Amis relied on an interpretation of the left-wing intellectuals of the 1930s that George Orwell had coined in his 1940 essay ‘Inside the Whale’. Though he criticised the essay’s ‘hysterical’ tone, Amis broadly endorsed Orwell’s vision of WH Auden and certain other left-wing intellectuals who went to Spain as irresponsible romantics.<sup>21</sup>

*Socialism and the Intellectuals* was widely though not always sympathetically reviewed.<sup>22</sup> Amis’ hostility to radical politics dismayed his admirers on the New Left. Dorothy Thompson remembered EP Thompson’s response to the pamphlet:

Everybody in the university world loved *Lucky Jim*, and Edward loved parts of *That Uncertain Feeling* [Amis’ second novel, published in 1955]. So [Edward’s] first response [to *Socialism and the Intellectuals*] was to feel a bit sad. Amis had been in the Communist Party and had moved right when he left.<sup>23</sup>

The feeling of disappointment was surely understandable. The author of *Lucky Jim*, a novel which had seemed to embody the ill-focused but rebellious energy of the Angry Young Men, was parroting the arguments of the ‘Natopolitan’ establishment.<sup>24</sup> It was clear that, for Amis as well as pillars of the establishment like TS Eliot and the ‘American’ WH Auden, resistance to political commitment

and acquiescence in the status quo was built on a negative view of the left-wing intellectuals of the 1930s – a view which was first advanced by ‘Inside the Whale’. Amis’ pamphlet helped to reinforce Orwell’s interpretation. In a 1960 review of Julian Symons’ book *The Thirties*, John Mandler noted that:

The fiftyish image of the Thirties – remember Mr Amis’ *Socialism and the Intellectuals* – has passed through Orwell’s prism.<sup>25</sup>

In *George Orwell and the Politics of Literary Reputation*, his careful study of the influence of Orwell, John Rodden notes that ‘Orwell became popular as an intellectual model’ for the Angry Young Men in the late 1950s.<sup>26</sup> But Amis’s pamphlet did not deliver George Orwell from any sort of obscurity. Orwell’s last two novels, *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, had become successful in his lifetime, partly because they had been co-opted by the right in the fiercely anti-communist atmosphere of the late 1940s. In 1955 and 1956 respectively *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* were filmed, further boosting sales. Pre-war works which had languished in obscurity, like *Homage to Catalonia*, were reprinted in Britain and published in the United States. Orwell’s critical reputation grew as quickly as his sales. Looking back in 1986, Raymond Williams acknowledged the posthumous influence that Orwell exerted on British intellectuals:

In the Britain of the fifties, along every road that you moved, the figure of Orwell seemed to be waiting. If you tried to develop a new kind of popular culture analysis, there was Orwell; if you wanted to report on work or ordinary life, there was Orwell; if you engaged in any kind of socialist argument, there was an enormously inflated statue of Orwell warning you to go back. Down into the Sixties political editorials would regularly admonish younger radicals to read their Orwell and see where that led to.<sup>27</sup>

The reputation of the young WH Auden and the left-wing thirties intellectuals he had symbolised in ‘Inside the Whale’ waned as the star of Orwell waxed. In 1961 John Mandler opened a discussion of Auden’s poetry with a blunt question:

Must we burn Auden? Many people seem to think so. The reputation of Auden and the Thirties poets is probably as low now as it has ever been.<sup>28</sup>

The newly politicised intellectuals of *Universities and Left Review* and the Angry Young Men had in common a dissatisfaction with British

society, and a feeling that cultural and intellectual patterns set before 1945 were inadequate to the radically different Britain that had emerged since the end of the war. If it was clear what *Universities and Left Review* and the Angry Young Men opposed, it was not always clear what they favoured. Members of both groupings tended to be suspicious of political parties of both the left and the right. They had grown up with an emasculated, economistic Labour Party, and had witnessed the near-implosion of the Communist Party in 1956.

The debate on commitment spilled out of the pages of *Universities and Left Review* and into a meeting of the London New Left Club that Stuart Hall recalled as ‘electric.’<sup>29</sup> The principal division in that meeting, and in the debate in *Universities and Left Review*, was between those who distrusted demands that intellectuals espouse politics too explicitly, and those who believed that politics and serious intellectual work were inseparable. Those who held the first view often feared that ‘commitment’ might come to mean the subordination of art and scholarship to political agendas, and bring a return to the dogmatic, philistine ‘Zhdanovism’ that had become notorious in the Communist Party of Great Britain. Those who held the second view often associated demands for the autonomy of intellectuals with an ‘ivory tower’ attitude to culture.

In a poem published in *Universities and Left Review*, Christopher Logue showed the passions that the ‘question of commitment’ could rouse.<sup>30</sup> In ‘To My Fellow Artists’ Logue inveighed against writers who refused to speak out against nuclear weapons. Turning to John Wain, an ‘Angry Young Man’ who had been reluctant to support the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, Logue asked:

And do you agree with them,  
Spender, and Barker, and Auden?  
... Will you adopt their lie by silence?

To some extent, the arguments over commitment reflected wider divisions within the first New Left. After the euphoria of 1956, when the mass protests against the war in Egypt had seemed like a revival of radical politics, the inchoate movement had been the site of chronic disagreements. Some of its members, like EP Thompson and most of the ex-communists associated with the *New Reasoner*, had hoped that the New Left could become a fighting mass movement, able to win the working class away from adherence to the Labour Party and the remnants of the Communist Party. Some of the leading members

of the circle around the *Universities and Left Review* thought that such an ambition was unrealistic, and that the New Left should focus on rebuilding a left-wing intelligentsia in Britain. Other activists, especially those influenced by Trotskyism, wanted to turn the movement into a selective, highly organised political party.

The debate rumbled on when the fourth issue of *Universities and Left Review* gave up half its space to a set of 'Documents on Commitment'. In a thoughtful introduction to these texts, Stuart Hall tried to clarify the parameters of the debate and find some middle ground between the antagonists. Admitting that the discussion had touched a nerve, Hall reaffirmed the importance of the 1930s, calling Auden's *Spain* 'the poem' and Orwell's 'Inside the Whale' a document 'of our time' which 'stands between us and the International Brigade'.<sup>31</sup>

Hall accepted Orwell's criticisms of *Spain*, but insisted that these criticisms did not imply that art and intellectuals should be separated from politics.<sup>32</sup> Rather, it was necessary for members of the New Left to 'deepen their understanding of what that relationship actually is'. Hall called for a literature that was politically committed yet still successful aesthetically. In an example that clearly drew on Engels' famous contrast between Zola and Balzac, Hall compared Jack London's *The Iron Heel*, which is politically correct but sometimes clumsily didactic, and thus supposedly similar to *Spain*, with Lawrence's far subtler *Sons and Lovers*. Hall's, though, was a lonely voice: most of the participants in the debate on commitment remained polarised between the two positions he had tried to reconcile.

### Thompson on commitment

EP Thompson made three contributions to the debate on commitment in *Universities and Left Review*. In the very first issue of the journal he delivered what may have been the first detailed response to Amis' pamphlet, which had been published only a few weeks earlier. Thompson began his essay by acknowledging that, as a recent departee from the Communist Party of Great Britain, he felt 'caught in the crossfire of a divided world'.<sup>33</sup> Conceding that 'rejection of Communism, or Marxism, or Belief in Progress, is now a trivial routine affair', Thompson took pains to differentiate himself from intellectuals who had departed the party and travelled toward some embittered acquiescence with the status quo. He complains of a 'dogmatic anti-communism' and a 'retreat from humanism', both of

which have been quickened, in certain circles at least, by events in Hungary.

After a justifiable sneer at the fantastic pretensions of the young Colin Wilson, Thompson settles down to a discussion of Amis' tract for the Fabian Society. Thompson makes it clear that he admires Amis' writing, and still considers him a socialist. He detects, nonetheless, a 'reluctant shuffle' away from 'humanism' and 'political commitment' in *Socialism and the Intellectuals*.<sup>34</sup> Thompson zeroes in on Amis' claim that 'it is easy to laugh' at intellectuals who went to fight in Spain, and notes that this charge 'is supported by a line from WH Auden, and a gloss from George Orwell'.<sup>35</sup> He complains that in 'Inside the Whale' Orwell removed lines of Auden's *Spain* from their proper context, and then misrepresented them as apologies for the crimes of Stalin's agents in Spain. In a section of his article called 'Spain: the Act of Choice', Thompson insists that the decision to fight in Spain was prompted not by some sort of romantic reflex peculiar to intellectuals, but by a considered commitment to one side of a conflict that seemed likely to determine the course of European history.

In the last part of his article, which he gives the subtitle 'The Intellectuals Disengaged', Thompson talks of a gap that exists in post-war Britain between intellectuals and the labour movement. In the 1930s, by contrast, a 'circuit' connecting the two ran through institutions like the Left Book Club, the Unity Theatre, and the *Left Review*. The 'block' which has developed between intellectuals and the labour movement has bred a certain philistinism in the labour movement, as well as an ivory tower 'detachment' amongst too many intellectuals. Thompson believes that the 'emergence of 'socialist humanism' – he is presumably referring to the appearance of the New Left of Britain, and the revolts against Stalinism shaking Eastern Europe – has the potential to break down the barriers between intellectuals and workers, and restore the 'circuit' that energised both groups in the thirties.<sup>36</sup>

Thompson's early entry into the debate about commitment meant that his response to Amis, as well as Amis' pamphlet itself, was a topic for discussion in the second issue of *Universities and Left Review*. Mervyn Jones and the philosopher Charles Taylor both wrote responses to Thompson's article; the editors of *Universities and Left Review* showed Jones' and Taylor's texts to Thompson, who felt he had been misrepresented, and wrote a text called 'Socialism and the Intellectuals – a reply' in time for the journal's second issue.<sup>37</sup> Thompson strenuously objects to his friend Jones' claim that intellectuals are

defined by their 'public position'. He protests that 'ordinary' people can be intellectuals, and points to Britain's working-class autodidact tradition.

Thompson responds angrily to Taylor's claim that communism is a fatally flawed idea, and to his deprecatory remarks about the pro-communist intellectuals of the 1930s. Thompson particularly objects to Taylor's claim that the work of the 1930s writers was overly didactic, on account of their closeness to the Communist Party. Thompson argues that Taylor has read the politics of post-war Stalinism back into the 1930s. This is a mistake, because the rise of Stalinism in the European Communist parties was only made possible by the destruction of the politics and in many cases the personnel of those parties at the hands of fascism and Stalin's agents. The parties which emerged from the long nightmare of fascism and World War Two had lost many of their old leaderships and rank and file members, and were thus easier for Stalin to bend to his will.

Thompson agrees with Taylor that much of the work of Lenin and some of the work of Marx needs to be questioned, and perhaps abandoned. But he insists that recent events in Eastern Europe prove, rather than disprove, the claims made for communism by sympathetic intellectuals in the 1930s. For Thompson, the opponents of Stalinism in Poland and Hungary are links to the Popular Fronts of the 1930s, and are easily related to an English socialist tradition – 'the tradition of Morris and Mann, Fox and Caudwell'.<sup>38</sup>

Thompson's third contribution to the debate on commitment in the *Universities and Left Review* came almost two years later, in the Spring 1959 issue of the journal. By 1959, plans to fuse *New Reasoner* with the *Universities and Left Review* were well advanced, and the New Left was an established, if still relatively marginal, part of the British political scene. As we will see in chapter 3, though, the New Left was troubled by political infighting and organisational confusion, and Thompson was playing an increasingly divisive role in the movement. His initial optimism about the prospects for joint work with the young intellectuals around *Universities and Left Review* had been replaced by an unease which found expression in a stream of bad-tempered internal memorandums.

'Commitment in Politics', the article published in the Spring 1959 issue of *Universities and Left Review*, reflects Thompson's troubled relations with the circle around the journal. Thompson begins on a bleak note:

Politics, for many of my friends, has meant some years of agonised impotence in the face of European fascism and approaching war; six years of war, whose triumphant conclusion and liberating aftermath were blighted by betrayals; a few years of makeshift defensive campaigns in the face of the Cold War and the fatty degeneration of the Labour Movement.<sup>39</sup>

Thompson's words place an immediate distance between him and most of the contributors to and readers of *Universities and Left Review*, young men and women who had only hazy memories of the era of World War Two, let alone the world of the thirties. The next part of 'Commitment in Politics' is no more conciliatory. Thompson notes that certain 'jibes' have been circulating about the *Universities and Left Review* circle, and then draws up a long list of these complaints. According to the anonymous jibers, *Universities and Left Review* believes in commitment to the arts, but not in class struggle; thinks that ugly architecture is worse than the ugliness of poverty; likes the Marx of the *1844 Manuscripts*, but not the Marx of *Capital*, and so on. As we will see in chapter 3, jibes like these tended to come from the typewriter of EP Thompson.

In a rather disingenuous gesture of generosity, Thompson says that the jibes he has listed are only half-justified. He believes that *Universities and Left Review* is occasionally guilty of 'aestheticism' and a 'fear' of the labour movement, but he thinks that these failings can be overcome if the journal and its readers can attain a 'sense of history'.<sup>40</sup> *Universities and Left Review's* sensitivity to the new features and fashions of post-war British society is commendable, Thompson says, but these features need to be related to broad trends in British history, or else what is historically contingent may be unjustly generalised into an eternal truth. The less than militant working class of the 1950s, for example, should not be the basis of generalisations about the whole history and future of that class. The quiescence of the 1950s is an aberration, not a rule.

Thompson also stresses that the rising wages and democratic and legal rights attained by the post-war union movement are the results of popular struggles of the past, not the magnanimity of Britain's ruling class. When these facts are understood, Thompson insists, the potential of the working class to awake from its post-war slumber and make new advances can be grasped. In a passage near the end of 'Commitment in Politics', Thompson invokes the Aldermaston march being held annually by the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament as an

example of the potential for positive political action linking the intellectuals of the New Left to the working class:

The presence of some thousands of young 'middle class' people was a great feature of the march. Who could have supposed, from an aloof analysis of the reading matter of the intelligentsia three years ago – *Waiting for Godot* and 1984, the back end of the *New Statesman* and the front end of *Encounter*, [Colin Wilson's] *The Outsider*, and Mr Khrushchev's secret speech – that out of such despair and contempt for common people, this swift maturity of protest could arise?<sup>41</sup>

In the conclusion to his article, Thompson restates the case for commitment, though he emphasises that he does not use the word in any 'narrow, organisationally-limited way'. Thompson argues that, by reopening connections between their work and the institutions and causes of the labour movement, intellectuals can help radicalise the working class. He maintains that it is the working class which has the power to change society, but insists that intellectuals can play a role in precipitating action by the class:

'The power to compel' must always remain with the organised workers, but the intellectuals may bring the hope, [and] a sense of their own strength and political life.<sup>42</sup>

### Fighting on two fronts

'Outside the Whale' has usually been viewed as an attack on the 'Nato-politan' intellectual and cultural establishment its author despised. The essay can also be seen, though, as EP Thompson's lengthiest and most eloquent contribution to the debate on commitment that raged in the first New Left. 'Outside the Whale' is a text that fights on two fronts. The essay contains few explicit references to the debate inside the New Left, but the contexts that Thompson chose for it shows his deep concern with the argument about commitment as well as wider confrontations within the movement he had helped to found.

'Outside the Whale' was delivered as a talk at a New Left Club meeting in 1959, and then included in *Out of Apathy*, the loose, book-length manifesto issued by the New Left in 1960.<sup>43</sup> At a New Left Club meeting in 1959, 'Outside the Whale' would inevitably been taken as the latest instalment in the long-running debate about commitment.

The debate on commitment and the situation of the New Left explain not only a part of the purpose of 'Outside the Whale', but also



the text's emphasis on the apparently obscure literary disputes of the 1930s. As we have seen, texts like Auden's *Spain* and Orwell's 'Inside the Whale' were not the object of antiquarian interest for left-wing intellectuals in 1950s Britain. For many contributors to the debate on commitment that had filled so many pages of *Universities and Left Review*, the 1930s were a sort of 'high ground' that overlooked contemporary debates about the relationship between intellectuals and workers and the desirability of creating politically committed art.

The 'Natopolitans' wanted to control the high ground so they could prevent the development of a new generation of radical intellectuals. Both of the major factions of the New Left wanted to foster a radical intelligentsia, but they disagreed about how to do this, and their disagreements became intertwined with arguments about the meaning and legacy of the radical intelligentsia that had briefly existed in Britain in the thirties.

Key members of the *Universities and Left Review* circle saw the 1930s as a warning, as well as an inspiration. For them, one of the important lessons of the 1930s was that intellectuals and artists must not allow their work to become to be used too instrumentally in pursuit of political causes. The autonomy of the intellectual must be preserved, and journals must not be too concerned with winning a large working-class audience, if the result is a 'dumbing down' of content. The building of a radical intelligentsia should not be subordinated to the building of a mass working movement. For many of the *New Reasoner* circle, though, a radical intelligentsia could not exist without a radical labour movement; intellectuals and workers needed each other. In 'Outside the Whale', EP Thompson struggles to wrest the 'high ground' of the 1930s from both the Natopolitans of Britain's literary establishment and the young men and women around *Universities and Left Review*.

### The larger scheme

In *Out of Apathy*, a book whose unwieldy structure and diverse contributors reflected the disorder of the New Left, 'Outside the Whale' was accompanied by two other Thompson texts, 'At the Point of Decay' and 'Revolution', which laid out an analysis of the contemporary British political scene and a strategic road for the left to advance along (we will discuss 'Revolution' in detail in chapter 4).<sup>44</sup> Together, the three texts acted as a sort of manifesto within a manifesto. 'Outside

the Whale' may have lacked many specific references to the New Left, but Thompson's two other contributions to *Out of Apathy* provided these aplenty. Together, 'Revolution' and 'At the Point of Decay' also illuminated the alternative to the Natopolitan intellectual culture Thompson condemned.<sup>45</sup>

We can say, then, that 'Revolution' and 'At the Point of Decay' concretise some of 'Outside the Whale'. As we will see in chapter 4, 'Revolution' fuses elements of British 'gradualist' socialism and 'classical' Bolshevism to propose an unusual route to power for Britain's radical left. Though it is never Thompson's main subject, the critique of Natopolitan ideology runs through 'Revolution'. Thompson criticises the tepid left social democracy of John Strachey and Richard Crossland, and ascribes the timidity of this ideology to its proponents' failure to challenge the obligations the Cold War and NATO membership have imposed upon Britain.

### Reading 'Outside the Whale'

'Outside the Whale' begins in 1955, as Thompson revisits the election where the British plumbed for the Tory government 'which was to see them through the crises of Quemoy, Suez, Hungary, hydrogen bomb tests, Jordan and other crucial incidents of the twentieth century.'<sup>46</sup> Thompson argues that the 1955 campaign was characterised not by genuine political debate, but by the agreement of the three main parties on the 'political and strategic premises of NATO'. No party campaigned against Britain's role in the Cold War that had begun almost a decade earlier; no party dared to question an Anglo-American alliance in which Britain now played a decidedly junior role.

Worse, perhaps, was the acquiescence of Britain's intellectuals in this 'Natopolitan' consensus. EP Thompson notes that, with one honourable exception, intellectuals played no important independent role in the campaign. Only the eighty-three year-old Bertrand Russell dared to intervene, by mounting the stage at a big Labour campaign meeting and raising the issue of the nuclear annihilation that the division of the post-war world into two hostile blocs threatened to bring. For his pains, Russell was mocked by Alistair Cooke in the *Manchester Guardian*, 'the favourite newspaper of British intellectuals'. How, Thompson wonders, could Cooke have been able to assume that his audience would share his scorn for the elderly man's intervention?

Why was it that Cooke could safely count on readers echoing his chuckle at the notion of 'progress to mankind' that Russell's left-wing politics represented?

Thompson believes that the 1955 campaign in general, and the isolation of Russell in particular, demonstrate the 'apathy' to which both British intellectuals and wider British society had succumbed since the end of World War Two. The division of the world into two power blocs, and two competing official ideologies – 'Stalinism', in the East, and 'Natopolitanism', in the West – has much to do with this apathy.

Thompson believes that the ideology of Natopolitanism has been developing since well before the beginning of the Cold War and the creation of NATO, and that it has gone through two stages of growth. In its first stage, when it was confined mostly to intellectuals, it was a sort of 'recoil' from harsh, disillusioning facts. Intellectuals who had, in the midst of the Great Depression and the rise of fascism, seen in the Soviet Union the promise of a better world, and in the Spanish Civil War a titanic struggle between pure good and pure evil, were confronted by events like the Moscow trials of 1938, and the execution of left-wing dissidents by pro-Moscow Republican forces in Spain. Shocked, they retreated from all political commitment, and indeed from all belief in the possibility of political action to change the world for the better. They abandoned the very idea of 'progress to mankind' in favour of a recycled notion of original sin. Their 'disenchantment' found its way into print, and became 'a central motif within Western culture'.<sup>47</sup>

In its second stage, Natopolitanism became a 'capitulation' to the status quo of Western capitalism and imperialism.<sup>48</sup> Intellectuals drifted from a despairing withdrawal from politics to a weary acceptance of the structures and rituals of Western society. Thompson compares the rightwards movement of the victims of Natopolitanism to the ideological drift that Wordsworth recorded in some of his most famous poems. Where Napoleon had upset Wordsworth, Stalin and Stalinism upset intellectuals who had been radicals in the 1930s.<sup>49</sup> There is a difference, though:

If history has repeated itself, it has most certainly done so as farce. Half a century, and years of self-examination, divide Wordsworth, the ardent revolutionary, from Wordsworth, the Laureate of Queen Victoria. In our time the reversion took place in a decade.<sup>50</sup>

In the second section of 'Outside the Whale,' Thompson turns to Auden and *Spain* to understand the first stage of Natopolitan 'regress'.<sup>51</sup> Thompson glosses the poem with a pithiness and sympathy that remind us that he had by 1959 spent more than a decade teaching English literature for the Workers Education Association:

The poem is constructed in four movements. First, a series of stanzas whose cumulative historical impressionism brings the struggle of 'today' within the perspective of civilisation. Second, a passage in which the poet, scientist and poor invoke an amoral life-force to rescue them from their predicament; and the life-force responds by placing the choice for moral choice and action upon them. ('I am whatever you do ... I am your choice, your decision. Yes, I am Spain').<sup>52</sup>

For Thompson, the third movement of the poem is the key to its meaning. In long, carefully weighted lines Auden describes the International Brigades that flocked to Spain to confront fascism:

Many have heard it on remote peninsulas,  
Or sleepy plains, in the aberrant fisherman's islands,  
    Or the corrupt heart of the city,  
Have heard and migrated like gulls or the seeds of a flower,  
  
They clung like birds to the long expresses that lurch  
Through the unjust lands, through the night, through the alpine tunnel;  
    They floated over the oceans;  
They walked the passes. All presented their lives.  
  
On that arid square, that fragment snipped off from hot  
Africa, soldered so crudely to inventive Europe;  
    On that tableland scored by rivers,  
Our thoughts have bodies; the menacing shapes of our fever  
  
Are precise and alive. For the fears that made us respond  
To the medicine ad and the brochure of winter cruises  
    Have become invading battalions;  
And our faces, the institute-face, the chain-store, the ruin  
  
Are projecting their greed as the firing squad and the bomb ...  
Madrid is the heart. Our moments of tenderness blossom  
    As the ambulance and the sandbag;  
Our hours of friendship into a people's army.  
  
Tomorrow, perhaps, the future.<sup>53</sup>

After quoting this passage, Thompson resumes his commentary:

In the fourth movement [the movement just quoted] we pass away, once again, from the Spanish war, into a passage of inventive impressionism (balancing the first movement) suggestive of an imagined socialist future; and this leads to the coda, which picks up once again the theme of the third movement, and which places 'today' in a critical poise of action and choice between yesterday and tomorrow:

To-day the deliberate increase in the chances of death,  
The conscious acceptance of guilt in the necessary murder;  
    To-day the expending of powers  
On the flat ephemeral pamphlet and the boring meeting.

To-day the makeshift consolations: the shared cigarette,  
The cards in the candlelit barn, and the scraping concert,  
    The masculine jokes; to-day the  
Fumbled and unsatisfactory embrace before hurting.

The stars are dead. The animals will not look.  
We are left alone with our day, and time is short, and  
    History to the defeated  
May say Alas but cannot help nor pardon.<sup>54</sup>

Thompson notes that *Spain* is 'commonly underestimated today', and he links this underestimation to the drastic changes Auden has made to his text over the years, as well as changes in the world outside the poem. When he collected *Spain*, which had originally been published as a pamphlet, in his 1940 book *Another Time*, Auden changed the controversial phrase 'the necessary murder' to 'the fact of murder'. When he compiled his first *Collected Poems* ten years later, Auden cut the last two stanzas in the third movement of *Spain*, and thereby destroyed what Thompson calls 'the fulcrum of the poem's formal organisation and the focus of the preceding and succeeding imagery'. Auden has, according to Thompson, committed 'a calculated act of mutilation' against his own poem.<sup>55</sup>

For Thompson, it is not only an individual poem which is compromised by the 'excisions' of 1950, but Auden's whole achievement as a poet. Thompson sees *Spain* as the consummation of the poems of social malaise and personal unease that made Auden famous in the 1930s. In collections like *The Orators* and *Listen! Stranger*, Auden is aware of the destructiveness of personal neuroses – our 'private wounds' – as well as the chronic and seemingly insoluble economic and political malaise of England, 'this country where no-one is well'. Thompson thinks this tension between the personal and social 'gives

to some early poems their probing, undoctrinaire, diagnostic tone. Nevertheless, the conflict between psychology and social analogy demanded some sort of resolution, and in *Spain* Auden found a theme 'demanding a resolution.' The nature of this resolution was explained, Thompson claims, in the stanzas that Auden cut from his poem in 1950:

*If the source of the conflict may still be traced to the individual human heart, the issue must be decided in the Spanish theatre of war. And the decision, if favourable, may be a watershed for human nature ... [in Spain] ... [t]here is no ambiguity.*<sup>56</sup>

By 1940, let alone 1950, Auden had changed his mind about the affirmations of *Spain*, and thus decided to revise the poem. Thompson locates the reasons for the change in the international events of 1937–39: Stalin's purges and the bizarre Moscow show trials; the 'increasing orthodoxy' of the Popular Front in Spain; and the Russo-German pact, which saw Stalin abandoning his anti-fascist rhetoric and dividing Poland with Hitler. Thompson does not fault Auden for being shocked by these events; it is the wholesale disenchantment which followed shock that he regrets:

It is not the authenticity of Auden's experience which we are disputing, but the default implicit in his response. There is, after all, some difference between confronting a problem and giving it up ... when many were showing an affirming flame on the seven fronts of fire and oppression unleashed by the Spanish defeat, Auden's own flame had been doused.<sup>57</sup>

Turning to 'September 1, 1939', the poem Auden wrote in a New York bar after learning of the Nazi invasion of Poland, Thompson finds a picture of 'a mind in recoil' from the realities of what Auden now called 'a low dishonest decade'.<sup>58</sup> Thompson shows that, in place of the complex social analysis of *Spain*, Auden introduces the concept of original sin into 'September 1, 1939'. Original sin goes hand in hand with a kind of apathy. Where the Auden of *Spain* had believed in the possibility of redeeming humanity through mass political action, the Auden of 'September 1, 1939' is, by and large, resigned to the inevitability of the nightmare the world is experiencing. The poem's few 'affirmative' lines, like the famous exclamation that 'We must love one another or die' are not related to any sort of political action. Rather than a 'people's army', Auden imagines a few isolated 'just men' showing 'an affirmative flame' on the margins of a dark world, and

'flashing messages' to one another across the obscurity. If justice is possible, Auden suggests, it is possible only in a sort of ideal world – a Christian Platonist heaven. The real world and its history are not redeemable. In a magisterial passage, Thompson connects the turn in Auden's thinking to the wider trend he sees in Western culture:

The most marvellous thing about the adherence to the doctrine of original sin (in its Manichaean contortions) is that there is nothing to be done about it ... The quietist ... has attained through meditation and spiritual exercise to the great Natopolitan truth first stumbled upon by Henry Ford: 'History is bunk.'<sup>59</sup>

Thompson believes that Auden's decision to cut 'We must love one another or die' and similarly 'affirmative' lines out of 'September 1, 1939' when he republished the poem in 1950 shows the logic of Natopolitan 'drift' at work. For Thompson, the tone of the later, 'American' Auden, and of Natopolitan intellectuals in general, is 'one of tired disenchantment'. The one really impassioned aspect of Natopolitan ideology is, of course, anti-communism. Thompson believes that, for Natopolitans, 'ritual demolitions of Marxism' serve 'necessary theological functions':

[Communism] would remain a necessity to Natopolitans, as a Satanic Idea, even if the Soviet Union were to vanish from the earth. And the remaining intellectual apologists for Stalinism are as necessary to the functioning of the cultural life of the free world as was the odd atheist, witch, or Saracen within medieval Christendom.<sup>60</sup>

In a section of his essay called 'Inside Which Whale?', EP Thompson turns his attention to George Orwell, whom he regards as another architect of Natopolitan ideology. Examining Orwell's essay 'Inside the Whale', which became famous for its splenetic attack on Auden and his circle of left-wing 'nancy poets', Thompson finds a tone of 'wholesale, indiscriminate rejection'. Repeating the argument he made in response to Charles Taylor in *Universities and Left Review*, Thompson insists that Orwell's anti-communism and his jibes about left-wing intellectuals ignore the humanism and heroism of writers like Ralph Fox and Christopher Caudwell, who died fighting fascism in Spain. Thompson is particularly unimpressed by Orwell's discussion of *Spain*; he accuses Orwell of offering up a 'sheer caricature' of the meaning of Auden's poem, and of 'replacing the examination of objective situations by the imputation of motive.'<sup>61</sup> Thompson claims that Orwell's caricature of Auden and his cohorts as irresponsible

romantic rebels has 'passed into Natopolitan folklore', and notes its reprise in Kingsley Amis' Fabian Society pamphlet.

In Thompson's view, Auden's phrase 'the necessary murder' represented nothing more than an acceptance that any war, no matter how just, requires killing. Thompson claims a huge influence for 'Inside the Whale' when he argues that it was in Orwell's essay, 'more than any other', that the 'aspirations of a generation were buried'. Orwell's belief that the fine causes of the 1930s have turned out to be a 'swindle', and his vision of a world where authors substitute the apolitical quietism of Henry Miller for the commitment of *Spain*, seem to Thompson like a prophecy of Natopolitanism. He suggests that 'Inside the Whale' had little influence during the first half of the forties, when the peoples of Europe were engaged in a new war against fascism, but that:

[A]fter the war and after Hiroshima, as the four freedoms fell apart and the Cold War commenced, that people turned back to 'Inside the Whale'.<sup>62</sup>

In a section of 'Outside the Whale' he names 'Pig's head on a stick', after a famous image in William Golding's novel *Lord of the Flies*, Thompson looks at some of the challenges to Natopolitanism that have emerged in the second half of the 1950s. Yoking together the anti-Stalinist risings in Eastern Europe, the New Left, and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, he argues that:

It was the cockcrow of the Hungarian rising which – by denying the horror of 1984 – lifted the spell of impotence. It was the threat of annihilation that made the quietists rebel.<sup>63</sup>

Like the hero of *Lord of the Flies*, Thompson's readers have to face up to the horror, not recoil like Natopolitans.<sup>64</sup> 'The Beast is real', Thompson tells us, 'but its reality exists within our conformity and fear'.

### Thompson's parable

It is worth noting what 'Outside the Whale' is not. Though the essay runs to more than thirty pages, it eschews a systematic survey of the 1930s intelligentsia, and avoids a careful analysis of the defeat of the Republican cause in Spain. Thompson also eschews the sort of impressionistic, semi-autobiographical account of the 1930s and 1940s that was becoming popular by the late 1950s. Although he had vivid memories of the crises of the late 1930s and witnessed the war



‘unleashed by the failure of Spain’ at first hand, Thompson avoids personal reminiscence. ‘Outside the Whale’ cannot even be considered a political polemic, if the term is understood reasonably precisely. Thompson does not connect his criticisms of WH Auden and George Orwell to any concrete political positions and arguments, though he does supply such things in other places, like the two other texts he contributed to *Out of Apathy*. ‘Outside the Whale’ has many of the qualities of a parable, and like all parables it ends with a moral lesson.

In Thompson’s eyes, Auden and Orwell passed the ‘test’ of Spain, but not the ‘test’ of Stalinism. Their failure was moral, as much as intellectual – that is to say, it was not their initial analysis of Stalinism that was flawed, but their decision to ‘give up’ in the face of ‘disenchantment’. Their failure does not, of course, invalidate their actions in 1937, or the integrity and quality of works like *Spain* and *Homage to Catalonia*. On the contrary, their commitment and its literary legacy ought to be an inspiration to the New Left two decades later.

The strongly moral flavour of Thompson’s explanation for Auden’s and Orwell’s trajectory is well suited to his purpose, because it makes ‘teleological’ readings of their committed work difficult. The drift into Natopolitanism was caused not by some deep-rooted error in their thoughts and words, but by an isolated failure of nerve – the sort of ‘default’ in the face of unpleasant reality that knocked Wordsworth off course more than a century earlier. Neither the Natopolitan intellectuals nor the Young Turks of the New Left can draw a line between *Spain* and *The Age of Anxiety*, or *Homage to Catalonia* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

The style of ‘Outside the Whale’ suits Thompson’s intentions well. Thompson’s prose echoes Orwell’s, even when it criticises Orwell. Thompson builds Auden’s vocabulary into his text by quoting long stretches of *Spain* and also dropping catchphrases from the poem into his sentences. Thompson’s intense sympathy with the committed work of Orwell and Auden makes his style much more than a pastiche. ‘Outside the Whale’ can be considered a sort of ‘polemic-homage’: a text that pays tribute to its subjects, even as it delimits their achievements and explains their failings. The tone of ‘Outside the Whale’ also owes a debt to Orwell, as Christopher Norris notes:

[In ‘Outside the Whale’] we have what often reads like a latter-day Orwellian riposte, albeit on a level of argument more intricate and sustained than anything in Orwell ... Thompson takes over some of the

plain-speaking, common-sense, empirical 'line', even while deploring what it led to in Orwell's case ... There is the air of a knock-down common-sense argument, an exasperated appeal to what anyone must recognise unless they are in the grip of some half-baked 'theory' or other.<sup>65</sup>

### The influence of Jarrell

Despite its idiosyncratic moralism, 'Outside the Whale' draws carefully on the literary-critical and academic literatures on Orwell and Auden. Thompson's account of Auden's career is indebted to the American critic Randall Jarrell's pioneering essay 'Changes of Attitude and Rhetoric in Auden's Poetry'.<sup>66</sup> Jarrell accepted Auden's own view that his move to America represented a fundamental 'break' in his work, but lamented the consequences of this break. Jarrell identified several stages in the development, or rather degeneration, of Auden's work, arguing that the retreat from political commitment ushered in a period of quietism, and that, as Auden became more enamoured with Christianity, this quietism evolved into an acquiescence with the status quo of Anglo-American society.

Like Thompson, Jarrell criticises Auden's physical and emotional distance from the war against fascism that took up the first half of the 1940s. It is difficult to know whether Thompson read Jarrell's essays on Auden for himself, or absorbed their arguments via the many critics and academics Jarrell influenced. John Boyle has described the impact of Jarrell's view of Auden:

Jarrell's may be the most influential criticism ever written about Auden. Its idea of a three-step development, from personal, to social, then back to personal (religious) concerns, has furnished a framework that both Auden's defenders and detractors have been obliged to accept.<sup>67</sup>

### Revising Auden

'Outside the Whale's' discussion of the 'act of mutilation' against *Spain*, and the less dramatic changes to 'September the 1st, 1939', probably owes a debt to *The Making of the Auden Canon*, a book published by AW Beach in 1957.<sup>68</sup> Beach was the first scholar to trace the numerous changes that Auden had made to his poems in the 1940s and 1950s. Like Thompson, Beach believed that these revisions reduced the integrity of Auden's work. In a perceptive review of Beach's book

for the journal *Essays in Criticism*, the academics AE Rodway and FW Cook seized upon the later Auden's tendency to capitalise his favourite abstract noun:

In [Auden's] early verse, although the abstraction 'love' was primarily concerned with concrete action, was nevertheless also invested with peculiar mystical power ... [it] appeared to reside at the points where the poet's own versions of Marx's and Freud's theories conjoined in his imagination ... this earlier use of 'love' lent itself, by capitalisation ... to easy transformation into a 'Love' implying 'God is Love.'<sup>69</sup>

In 'Outside the Whale', Thompson makes a similar point:

It was also futile [for the quietist Auden] to affirm 'love' in its active social connotations; hence that retreat, in Auden's ... verse, into an abstract capitalised 'Love', undefined by any context of human obligation. And in this, once again, Auden exemplifies a more general pattern of regression.<sup>70</sup>

Thompson's interest in the successive revisions that Auden made to *Spain* may have been piqued by his study of William Blake's poem 'London'. In a 1958 issue of *New Reasoner*, Thompson published an article called 'The Making of 'London' under the pseudonym William Jessup.<sup>71</sup> Using a few of the plentiful manuscripts Blake left to posterity, Thompson's article traces the evolution of 'London' through a series of rough drafts. Noting changes like the substitution of the famous line 'I wander through each charter'd street' for 'I wander through each dirty street', Thompson argues that Blake carefully constructed 'London' as 'a poem with a clearly conceived, developing emotional logic' which operated within 'a central theme of [the hypocrisies of] bourgeois morality'.<sup>72</sup> It is hard to believe that the multiple versions of 'London' were not in the back of Thompson's mind when he wrote about the revisions Auden made to *Spain*. Of course, Thompson thought that Blake's revisions had a very different purpose to Auden's 'mutilation' of his greatest poem.

### Orwell's shadow

'Outside the Whale' includes a nod to Raymond Williams' *Culture and Society*, which ruffled Natopolitan feathers when it appeared in 1958. Thompson had good reason to be grateful to Williams: his account of the career of George Orwell owes much to *Culture and Society*.<sup>73</sup> John Rodden has carefully reconstructed Williams' long and torturous

relationship with Orwell's work, and his observation that 'Williams struggled ... to cast himself as Orwell's successor and to withdraw from Orwell's shadow' could easily be applied to 'Outside the Whale'.<sup>74</sup> By praising Orwell's sacrifices in Spain and recognising the essential correctness of his anti-Stalinism, yet rejecting the 'disenchantment' and 'tone of wholesale rejection' in 'Inside the Whale' and later works like *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Thompson tried simultaneously to praise Orwell and to put Orwell in his place.

As Rodden notes, though, Thompson's criticisms of Orwell are more severe than Williams', and his tone is a good deal harsher. Rodden attributes these differences to the fact that Thompson occupied a position to the left of Williams in the late 1950s, and favoured a more activist programme for the New Left than Williams, whose overriding interest in scholarship drew him towards Orwell's pioneering studies of popular culture, and perhaps made him less conscious of the rather unconstructive criticisms of the left which mar Orwell's more political work.<sup>75</sup>

There are two other likely reasons for the severe treatment of Orwell in 'Outside the Whale'. The first is Thompson's long-time membership of the Communist Party of Great Britain – a commitment that was only three years in the past when 'Outside the Whale' was written. The party had spent a lot of energy attacking Orwell in the first half of the 1950s, and some of its hostility may have remained with Thompson after 1956.

Thompson may also have received a firsthand, and very unflattering, account of Orwell the man, courtesy of the young poet David Holbrook, who lived for several weeks with the ailing anti-communist in the summer of 1946, when the first draft of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was taking shape. As members of the Communist Party's writers' group in the years immediately after World War Two, Thompson and Holbrook met regularly to discuss literature and politics. In 1946 they appear to have worked closely together to topple Edgell Rickword from the editorship of *Our Time*, a literary journal linked to the party (we will discuss Thompson's involvement with *Our Time* in greater detail in chapter eleven). In his biography of Orwell, George Bowker describes Holbrook's visit to Jura Island, where his girlfriend had been working as Orwell's housekeeper:

Holbrook, twenty-three and a member of the Communist Party, was just out of the army, and finishing an English degree at Downing College, Cambridge. He was anxious to meet the controversial author of *The*

*Road to Wigan Pier* and *Animal Farm*, and was quite expecting to enjoy long conversations with him about literature and politics. He was to be disappointed. After struggling with his luggage over the last eight miles of track [to Orwell's home], menaced by rutting deer, he was greeted by the sight of Orwell shooting a duck ... Inside the house the mood was somber, the conversation gloomy and the atmosphere tense. He thought that having been told he was a Communist, Orwell suspected he had come to spy on him ... [Orwell] feared something even worse ... After all, Trotsky had been eliminated by a Communist agent who had insinuated himself into his household ... Holbrook had walked on to the set of a Kafkaesque dream being played out in Orwell's own mind.<sup>76</sup>

Holbrook often spoke and wrote about his encounter with Orwell; he even penned a few chapters of an abortive novel called *Burrows* based on the experience.<sup>77</sup> It is easy to imagine him telling Thompson and his other colleagues in the party writers' group about how unpleasant he had found the author of *Homage to Catalonia*. Thompson may even have read *Burrows*: writers' group members often shared work in progress with each other.

### Auden's road to Spain

It is time for us to assess some of the main arguments in 'Outside the Whale'. How correct were Thompson's assessments of the political and literary trajectories of Auden and Orwell, and how fair are his claims about the influence the two men exerted on the post-war world?

We should begin by noting that Thompson simplifies the origins and themes of the vast amount of writing that Auden did before *Spain*. Auden came from a wealthy northern family, attended Oxford, where he did badly despite his obvious talents, and became, at the beginning of the 1930s, a master in a second-rate British public school. Auden's very early work sometimes has an intense, joyful lyricism, but it is also marked by a feeling of malaise that Edward John Thompson would recognise. A sense of threat encroaches on the reveries of the young bohemian and his friends in poems like 'A Summer Night':

Soon, soon, through the dykes of content  
The crumpling flood will force a rent  
And, taller than a tree,  
Hold sudden death before our eyes  
Whose river dreams long hid the size  
And vigours of the sea.<sup>78</sup>

There is a hankering, in some of the poems Auden and his friends wrote in the early 1930s, for a messianic figure, like the ‘English Lenin’ that the editors of the landmark *New Country* poetry anthology called for in 1932.<sup>79</sup> In his 1932 book *The Orators*, Auden appears to flirt with the idea that a strong, authoritarian figure can deliver the English people from their unhappiness, and from the threat of economic ruin and war. Looking back on *The Orators* from the safety of old age, Auden remarked that it seemed to have been written by a young man who was ‘talented but near the border of sanity’, someone ‘who might well, in a year or two, become a Nazi.’<sup>80</sup> At times, the young Auden seems to see the working class as a potential source of salvation, but he is never unequivocal.

Auden’s experiences in Spain remain somewhat mysterious. Auden had talked for a time of going to Spain as a soldier, but eventually signed on with a group of ambulance drivers. Perhaps because of a perception of political unreliability, Auden was never employed as a driver by the Republican government. He ended up drifting around Spain for several months, visiting Barcelona, which was in the grip of a power struggle between the Communist Party and its anti-Stalinist enemies, and settling for a few weeks in Valencia, the makeshift Republican capital.<sup>81</sup>

Auden wrote a short, superficial article called ‘Impressions of Valencia’ and made a few English-language radio propaganda broadcasts that only reached areas already under anti-fascist control.<sup>82</sup> Auden ended up returning home early and holing up in the Lake District, where he wrote *Spain* and a brief but enthusiastic review of Christopher Caudwell’s *Illusion and Reality*. *Spain* was published as a pamphlet by Faber and Faber in July 1937; all profits from sales went to Medical Aid for Spain. The poem quickly sold out its first print run of three thousand copies, and was read aloud at pro-Republican public meetings throughout Britain.

### After Spain

Auden seldom commented on his experiences in Spain, but he did once say that seeing the hundreds of churches revolutionary forces had burned in Barcelona upset him, and made him aware of his residual sympathy for religion. In 1938 Auden was certainly showing an increased interest in Christianity, a doctrine that had not greatly interested him since he was a child. Auden was particularly affected

by a meeting with Vaughan Williams, a novelist and lay Anglican who belonged to the same social circle as JRR Tolkien and CS Lewis. When he met Williams in July 1937, Auden found that ‘for the first time’ he felt himself to be ‘in the presence of personal sanctity’.<sup>83</sup>

But 1938 is also the year Auden co-wrote the play *On the Frontier* with Christopher Isherwood. The play has usually been judged aesthetically unsuccessful, but it appears, with its frequent use of Marxist jargon and left-wing slogans, to be one of Auden’s most politically committed works. Auden’s emigration to the United States in May 1939 has often been taken to mark the end of any residual loyalty he had to the cause of the left. Shortly after arriving in New York, Auden wrote his famous elegy for WB Yeats, which included the line ‘Poetry makes nothing happen.’<sup>84</sup> In a little-known mock-trial of Yeats written in prose at about the same time as the elegy, Auden dismissed the idea of a politically committed and efficacious poetry at greater length.<sup>85</sup>

‘September 1, 1939’ is one of Auden’s most famous poems, and its characterisation of the 1930s as a ‘low, dishonest decade’ can reasonably be read as a repudiation of the political commitment *Spain* had seemed to offer. ‘September 1, 1939’ did not appear to distinguish between the forces and ideas – socialism and the trade unions, fascism and its street fighting gangs, the bourgeoisie and its press barons – that contested one another to determine the course of the 1930s: all of them, it seemed, were ‘low’ and ‘dishonest’. Yet ‘September 1, 1939’ was still filled with revulsion at the latest war fascism has started, and it included a few memorably urgent lines like ‘We must love one another or die.’

### Auden's odd influences

‘Outside the Whale’ appears to proceed under the assumption that the Popular Front which Auden supported, for a few months in 1937 at least, was built around a core of beliefs that united Communists, social democrats, liberals, left-wing Christians, and even some conservative anti-fascists. We saw in chapter 1 that the Communist Party of Great Britain made great efforts to define the content of this ideological core – Edgell Rickword and Jack Lindsay’s *A Handbook of Freedom*, the book that so deeply influenced Thompson, was one of the more notable attempts in this direction.

It is arguable, though, whether support for the politics of the Popular Front, and for organisations like Aid for Spain and the

government in Valencia, really demanded a coherent set of beliefs, beyond a basic desire to defeat fascism. In his eagerness to identify with the young Auden, Thompson perhaps disregards the influence that ideas which had nothing to do with the left exerted on *Spain*. Certainly, Thompson ignores signs of the influence that Freud, Jung and the diffusionist school of anthropological and historical thought popular in the 1930s had on Auden's most controversial poem.

The first section of *Spain*, which Thompson treats as a sort of verse essay in the historical materialist view of history, appears to have been strongly influenced by the peculiar writings of the then-popular WJ Perry. A heliocentrist as well as a diffusionist, Perry believed that civilisation had developed only once, in ancient Egypt, then spread around the world. In tomes like *The Children of the Sun: A Study of the Egyptian Settlement of the Pacific*, Perry ingeniously discovered 'evidence' for his theses.<sup>86</sup> John Fuller has suggested that Perry's shadow hangs over the opening section of *Spain*.<sup>87</sup> The poem's opening stanza certainly seems to nod in Perry's direction:

Yesterday all the past. The language of size  
Spreading to China along the trade routes; the diffusion  
Of the counting frame and the cromlech.

Another key feature of *Spain*, the alternating refrains 'Yesterday', 'To-morrow' and 'To-day' may have been prompted, in part at least, by a passage in Carl Jung's book *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*. Auden, who was fascinated by the new science of psychiatry, had certainly read Jung's book by 1937. One of Jung's passages may have suggested to Auden the structure of his poem:

'Today' stands between 'yesterday' and 'tomorrow', and forms a link between past and future; it has no other meaning. The present represents a process of transition, and that man may account himself modern who is conscious of it in that name.<sup>88</sup>

It may well be true that Auden wanted *Spain* to be a progressive poem loyal to the politics of the Popular Front and committed to the defeat of fascism. Auden certainly wanted his poem to be used for political purposes, and the Aid for Spain movement made good use of it in the second half of 1937. It may nevertheless be true that Auden understood the Popular Front very differently from Thompson, and that he fashioned his poem out of elements that had little to do with the politics of the left, as well as more familiar materials.



### The influence of Caudwell

One of the two main sources of Marxist influence on *Spain* was Christopher Caudwell's *Illusion and Reality*.<sup>89</sup> Auden was enthusiastic about Caudwell's hurriedly-written 'study of the sources of poetry', despite the fact that its final chapter included a critical account of his own work. Caudwell, who was killed in Spain at the beginning of 1937, months before *Illusion and Reality* was published, found Auden's political commitment disappointingly incomplete. He was particularly unimpressed by the vision of the future that appeared in the supposedly socialist poems of Auden and his friends Spender and Day-Lewis:

They know 'something' is going to come after the giant firework display of the Revolution, but they do not feel with the clarity of the artist the specific beauty of this new concrete living ... They must put 'something' there in the future, and they tend to put their own vague aspirations for bourgeois freedom and bourgeois equality.<sup>90</sup>

*Illusion and Reality* may be a badly flawed book, but this passage shows a fine appreciation of the peculiar situation faced by Auden and other radicalised English liberals in the 1930s. Caudwell is critiquing what we called in chapter 1 the 'twentieth-century ark' view of the Communist Party – that is, the view that the party could take on board a layer of bourgeois intellectuals, and thus help to preserve the best features of bourgeois high culture amidst the collapse of Western capitalist civilisation. As a Communist Party member who had made a sustained effort to escape his middle-class origins and sensibility, Caudwell was unimpressed with intellectuals who saw socialist revolution as a way to preserve bourgeois culture.

Caudwell's criticisms of Auden's vision of the future are extraordinarily applicable to *Spain*. Consider, for instance, these lines from the fourth 'movement' of the poem:

To-morrow, perhaps, the future: the research on fatigue  
And the movements of packers; the gradual exploring of all the Octaves  
of radiation;  
To-morrow the enlarging of consciousness by diet and breathing.  
To-morrow the rediscovery of romantic love;  
The photographing of ravens; all the fun under  
    Liberty's masterful shadow;  
To-morrow the hour of the pageant-master and musician.  
To-morrow for the young the poets exploding like bombs,

The walks by the lake, the winter of perfect communion;  
    To-morrow the bicycle races  
Through the suburbs on summer evenings.

Discussing on the sections of the poem that used the refrain 'To-morrow', Edward Mendelson pointed out that they had:

[L]ess to do with the class struggle than with ... visionary hopes to build Jerusalem in England's green and promised land ... The desired future in 'Spain' is a liberal one of freedom of expression and movement.<sup>91</sup>

Robert Sullivan, one of the first scholars to discuss the link between *Illusion and Reality* and *Spain*, has noted that Auden's vision of the post-revolutionary future seems designed to confirm Caudwell's criticisms.<sup>92</sup> It is tempting to believe that, holed up in the Lake District writing *Spain* and reading *Illusion and Reality*, Auden decided to accept Caudwell's criticisms of his political perspective and his poetry, without feeling the need to change either.

EP Thompson does not remark upon the traces of *Illusion and Reality* which can be found in *Spain*. It is doubtful whether Caudwell, with his faith in the 'science' of dialectical materialism and his contempt for liberal and religious thought, would have found Lindsay and Rickword's *A Handbook of Freedom* very edifying. Thompson was always sympathetic towards Caudwell, and wrote a fine appreciation of him for the 1977 *Socialist Register*,<sup>93</sup> but he did not esteem *Illusion and Reality*, perhaps because it draws such a firm line between 'genuine' Marxism, on the one hand, and the 'bourgeois' ideas of Auden and his peers, on the other.

### The shadow of Stalinism

Thompson is also reticent about the other main 'Marxist' influence on Auden's poem: the Stalinism of Moscow and its representatives in Spain. In 'Outside the Whale' and his other writings that touch on Spain, Thompson tends to fold the Communist Party of Spain into Spain's anti-fascist forces in general; by doing so, he elides the distinctions between the party and the rest of the Republican government, and between the party and its left-wing foes in Catalonia and Aragon.

Thompson never acknowledges the extent of the split within the anti-fascist camp over strategy. In Catalonia and Aragon, anarchists and the anti-Stalinist Party of Marxist Unification had moved from resistance against the fascist military rebellion to an offensive against

sectors of society that supported Franco. They occupied factories and farms, driving capitalists and big landowners away, and burnt thousands of churches to punish the clergy for supporting fascism. The workers and peasants of Catalonia and Aragon attempted to run the occupied farms and factories, as well as their militia, along democratic and socialist lines. In other parts of the country more moderate groups were in control of the anti-Franco struggle, and industry and farms were not usually occupied. The Communist Party of Spain insisted that the building of socialism in Spain could only follow the defeat of Franco – war and social transformation were to be two distinct ‘stages’ of the revolution. Alliances with the local bourgeoisie, and international bourgeois powers like Britain and France, had to be built, and the confiscation of capitalist property would hardly help this.<sup>94</sup>

The Communist Party also wished to centralise the war effort, by combining all militia into one tight, hierarchical army, and focusing resources on the defence of Madrid, so that the Republican government could return from its ‘exile’ in Valencia. The anarchists and anti-Moscow Marxists, by contrast, saw their power base of Barcelona as the heart of the revolution, and for some time refused to place their militia under the control of the official government of Spain, or tie them up in battles to defend Madrid.

Auden gave his broadcasts from Valencia at the behest of the government there, and the report he wrote from the city for the *New Statesman* faithfully reproduced the perspective of the Communist Party of Spain. In *Spain* the influence of the party line can perhaps also be detected. The poem’s distinction between ‘To-day’ and ‘To-morrow’ recalls the argument for a ‘two-stage’ revolution, and the line ‘Madrid is the heart’ recalls the insistence of the Kremlin’s local allies on the predominance of that city’s needs over the needs of other theatres of the revolution.<sup>95</sup>

### Simplifying Auden

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that EP Thompson simplifies Auden’s pre-Spain career, Auden’s response to Spain, and the importance of this response to his subsequent political and literary trajectory. Auden’s career in the 1930s was not a slow rise to a zenith of political commitment and literary achievement, followed by a sharp falling away. The journey to Spain was not some simplistic exercise in solidarity, marred by the ugly experience of Stalinism, and the

poem arising from that journey was not a simple expression of all that was pure in the struggle against Franco. Nor does the period between *Spain* and 'September 1, 1939' resolve into a simple narrative of 'disenchantment' and political and moral 'default'.

There is no doubt that Auden was, for at least a few months in 1937, a committed supporter of Popular Front politics and the Republican government, but his commitment had tangled roots, and it found expression in a poem as complex as it is beautiful. *Spain* is not a straightforward battle hymn for the Republic, but an unstable assemblage of many different ideological elements – 'bourgeois' utopian fantasy, Jungian gobbledygook, eccentric diffusionist theory-mongering, and Stalinist propaganda can all be located in the poem, alongside the moral outrage and political commitment that Thompson recognises, and so eloquently defends from the enormous condescension of posterity. Ultimately, Thompson's reading of *Spain* is an exercise in simplification.

### 'The necessary murder'?

EP Thompson may have misjudged some aspects of *Spain*, but he was right to defend the poem from the criticisms George Orwell made in 'Inside the Whale'. To concede that Stalinist ideology and rhetoric cast a shadow over *Spain* is not to agree with Orwell's argument that parts of *Spain*, and in particular the famous line about 'the necessary murder', were no more than an apology for Stalinism. It is fairer to say that Stalinist rhetoric was simply one of many elements that went into the forging of a very complex and ambiguous poem.

Auden's decision to revise the controversial line when he collected *Spain* in his 1940 volume *Another Time*, and his eventual repudiation of *Spain* as a whole, should not be taken as an admission of Orwell's charges. *Another Time* was published a week before *Inside the Whale*, whose title essay had not appeared in any periodical.<sup>96</sup> Even before Orwell's original attack on *Spain* had appeared in *Adelphi* at the end of 1938, Auden had begun to develop his own criticism of the poem. In November 1937, a mere four months after the publication of *Spain*, Auden gave a public lecture called 'The Craft of Poetry', during which he wondered whether it was possible to write about 'killing' without being 'a killer'.<sup>97</sup> Auden's talk also included the claim that 'poetry could never be taken quite seriously' – a statement that foreshadows the famous line 'Poetry makes nothing happen' in the elegy for Yeats.

As we have seen, doubts about the efficacy and morality of mixing politics with poetry had all but overwhelmed Auden by the time he came to write 'September the 1st, 1939'. He had arrived at his own, distinctive critique of *Spain* and his other 'committed' poems. What he objected to, in *Spain* and similar poems, were the notion that poetry could be used as propaganda, and the idea that morality was connected to the vicissitudes of political conflict.<sup>98</sup> Auden's failure to reply publicly to Orwell's attacks was a symptom of his disengagement from the commitment of *Spain*, but it was not an implicit admission of Orwell's charges. In a letter he wrote in 1963, about the time he decided never to republish *Spain*, Auden insisted that he still did not accept Orwell's argument about the poem's most famous line:

I was not excusing totalitarian crimes ... If there is such a thing as a just war, then murder can be necessary for the sake of justice.<sup>99</sup>

Auden's decision in 1940 to replace 'the conscious acceptance of guilt in the necessary murder' to 'the conscious acceptance of guilt in the fact of murder' does not dilute this point. Auden's line certainly cannot be taken as support for the execution of left-wing dissidents away from the frontlines by Stalin's agents in Spain. Arguably, Auden's decision to call the killing of one soldier by another 'murder' reflects an acute awareness of the horrors of war, rather than any sort of indifference to them. Thompson recognized this, and so did John Maynard Keynes, when he said in 1937 that Auden 'speaks for many chivalrous hearts'. In a 1941 essay on pacifism, the great literary critic William Empson made a similar point, arguing that the reference in 'Spain 1937' to 'the necessary murder' is actually the mark of 'a conscience sensitive about war rather than brutalised'.<sup>100</sup>

### Misjudging Orwell

EP Thompson's treatment of George Orwell is another problematic part of 'Outside the Whale'. It is not unreasonable to contrast the hope Orwell vested in the Spanish revolution with the pessimism of 'Inside the Whale'. But Orwell's career as a writer and political thinker lasted two decades, and featured an extraordinary number of twists and turns. By the time that 'Inside the Whale' had been collected in the book of the same name in 1940 Orwell had well and truly 'recovered' from his bout of quietism.

Indeed, it is doubtful whether the pessimism of 'Inside the Whale'

really reflected Orwell's politics at any point in the late 1930s. Certainly, Orwell became more rather than less politically committed after returning from Spain. While he was still recovering from his wounds he joined the Independent Labour Party: this was an important decision, because he had previously believed that writers should not belong to political organisations, even if they supported those organisations' policies. In an article called 'Why I Join the ILP', Orwell insisted that a 'new age' of 'rubber truncheons and concentration camps' meant that writers had to be less distant from politics than they might prefer.<sup>101</sup>

In 1938 and 1939 Orwell wrote often about the oncoming world war, arguing that British workers should refuse to fight in such a conflict. EP Thompson appears to associate this argument with the mood of 'Inside the Whale', but it had more to do with the 'revolutionary defeatism' preached by the Trotskyist left wing of the Independent Labour Party than with despair. 'Revolutionary defeatism' was based upon an overoptimistic evaluation of the prospects for revolution, not upon any sort of despair.

We have seen that Thompson makes Orwell into an example of those 'turned' to arch-quietism by a late-1930s disillusionment with Stalinism, but the Orwell of the 1940s developed a fierce faith in a peculiarly English socialism. The classic expression of Orwell's alternative to Stalinism is *The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius*, a little book published in 1941.<sup>102</sup> *The Lion and the Unicorn* argued that the survival and advancement of the culture of the first capitalist country depended on its 'going socialist'. Orwell argued that Britain could only compete with 'totalitarian' societies like Germany and the Soviet Union by planning its economic and social development, and by eliminating the irrationalities of class and superstition.

Neither a quietist nor a Colonel Blimp, Orwell saw the war as a struggle for the transformation of British society as well as the defeat of fascism, and repeatedly tried to enlist in the army. Eventually he became active in the Home Guard, an institution which he promoted, in a series of articles and letters, as a potential people's revolutionary militia. Like Thompson himself, then, Orwell held to what Raymond Williams described as 'the notion ... that British society could be transformed through the conduct of the war'.<sup>103</sup>

Orwell's belief that socialism could grow out of the war effort may have been mistaken, but it was far from the nihilistic quietism which Thompson charges him with, on the basis of a few quotes from 'Inside the Whale'.

### A burden too heavy?

There are problems with some of the causal relationships Thompson argues for in 'Outside the Whale'. Thompson claims that 'an influential minority' of intellectuals moved from radicalism to quietism between 1938 and 1940, fashioning an ideology that a much wider section of the general population adopted later, after the Cold War put paid to the hope that the 'second great anti-fascist struggle' would lead to a transformed world.

But Thompson does not specify the mechanisms by which his small group of disillusioned socialist intellectuals supposedly influenced the wider intelligentsia, and the population at large. Thompson's argued that Orwell's essay 'Inside the Whale' played a particularly important role in the formation of Natopolitanism:

It was in this essay, more than any other, that the aspirations of a generation were buried; not only was a political movement, which embodied much that was honourable buried, but so was the notion of disinterested dedication to a political cause ... Socialist idealism was not only disconnected, it was also explained away, as the fruit of middle class guilt, frustration, or ennui.<sup>104</sup>

If Thompson does not merely claim a parallel between 'Inside the Whale' and attitudes that became popular after the war: he argues that Orwell's essay caused these attitudes in a quite direct way. It's hard to see how his argument does not put too much emphasis on the influence of ideas in the course of modern British history. Thompson's over-estimation of the influence of Orwell on the 1940s is matched, at the end of 'Outside the Whale', by an over-estimation of the potential influence of New Left intellectuals on the course of the future. According to Thompson, the young intellectuals radicalised by the dramas of 1956 and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament can spark revolutionary change in the West. Stefan Collini sums up the problem when he writes that Thompson:

[P]laces a surprisingly heavy burden on the shoulders of that elusive species, the British intellectual, since nothing less than the throwing off of both the Soviet and the American yokes seems to depend on their rebellion.<sup>105</sup>

In a 1969 article called 'George Orwell: International Socialist?', Peter Sedgwick makes a similar point, complaining that Thompson attaches 'extraordinary importance' to 'Inside the Whale', when the text was far from being Orwell's most influential, even in 1940.<sup>106</sup>

### The good war?

Thompson suggests that his quietist intellectuals would have escaped their Natopolitan fate had they marched in tune with the ‘commuters and housekeepers’ into the ‘seven fronts of fire’ known as World War Two. In fact, some of the intellectuals who did join in the war effort viewed the enterprise as something less than heroic. Thompson castigates the Auden of the end of the 1930s and the 1940s for his negativity, but poems like ‘September the 1st, 1939’ seem like warm slices of humanism compared to the output of Keith Douglas and Alun Lewis, the two best British poets killed in World War Two. Poems like Douglas’ ‘How To Kill’ and Lewis’ ‘The Jungle’ speak of a nihilistic retreat from all human values effected by the extremity of the soldier’s experience of a war fought on an incomprehensible scale for an incomprehensible purpose.<sup>107</sup>

In ‘How To Kill’ and his other great poems Douglas exults uneasily in the dehumanising distance that the techniques of the war create between him and other soldiers. In ‘The Jungle’, a poem written shortly before he took his own life in the midst of a battle, Lewis recounts a hallucinatory journey to a stagnant pool deep in a jungle where autumn is ‘rotting like an unfrocked priest.’<sup>108</sup> In a crucial passage, Lewis claims that ‘we who dream beside this jungle pool’ prefer the alienation of the natural world to the alienations of the human world – prefer the ‘instinctive rightness of the poised kingfisher’s dive’ to ‘all the banal rectitude of states.’<sup>109</sup> Lewis’ is not the voice of humanist socialism on the march, but of humanity outraged beyond sanity by inhuman war.

*Outside the Whale* is silent about the recalcitrance or outright resistance that World War Two at times inspired in important sections of the British working-class and left-wing movement. Thompson fails to mention the ‘housekeepers and commuters’ who did *not* show an ‘affirming flame on the seven fronts of fire’. He does not discuss the opposition to conscription, to the militarisation of the workforce at home, to the cross-class ‘production committees’ in important factories, to the bans on strikes in key industries, and to the attempts to control consumption with ration books. He does not mention the fact that the later years of the war were characterised by high levels of working-class militancy – that in 1942, for instance, there were more hours lost to strikes than in any year since 1931.<sup>110</sup> Thompson does not mention the anti-war working class politics of the Workers



International League, a group 'disillusioned' enough with Stalinism to oppose the production committees of the Communist Party and lead tens of thousands of workers in strike action that roused debate in Westminster and prompted urgent MI5 reports to Cabinet.<sup>111</sup> Thompson does not mention the huge audiences Lord Haw Haw enjoyed, or the crime waves that accompanied 'air raid' blackouts in many cities.

### Irony

'Outside the Whale' is Thompson's attempt to lay claim to *Spain* and the 'decade of heroes' it supposedly represented, without apprehending and interrogating the contradictions and ambiguities inherent in the poem and in the era that inspired the poem. Thompson's essay is, in the final analysis, an unsuccessful attempt to build a 'softcore' defence for 'hardcore' ideas which he had adopted during the 'decade of heroes' *Spain* supposedly exemplified. But *Spain* has to be related to Auden's subsequent literary and political development, not spared from analysis. The reasons for the 'sickening jerk of deceleration' that ended the 'decade of heroes' cannot be explained by a parable. The reasons for the 1930s generation's drift toward Natopolitanism cannot be reduced to the supposed moral failure of two of that generation's finest writers.

Because he failed to understand their lives, Thompson was doomed to repeat some of the mistakes of Auden and Orwell. Within a few years of writing of 'Outside the Whale', Thompson would begin his own descent into quietism. Auden would have appreciated the irony.

### Notes

- 1 Mary Lago, *India's Prisoner*, University of Missouri Press, Columbia, 2001, p. 293.
- 2 Quoted in Richard Devonport-Hines, *Auden*, Heinemann, London, 1995, p. 166.
- 3 George Orwell, 'Reflections on the Crisis', *The Adelphi*, December 1938, p. 110.
- 4 Rickword's review is quoted in Humphrey Carpenter's *W.H Auden: A Biography*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1981, p. 219.
- 5 Lago, *India's Prisoner*, p. 294.
- 6 Thompson describes the battles between the philistinism of 'King Street' and the group of writers around Edgell Rickword's *Our Time* in his 1979

essay 'Edgell Rickword' (*Persons and Polemics*, Merlin, London, 1994, pp. 238–240). Charles Hobday gives a rather less flattering account of Thompson's role in the purging of Rickword in his *Edgell Rickword: A Poet at War*, Carcanet, London, 1989, pp. 241–242. Dorothy Thompson recalls that 'there were several points' where she and Edward were in conflict with the Communist Party hierarchy before 1956. Yugoslavia was one important source of division: Dorothy remembers that she and Edward 'took the Tito-Dimitrov line' against Stalin (email to the author, 5/4/06). For an account of the lurch to the right by literary London in the 1940s see Robert Hewison's *Under Siege: Literary Life in London, 1939–1945*, Weidenfeld and Chalton, London, 1977.

- 7 See 'Edward Thompson as a teacher: Yorkshire and Warwick', Peter Searby *et al.*, in John Rule and Robert Malcolmson, *Protest and Survival*, Merlin, London, 1993, pp. 1–4.
- 8 For a good account of the tradition Orwell's journey north belongs to, see Marsha Bryant's *Auden and Documentary in the 1930s*, University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville, 1997.
- 9 Quoted in Andy Croft's 'Walthamstow, Little Gidding and Middlesborough: Edward Thompson the Literature Tutor', in *Beyond the Walls: 50 years of Adult and Continuing Education at the University of Leeds 1946–1996*, ed. Richard Taylor, University of Leeds, 1996, p. 146.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 147.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 144.
- 13 The figures are given by Francis Beckett in *The Enemy Within: the Rise and Fall of the British Communist Party*, John Murray, London, 1995, p. 138. In 'An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski', EP Thompson claims that ten thousand people, or one-third of the party's membership, broke ranks after the events of 1956. It is not possible to detail the vicissitudes of Thompson's struggle with the leadership of the British Communist Party in detail here. For a useful discussion of the subject, see John Saville, 'EP Thompson, the Communist Party, and 1956', *Socialist Register*, 1994, pp. 20–31. For a detailed discussion of events in Hungary by Thompson, see 'Through the Smoke of Budapest', *The Reasoner* 3, November 1956. This angry denunciation of the invasion of Hungary and its British apologists was dictated down the phone to John Saville, who was about to put *The Reasoner* through the press.
- 14 EP Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, Merlin, London, 1978, p. i.
- 15 For a justification of the enterprise, see EP Thompson and John Saville, 'Why We Are Publishing', *The Reasoner*, 1, July 1956, pp. 1–3.
- 16 The healthy sales are noted in EP Thompson and John Saville, 'The Case for Socialism', *The Reasoner* 2, September 1956, pp. 1–7.

- 17 In a February 1956 letter announcing the establishment of the *New Reasoner*, Thompson says that, although he and others behind the journal are 'ex-communists', they 'certainly don't want to go sour' on 'the rich humanist traditions of the communist movement' (EP Thompson, letter to Rutland Boughton 20/2/57, Communist Party Archives).
- 18 John Mander, *The Writer and Commitment*, Secker and Warburg, London, 1961.
- 19 Kingsley Amis, *Socialism and the Intellectuals*, Fabian Society, London, 1957.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 Amis' opinion of Orwell would get even more positive as the years went by. In 1967, responding to a letter from a belated reader of *Socialism and the Intellectuals*, Amis clarified his attitude toward Orwell. '[I]n the late '50s I still contained considerable vestiges of my early leftism', Amis wrote. 'I was often made uncomfortable by Orwell's writings about Communism.' Amis explained that he regretted calling Orwell 'hysterical', and argued that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* had been proven a prophetic book (Kingsley Amis, *The Letters of Kingsley Amis*, ed. Zachary Leader, HarperCollins, London, 2000, pp. 710–712).
- 22 Amis' pamphlet managed to nettle one or two of his fellow Angry Young (wo) Men. Two of the contributors to *Declaration* (ed. Maschler, MacGibbon and Kee, London, 1959), a collection of statements by members of the ill-defined movement, took aim at *Socialism and the Intellectuals* and its author. Doris Lessing accused Amis of succumbing to 'a temporary mood of disillusion' (*ibid.*, p. 25); Lindsay Anderson was harsher, claiming that, in *Socialism and the Intellectuals*, 'Amis reveals himself as a coward' (*ibid.*, p. 166). Amis himself refused to write anything for *Declaration*.
- 23 Dorothy Thompson, email to the author, 21/10/05. EP Thompson himself calls Amis' pamphlet a contribution to 'Natopolitan folklore' in 'Outside the Whale' (Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, p. 17).
- 24 Kingsley Amis, *Lucky Jim*, Gollancz, London, 1954.
- 25 John Mandler, 'From Aldermaston to Jarrow', *New Statesman*, 10/12/60, p. 935.
- 26 John Rodden, *The Politics of Literary Reputation: The Making and Claiming of 'St. George' Orwell*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1989, p. 188.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 191.
- 28 John Mander, *The Writer and Commitment*, Secker and Warburg, London, 1961, p. 24.
- 29 Stuart Hall, 'Mr Raymond and the Dead Souls', *Universities and Left Review*, 4, Summer 1958, p. 81.
- 30 Christopher Logue, 'To My Fellow Artists', *Universities and Left Review*, 4, Summer 1958.

- 31 Stuart Hall, 'Inside the Whale Again', *Universities and Left Review*, 4, Summer 1958, p. 14.
- 32 *Ibid.*
- 33 EP Thompson, 'Socialism and the Intellectuals', *Universities and Left Review*, 1, Spring 1957, pp. 31–36.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- 37 EP Thompson, 'Socialism and the Intellectuals: A Reply', *Universities and Left Review*, 2, Summer 1957, pp. 20–22. Mervyn Jones' text can be found on pp. 16–17, and Charles Taylor's response can be found on pp. 18–19.
- 38 *Ibid.*, pp. 21–22.
- 39 EP Thompson, 'Commitment in Politics', *Universities and Left Review*, 6, Spring 1959, pp. 50–55.
- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 52.
- 41 *Ibid.*, p. 54.
- 42 *Ibid.*, p. 55.
- 43 Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, p. 399. There are some minor differences between the text that appears in *Out of Apathy* and the text that appears in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*. Some of these differences arose because when Thompson collected the essay he restored passages that had been excised from *Out of Apathy* 'for reasons of space' (*ibid.*). He also 'cut out some dated allusions and rhetoric' from the original version of the text (*ibid.*). Unlike the changes to 'The Peculiarities of the English' we will examine in chapter 3, the alterations to 'Outside the Whale' are not significant to a reading of the text.
- 44 EP Thompson ed., *Out of Apathy*, New Left Books, London, 1960.
- 45 Unfortunately, few commentators on Thompson have recognised the unity of the texts he contributed to *Out of Apathy*. An honourable exception is Thompson's old friend and comrade Staughton Lynd, who observed in a 2002 essay that 'Outside the Whale' is 'justly remembered', while 'Revolution' and 'At the Point of Decay' are 'unjustly forgotten' ('Edward Thompson's Warrens: On the Transition to Socialism and its Relation to Current Left Mobilisations', *Labour/Le Travail*, Fall 2002).
- 46 Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, p. 1.
- 47 *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- 48 *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- 49 Thompson would pursue the reasons for Wordsworth's disillusionment in 'Disenchantment or Default?', a lecture he gave at New York University in 1968, and 'Wordsworth's Crisis', a 1988 review of George McLean Harper's biography of Wordsworth. In 'Disenchantment or Default?', Thompson once again connects Wordsworth to the 1930s generation. Both texts are

- collected in EP Thompson, *The Romantics: England in a Revolutionary Age*, The New Press, New York, 1997.
- 50 Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, p. 4.
- 51 We will follow Thompson's use and refer to Auden's poem as *Spain* throughout this chapter, despite the fact that Auden first called it *Spain* (1937), later changed it to 'Spain 1937' and eventually settled for 'Spain'. For the first version of the text, which is the one that Thompson quotes during his explications, see *Spain* (1937), Faber and Faber pamphlet, London, 1937.
- 52 Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, p. 4.
- 53 *Ibid.*, pp. 4–5.
- 54 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 55 *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- 56 *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- 57 *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- 58 WH Auden, *Collected Shorter Poems 1927–1957*, Faber and Faber, London, 1966, pp. 112–115.
- 59 Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, p. 10.
- 60 *Ibid.*
- 61 *Ibid.*, p. 16
- 62 *Ibid.*, p. 31.
- 63 *Ibid.*
- 64 *Ibid.*, p. 32. William Golding, *Lord of the Flies*, Faber and Faber, London, 1954.
- 65 Christopher Norris, 'Language, Truth and Ideology: Orwell and the Postwar Left', in *Inside the Myth*, ed. Norris, Lawrence and Wishart, London, pp. 247–249.
- 66 The text is collected in Randall Jarrell, *No Other Book: Selected Essays*, ed. Brad Leithauser, HarperCollins, New York, 1999.
- 67 John R Boly, *Reading Auden*, New York, Ithaca, 1991, p. 40. For an overview of Jarrell's long engagement with Auden's work, see Ian Sansom, 'Flouting Papa': Randall Jarrell and WH Auden', in *In Solitude, for Company: WH Auden After 1940*, ed. Katherine Bucknell and Nicholas Jenkins, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1995, pp. 273–287.
- 68 JW Beach, *The Making of the Auden Canon*, Oxford University Press for Minnesota University Press, Oxford, 1957.
- 69 AE Rodway and FW Cook, 'An Altered Auden', *Essays in Criticism*, vol. 18, 1958, p. 318.
- 70 Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, p. 11.
- 71 EP Thompson, aka William Jessup, 'The Making of 'London'', *New Reasoner*, Winter 1957–58, no. 3, pp. 65–68. Jessup was Theodosia Thompson's maiden name and parts of 'The Making of "London"' are reproduced in chapter 11 of Thompson's late book *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, pp. 174–194).

- 72 Thompson, aka Jessup, 'The Making of Blake's "London"', p. 68.
- 73 Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780–1950*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1958.
- 74 Rodden, *The Politics of Literary Reputation*, pp. 194–195.
- 75 *Ibid.*, pp. 192–193.
- 76 Gordon Bowker, *Inside George Orwell*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2003, p. 356.
- 77 For some details of the novel, see Bernard Crick, *George Orwell: A Life*, Penguin, Middlesex, 1980, p. 516.
- 78 WH Auden, *Collected Shorter Poems 1930–44*, Faber and Faber, London, 1950, p. 110.
- 79 Michael Roberts ed., *New Country*, Hogarth Press, London, 1932.
- 80 WH Auden, *The Orators*, Faber and Faber, London, 3rd edn, 1966, p. 7.
- 81 For an account of Auden's time in Spain, see Nicholas Jenkins, 'Appendix: Auden and Spain', in *Auden Studies* 3, pp. 88–93.
- 82 'Impressions in Valencia' is reproduced in WH Auden, *The Complete Works: Prose, Volume One 1926–1938*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2002, pp. 383–384.
- 83 Quoted in Richard Devonport-Hines, *Auden*, Heinemann, London, 1995, p. 169.
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- 85 WH Auden, 'The Public v the Late Mr William Butler Yeats', in *The Complete Works: Prose, Volume One 1939–48*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2002, pp. 5–7.
- 86 WH Perry, *The Children of the Sun: A Study of the Egyptian Settlement of the Pacific*, Methuen, London, 1923.
- 87 John Fuller, *WH Auden: A Commentary*, Faber and Faber, London, 1988, p. 284.
- 88 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 283.
- 89 For Auden's review of the book, see *Complete Works: Prose, Volume One* pp. 386–387.
- 90 Christopher Caudwell, *Illusion and Reality*, International Publishers, New York, 1937, p. 283.
- 91 Edward Mendelson, *Early Auden*, Viking Press, New York, 1981, p. 266.
- 92 Robert Sullivan, 'History and Desire: Auden's "Spain" and Caudwell's *Illusion and Reality*', in *Rewriting the Good Fight: Essays on the Literature of the Spanish Civil War*, ed. Frieda S Brown et al., Michigan State University Press, Michigan, 1989, pp. 229–240.
- 93 EP Thompson, 'Caudwell', *Socialist Register*, 1977, pp. 1–33.
- 94 For the classic critique of Republican government and Communist Party practice in Catalonia and liberated Aragon, see George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia*, Victor Gollancz, London, 1938.

- 95 The literary critic and publisher Cyril Connolly was in Spain at the same time as Auden; in an article published in the *New Statesman* in mid-February he commented on the different perspectives of Madrid and Barcelona. Connolly summed the Madrid line up as 'first win the war, then attend to the revolution' (*New Statesman*, 20/2/37, p 278). It can certainly be argued that *Spain* makes a similar point, in a more poetic manner.
- 96 WH Auden, *Another Time*, Faber and Faber, London, 1940.
- 97 Cited in Fuller, *WH Auden*, p. 285.
- 98 Auden explicitly disavowed *Spain* in the introduction to the 1966 edition of his *Collected Shorter Poems* (Faber and Faber, London, pp. 15–16). Auden claimed that the last two lines of his poem – 'History, to the defeated/May say Alas but cannot help nor pardon' – equate 'goodness with success' (p. 15). Auden goes on to protest that he never believed that goodness equated success, but merely 'stated it simply because it sounded effective' (*ibid.*). He seems to be criticising himself not for being complicit in Stalinist murder, but for succumbing to the temptations of rhetoric. Auden appears to be suggesting that, in his eagerness to enlist poetry for a cause, he was prepared to play fast and loose with the meaning of his lines, and express ideas he did not actually believe.
- 99 Quoted in Fuller, *WH Auden*, p. 286.
- 100 Quoted in William Empson, *The Complete Poems*, ed. John Haffenden, University Press of Florida, Gainesville, 2001, p. 352.
- 101 For a discussion of 'Why I Join the ILP', see Bernard Crick, *George Orwell: A Life*, pp. 364–365.
- 102 George Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius*, Secker and Warburg, London, 1941.
- 103 Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*, New Left Books, London, 1979, p. 386.
- 104 EP Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, pp. 17–18.
- 105 Stefan Collini, *Absent Minds*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006, p. 165.
- 106 Peter Sedgwick, 'George Orwell: International Socialist?', *International Socialism*, June/July 1969, online at the Marxist Internet Archive, [www.marxists.org/archive/sedgwick/1969/xx/orwell.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/sedgwick/1969/xx/orwell.htm), accessed 12/10/07.
- 107 Keith Douglas, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Desmond Graham, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1979, p. 112; Alun Lewis, *Selected Poems*, Unwin, London, 1981, pp. 97–100.
- 108 Lewis, *Selected Poems*, p. 97.
- 109 *Ibid.*, p. 98.
- 110 See Mark Donnelly, *Britain in the Second World War*, Routledge, London, 1999, p. 63.
- 111 For documents relating to the Cabinet discussions and a commentary, see Ted Crawford, 'The British Cabinet Discusses Trotskyists', in the Encyclopedia of Trotskyism Online, [www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/britain/brit01.htm](http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/britain/brit01.htm), accessed on 12/03/08.

## A peculiar classic

'The Peculiarities of the English' is perhaps the most celebrated of the four texts EP Thompson collected in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*. Copies of the 1965 issue of *Socialist Register*, in which 'Peculiarities' first appeared, sold out, a feat the journal would not manage again until 1973, when 'An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski' boosted sales.<sup>1</sup> For many scholars interested in British socialism, 'Peculiarities' is a canonical text, the most eloquent statement of the differences between the 'Old New Left' and the 'New New Left'.

The interpretation of English history sketched in 'The Peculiarities of the English' has bred an enormous literature, and remains a reference point for contemporary debates amongst historians and sociologists interested in the development of British capitalism. Many of Thompson's admirers have seen the text as a sort of 'sketch map' for the important historical work he published in the late 1960s and 1970s.<sup>2</sup> 'Peculiarities' fervent defence of the value of English history, and of England's liberal and radical traditions, makes it seem to many readers like the quintessential expression of Thompson's creed of 'socialism with English characteristics'.

Yet 'The Peculiarities of the English' presents any careful reader with a puzzle. For all its renown as a New Left polemic, the essay contains very few references to the New Left. In fact, 'Peculiarities' only rarely mentions any aspect of the era and society in which its author was living. It is in some ways difficult to understand why 'Peculiarities' belongs in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* at all. Despite their many idiosyncrasies, 'Outside the Whale', 'An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski' and 'The Poverty of Theory' all contain long discussions of the problems of the contemporary left, and take positions on questions of political strategy. These texts are recognisably political



polemics, though they are many things besides.

In comparison to these texts, 'Peculiarities' seems preoccupied with essentially historical questions. Oliver Cromwell looms larger than Harold Wilson. It is true that the essay is primarily a response to a set of ideas produced by two men – Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn – who had become political opponents of Thompson inside the New Left. It is also true that the 'Nairn–Anderson theses' Thompson was determined to demolish were a set of claims about English history. But the Nairn–Anderson theses were designed to explain contemporary British society, and to thereby make possible a coherent strategy for the British left. Not for nothing did Anderson name the most famous expression of his and Nairn's ideas 'Origins of the Present Crisis'.<sup>3</sup>

Did Thompson collect 'The Peculiarities of the English' in the wrong place? Would the essay have looked less incongruous in, say, *Customs in Common*, his 1991 volume of academic essays on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British history? There are reasons to reject such a judgement. Despite its subject matter, the *tone* of 'Peculiarities' recalls the political polemics of the late 1950s and early 1960s.<sup>4</sup> The long backward gazes of 'Peculiarities' make it easy for us to forget that in 1965 the essay was received not as a disinterested piece of history, but as a political onslaught against Perry Anderson and the circle he had gathered around him at the *New Left Review*. To treat 'Peculiarities' as a piece of academic history would mean ignoring some of the most important effects that the text generated.

'Peculiarities' is, then, a puzzling, paradoxical text. Its subject matter appears largely unconnected to contemporary Britain and the contemporary left, and yet its tone is urgently polemical, and its early readers, at least, saw it as a withering attack on a section of the left. 'Peculiarities' lacks the contemporary focus and programmatic detail of New Left-era Thompson texts like 'Revolution', and the relatively restrained, almost academic tone of essays like 'Time, Work Discipline and Industrial Capitalism'. If 'Peculiarities' looks out of place in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, it might also raise eyebrows in *Customs in Common*.

We cannot explain the puzzle that is 'Peculiarities' simply by doing a close reading, however attentively we might be prepared to read. If we are to understand the paradox in Thompson's essay, we must first wrestle with the paradox that was Thompson's life in the first half of the 1960s.

### The view from St Pancras

On a cold December night in 1959, Edward Thompson addressed five hundred supporters of the New Left in London's St Pancras Hall. Thompson was one of half a dozen speakers at a meeting called to launch the *New Left Review*, a bimonthly publication created by the fusion of two smaller journals, the *New Reasoner* and the *Universities and Left Review*. Thompson's speech at St Pancras was notable for its optimism about the potential of the New Left and the possibilities for decisive change in British society. Raymond Williams, who also spoke that night at St Pancras Hall, would wryly remember the scale of Thompson's ambitions:

Edward Thompson ... had spoken in the perspective of a new popular movement that would completely transform or replace the existing Labour Party. I said that, well one hoped for that, but I would be very satisfied if in ten years' time we have twenty or thirty good socialist books about contemporary Britain.<sup>5</sup>

It could be argued that Thompson had good reasons for exuding optimism at St Pancras. In 1956, in response to their suspension from a Communist Party rocked by Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin and invasion of Hungary, he and his friend John Saville had circulated a statement calling for a new 'movement of ideas, reaching out beyond party barriers'.<sup>6</sup> Only three years later, that wish seemed to have come true. The *New Left Review* was intended as a mouthpiece and organisational tool for the Left Clubs which had begun to appear up and down the country after the creation of a London Left Club by supporters of the *Universities and Left Review* in 1956.<sup>7</sup>

Three months before the evening at St Pancras Hall, a conference of the Left Clubs had established a national committee, to help mould them into a coherent political movement. The energies of the clubs had already been focused by the establishment of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in 1958. Along with many of those assembled at St Pancras, Thompson had taken part in the huge marches from London to the nuclear research station at Aldermaston in 1958 and 1959.

By the time of the St Pancras meeting, the New Left had even entered electoral politics: the Fife Socialist League, an affiliate of the National Clubs Committee, had run miners' leader Lawrence Daly as a candidate in the seat of West Fife in the 1959 general election. Daly surprised psephologists by winning nearly five thousand votes,

enough to defeat the Communist and Conservative candidates. The New Left seemed on the brink of becoming a real political force. Peter Sedgwick has described the movement's bustling headquarters in Soho at the dawn of the 1960s:

There was the building ... situated a stone's throw from Marx's old rooms in Soho, whose various floors were given over to the manifold functions of the New Left's cultural apparatus; its nether stories housed the Partisan, 'London's left-wing coffee house' ... the basement was ... a dining room and resort for poetry and folk-song; the first floor began life as the frantic publicity HQ for the first Aldermaston march and subsequently became an odd little socialist library ... Here meetings and at least one exhibition (a heaped conspectus of cuttings and souvenirs from the thirties) took place. The uppermost floor held the editorial-cum-administrative office for the publications and groupings of the movement.<sup>8</sup>

### Thompson discontented

Despite the successes of the late 1950s and the rhetoric of St Pancras Hall, Thompson's attitude to the New Left was far from unambiguously optimistic. Few of those who had heard him at St Pancras could have guessed that only two weeks earlier he had written to Saville, who was chairman-designate of the New Left Editorial Board, to tell him the movement was doomed.<sup>9</sup> Although he had been an advocate of the fusion of the *New Reasoner* with the *Universities and Left Review*, Thompson was plagued by mistrust of the *Universities and Left Review* circle, which consisted mostly of young men and women based in London and Oxford – men and women with little experience of labour movement politics and no memory of the Great Depression and Second World War Two.<sup>10</sup>

As early as 1958, Thompson was concerned that the 'socialist humanist' politics he identified with – a politics that looked back for inspiration to the 'decade of heroes' – would be marginalized inside the New Left. By the end of 1959, Thompson had become worried that the London base established for the *New Left Review* would isolate the northerners who had dominated the *New Reasoner's* editorial board. Dennis Dworkin has described how Thompson's concerns soon centred on Stuart Hall, the young editor-designate of the new journal:

From the start, Thompson besieged Hall with highly critical and sometimes angry letters ... The difficulty of Hall's task was intensified by Thompson's ceaseless pressure and criticism ... He was apparently frustrated at seeing what he had created being run by others.<sup>11</sup>

### The textbook

Ironically enough, Stuart Hall had been chosen as the *New Left Review's* editor only after his most vociferous critic had rejected the job. If Thompson had not been keen to move to London and take up what was effectively a full-time position, it was because he had another life, and another set of responsibilities, outside the New Left.

Since 1948 Thompson had been employed by the extra-mural department of the University of Leeds, as a tutor attached to the Workers Education Association. Late in 1959 he had signed a contract with Victor Gollancz to write a textbook on nineteenth century labour history for sixth form, undergraduate and extra-mural students. Thompson had already done some of the research that would end up in his 'textbook' – indeed, the outline of the course in history that he prepared for his 1959 students looked a lot like the eventual contents page of *The Making of the English Working Class*.<sup>12</sup>

If Thompson's refusal of the editorship of the *New Left Review* surprised some of his comrades in London and Oxbridge, it was because they knew him as a political activist and a polemicist, not as a historian. In 1959 Thompson did not even consider himself a historian, in the usual sense of the word. He had played no part in the famous Historians' Group which had flourished during his period in the Communist Party, preferring the company of poets and novelists.<sup>13</sup> He continued to harbour ambitions as a poet, and in 1959 he was still teaching as much literature as history to his students in the West Riding. Thompson saw his textbook as a financial opportunity and a pedagogical exercise, not as any sort of intervention in historiographical discourse. In a 1976 interview he would make his financial motivations clear:

I would appall you if I told you the truth: I agreed to write *The Making of the English Working Class* because I was hard up, and a publisher wanted a textbook on the British labour movement from 1832 to 1945.<sup>14</sup>

It is significant that Thompson's windfall only came about because John Saville, who had originally been asked to write the textbook,

recommended him for the job. (Asa Briggs, who had approached Saville for Victor Gollancz, had never even heard of Thompson.)<sup>15</sup>

### Salad days

Through 1960 the *New Left Review* and the movement identified with it seemed to go from strength to strength. The new journal soon had nearly ten thousand subscribers, and by October 1960 the National Clubs Committee was reporting the existence of forty-five clubs with a combined membership of three thousand.<sup>16</sup> In July New Left Books published its first volume, an anthology called *Out of Apathy*, introducing a wider audience to the work of Stuart Hall, Alasdair MacIntyre and Thompson himself. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) continued to grow, and won increasing support from the trade union movement, so that the 1960 Labour Party conference at Scarborough voted for a policy of unilateral nuclear disarmament, delivering a setback to Hugh Gaitskell.<sup>17</sup> New Left members spoke seriously of the irrelevance of the Labour Party leadership, and even the cautious Raymond Williams felt that the CND was 'carrying all before it'.<sup>18</sup>

Through 1960, Thompson was kept busy addressing Left Club meetings, writing for the *New Left Review*, and speaking at CND demonstrations. Political activism was balanced with research for the Gollancz textbook.

Like the study of William Morris, which had begun as an article and ended as a nine hundred page book, the introductory chapter of Thompson's textbook would grow and grow, until his publishers felt it prudent to dedicate a whole volume to the period between 1790 and 1832. There is little doubt, though, that Thompson's ambitions were focused upon the New Left. In 'Revolution Again: Or, Shut Your Ears and Run!', a sequel to his most-discussed contribution to *Out of Apathy*, Thompson marked the close of 1960 by maintaining the heady tone he had struck a year earlier at St Pancras, describing a 'popular struggle' that was opening a British road to socialism:

The first stage of this struggle commenced at Aldermaston and culminated in the Scarborough victory. The second stage has now commenced ... The struggle this year is going to be far sharper than anything we have seen for fifteen years.<sup>19</sup>

The hyper-optimism of 'Revolution Again' belied the fact that in June 1960, about a month before the publication of *Out of Apathy*, Thompson had made good on his threat to resign from the New Left Board. Used to getting his way with the tolerant John Saville, his co-editor on the *New Reasoner*, Thompson felt frustrated on the *New Left Review's* unwieldy Board. He had antagonised Stuart Hall completely, and even managed to fall out for a time with Saville, whom he had begun to accuse of secret sympathies with the *Universities and Left Review* circle.<sup>20</sup> Thompson would be convinced to rejoin the Board, but his unhappiness was clear. Michael Kenny has described some of Thompson's frustrations:

The journal, according to Thompson, had been poorly edited and allowed to drift. The complaints of Hall and [*New Left administrator Janet*] Hase were indicative of their oversensitivity and inability to organise the office. The New Left was anarchistic: many in London made a virtue out of disagreement. The journal was too eclectic and dominated by cultural and sociological fashions ... Many of these criticisms were typically hyperbolic.<sup>21</sup>

Thompson was hardly unique in his unhappiness with the progress of the New Left. Even in the midst of the successes of 1960, tension and dissension had been widespread inside the movement. The first issues of the *New Left Review*, for instance, could not satisfy widely varying expectations. The journal's glossy paper was enough to offend some foes of 'consumer capitalism', while Thompson and other members of the old *New Reasoner* circle complained about similarities to the layout of *Universities and Left Review*. For their part, some members of the Clubs Committee complained that Hall's journal was too 'abstract' and 'theoretical', and failed to address the interests of ordinary members of the movement. New Left members influenced by Trotskyist interpretations of Marxism directed complaints of 'eclecticism' and 'vagueness' towards Stuart Hall.<sup>22</sup> A political downturn would bring the New Left's contradictions to the fore.

### Dog days

The year 1961 was a hard one for the New Left. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, which had done so much to unite the different parts of the movement in action, received a blow when the Labour Party's annual conference voted to reverse the endorsement of unilateral nuclear disarmament. Labour's decision coincided with

an international agreement to end nuclear tests. The deal placated many CND members, showing the limits of the radicalisation that Thompson had hailed in the Aldermaston marchers. Falls in CND membership and activity coincided with a decline in attendances at Left Club meetings. Some clubs disappeared altogether, while others became shells of their old selves. The *New Left Review's* circulation shrank.

The loss of the momentum of 1960 exposed the weak financial and political foundations of the New Left. By the end of 1961 the ambitious New Left Books project had stalled due to lack of funds, the Partisan Coffee House was hopelessly in debt, and the *New Left Review* was running at a loss. The political divisions in the movement showed themselves in July 1961, when the city of Stockport hosted a conference of club delegates, editorial board members, and *New Left Review* staff. The gathering became, in Thompson's words, 'a forum for self-criticism and some recrimination'.<sup>23</sup>

The array of complaints aired at Stockport showed the lack of ideological as well as organisational cohesion in the New Left. Perhaps the most significant complaints came from the clubs delegates, who charged the *New Left Review* with a continuing neglect of their interests and activities, described falling memberships and attendances, and warned that the movement faced extinction. By the time of the Stockport meeting the National Clubs Committee had ceased to function, leaving individual branches of the New Left isolated and adrift.

In the aftermath of Stockport John Saville resigned as chairman of the New Left Board. Other Board members soon followed his example. Determined to prevent the collapse of the movement he had worked so hard to build, Thompson took over as chairman. Perhaps not coincidentally, Stuart Hall left his job as editor at the end of 1961, citing exhaustion and depression.<sup>24</sup>

Hall was replaced by a troika of young men who had emerged from the *Universities and Left Review* milieu. By the time Perry Anderson, Daniel Butt and Raphael Samuel delivered their first issue it was five months overdue, one thousand pounds over budget, and twice the expected length. In March 1962 Butt and Samuel resigned, bowing to the criticisms of an outraged Board. Thompson saw Anderson as a protégé, and helped persuade him not to follow his friends' example. The two men even shared a flat for a few weeks at the end of 1962, when Thompson was spending his days at the National Library in a

frantic attempt to prepare *The Making of the English Working Class* for publication.<sup>25</sup>

By the end of 1962 Anderson had put together a new editorial team, recruiting his peers Tom Nairn and Robin Blackburn. If the 'cub editor' was under less pressure than Hall had been a year earlier, it was because the *New Left Review* had lost large chunks of its old constituency. Subscriptions had fallen to three thousand, less than a third of the figure achieved in late 1960. Almost all of the Left Clubs were moribund, and some had formally dissolved themselves. In 1963 many erstwhile members would find greener pastures in the Labour Party, which was putting the infighting of the Gaitskell years behind it by uniting around Harold Wilson, a leader whose relative youth, left-sounding rhetoric, and commitment to 'modernisation' were very attractive to many veterans of the Aldermaston marches.<sup>26</sup>

In the face of plummeting sales and the disappearance of organised grassroots support, only Anderson's largesse could keep the *New Left Review* alive. Late in 1962 the editor paid nine thousand pounds to settle the debts of the New Left Board, and in return took control of the organisation's headquarters in Soho. Anderson was intent on extending intellectual as well as financial control, and his editorial decisions increasingly rankled with Thompson and other members of the rump of the Board. Writing in middle age, Anderson admitted some responsibility for the breakdown in communications between his young editorial team and the older men on the Board. Anderson has confessed to a 'them and us' attitude toward the older 'generation' which had been involved in the *New Reasoner*, remembering that:

Edward seemed not just one, but two generations older ... His looks assisted the illusion ... it was the conjuncture that clinched it: never did differences of age, however slight, loom so large as at that time.<sup>27</sup>

It was not long before 'generational' differences were sparking arguments over the contents of the *New Left Review*. Thompson, for example, was enraged when Anderson and his committee rejected an article he had submitted to the journal on the subject of British involvement in the European Community. European integration was, and would remain, a flashpoint for the two 'generations' of the New Left, or the 'Old New Left' and the 'New New Left', as Peter Sedgwick dubbed them.<sup>28</sup>

Thompson was also angered by Anderson's claim of ownership over New Left assets. He unsuccessfully demanded a slice of the (apparently non-existent) rental income from surplus New Left office space,



and Raymond Williams and other friends had to talk him out of plans to take legal action in an attempt to wrest control of the *New Left Review* copyright from Anderson.<sup>29</sup>

### 'Where Are We Now?'

In April 1963, less than three and a half years after the heady evening at St Pancras Hall, Thompson attended another meeting – a small, acrimonious, two-day affair, where the future of the *New Left Review* was settled to Anderson's satisfaction.<sup>30</sup> Three days before the meeting Thompson had poured his frustrations into a 15,000-word memorandum called 'Where Are We Now?' In 1973, Thompson would remember the genesis of the text. After 'more than one session of intense argument' with Perry Anderson, including 'a long argument on a street corner', he 'belatedly' made an attempt 'to provoke an open debate' inside the New Left Board as a whole:

I typed directly onto the skins of old duplicator a 20 or 30 page memo ... At the subsequent Board meeting – a demoralised, ill-attended affair, when we finally ceded the review – Perry made no attempt whatsoever to enter into discussion of any of the theoretical points there. Some of the points, however – including the critique of Sartre on Fanon – proved to be prescient.<sup>31</sup>

At the beginning of 'Where Are We Now?' Thompson asks New Left Board members to bear in mind the speed with which he has composed his polemic, and to excuse any 'looseness' and 'prolixity'. He need not have apologised: 'Where Are We Now?' is a powerfully coherent text, and a major, albeit unpublished, work in the Thompson canon. Thompson's polemic foreshadows some of the most important passages of 'The Peculiarities of the English', the 'Open Letter to Lezek Kolakowski', 'The Poverty of Theory', and the also-unpublished 'Six Weeks in India'.

Thompson begins 'Where Are We Now?' by interrogating the concept of 'intellectual work', which Perry Anderson had used to justify the new direction of the *New Left Review*. Thompson accepts that the decline of the New Left as a large movement makes intellectual work more important, but he insists that careful reflection does not necessitate a 'polemical rejection of the past'. He accuses Anderson's 'new review' of 'evacuating old territory and pitching its tent elsewhere'.<sup>32</sup>

Thompson is similarly unimpressed by the ‘internationalism’ being vigorously espoused by the ‘new Team’. He argues that both the *New Reasoner* and the *Universities and Left Review* were ‘part of an international discourse’. That discourse was a two-way exchange between Britain and the rest of the world, but Thompson fears that internationalism means something different to Anderson and his circle. Thompson warns of the danger of ‘allowing admiration for the example of other peoples to become intellectual abasement before them.’<sup>33</sup>

Thompson zeroes in on Anderson protégé Keith Buchanan’s writing for the *New Left Review* on the Third World, and makes a series of strong criticisms. Thompson is sceptical about Buchanan’s thesis that the ‘proletarian nations’ of the Third World are becoming a political force independent of the First World and the Soviet bloc.

Thompson also objects to Buchanan’s claim that the West as a whole is responsible for the oppression of the Third World. Thompson warns that this notion, which he also finds in Jean-Paul Sartre’s introduction to Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, threatens to turn the ‘racialism of imperialist oppression’ into its opposite, ‘anti-white nationalist chauvinism.’<sup>34</sup> Thompson even faults his old comrade C Wright Mills’ study of the Cuban revolution for being too indulgent towards Third World nationalism. When he attacks Sartre, Thompson deploys the sort of Francophobic rhetoric and imagery that he will make famous in ‘The Poverty of Theory’:

I write still infuriated by Sartre’s foreword to Fanon’s book. Where Sartre writes so elegantly about European narcissism, his own circle would appear to be the ultimate in this: if Paris is the only city that talks constantly about itself, what are we to make of this circle? Of its introverted intellectual life? Of its profound irresponsibility ... Of its emotional parasitism on the drama of revolution, its refurbishing of neo-Sorelian mystiques of violence? Of its preoccupation with mammoth intellectual apologias?<sup>35</sup>

The juxtaposition of French and English intellectual traditions also appears, for perhaps the first time in Thompson’s oeuvre:

The French passion for global generalisation encourages the deracine, cosmopolitan character of its theory; while the empirical idiom favours theoretical evasiveness and insular resistances. I wonder, however, how far the Team is aware of empiricism’s strengths?<sup>36</sup>

Against Buchanan and Sartre, Thompson develops an account – unusual, in his oeuvre – of the process of decolonisation that was

such a feature of the decades after World War Two. Thompson argues that decolonisation took a variety of forms, and often hinged upon the growth of anti-imperialist feeling in the First World, as well as national liberation movements in the Third World. In a long, detailed discussion of India's road to independence which he punctuates with autobiographical asides, Thompson argues that Britons like his father made an important contribution to the cause of Nehru and Gandhi.

Thompson asserts the existence of an anti-imperialist 'minority tradition' within the British left and labour movement. In sentences that would find their way into 'The Peculiarities of the English' almost unaltered, Thompson suggests that the influence of Marxism has helped ballast the anti-imperialist tradition. Claims by members of Anderson's circle that 'there is no Marxist tradition' in Britain are angrily refuted.

The final pages of 'Where Are We Now?' are tinged with resignation, and call into question Thompson's later claims that he was forced off the New Left Board and barred from involvement with the *New Left Review*. Thompson's words suggest a deep disillusionment had set in, even before Anderson's bureaucratic coup at the last Board meeting:

I can no longer take much interest in New Left Review as it now stands. I wish it well, I hope it continues ... [*but*] ... there is a real resistance to many of the comrades who first built the New Left ... The socialist tradition should surely not be reduced to a three-generation novel, complete with Victorian Papas and Oedipal revolts?<sup>37</sup>

As Thompson would later note bitterly, the extraordinary appeal that was 'Where Are We Now?' did not move Anderson, who used the meeting of April the sixth and seventh to force the dissolution of the New Left Board. On the afternoon of the seventh of April the defeated Board repaired to the home of Ralph Miliband and Marion Kozak, where they 'ate kebabs in the Sunday sunshine' and laid plans for a new journal, which might be able to continue the work of the '*New Left Review* mark I', albeit on a much more modest scale.<sup>38</sup> For Edward Thompson, the euphoria of that cold winter's night in St Pancras three and a half years earlier must have seemed a distant memory. Sheila Rowbotham has offered a snapshot of the aftermath of the defeat of April 1963:

Lawrence Daly ... called at the Thompson's house in Halifax when I was there one day ... They were talking about a break in the New Left, about

how they had wanted a different, much broader movement ... Edward looked down, his head on one side, and said that a chance had been missed. I was too shy to ask what he meant. 'We failed', he remarked to the floor.<sup>39</sup>

**'For Christ's sake, let us have something from you'**

A fortnight after the final, sad meeting of the New Left Board, Ralph Miliband circulated a memo describing plans to set up a new 'Socialist Annual'. In a letter he sent to John Saville along with the memo, Miliband announced that he was 'done with *New Left Review* and such for good.'<sup>40</sup> Miliband told Saville about a phone conversation with EP Thompson, in which the old co-editor of *New Reasoner* declined an invitation to share responsibility for the new annual.

In her memoir about the early days of the *Socialist Register*, Miliband's widow Marion Kozak claimed that Thompson refused the co-editorship because of his political differences with Miliband and Saville. It is likely, though, that there was more than one reason for Thompson's lack of enthusiasm. The collapse of the first New Left and the disintegration of relations with the Anderson circle had hit Thompson hard. Miliband suggested to Saville that Thompson's 'present attitude may be due, and he hints at this himself, to a general dispiritedness.'<sup>41</sup>

Shortly after his conversation with Miliband, Thompson wrote a long letter to both his comrades to elaborate on his refusal to co-edit the new 'Socialist Annual'. Thompson began by explaining that he was preoccupied with preparing his long-overdue history book for publication. Thompson's enthusiasm for scholarship seemed connected to a weariness with politics:

There is a chance of autumn publication, and I now feel that I would like it out, so that I can be known as a historian and not just as the wrecker of the New Left which is my current persona.<sup>42</sup>

But Thompson complicated his refusal of co-editorship by suggesting that the editorial board of the *New Reasoner* ought to be reconvened, with a view to refounding the journal in 1964. Thompson wanted the journal to be a quarterly, and mentioned that he has talked with former Board member Ken Alexander, who was very much in favour of refounding the journal. 'I have got the habit of journals,' Thompson explained, 'and find it hard to imagine not having one as a base.'<sup>43</sup>

Saville and Miliband were unenthusiastic about reviving the *New Reasoner*. Saville wrote to Thompson to say that he was 'not keen to sit through more Board meetings'. Undeterred, Thompson wrote Saville a long, excited letter on 25 March – a little over a week after his phone conversation with Miliband – to give more details about his plan to revive the *New Reasoner*. Thompson wanted the old editorial board to meet soon in Sheffield. He had made contact with some Italian socialists, and believed that they could be involved in the journal. Stuart Hall, the old editor of the *New Left Review*, could be won away from Anderson's circle.<sup>44</sup>

On the same day, Thompson wrote to Miliband to repeat many of his proposals. At the bottom of his letter, though, he again claimed that he was 'too busy' to be involved in Saville and Miliband's new journal.<sup>45</sup> At the end of March John Saville wrote again to Thompson to explain that he did not think the revival of the *New Reasoner* was practical. With a certain weariness, Saville warned Thompson that 'yards of talk' could not be turned into a new quarterly journal.<sup>46</sup> Miliband was equally sceptical of Thompson's proposals. 'Edward may be in for more disappointments' he wrote to Saville on 24 March. 'It is clear that we must proceed without him.'<sup>47</sup> There is no evidence that Thompson ever succeeded in reconvening the old *New Reasoner* editorial board.

Miliband and Saville may have found Thompson a frustrating interlocutor, but they had great respect for his scholarship and writing, and they still hoped to secure a contribution from him for the first issue of their 'Socialist Annual', which would soon be rechristened the *Socialist Register*. In May, though, Saville reported to Miliband that Thompson was reluctant to contribute. The only material he could immediately offer was a collection of Luddite documents he had acquired while researching *The Making of the English Working Class*. 'I am not keen on Ludd docs', Saville told Miliband.<sup>48</sup>

Miliband himself asked Thompson to review the posthumous collection of essays by C Wright Mills called *Power and Politics*. At the end of August, though, he had to report to Saville that Thompson had refused the assignment, on the 'absurd' grounds that 'he is not a sociologist'.<sup>49</sup> When Saville suggested that their new journal should review *The Making of the English Working Class*, Miliband's reply showed some exasperation:

I should be very glad to have ... Thompson's book reviewed ... but you deal with him: I think he has displayed remarkably little goodwill since

the first letter he wrote ... I was annoyed with his preemptory rejection of the idea that he should review the Mills essays.<sup>50</sup>

At the beginning of October, though, Thompson wrote to Miliband asking whether the *Register* would be interested in some 'Notes Toward the Definition of Class'.<sup>51</sup> Thompson explained that he wanted to differentiate 'historical' from 'sociological' notions of class, and to 'challenge over-rigid contemporary formulations'. He imagined that his 'Notes' would include a discussion of Mills. 'I think Edward is now rather narked not be in on the Annual', Miliband reported to Saville.<sup>52</sup>

On 17 November Thompson wrote a long letter to Miliband, in which he tried to explain what he might be able to write for the *Register*. Thompson explained that he had been spending most of his free time immersed in historical scholarship:

I am very much preoccupied with history ... All the '56 onwards period left little time for history, and for two years or so I have been catching up like mad.<sup>53</sup>

Thompson claimed that he had not wanted to write about Mills because of this immersion in history. (This explanation is unconvincing, because Thompson had in fact reviewed Mills' posthumous essays for the journal *Peace News*, shortly after rejecting Miliband's request.) Thompson explained that his notion of an essay on class stemmed from some of the business *The Making of the English Working Class* had left unfinished:

My book became more pretentious as it got bigger; and at the end of it I convinced myself (in the five-week euphoria which I usually have after completing something big, which is usually followed by a five or fifteen year nausea) that I had actually said something about class in general, and not just something about England in 1790–1832. In fact I wrote an introduction making just this claim and cocking snooks at named and unnamed sociologists. And now I rather feel that I shall have to hold the ground, and put up some theoretical hurdles around it to keep the buggers out.<sup>54</sup>

Thompson also outlined his plan for an essay on 'the Marxist tradition':

It is an attempt to discriminate between Marxism as a dogma; Marxism as a self-sufficient theoretical corpus which contains within itself the means to self-correction and self-validation; and Marxism as a 'tradition'. I reject the first two.<sup>55</sup>

At the end of his letter, though, Thompson appears to once more withdraw his goodwill:

I am sorry to be such a nuisance: I can't tell you which essay you'll get or whether you'll get one at all.<sup>56</sup>

After discussions with Miliband, Saville wrote to Thompson to explain that space in the forthcoming issue was limited, and that an essay on class would not be an easy thematic fit.<sup>57</sup> Thompson's other suggestion, though, 'would fit nicely with our English section.'<sup>58</sup> Miliband and Saville set aside a few pages for Thompson's essay on 'The Marxist Tradition', and Thompson apparently arranged to give the text to Miliband on a visit to London he would be making in the second week of November. On the eleventh of that month, though, Thompson had to write Miliband an apologetic letter:

I'm afraid I'm going to come down to London empty-handed ... I have a dozen false starts, and some stuff in drafts, but it really isn't coming out.<sup>59</sup>

Thompson did send a manuscript to Miliband, but it was hardly what his long-suffering friend had been hoping for:

I am enclosing one of the only things I have ready-made in my drawer, a story which I wrote four or five years ago. But it is very slight. Anyway, you don't want stories. And if you did, you could get much better ones. Doris [*Lessing*], for example.<sup>60</sup>

Thompson's story was called 'Cassino', and was probably related to a novel he had tried to write 'in 1947 or 1948' about his experiences in the most famous battle of the Italian campaign (a fragment of the novel would be published as 'Overture to Cassino' in the British edition of the 1985 collection of political and literary writing he called *The Heavy Dancers*).<sup>61</sup> It is hard to think how the most imaginative editor could have fitted Thompson's story into an 'English section' in the first *Socialist Register*. Miliband's response to Thompson's submission showed considerable restraint:

The only criticism I would venture [*of 'Cassino'*] is that it is perhaps over-didactic. However, it would obviously be incongruous as the only piece of imaginative writing in the *Register*.<sup>62</sup>

Aware of the hole in his journal, Miliband urged Thompson to turn to a new subject:

What about stretching the anniversary section backwards, and have us do something on 1814. Select some topic or event, happening in or around that year ... for Christ's sake, let us have something from you.<sup>63</sup>

Miliband's words remind us of a schoolmaster struggling to find an essay topic that will interest a bright but recalcitrant pupil. Sadly for the master, Thompson showed no sign of taking up the latest suggested subject. 'Personally, I think our missing contributors are SHITS' Miliband wrote to Saville at the end of November, when it had become clear that the first issue of the *Socialist Register* would appear without a contribution from EP Thompson.<sup>64</sup>

### Peculiar comrades?

Thompson can perhaps be forgiven for feeling a little ambivalent about submitting material to Ralph Miliband and John Saville in 1963. In 'An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski', Thompson would call the *Socialist Register* 'the last survivor in the direct line of continuity from the old New Left'. Certainly, the members of the small circle of comrades who conceived the *Socialist Register* on that sunny April afternoon all acknowledged the profound influence of 1956 on their thinking. Thompson, Saville, Lawrence Daly, Ralph Miliband and Marion Kozak had also been united in their opposition to the political drift of the *New Left Review* 'mark II'.

Thompson was nevertheless wrong to present the *Socialist Register* as an incarnation of the politics he identified with the *New Reasoner* and the 'first New Left'. Important differences divided Thompson from some of his close comrades. Some of these differences had become apparent by 1963.

Thompson's differences with Ralph Miliband could be particularly sharp. A cosmopolitan uber-intellectual as comfortable with French as English, Miliband conceived of Marxism as a science of society, however incomplete and qualified, and was deeply suspicious of 'woolly' notions of 'socialist humanism'. When John Saville wrote to suggest that the first issue of the *Register* include 'something on the moral basis of socialism', Miliband's reply had been unequivocal:

[T]he Moral Basis of Socialism – the thing is I cannot remember anything worthwhile on this subject for years ... My objection is not aesthetic but intellectual and practical.<sup>65</sup>



The editors eventually 'compromised' by printing a mordant review by Donald C Hodges of Eugene Kamenka's study of *The Ethical Foundations of Marxism*.<sup>66</sup> There were other aspects of their preparation for that first issue which would have left Thompson unimpressed. Saville was casting about for someone to review Sartre's newly published *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, seemingly ignoring Thompson's strenuous objections to 'existential Paris' in 'Where Are We Now?' Worse still, perhaps, Miliband and Saville invited Tom Nairn, one of Anderson's editorial committeemen, to write a critique of 'the politics of the *New Statesman*' for the inaugural issue of the *Register*.<sup>67</sup>

### A pair of surprises

If the end of 1963 saw Thompson at a political nadir, it also brought him his first great victory as a historian. The publication of *The Making of the English Working Class* in November was celebrated by a front-page review in the *Times Literary Supplement*, the same publication that eight years earlier had greeted Thompson's book on William Morris with a hatchet job in its back pages.<sup>68</sup> This thumbs up contributed to *The Making's* strong sales, and encouraged a stream of reviews – a large majority of them supportive – in both academic and non-academic periodicals.

*The Making* earned Thompson an overnight reputation amongst historians in Britain and in the United States – Eric Hobsbawm compared his rise to the take-off of a space rocket – and led to his being offered the post of Reader in Social History at Warwick University, a new institution on the outskirts of Coventry.<sup>69</sup> After Thompson assumed the post at the beginning of 1965 he attracted a circle of talented postgraduate students, keen to work with the author of *The Making*.<sup>70</sup> Perry Anderson has noted the change of setting that the move south represented:

In Yorkshire [*Thompson*] lived in a draughty Victorian building, perched high above the desolate black-red streets of Halifax, among the grimmest scoria of the Industrial Revolution. In Worcestershire his home was a Georgian mansion in the rolling countryside, once a bishop's manor. The move allowed Raymond Williams ... a sly jest about 'country house Marxism'.<sup>71</sup>

At the beginning of 1964 Thompson received another, much less welcome surprise. The January/February issue of the *New Left Review*

opened with a long essay by Perry Anderson, called 'Origins of the Present Crisis.' Anderson's text would soon rival *The Making of the English Working Class* as a classic leftist study of English history. The first English-language unveiling of the so-called 'Nairn-Anderson theses,' 'Origins' announced Perry Anderson's vision for the *New Left Review*, which had by his own admission 'been struggling for direction' since the end of the Old New Left.

Edward Thompson had been largely responsible for making Anderson the editor of the *New Left Review*. He had seen the young scholar as a keeper of the flame of 1956, a defender of the Old New Left. Anderson's editorial caprices and bureaucratic manoeuvres had first disappointed and then enraged Thompson, as the extraordinary outpouring that was 'Where Are We Now?' testifies. But even after the bitterness of 1963, Thompson had been unwilling to write the *New Left Review* 'mark II' off entirely, or to see Anderson as an outright enemy. In the tribute to C Wright Mills he wrote late in 1963, Thompson had offered a non-committal view of the journal's future:

[T]he movement which once claimed to be 'the New Left' has now, in this country, dispersed itself ... What purposes the review which bears its name will fulfil remains to be seen.<sup>72</sup>

Now, with 'Origins,' the shape of things to come was clear, and Thompson did not like what he saw. The text's contempt for British liberal and radical political traditions could not fail to upset the author of *The Making of the English Working Class*. Writing in 1992, Anderson himself could recognise what a provocation he and Nairn created in 1964:

[W]e unwisely declared our belief that the tradition of Marxism had hitherto been relatively weak in Britain, while ourselves resorting to categories derived from Marxist traditions in Italy and France. It was this injurious judgement that was surely the immediate ground for Thompson's wrath.<sup>73</sup>

Anderson's corrective to the ills of British society and the British left – the creation of a Marxist intellectual vanguard, carefully insulated from the experiences and political routines of the working class and non-Marxist left – flew in the face of the practice of the Old New Left. The insults of 'Origins' were compounded by Tom Nairn's review of *The Making* in the following, March/April issue of the *New Left Review*.<sup>74</sup> Though respectful of Thompson's scholarship, Nairn felt compelled to repeat many of the generalisations about English intellectual and

political traditions that had made 'Origins' so provocative.

In the middle of 1964 the first issue of *Socialist Register* appeared. Thompson is unlikely to have been pleased by the contents of the 'last survivor' of the old New Left. A sympathetic analysis of the Chinese revolution by Isaac Deutscher led the issue, which also included a piece by Ernest Mandel and Hodges' attack on socialist humanism. Thompson would not have liked the tone of Deutscher and Hodge's pieces, and he cannot have failed to have noticed that 'Origins' had been strongly influenced by a study of Belgian history which Mandel had contributed to the November/December 1963 issue of the *New Left Review*.<sup>75</sup> Insult was added to injury when John Saville forgot to post Thompson a prompt copy of the first *Register*. A letter from Miliband reported the mistake:

Edward was a bit peeved at not having a copy [of the *Socialist Register*] when I saw him ... I told him that a copy from you was on the way ... It would be *awful* if he had not been sent a copy (*emphasis in original*).<sup>76</sup>

### Second time lucky?

Despite the disappointment he had caused them, Saville and Miliband were keen to get Thompson to contribute to the second issue of their journal. Miliband and Saville respected Thompson's scholarship, and it is likely that the success of *The Making of the English Working Class* helped them overlook the frustrations of 1963. In late February 1964 Miliband reported to Saville that Thompson had asked about making another attempt at an essay about class. 'It is the sort of thing he might do very well, judging by the Introduction to his book' Miliband wrote.<sup>77</sup>

On the first day of March Saville wrote to Miliband to report that he would be seeing Edward 'at Leeds at the end of the week'. Saville pledged to talk to Thompson 'about the contribution he has promised'.<sup>78</sup> On the ninth of March, Saville posted Thompson a letter which discussed the first issue of the *Register*, and speculated about the future of the journal. Perhaps sensitive to Thompson's absorption in history, and the success of *The Making*, Saville argued that the 'intellectual activity' that the *Register* represented maintained the spirit of the New Left Thompson had done so much to found in 1956. Saville described the importance of developing the journal, and talked up the possibility of setting up a 'New Socialist Library' to complement it.

At the end of August Saville wrote excitedly to Miliband about the upcoming second issue of the *Register*. 'We shall really have a list: Deutscher, Conor Cruise O'Brien, Michael Foot, EPT, to say nothing of Lukacs', Saville enthused.<sup>79</sup> Once again, though, Thompson proved a less than reliable contributor. At the end of November, Miliband sent Saville an anxious letter about Thompson's aversion to deadlines. Miliband was worried that he would 'end up waiting for a bit of his manuscript at 3am at Kings Cross' on the night before the second *Register* went to the printers.<sup>80</sup> For his part, Saville insisted that he was 'not going to be weak minded about deadlines' with Thompson. 'I've suffered too much in the past', he told Miliband.<sup>81</sup> On the ninth of December, Saville wrote his co-editor a relieved letter:

Edward has dropped me a hasty line saying that he is writing, but it is turning into a commentary? Polemic? Discussion(s) of some of the things that Perry Anderson wrote in his sweeping survey of the British political tradition. I add that this pleases me because Edward is at his best when he doesn't write out of the air but to a text.<sup>82</sup>

Saville's message does not seem to have pleased Miliband, who replied immediately:

What you say about Edward greatly worried me: I am not at all sure we want a highly polemical [essay] for a publication like the *Register*.<sup>83</sup>

Miliband's misgivings about the possible tone and content of Thompson's piece appear to have been balanced by his anxiety that Thompson would once again fail to produce anything at all. On 21 January, he reported to Saville that Thompson had promised to send a manuscript in a few days. Four days later, Miliband was still waiting on Thompson, though he had received 'a card this morning [which] says he is very nearly through'.<sup>84</sup> 'I feel more and more irritated with Edward', Saville wrote in reply.<sup>85</sup> Thompson's manuscript appears to have finally arrived at the end of January or the beginning of February.

### Reading 'Peculiarities'

What can we say about the text that Thompson eventually delivered to Saville and Miliband?<sup>86</sup> 'The Peculiarities of the English' opens with a short, acidic summary of the 'ruthless modernisation' of the *New Left Review* at the hands of 'Comrade Anderson', that 'veritable Dr Beeching of the socialist intelligentsia'.<sup>87</sup> Thompson announces that enough time

has now elapsed since Anderson's takeover to examine 'the general tendency of the 'new' New Left'. Anyone reading these words could be forgiven for expecting that Thompson is about to embark on a survey of the contributors to the journal and the political positions they hold. What Thompson actually does is begin a close and critical study of the 'Nairn-Anderson theses'. Thompson has nothing to say about the *New Left Review's* analysis of British politics in the Wilson era, and the rich discussion of events in the Third World which was a highlight of 'Where Are We Now?' finds no echo in 'Peculiarities'.

After caricaturing Anderson and Nairn as intrepid missionary-explorers determined to bring 'the intense rational consciousness' of their Continental Marxism to the 'astonished aborigines' of backward Britain, Thompson makes a series of criticisms of his antagonists' interpretation of the English revolution. Thompson disputes Nairn and Anderson's view that the upheavals of seventeenth-century England were a feeble 'premature bourgeois revolution'. He stresses the radical strands of the revolution, strands that his early hero Christopher Hill did so much to bring to light.

Thompson contests Anderson and Nairn's portrait of the English bourgeoisie as a weak class mired in pre-capitalist ideology and fearful of confronting the remnants of the old feudal class. Nairn and Anderson have erred, in assuming that a 'real' bourgeoisie must be urban. The English bourgeoisie that emerged after the victories of the seventeenth century was based in the countryside, rather than industrial towns, but this did not stop it being self-confident and articulate:

Even a cursory acquaintance with the sources must dispel all doubts as to the fact that the 18th century gentry made a superbly successful and self-confident capitalist class. They combined, in their style, features of an agrarian and urban culture. In their well-stocked libraries, month by month, 'Mr Urban' of the *Gentleman's Magazine* kept them informed of the affairs of the Town ... their sons were urbanised at Oxford and Cambridge, at the London Inns of Court, and on the tour of Europe, their daughters and wives were urbanised in the London season. To compensate for the isolation of the countryside, their great houses were expanded to accommodate those extended social exchanges (like select urban samples) which provide matter for the novel of fashion.<sup>88</sup>

Nor does Thompson agree that the English bourgeoisie produced no worthwhile ideology. Against Nairn and Anderson he cites Protestant radicalism, with its bourgeois democratic spirit and disdain for Popish superstition, the capitalist political economy of Adam Smith

and his followers, and the tradition of natural science which produced Darwin.

Having defended the honour of the English bourgeoisie, Thompson turns his attention to the English working class. He denies Anderson and Nairn's claim that ever since the decline of Chartism this class has had a 'supine' quality. Arguments first aired in 'Where Are We Now?' are repeated, as Thompson convicts his antagonists of neglecting the 'radical moments' in post-Chartist English working-class history, and patronising the reformist currents that have dominated the labour movement.<sup>89</sup> The 'radical moments' Thompson invokes are the expected ones – the early 1890s, when the modern union movement exploded into life; the years just before World War One, when a strike wave menaced the Liberal government; and the first years of the Attlee administration, before the onset of the Cold War disappointed hopes for radical change.

Thompson's defence of the gradualist, reformist traditions in the English labour movement is more imaginative: he uses the rabbit warren as a metaphor for the way that many workers have attempted to renovate rather than demolish English society. The image is a useful one, because it suggests purposeful activity rather than the apathy or false consciousness which Nairn and Anderson stress in their discussions of the British labour movement.

In the last section of his essay, Thompson turns from history and historiography to theory, as he reflects on the problems of being a Marxist historian. He argues that Anderson and Nairn have failed to appreciate the variety of English history, because they have subordinated it to a schema inspired by the experiences of France, and to a lesser extent Russia. Thompson does not deny the necessity of models to the historian, but he argues that there must always be a 'dialogue' between the model and the historical reality it is supposed to explain:

One can almost hear the stretching of historical textures as the garment of historical events ... is strained [by Anderson and Nairn] to cover the buxom model of La Revolution Francaise. In the end, with some splitting at the seams, the job is done: it can always be. And yet if earlier Marxists had been less obsessed with the French, and more preoccupied with the English, revolution, the model might have been different ...

Must we dispense with any model? If we do so, we cease to be historians ... the question is, rather, how is it proper to employ a model? There is no simple answer. Even in the moment of employing it the historian must be able to regard his model with a radical scepticism,

and to retain an openness of response to evidence for which it has no categories. At the best – which we can see at times in the letters of Marx and Darwin – we must expect a delicate equilibrium between the synthesising and the empiric modes, a quarrel between model and actuality. That is the creative quarrel at the heart of cognition. Without this dialectic, intellectual growth cannot take place.<sup>90</sup>

This is a sensitive, suggestive passage, which recalls the balanced account of the relationship between the First and the Third Worlds in ‘Where Are We Now?’ But Thompson’s fine words about dialogue are overshadowed by the rhetoric of English exceptionalism which accompanies the jibes against Anderson and Nairn that are scattered through ‘Peculiarities’. Thompson’s rhetoric becomes still more inflated in the last passages of ‘Peculiarities’, when he likens his antagonists to Stalinists:

There is a stridency in the way our authors hammer at class and tidy up cultural phenomena into class categories, as well as a ruthlessness in their dismissal of English experience, which stirs uneasy memories ... There are men who have heard that tone, in the past half century, and who retreated into an obscurity which was profound indeed. It was against that tone – that sound of shots being fired against experience and enquiry (and the remoter sound of more objective bolts) – that a few of us manned our duplicators in 1956. If this is where we are in 1965, then the locust has eaten nine years. But if it should be so, and if there should be any danger that that tone will be mistaken for the voice of socialist humanism, then, if it comes to that, there are some of us who will man the stations of 1956 once again.

### More trouble with editors

‘The Peculiarities of the English’ would bring to a head the differences between Thompson and the co-editors of the *Socialist Register*. Miliband and Saville had no complaints about the grand vision of English history that took up most of ‘The Peculiarities of the English’; nor did they object to Thompson’s meditations about the problems of writing Marxist history. What upset Thompson’s long-suffering editors were the attacks on Perry Anderson, Tom Nairn, and the new incarnation of the *New Left Review* which were scattered through ‘Peculiarities’. Miliband and Saville were particularly troubled by the essay’s opening paragraphs accusing Anderson of hijacking the *New Left Review*, and by the concluding passage that linked Anderson and

his circle to the Stalinists that the New Left had come together to fight in 1956. They insisted that Thompson either excise or rewrite these and several other parts of his essay. Thompson did not consider his attacks on Nairn and Anderson gratuitous. In a letter written in 1973, he explained the significance of the last part of his essay:

The critical point was the conclusion and the reference back to 1956 ... It had been central to my argument with a major part of the Marxist tradition that this tradition had ... lost any 'moral vocabulary' ... This had been a central theme of mine from 'Through the Smoke of Budapest' via 'Stalinism' to *Out of Apathy*. When I said that in the Anderson-Nairn vocabulary and mode of analysis 'the locust has eaten nine years', this was my meaning.<sup>91</sup>

Thompson was angry at the 'inhibitions' imposed upon him by Miliband and Saville, and argued long and hard before revising his text. On the fourteenth of March Saville wrote to Miliband describing the final stages of the struggle over the shape of 'Peculiarities':

I have just sent off Edward's proofs ... the first two major insertions fitted all right. So this brought me to the suggested final ending: which included the terrible phrase about manning the duplicators and so on ... All I could get him to do was take out the duplicator bit and insert the phrase about the New Left which is calculated to annoy you, but not me. But I couldn't budge him over the final sentence which I also don't like; and after half an hour of the university's money I had to agree to leave it in. And so will you, my good friend, who must be lying on the floor, screaming, at this very moment.<sup>92</sup>

Saville and Miliband may have been upset by Thompson, but it is easy to imagine the dismay they had caused their old comrade. He was the most gifted and – in 1964, if not earlier – the most famous English socialist intellectual of his generation. His prestige was such that Saville and Miliband had disregarded his sometimes-troublesome behaviour and offered him co-editorship of the *Socialist Register*. After he had declined that invitation, Thompson had repeatedly been urged to contribute an article to the *Socialist Register*. Thompson knew that Saville and Miliband rejected notions of a 'party line' for their journal, and prided themselves in publishing work from across the left spectrum. Yet Saville and Miliband had found 'Peculiarities' unpublishable, in its original form at least.

Edward Thompson was not a man who took kindly to editors or anybody else interfering with the shape and content of his writing.



His horror of censorship was expressed in an early pamphlet for the Communist Party called *The Struggle for a Free Press*.<sup>93</sup> In 1956, his critique of the same Party had been sharpened by successive rejections at the hands of bureaucratic editors. *The Reasoner* had been founded because Thompson and Saville were determined not to allow their arguments to be suppressed or truncated by the *Daily Worker* or *World News*, and the first issue of the journal had included Thompson's 'Reply to George Mathews', a text *World News* had refused to run.<sup>94</sup>

Thompson was always keenly sensitive to criticism, so that up until the end of his life he insisted on replying, often at considerable length, to perceived misreadings of his work, or misrepresentations of his behaviour. The 'Letter to Readers' column he wrote for the *New Reasoner* and the early issues of the *New Left Review* often became an exercise in 'clarification.' Two of Thompson's longer New Left polemics, 'Socialist Humanism' and 'Revolution', bred sequels, partly because their author felt the need to reply to criticism they generated. The 1968 paperback edition of *The Making of the English Working Class* would feature a spirited postscript, referring to the few negative reviews the book had garnered, and *Customs in Common* would include a ninety-two-page response to the literature created by Thompson's 1971 paper 'The Moral Economy of the Eighteenth Century Crowd'.

Why, given his sensitivity to censorship and criticism, did Thompson agree to the mutilation of 'The Peculiarities of the English', a text which he clearly conceived as a 'right of reply' to the onslaught by Tom Nairn and Perry Anderson on some of his most prized beliefs? Thompson's decision to publish the unexpurgated 'Peculiarities' in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* in 1978 suggests that Miliband and Saville never convinced him that their changes improved the text. Thompson's acquiescence to Saville and Miliband's excisions and amendments can probably be explained by the political demoralisation he was suffering in 1965. Faced with the prospect of isolation from even his closest comrades, he bit his lip and compromised. It is hard to imagine him making a similar concession during the heady days of 1959 and 1960.

### Two paradoxes

We turned to the narrative formed by Edward Thompson's life and career in the first half of the 1960s because we wanted to explain the paradoxical reputation of 'The Peculiarities of the English'. We wanted

to know why a polemic aimed at Thompson's contemporaries could be so devoid of contemporary reference. We wanted to understand the difference between the backward gaze of 'Peculiarities' and the contemporary, programmatic foci of earlier New Left polemics like 'Revolution' and 'Outside the Whale'. Our narrative has turned up a further paradox: the contrast, in the early years of the 1960s, between Thompson's fortunes as a political leader and as a historian.

Thompson began the 1960s as perhaps the most important leader of a substantial and growing political movement, a movement for which he entertained colossal ambitions. By the middle of the 1960s this movement had collapsed, and Thompson-the-activist had become an isolated and embittered figure, surprisingly alienated even from formerly close comrades like John Saville and Ralph Miliband. At the beginning of the 1960s, Thompson had entertained no real academic ambitions, regarding his historical research as fuel for political pedagogy, not as contributions to historiographical discourse. Yet by the middle years of the 1960s Thompson found himself one of the best-known younger historians in Britain, the leader of a circle of young scholars drawn to the flame of *The Making of the English Working Class*, and the effective head of a new academic department.

We have to use the extraordinary changes in Thompson's life in the first half of the 1960s to explain the puzzle that is 'The Peculiarities of the English'. The focus of 'Peculiarities', so unusual in Thompson's New Left polemics, has to be understood as a tactical choice dictated by the circumstances in which the revolutionary optimist of 1959 found himself by 1964. Demoralised by the collapse of the first New Left, outmanoeuvred organisationally by Perry Anderson and the Young Turks of the 'New Left Review mark II', and dismayed by the increasing distance of old comrades like Saville and Miliband, Thompson resolved to use his new-found reputation as a historian to strike a blow for the politics he associated with the Old New Left and 1956. Many of Thompson's rhetorical manoeuvres in 'Peculiarities' can be read as attempts to capitalise upon the reputation he has recently won as an historian.<sup>95</sup> He repeatedly appeals to the expertise of the historian, and to the superiority of historical procedures. Defeated and to some extent discredited as a political leader and strategist, Thompson would fight his battles on more favourable terrain.

### Consequences

'The Peculiarities of the English' is a paradoxical text, and it had some paradoxical effects. The essay rapidly became a classic, breeding a large and mostly admiring body of commentary.<sup>96</sup> 'Peculiarities' can be compared to Christopher Hill's *The English Revolution 1640*, because of the assured way that it put forward controversial new theses and opened up new paths of enquiry.<sup>97</sup> Thompson's conception of the English revolution as an extended process rather than a few dramatic events, his insistence on the existence of a powerful rural bourgeoisie in seventeenth and eighteenth-century England, his emphasis on the progressive aspects of Protestant thought, his spotlighting of England's 'indigenous' Marxist tradition, and his sympathetic account of the 'warrening' of English society by reformist workers' organisations were all immensely suggestive for a generation of scholars.

'Peculiarities' can also be seen as a sort of manifesto for Thompson's own historical research programme. As a compressed yet eloquent statement of his research interests and of his method it has no rival.

'The Peculiarities of the English' did not, of course, please everyone. The first 1966 issue of the *New Left Review* was marred by a long, almost incoherently angry reply to Thompson by Perry Anderson.<sup>98</sup> Despite its length, 'Socialism and Pseudo-Empiricism' failed to deal properly with any of the main arguments in 'Peculiarities'. Rather than subject Thompson's text to a close reading, Anderson threw together short and often arbitrary excerpts from a variety of published and unpublished texts in a manner which Thompson considered 'despicable'.<sup>99</sup> Anderson would eventually regret and repress 'Socialism and Pseudo-Empiricism', and accept some of the arguments it had tried to rebut.

Yet 'The Peculiarities of the English' was not an unqualified success. The essay had important negative repercussions for Thompson's politics, and for the relationship between his political and scholarly work. 'Peculiarities' may have won respect as a work of history, but its polemical blows upset many on the British left.

In 'Outside the Whale' and other polemics of the first New Left, Thompson's targets had either been confirmed right-wingers, like Alistair Cooke and TS Eliot, or unpopular Stalinists like Palme Dutt. In either case, Thompson had seemed to be attacking members of an establishment which was unpopular with most of the left. In 'Peculiarities', though, Thompson turned his guns on a group of young,

insouciant intellectuals who were identified in the minds of many with the hopeful politics of the anti-Stalinist revolt of 1956 and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. To left-wing readers not versed in the intricacies of New Left Board rivalries, Thompson's polemic must have seemed curmudgeonly, if not downright malicious.

Thompson's essay certainly did nothing to stem the progress of the 'New Left Review mark II'. With Anderson at the helm, the journal built up its range of contributors and readership in the second half of the 1960s, and became an important component of the 'New New Left' that coalesced around student unrest and protests against the Vietnam War.<sup>100</sup>

It was never possible that Thompson's combination of an excursion into English history and sectarian jibes could have sunk the ship Anderson was steering. By abandoning programmatic political argument, and focusing instead on a discussion of history largely disconnected from contemporary issues, Thompson guaranteed that the immediate political impact of his essay would be limited.<sup>101</sup> Readers could happily accept Thompson's interpretation of the English revolution or the thought of Darwin without rejecting most of the contents of the 'New Left Review mark II'. Saville and Miliband, for instance, readily admitted to the power of Thompson's vision of English history, without considering that this admission implied that they must cease to think of Perry Anderson and his circle as comrades.

The harsh tone and barbed jibes of 'Peculiarities' could only increase Thompson's already considerable political isolation. By making some of his attacks so indiscriminate – by associating the whole of the new-look *New Left Review* with Stalinism, for example – Thompson made any short-term rapprochement with members of Anderson's circle impossible. Looking back in 1973, Thompson remembered how hostile his opponents had become, and how isolated he had felt in the years after the publication of 'Peculiarities':

I have never received any editorial communication from Perry or his people, have never been invited to contribute to the review, never asked for an opinion as a reader ... There are also pitiful pin-pricks which did succeed in pricking: as, for example, I know that the new editorial team refused to forward letters (from abroad) to me, and that when overseas visitors called at the office professed not to know our address ... despite the fact that Dorothy and I had a banker's order to the NLR fund, they ceased to send us the review ...

I have genuinely felt isolated ... by the sense that a whole idiom and tradition of thought within which I worked was being bypassed and rejected by the young Left. This is not a posture: I have thought and felt this strongly.<sup>102</sup>

### The price of exceptionalism

It was not only the truculence of 'The Peculiarities of the English' that isolated Thompson in the years after 1965. The English exceptionalism that the essay embraced caused grave damage to the coherence of Thompson's thinking, and made it much harder for him to relate his scholarly work to his political enthusiasms.

We saw in earlier chapters how EP Thompson's thinking was shaped during the Popular Front era, a time when William Morris and the young Coleridge as well as Marx and Lenin were lauded by the Communist Party, and the Levellers and Chartists were allotted places in the same pantheon of heroes as the Bolsheviks.

From the beginning of his career as an activist and as a scholar Thompson was convinced of both the interest and the importance of English history and culture, and of the relevance of this history and culture to contemporary political practice. Thompson's first important work of scholarship, his monumental biography of William Morris, was intended partially as a political intervention. In the best Popular Front tradition, Thompson wanted to reclaim an indigenous radical from his admirers on the right; he also believed that Morris' 'revolutionary romantic' politics could help counter certain tendencies toward economism and philistinism in the post-war British left. By the time he had become a leader of the first New Left, Thompson was asserting that the tradition which included William Morris was important not just to the local but to the international left. At the end of 'Revolution,' a text that was widely read in the first New Left, Thompson argued that:

It would be foolish ... to underestimate the long and tenacious revolutionary tradition of the British commoner. It is a dogged, good-humoured, responsible, peaceable 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 struggles for democratic and for social rights have 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 which could leaven the socialist world.<sup>103</sup>

When he published *The Making of the English Working Class* in 1963, Thompson prefaced the work with a famous assertion of its heuristic value for both scholars and political activists in the developing world:

[T]he greater part of the world today is still undergoing problems of industrialisation, and of the formation of democratic institutions, analogous in many ways to our own experience during the Industrial Revolution. Causes which were lost in England might, in Asia or Africa, yet be won.<sup>104</sup>

Here Thompson is suggesting English history, or at least a certain period in English history, as a model for understanding the situation of large parts of the developing world. Thompson's claim for the relevance of his book to the situation of many developing countries is one of the reasons for the popularity it has enjoyed, not only amongst scholars in the Third World but amongst First World social scientists and political activists concerned with the problems thrown up by capitalist development in the Third World. For many readers, Thompson is not just describing the distant history of the world's first industrial power; he is saying something about the situation of billions of his contemporaries.

As we have seen, 'Where Are We Now?' argued against treating the Third World as a collection of proletarian nations oppressed by all Westerners. Thompson emphasised the interconnections between the working classes and left-wing parties of the First and the Third World, and suggested that decolonisation was the result of their collaboration. In 'The Peculiarities of the English', though, Thompson suppressed these arguments by proclaiming the Third World 'outside the scope' of his essay.<sup>105</sup> Thompson's neglect of the Third World was connected to his use of the rhetoric of English exceptionalism.

In the early 1960s, Thompson had to deal with the abject failure of Britain's first New Left, and the increasing prominence of revolutionary movements in the Third World that bore little resemblance to the Levellers or the Chartists. Perry Anderson and his allies reacted to the failure of the first New Left by clumsily importing Continental thinkers, and abstractly championing national liberation and revolutionary movements in the Third World. The Nairn-Anderson theses explained the dismal state of the British left by backdating it to the

seventeenth century. Anderson and his co-thinkers did not think that English history provided a model for the *English* left, let alone progressives in other countries.

Instead of continuing to make the case for the direct relevance of English history to the contemporary world, 'The Peculiarities of the English' embraced English exceptionalism. Freed from the responsibility of universalising English history, Thompson was able to cut his losses and abandon the over-optimism of New Left texts like 'Revolution', which had moved easily from a vision of approaching radical change in Britain to the coming transformation of the international political order.

The exceptionalist Thompson was able to devastate Nairn and Anderson's arguments, by ridiculing their efforts to subordinate the messy complexity of English history to an interpretive framework based on the experiences of France and Italy. But English exceptionalism deprived Thompson's historical arguments of much of their political relevance. What did the Levellers of the Chartists matter, if they were passing phenomena in an exceptional society? What relevance could they possibly have to contemporary Cuba or India or Vietnam?

As the 1960s went on and his academic career burgeoned, Thompson increasingly withdrew from political activity.<sup>106</sup> In the 1950s and 1960s his scholarly and political activities had been intertwined. His research on Blake and parts of the manuscript that became *The Making of the English Working Class* had gone into *New Reasoner*, alongside his more obviously political writing. As a reader in Social History at Warwick University, though, Thompson began to see scholarship and politics as less complementary activities.<sup>107</sup>

At times, Thompson seemed to consider his academic work as a political activity in and of itself. In a 1966 article for the *Times Literary Supplement*, he talked bathetically of combating the 'seed of William the bastard' that still occupied most of the chairs in history at British universities.<sup>108</sup> Thompson's scholarship lost some of its political edge, though, as his footnotes grew longer and the daring readings of primary material of *The Making of the English Working Class* were replaced by a measure of academic caution.

Thompson increasingly perceived an opposition between student activism, at least in the form in which it had become popular, and scholarship. In a memoir of his time as Thompson's student, Peter Linebaugh recalled the emerging contradiction. Linebaugh had travelled thousands of miles to study with Thompson after reading

*The Making of the English Working Class*, a book which he rightly interpreted as an intervention in contemporary politics, as well as a masterpiece of scholarship. But the Thompson that Linebaugh found at Warwick was keen to disentangle activism and scholarship:

A comic element entered our purposes: what I wanted to learn from him he wished to suppress, and what he wanted to teach I wished to ignore ... He wanted to get me in the archives and to produce a British PhD thesis that could meet the toughest standards ... I had seen the spirit of this advice before in reviews of his own work.<sup>109</sup>

‘The Peculiarities of the English’ was one of the obstacles that stood between Linebaugh and the EP Thompson who wrote *The Making of the English Working Class*.

#### Afternote: a fighting withdrawal

EP Thompson did not withdraw entirely from political activism in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In 1968 he was a central figure in the short-lived *May Day Manifesto* project, and at the beginning of the 1970s he was the public face of a campaign against Warwick University’s practice of spying on its students and staff.

Initiated by Raymond Williams, the *Manifesto* was an attempt to create a pole of attraction outside the Labour Party by presenting a policy programme at odds with the rightward drift of the Wilson government.<sup>110</sup> The public meetings which were held to plan and then promote the *Manifesto* suffered the same kind of infighting that had tarnished the New Left Clubs. Thompson would recall the *Manifesto* ‘in its organisational side’ as ‘an appalling experience of the usual kind of factionalising and intrigue.’<sup>111</sup>

Thompson’s influence on the *Manifesto* is betrayed by passages that emphasise the use of British democratic institutions as tools to facilitate a transition to socialism. In 1968, the year of near-revolution in France, rioting across America, and a burgeoning international movement against the Vietnam War, such ideas seemed not only parochial but conservative, and the *May Day Manifesto* failed to strike a chord in the radicalised second New Left.

Thompson’s engagement with the struggle at Warwick University also exposed his distance from a new generation of activists. After students occupied university buildings in protest at the administration’s habit of monitoring their political activities, Thompson had no



hesitation in taking their side. He was the first staff member to join the occupation, and he edited *Warwick University Ltd*, a Penguin paperback that put the protesters' case to the British public. Thompson complicated his commitment, though, by arguing against continuing the occupation in the face of threats of police action. Inspired by student protests overseas, many students were prepared for a confrontation with the police. Such a prospect disturbed Thompson, who insisted on viewing the Warwick struggle through the prism of the distant English past. David Eastwood has commented on Thompson's unusual perspective on events:

Thompson, without any sense of irony, compared the campaign of dissidents at Warwick University to the popular agitation for the Second Reform Bill. In a still greater rhetorical flourish, the struggle against Warwick's council became a re-enactment of the struggle for the Great Reform Act.<sup>112</sup>

Thompson's long contribution to *Warwick University Ltd* was not authorised by any of the other contributors to the book, and it included passages that made his disdain for parts of the student movement obvious:

I have been known to lament that young people do not serve a term in a really well-disciplined organisation, such as the Officers' Training Corps or the British Communist Party. Youth, if left to its own devices, tends to become very hairy, to lie in bed till lunch time, to miss seminars, to be more concerned with the style than with the consequences of actions, and to commit various sins of self-righteous political purism and intellectual arrogance which may be itemised in some other book.<sup>113</sup>

In a 1973 letter, Thompson both acknowledged and excused the way he edited *Warwick University Ltd*:

I still feel unhappy that in a sense I put one over [the other contributors] by publishing a personal statement; but the alternative – and the Penguin was only being published because I had undertaken to edit it – was to leave myself captive to a whole set of quite adolescent political attitudes.<sup>114</sup>

In the same letter, Thompson remembered being 'demonised in student circles for a long time after the Warwick episode'.<sup>115</sup> Thompson's engagement with the 'New New Left' only served to emphasise his alienation from a new generation of activists.

Notes

- 1 John Saville informed Thompson of these achievements in a congratulatory letter (8/3/74, Saville papers).
- 2 Thompson himself described 'Peculiarities' as a 'sketch map' which attempted to deal with 'what happened in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries' on 'a theoretical level' (interview in *Visions of History*, ed. Moore et al., Pantheon, New York, 1984, p. 15).
- 3 In 'Socialism and Pseudo-Empiricism', his generally intemperate reply to 'Peculiarities', Perry Anderson justly complained that 'any serious attack' on the Nairn-Anderson theses ought to have considered the phenomenon the theses were designed to explain: 'the contemporary crisis of English capitalism'. Anderson pointed out that 'Thompson nowhere ventures even the slightest comment' on the crisis of the 1960s (Perry Anderson, 'Socialism and Pseudo-Empiricism', *New Left Review*, 35, January/February 1966, p. 16).
- 4 In *Arguments within English Marxism*, his book-length reply to 'The Poverty of Theory', Anderson laments that 'Peculiarities' adopted 'a tone from the outset that Thompson never displayed even to enemies on the Right' (*Arguments within English Marxism*, Verso, London, 1980, p. 139).
- 5 Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*, New Left Books, London, 1980, p. 363.
- 6 Saville reproduces and discusses his and Thompson's 'Statement in Response to Suspension' in *Memoirs from the Left*, Merlin, Monmouth, 2004.
- 7 For a detailed narrative of the history of the 'Old New Left', see Michael Kenny, *The First New Left: British Intellectuals After Stalin*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1995, pp. 10-53.
- 8 Peter Sedgwick, 'The Two New Lefts', *International Socialism*, August 1964.
- 9 Kenny, *The First New Left*, pp. 35-36. John Saville gives an account of his 'sometimes tempestuous' relationship with Thompson during the production of *The Reasoner*, forerunner of the *New Reasoner* and the *New Left Review*, in 'The Twentieth Congress and the British Communist Party', *Socialist Register*, 1976, p. 17. Saville reveals that there 'was never a major issue, during the whole of the Reasoner period, on which we agreed from the beginning. We always had to argue and debate our strategy' (*ibid.*).
- 10 Raymond Williams remembered that 'ULR people tended to treat the Cold War epoch as a past phase. They were much more oriented to what was happening now in the rapidly changing society of contemporary Britain' (Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*, New Left Books, London, 1979, p. 362).
- 11 Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: history, The New Left, and the Origins of Cultural Studies*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 1997, p. 68.

- 12 For the outline, see David Goodway, 'EP Thompson and the Making of *The Making of the English Working Class*', in Richard Taylor ed., *Beyond the Walls*, p. 137.
- 13 In 1994, John Saville remembered that 'Edward did not take an active part in the work of the [Communist Party] Historians' Group ... I thought of Edward not primarily as a historian' (John Saville, 'Edward Thompson, the Communist Party, and 1956', *Socialist Register*, 1994, p. 23).
- 14 Thompson makes his appalling confession in the interview with Merrill Moore collected in *Visions of History*, ed. Henry Abelove, Pantheon, New York, 1984, p. 14. Elsewhere in the same discussion he insists that he "never 'took a decision' to be a historian" (p. 13).
- 15 For Saville's account of the making of *The Making*, see *Memoirs from the Left*, Merlin Press, London, 2003, p. 119.
- 16 For Thompson's excited report on this period of rapid growth, see 'Letter to Readers', *New Left Review* 4, July/August 1960, p. 72.
- 17 Thompson's ultra-optimistic response to Scarborough can be found in 'Revolution Again', *New Left Review* 6, November/December 1960. Thompson predicts that 'popular struggle' will 'awaken the political consciousness of the nation' over the coming year (p. 19). The New Left's role at Scarborough is detailed in Thompson's 'Letter to Readers' in the same issue. Thompson calls Scarborough 'the New left's most effective intervention ... A team of twelve or more managed to get out a four-paged bulletin, *This Week*, for every day of the Conference, and, by the end of the week, many people were asking for back issues to complete a set' (p. 71).
- 18 Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*, New Left Books, London, 1980, p. 365.
- 19 EP Thompson, 'Revolution Again: or, Shut Your Ears and Run!', *New Left Review*, 6, November/December 1960, pp. 18–19.
- 20 Michael Kenny discusses the tensions between Saville and Thompson in *The First New Left*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1995, p. 36:2.
- 21 *Ibid.*, pp. 35–36.
- 22 See, for instance, Peter Sedgwick, 'The Two New Lefts', *ibid.*
- 23 EP Thompson discusses the Stockport meeting and the wider problems of the New Left in 'Notes for Readers', *New Left Review*, November/December 1961, p. 12.
- 24 Kenny, *First New Left*, pp. 28–29.
- 25 Perry Anderson, 'Diary', *London Review of Books*, 21/10/93, pp. 24–25.
- 26 Raymond Williams remembered that Wilson's ascent to the Labour leadership, and his 'new style of rhetoric' caused 'a very rapid transit of most CND people I knew' back into what they considered to be a revitalised party (Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*, New Left Books, London, 1979, pp. 366–367).
- 27 Perry Anderson, 'Diary', p. 24.

- 28 Peter Sedgwick, 'The Two New Lefts'.
- 29 For Perry Anderson's account of the transition at the *New Left Review*, see his *Arguments within English Marxism*, Verso, London, 1980, pp. 36–37. Anderson argues that what Thompson considers a coup was in fact 'an abdication'.
- 30 For an account of this period of New Left history, see Marion Kozak, 'How It All Began: a Footnote to History', *Socialist Register* 1995, pp. 264–288.
- 31 EP Thompson, letter to John Saville and Ralph Miliband 20/5/73, Saville papers.
- 32 'Where Are We Now?', unpublished manuscript, Saville papers.
- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 *Ibid.*
- 35 *Ibid.*
- 36 *Ibid.*
- 37 *Ibid.*
- 38 Kozak, 'How It All Began', pp. 264–265. For Miliband's account of this event, see 'Thirty Years of the *Socialist Register*', in *Socialist Register* 1994, p. 1.
- 39 Sheila Rowbotham, *Promise of a Dream*, Verso, London, 2002, p. 63.
- 40 Ralph Miliband, memo to contacts 17/4/63, Saville papers.
- 41 Ralph Miliband, letter to John Saville 17/4/63, Saville papers.
- 42 EP Thompson, letter to John Saville and Ralph Miliband 18/3/63.
- 43 *Ibid.*
- 44 EP Thompson, letter to John Saville 25/3/63, Saville papers.
- 45 EP Thompson, letter to Ralph Miliband 25/3/63, Saville papers.
- 46 John Saville, letter to EP Thompson 20/4/63, Saville papers.
- 47 Ralph Miliband, letter to John Saville 24/3/63, Saville papers.
- 48 John Saville, letter to Ralph Miliband 31/5/63, Saville papers.
- 49 Ralph Miliband, letter to John Saville 26/8/63, Saville papers.
- 50 Ralph Miliband, letter to EP Thompson 21/9/63, Saville papers.
- 51 EP Thompson, letter to Ralph Miliband 'Tues' [early in October 1963], Saville papers.
- 52 Ralph Miliband, letter to John Saville 16/10/63, Saville papers.
- 53 EP Thompson, letter to Ralph Miliband 17/10/63, Saville papers.
- 54 *Ibid.*
- 55 *Ibid.*
- 56 *Ibid.*
- 57 John Saville, letter to EP Thompson 17/10/63, Saville papers.
- 58 *Ibid.*
- 59 EP Thompson, letter to Ralph Miliband 11/12/63, Saville papers.
- 60 *Ibid.*
- 61 For Thompson's discussion of 'Overture to Casino', see *The Heavy Dancers*, US edn, Pantheon, New York, 1985, p. x.

- 62 Ralph Miliband, letter to EP Thompson 11/12/63, Saville papers.
- 63 *Ibid.*
- 64 Ralph Miliband, letter to John Saville 21/12/63, Saville papers.
- 65 Kozak, 'How It All Began', p. 277.
- 66 Eugene Kamenka, *The Ethical Foundations of Marxism*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1962; Donald C Hodges, 'Marx's Ethics and Ethical Theory', *Socialist Register* 1964.
- 67 *Ibid.*, p. 272.
- 68 For the review of *The Making*, which we now know was written by Christopher Hill, see 'Workers' Progress', *Times Literary Supplement* 12/12/63, pp. 1021–1023 ; for the review of the Morris biography, see 'Morris and Marxism', *Times Literary Supplement* 15/7/55, p. 391.
- 69 Eric Hobsbawm, 'EP Thompson', *The Independent*, 30/8/93.
- 70 Dorothy Thompson provides an account of the move south from Yorkshire to the countryside outside Worcestershire in the introduction to her book *Outsiders: Class Gender Nation*, Verso, London, 1996, p. 8.
- 71 Perry Anderson, 'Diary', p. 24.
- 72 EP Thompson, 'C Wright Mills: the Responsible Craftsman', *Peace News*, 22/11/63 and 29/11/63.
- 73 Perry Anderson, *English Questions*, Verso, London, 1992, p. 138.
- 74 Tom Nairn, 'The English Working Class', *New Left Review*, 24, March/April 1964, pp. 43–57.
- 75 Ernest Mandel, 'The Dialectic of Class and Region in Belgium', *New Left Review* 20, pp. 5–31.
- 76 Ralph Miliband, letter to John Saville 12/6/64, Saville papers.
- 77 Ralph Miliband, letter to John Saville 23/2/64, Saville papers.
- 78 John Saville, letter to Ralph Miliband 1/3/64, Saville papers.
- 79 John Saville, letter to Ralph Miliband 28/8/64, Saville papers.
- 80 Ralph Miliband, letter to John Saville 25/11/64, Saville papers.
- 81 John Saville, letter to Ralph Miliband 13/11/64, Saville papers.
- 82 John Saville, letter to Ralph Miliband 9/12/64, Saville papers. Thompson's classic study of English history appears to have been written at Hafotdy, the village in North Wales where he often holidayed.
- 83 Ralph Miliband, letter to John Saville 10/12/64, Saville papers.
- 84 Ralph Miliband, letter to John Saville 21/1/64, Saville papers.
- 85 John Saville, letter to Ralph Miliband 25/1/64, Saville papers.
- 86 The following summary of 'Peculiarities' refers to the original version of the essay, which was published in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* in 1978. Later in this chapter we will discuss the changes that Thompson made to the text so that it could appear in the 1965 *Socialist Register*.
- 87 EP Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, Merlin Books, London, 1978, p. 35.
- 88 *Ibid.*, p. 43.

- 89 *Ibid.*, pp. 64–66.
- 90 *Ibid.*, p. 78.
- 91 EP Thompson, letter to John Saville and Ralph Miliband 20/5/73, Saville papers.
- 92 John Saville, letter to Ralph Miliband 14/3/65, Saville papers.
- 93 EP Thompson, *The Struggle for a Free Press*, People's Press Publishing Society, London, 1952. Peter Linebaugh recalls that Thompson 'often said that it was debate that differentiated us from the right' (email to the author, 31/01/05).
- 94 EP Thompson, 'Reply to George Matthews', *The Reasoner* 1, July 1956, pp. 11–15.
- 95 In his reply to 'Peculiarities', Perry Anderson notes the way that Thompson's text 'so frequently invokes' the "standards of the 'professional' historian" ('Perry Anderson, Socialism and Pseudo-Empiricism', *New Left Review*, 1966, p. 10–11).
- 96 Even the principal target of 'Peculiarities' has been obliged to acknowledge the text's importance. In 1980 Perry Anderson wrote that it was 'in many ways a marvellous essay in its own right, as an exercise of historical imagination' (*Arguments within English Marxism*, Verso, London, 1980, p. 139). For a detailed discussion of the impact of Thompson's broadside on Anderson and his circle, see Duncan Thompson, *Pessimism of the Intellect?*, Merlin, Monmouth, 2007, pp. 16–18.
- 97 Christopher Hill, *The English Revolution 1640*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1939.
- 98 Perry Anderson, 'Socialism and Pseudo-Empiricism', *New Left Review*, 35, January/February, 1966.
- 99 EP Thompson, letter to John Saville and Ralph Miliband 20/5/73, Saville papers.
- 100 For a lucid account of the history of the *New Left Review* after the departure of Thompson et al., see Duncan Thompson, *Pessimism of the Intellect?*, Merlin, Monmouth, 2007.
- 101 Perry Anderson was, then, justified in criticising Thompson for a withdrawal into 'contemplative history'. "Thompson writes as if all this intense debate was about the Puritan revolution, or Old Corruption, or the Chartists – and no more ... Thompson ... has forgotten the present", Anderson complained ('Socialism and Pseudo-Empiricism', pp. 32–33).
- 102 The first paragraph comes from the letter EP Thompson sent to John Saville and Ralph Miliband on 20 May 1973; the second comes from a letter sent to the same interlocutors a week later (Saville papers).
- 103 EP Thompson, 'Revolution', *New Left Review*, 3, May/June 1960, p. 10.
- 104 Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p. 13.
- 105 Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, p. 35.
- 106 In a 1980 interview, Thompson remembered that after moving to

- Warwick he had become 'increasingly engaged with the profession of history' (quoted in Peter Scott, 'Voluntary Exile from History's Mainstream', *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 27/6/80, p. 7). Thompson's interlocutor suggests that the 'geographical' shift to Warwick was paralleled by an 'intellectual' shift away from 'the ghetto of orthodox Marxism towards the historical mainstream' (*ibid.*).
- 107 Eric Hobsbawm commented perceptively on Thompson's 'turn' in an obituary for his old friend ('EP Thompson', *The Independent*, 30/8/93). After the mid-1960s, Hobsbawm remembered, Thompson increasingly 'wrote about history or anything else in the persona of a traditional English (not British) country gentleman of the radical left. This role, though unconvincing, went down well with the depth of his immersion in the history of his people.'
- 108 EP Thompson, 'History from Below', *Times Literary Supplement*, 4/7/66.
- 109 Peter Linebaugh, 'From the Upper West Side to Wick Episcopi', *New Left Review* 201, September-October 1993, p. 23. For another fine and funny memoir of Thompson by Linebaugh, see 'Edward Thompson (1924-1993)', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 7, 4, 1994, pp. 363-367.
- 110 Raymond Williams ed., *May Day Manifesto 1968*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1968. For Williams' account of the *Manifesto* project, see Williams, *Politics and Letters*, New Left Books, London, 1979, pp. 373-374.
- 111 EP Thompson, letter to John Saville and Ralph Miliband 27/6/73, Saville papers.
- 112 David Eastwood, 'History, Politics and Reputation: EP Thompson Reconsidered', *History* 85, 2000, p. 639.
- 113 EP Thompson, *Warwick University Ltd: Industry, Management, and the Universities*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1970, p. 155.
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- 115 *Ibid.*

## 4

# Getting out of the tent

In the summer of 1973 two old friends spent a weekend together in a beautiful eighteenth-century house in the English Midlands. The connection between EP Thompson and Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski went back to 1956. The dramatic events of that year – Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin, the Soviet invasion of Hungary and massive anti-Soviet protests in Poland – had brought both men to prominence as ‘dissident’ communists, critical of the Soviet Union and its satellite parties in Eastern and Western Europe.

In the years after 1956, both Thompson and Kolakowski had produced streams of politically engaged writing, writing that inspired the members of what is sometimes called the ‘Old New Left’, that amorphous but outspoken movement of youth and intellectuals determined to find a ‘Third Way’ – the phrase had not yet been tarnished – between Stalinist communism and Western capitalism and imperialism. Thompson and Kolakowski had read each other’s work, and after an exiled Kolakowski arrived in Britain in 1968 they became acquainted in person. By 1973, when Edward and Dorothy Thompson hosted Kolakowski at their home in the rolling hills outside Worcestershire, it was apparent that the ties that went back to 1956 had loosened.<sup>1</sup>

We have noted the way that, after the collapse of the Old New Left in Britain and the rise of a ‘New New Left’ more orientated toward student politics and national liberation struggles in the Third World, and enthusiastic about Continental Marxist theorists like Jean-Paul Sartre and Louis Althusser, Thompson had largely withdrawn from political activism. Thompson’s socialist principles may have remained strong, but in 1973 he was having trouble knowing how to turn them into practice. We noted, at the end of chapter 3, how Thompson’s withdrawal from political activism in the second half of the 1960s



had been hastened by the collapse of the first New Left and the isolationist rhetoric of 'The Peculiarities of the English'. We noted that Thompson's two important political interventions in the next decade – the creation of the *May Day Manifesto* in 1967–68 with Raymond Williams and other old comrades, and the campaign in 1970 against Warwick University's habit of spying on its students and staff – were short-lived, and ended in bitterness. In the second half of the 1960s a large part of Thompson's energy had been taken up with his work as a Reader in Social History at Warwick University, but in 1971 he had left that institution, claiming that academic life was not conducive to scholarship.<sup>2</sup> Thompson continued to give seminars and supervise the odd PhD, but the circle of young scholars that had formed around him at Warwick in the late 1960s had dispersed.

Despite his disappointments, Thompson remained a convinced socialist who supported the working class movement confronting the Tory government of Edward Heath in the early 1970s.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, Kolakowski had ceased to define himself as a socialist, and had made a series of attacks on the Western as well as Eastern left in right-wing publications like the CIA-funded journal *Encounter*.<sup>4</sup> Dorothy Thompson remembers that during the conversations of that 1973 weekend the difference in the old comrades' political trajectories became unmistakable.<sup>5</sup>

EP Thompson was never a man to dodge an argument, and late in 1973 'An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski' appeared in the *Socialist Register*, the annual journal whose early years we described in chapter 3.<sup>6</sup> Running to ninety-nine pages, and adorned with quotes from Wordsworth and Auden as well as Marx and Alasdair MacIntyre, Thompson's epistle was a passionate appeal against an old friend's rejection of Marxism and the socialist project. Against Kolakowski's pessimism about the prospects for Marxism and the possibility of radical change, Thompson insisted upon the existence of a 'Marxist tradition' irreducible to the crimes of Stalin and his successors.

The 1974 issue of the *Socialist Register* opened with Kolakowski's terse reply to Thompson's flood of words.<sup>7</sup> Described by Saville and Miliband as 'a tragic document', 'My Correct Views on Everything' found little common ground with Thompson:

I hope to have explained to you why, for many years, I have not expected anything from attempts to mend, to clean up or to correct the communist idea. Alas, poor idea. I knew it, Edward. This skull will never smile again.<sup>8</sup>

Thompson never replied in writing to ‘My Correct Views on Everything’, but at the end of 1974 the two old comrades did cross swords at a seminar held at Oxford, where Kolakowski had become a professor.<sup>9</sup> In 1978, Thompson collected his ‘Open Letter’ in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, but when that book was reprinted in 1995 the text was dropped. For his part, Kolakowski never bothered to collect ‘My Correct Views on Everything’.

### Out of the shadows

In 2006 the debate between Thompson and Kolakowski returned to print, and began to enjoy again at least a measure of attention, after St Augustine’s Press made the reply to Thompson the title essay of a collection of Kolakowski’s writing about communism, religion, and ‘various unpleasant dilemmas of our civilisation.’<sup>10</sup> A couple of pages of Thompson’s ‘Open Letter’ are included in the book, in a rather inadequate attempt to remind readers of the original context of ‘My Correct Views on Everything’.

In an ambitious essay for the *New York Review of Books*, Tony Judt excavated the Kolakowski-Thompson debate and tried to connect it with wider discussions about the nature and future of Marxist theory and left politics.<sup>11</sup> Norton has republished *Main Currents of Marxism*, the long, hostile, and influential account of the development of Marxism that Kolakowski published in the 1960s and 1970s, and Judt recommended this text as well as *My Correct Views About Everything* to his readers.<sup>12</sup>

Judt’s essay claims that *Main Currents of Marxism* ‘is the most important book on Marxism of the past half-century’ and ‘will surely not be superseded’. Judt repeats Kolakowski’s explanation of Marxism as a mixture of ‘Romantic illusion’ and ‘uncompromising historical determinism’, seasoned with a whiff of pseudo-Christian apocalypticism.<sup>13</sup> This brew has a tendency to upset the mental balance of intellectuals. Judt makes a great deal of the fact that Kolakowski undertook his intellectual apprenticeship in Poland, and suffered repression at the hands of that country’s political and intellectual establishment in the decade after 1956. Kolakowski, Judt assures his readers, had first-hand experience of the consequences of Marx’s doctrine, and was thus in a better position than privileged and protected Western intellectuals to appreciate its flaws.

A reading of Kolakowski's oeuvre suggests that exposure to 'actually existing socialism' did influence his understanding of Marxism, but not in the way that Judt imagines. Despite his political changes of heart, Kolakowski has never lost the habits of thought he learned from doctrinaire Stalinists in the first decade of the Cold War. In his early twenties Kolakowski made a name for himself as the Communist Party's most energetic critic of Catholicism, that traditional enemy of the Polish left. The young Kolakowski's criticisms of the Catholic tradition betray the classical intellectual method of Stalinism. In essay after essay, Kolakowski essentialises a complex body of ideas, reducing it to a few crude formulations, links these formulations to discredited political positions, and gives the ideas a teleological quality, in an effort to undercut any future attempt to revise or otherwise rehabilitate them. Under the guise of intellectual history, the young Stalinist pursues the crudest political polemic.<sup>14</sup>

The same procedure can be observed in *My Correct Views on Everything* and *Main Currents of Marxism*. Marx wrote millions of words in an extraordinary range of genres, from political journalism to poetry to history to 'pure' economics. Marx's oeuvre is the record of a political and intellectual quest, not a set of commandments. Yet Kolakowski is able to reduce Marx's work to a few hackneyed formulations:

The idea that the whole theory of communism may be summed up by the single phrase 'abolition of private property' was not invented by Stalin ... The point is that Marx really did consistently believe that human society would not be 'liberated' without achieving unity. And there is no known technique apart from despotism whereby the unity of society can be achieved.<sup>15</sup>

A good example of the poverty of Kolakowski's method is his treatment of Marx's view of the likelihood and likely location of a future socialist revolution. Referencing a handful of texts, Kolakowski claims that Marx believed that socialist revolution would break out in the 'advanced' countries of the West, and that it was well-nigh inevitable. Marx's careful reassessment of the prospects for socialist revolution in the West after the destruction of the Paris Commune in 1871, and the growing interest he showed in Russia and other 'undeveloped' societies in the last decade of his life are ignored by Kolakowski, lest they disturb his attribution of failure to Marx's 'prophecies', and his claim that the Bolshevik revolution could never have been foreseen by the author of *Capital*. (We should note, as well, that Kolakowski's

claim that Marx could never have anticipated the October revolution looks rather uncomfortable beside his attempt to make Marx responsible for the degeneration of that revolution and the depredations of Stalin.)

Worse than Kolakowski's misuse of Marx's oeuvre is his misunderstanding of Marx's method. Kolakowski's Marx is a cross between a second-rate bourgeois social scientist and a demented prophet. Marx's use of the dialectic is treated either as a rhetorical affectation or as evidence of an appetite for feverish pseudo-Hegelian speculation about 'destiny'. Kolakowski is incapable of appreciating the way that the dialectical method informed all of Marx's thinking, making his concepts nuanced and contextual and open to continual refinement. Marx had no time for the static categories of 'bourgeois economics', just as he had no time for the dogmatism inherent in all prophecy. All of Marx's concepts, even concepts as fundamental as 'proletariat' or 'capital', were dialectical abstractions, slices of an infinitely complex and continually changing reality.<sup>16</sup> Kolakowski, though, insists on freezing the concepts of Marx and his followers, and treating them like the definitions of a dour analytic philosopher or a number-crunching sociologist.

Judt's essay is oblivious to the weaknesses in Kolakowski's understanding of Marx and Marxism. Indeed, he repeats some of Kolakowski's most dubious arguments, insisting that 'neither Marx nor the theorists who followed him intended or anticipated' socialist revolution outside Western Europe, and characterising Lenin, that most voluntarist of all Marxists, as a crude fatalist who 'insisted upon the ineluctable necessity' of the triumph of Bolshevism.<sup>17</sup>

### The making of the 'Open Letter'

After lauding Kolakowski, Judt attacks Thompson's 'Open Letter'. For Judt, this 'patronising and sanctimonious' text represents Thompson at his 'priggish, Little Englander worst':

In a pompous, demagogic tone, with more than half an eye to his worshipful progressive audience, Thompson shook his rhetorical finger at the exiled Kolakowski, admonishing him for apostasy ... How dare you, Thompson suggested from the safety of his leafy perch in middle England, betray us by letting your inconvenient experiences in Communist Poland obstruct the view of our common Marxist ideal?<sup>18</sup>

Judt calls Kolakowski's reply to Thompson 'the most perfectly executed intellectual demolition in the history of political argument'. No one who reads it 'will ever take Thompson seriously again'. The author of *The Making of the English Working Class*, veteran of the battle of Cassino, and leader of the international volunteer labour force that built a railway across the wilderness of post-war Bosnia stands exposed as a 'lazy' man 'untainted by real-world experience', who was interested in Marxism only because it 'made it possible for him to master all of history and economics without having to study either' and thus 'solve the problems of mankind in one stroke'.<sup>19</sup> According to Judt, Thompson is not even interested in debating Kolakowski seriously – he is more interested in whitewashing the Soviet Union and its uncritical supporters than in dealing with the principled positions of the Polish critic of the New Left.

A short narrative of the making of 'An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski' may help to expose the injustice of Judt's claims about the text and about its author. Both John Saville and Ralph Miliband had been keen for EP Thompson to write something for the 1973 *Socialist Register*. As we saw in chapter 3, Thompson's association with the *Register* went back to its foundation in 1963; his essay 'The Peculiarities of the English' had helped sell out the 1964 issue of the journal. A letter that Saville sent to Thompson in September 1972 gives us a sense of the esteem in which he was held by the editors of the *Register*:

You do not need me to tell you that the fact that you might have an article in the *Register* would be seized on immediately by everyone in sight; in the same sort of way that your previous article [*The Peculiarities of the English*] has been quoted everywhere.<sup>20</sup>

Early in 1972, after prompting from the editors, Thompson announced an interest in writing a piece on 'women's lib'. By the end of May, though, he had become less keen on the idea:

I must withdraw the suggestion of a piece on women's lib: I don't have either the time or the heart for this right now. I already have enough enemies on the left, without bringing down upon me the whole tribe of womankind, in addition to those particular members of it to whom I've already given offence.<sup>21</sup>

Elsewhere in his epistle Thompson foreshadowed the central argument of the 'Open Letter':

I have also long intended to do a piece on Marxism as Tradition ... a piece distinguishing the notion of Marxism as a system from Marxism as a tradition. A trouble with this is that it is wholly out of phase with current young Marxism.<sup>22</sup>

In chapter 3 we saw how Saville's co-editor Ralph Miliband had encouraged Thompson to write an essay on 'The Marxist Tradition' for the very first issue of the *Socialist Register*.<sup>23</sup> As we have seen, 'The Marxist Tradition' was stillborn in 1963, though some of its themes probably sneaked into the meditations on Marxism and history that occur near the end of 'The Peculiarities of the English'.

Thompson's claim that his notion of Marxism was 'out of phase' reflects his alienation from what he sometimes called the second New Left, and the antagonism he had long felt toward many of its intellectual heroes. In 'Where Are We Now?', the long internal document written during the struggle over the *New Left Review* in 1963, Thompson had criticised the fashionable 'Third Worldism' of Continental Marxists like Jean-Paul Sartre. In 'An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski', these criticisms would be renewed and extended, as Thompson met Kolakowski's condemnation of the 'generation of 1968' halfway. In one of the most memorable passages in the 'Open Letter' comes when Thompson dramatises his alienation from the new generation of Marxist intellectuals who were tuning in to thinkers like Sartre and Althusser:

I cannot fly ... I remain on the ground like one of the last great bustards, awaiting the extinction of my species on the diminishing soil of an eroding idiom, craning my neck into the air, flapping my paltry wings. All around me my younger feathered cousins are managing mutations; they are turning into little eagles, and whirr! with a rush of wind they are off to Paris, to Rome, to California.<sup>24</sup>

Late in 1972 Thompson considered writing a critique of Tom Nairn, a key figure in Britain's second New Left, but in the New Year he settled on Kolakowski as a subject, after being dismayed by the news that his old ally was busy organising the conference that would be held in April at Reading University under the title *The Socialist Idea: a Reappraisal*. Writing to Saville in March, Thompson described Reading's Graduate School of Contemporary European Studies, which was co-hosting the conference with the publishing house Weidenfeld and Nicholson, as 'a horrific set of people'. Robert Cecil, the head of the School, was a 'NATO professor'.<sup>25</sup>

Thompson researched his 'Open Letter' with the fervour and thoroughness that might be expected from the author of *The Making of the English Working Class*. 'I ransacked the Brum [Birmingham University] library yesterday for Kolakowski items', he reported to Saville on the 15th of March 1973.<sup>26</sup> The length of the 'Open Letter' was in part a consequence of Thompson's insistence on assessing Kolakowski's thinking carefully, and formulating his own ideas very carefully. Not for the first time, Thompson's assiduity threatened to drive his editors to distraction. On May Day 1973 John Saville wrote to his fellow Marxist historian Victor Kiernan, complaining that:

[T]he editorial bed of nails is more probing than usual ... When I tell you Edward Thompson is writing an open letter to Leszek Kolakowski of which he has only done the first 20,000 words so far ... you will understand the beginnings of our problems.<sup>27</sup>

### Reading the 'Open Letter'

'An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski' begins oddly, with Thompson 'introducing' himself to his old friend and comrade. 'You don't know me, but I know you well', Thompson tells Kolakowski, before calling himself 'an impossible and presumptuous guest'.<sup>28</sup> This sort of heavy-handed, self-deprecating humour will be a feature of the 'Open Letter', and of 'The Poverty of Theory' four and a half years later. Thompson explains that he and Kolakowski are related politically – 'I am ... your mother's brother's stepson',<sup>29</sup> he says helpfully – because they were both 'voices of the Communist revisionism of 1956'.<sup>30</sup> Thompson acknowledges, though, that the connection is less important than it used to be:

Not much can be made of that. The intellectual particles produced in that moment of ideological fission have now fallen out over most parts of the political globe.<sup>31</sup>

These sentences foreshadow one of the preoccupations the 'Open Letter', and perhaps help us to understand the strange way that Thompson begins the text. For Thompson, Kolakowski is a friend and a stranger, a courageous comrade and a man who has turned his back on the politics of 1956. By 1973, Thompson himself was struggling to hold on to the politics of the faraway 'decade of heroes', whose promise had seemed to be confirmed and renewed by the likes of Kolakowski in 1956. Thompson's ninety-nine page epistle is not just a

rambling, melancholy plea for Kolakowski to return to the left – it is an attempt to restate the core beliefs that Thompson associated with the great revolt of 1956, as well as with the ‘heroic decade’ of 1936–46. It is notable that Thompson feels ‘less certain’ of Kolakowski’s politics during the period when he himself withdrew from politics.<sup>32</sup> There is perhaps a self-portrait hidden in Thompson’s depiction of Kolakowski’s drift away from left-wing politics:

From the time of your enforced exile, in 1968, to the ‘West’, I feel less certain of your identity. Your published statements are few. I must reconstruct what I can from fragments – an article in the *Socialist Register*, an article in *Daedalus*, an interview in *Encounter*, the proceedings of a conference – and these fragments intersect in negatives. For each isolated negative – this expression of contempt for Communist orthodoxy, that outright ‘no’ to Althusser, this frank objection to unexamined socialist slogans – I may feel partial or complete assent. But for the intersection of particular negatives into a general sense of defeat and negation: for the absence of qualifications.<sup>33</sup>

Thompson certainly felt ‘partial or complete assent’ with many of Kolakowski’s judgments against the contemporary left, and in particular the ‘New New Left’. Most of the first twenty pages of the ‘Open Letter’ are taken up by a poorly-organised account of Thompson’s clash with Anderson in 1963, and a series of sneers at the ‘culture of radicalism’, with its ‘halo of hysteria’, ‘self-indulgent emotionalism’ and ‘miniskirts’, ‘Mao tunics’ and military leather jackets’ which has, in Thompson’s estimation, marred the Western left of the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>34</sup>

Having released his bile, Thompson turns abruptly to a careful consideration of the nature of Marxism.<sup>35</sup> Thompson considers Marxism as dogma, Marxism as method, and Marxism as merely one element in an eclectic ‘culture-market’, before settling on a definition of Marxism ‘as tradition’:

In choosing the term tradition I choose it with a sense of the meanings established for it within English literary criticism. You might prefer, as a philosopher, the term ‘school’. But it is easier, to my mind, to think of a plurality of conflicting voices which, nevertheless, argue within a common tradition than to think of this tradition within a school.<sup>36</sup>

Thompson claims that his definition, which of course harks back to his proposed essay for the first *Socialist Register*, ‘allows of a large measure of eclecticism’, yet is not an ‘unprincipled invitation to self-dissolution’.



In a suggestive passage, Thompson describes the particular branch of the Marxist tradition which he sees himself as occupying:

To work as a Marxist historian in Britain means to work within a tradition founded by Marx, enriched by independent and complementary insights by William Morris, enlarged in recent times in specialist ways by such men and women as V Gordon Childe, Maurice Dobb, Dona Torr, and George Thomson, and to have as colleagues such scholars as Christopher Hill, Rodney Hilton, Eric Hobsbawm, VG Kiernan and (with others whom one might mention) the editors of this Register. I could find no possible cause for dishonour in claiming a place in this tradition.<sup>37</sup>

Thompson's definition of Marxism as a tradition meant that he did not succumb, in 1973 at least, to the Marxological debates that had consumed some of the best minds on the left in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The narrowly essentialist definitions of Marxism that many thinkers and tendencies had established in that time necessitated constant border patrols, and skirmishes with rival thinkers and tendencies. Althusser, who expended huge amounts of labour trying to differentiate the 'scientific' from the 'non-scientific' parts of Marx, and who struggled against those in the Communist Party of France and elsewhere who contested his judgments, is an example of a gifted thinker who would have been better off – and, eventually, was better off – directing his energies elsewhere.

The concision and suggestiveness of Thompson's (re)definition of Marxism is not paralleled elsewhere in 'An Open Letter to Leszek to Kolakowski'. The text's last seventy pages are given over to a confusing variety of poorly developed arguments, and a 'conclusion' whose eloquence cannot disguise its lack of connection to much that preceded it. Thompson makes some attempts to withdraw his agreement with Leszek Kolakowski about the nature of the second New Left, and protests rather more heatedly that his old comrade's attitude to the 'Communists of the 1930s and 1940s' is unjustly harsh.

Thompson is also offended by Kolakowski's claim that Marx's writings are characterised by a 'secular eschatology'<sup>38</sup> and an 'anti-historical viewpoint'.<sup>39</sup> In an intriguing but undeveloped passage which bears witness to the range of his reading, Thompson considers the differences between Marx and Edmund Husserl, thinkers that Kolakowski had, with his usual lack of subtlety, tried to lump together as practitioners of 'anti-historical' thought. Using the sort of language

that would be deployed against Althusser in 'The Poverty of Theory', Thompson characterises the founder of phenomenology as a thinker hopelessly and tragically divorced from the real knowledge of the world that empirical research can bring. Logic and thought experiments are no substitute for historical investigation.<sup>40</sup>

Turning his attention back to his interlocutor, Thompson quotes a characterisation of Kolakowski which the young New Left philosopher Alisdair MacIntyre made in 1958. MacIntyre called Kolakowski a mere 'spectator' to history, a man who was cruelly persecuted in Poland but who would, if he were to come to the West, simply 'flow with the stream'.<sup>41</sup> Kolakowski's belief in the 'amorality of history', and his insistence that human action could not change that amorality, made him a heretic in Poland; in the West, though, he would be acquiescent in the status quo. As we saw in chapter 2, EP Thompson identified just this attitude with many of the 'Natopolitan' intellectuals of the post-war West.

In his 'Open Letter', Thompson suggests that MacIntyre had seemed too harsh on Kolakowski in 1958, but that the Pole's role in organising the Reading University conference on *The Socialist Idea* seemed 'to fulfil a fifteen-year-old prediction'.<sup>42</sup> Thompson 'was not invited to attend' to go to Reading, but if he had been asked he would 'have had to make the personal decision to refuse':

I would abstain for the same reasons (If I were invited to write for it, which I am not) I would abstain from writing for *Encounter*. I would feel awkward in such company ... I cannot overcome the habits of a lifetime ... Like an 18th-century Quaker, who will not bare his head before authority nor take oaths, I will not take my holidays in Spain nor attend conferences in Rome funded by the Ford Foundation. I will be imprisoned in my own isolation rather than pay any tithes whatsoever to the Natopolitan Church.<sup>43</sup>

Thompson concludes his epistle by urging his own friend to rethink his political trajectory:

You called, or seemed to call, us into a common struggle, as arduous in practice as in intellect. I do not think the time has gone by for such a struggle. I think it is with us, everyday. In any case, can we still meet one day and have a drink? I owe you more than one. And can we still drink to the fulfilment of that moment of common aspiration: '1956'?<sup>44</sup>

### More trouble with editors

When Thompson finally delivered the 'Open Letter' to Saville and Miliband in the middle of 1973, the text's hostility toward the second New Left tempered the editors' relief. In letters that recall the correspondence over the original draft of 'The Peculiarities of the English', Saville and Miliband urged Thompson to tone down his criticisms of the New New Left, and in particular of the circle surrounding Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn at the *New Left Review*. Miliband was particularly concerned at some of his old comrade's verbal jousts:

[Y]ou are writing an open letter to Leszek Kolakowski – and, though you say your experience and his *are* very different, you come perilously close to drawing a parallel between his being chucked out by Gomulka et al and you being chucked out by Perry Anderson et al ... I don't think it is appropriate, it does not belong to this essay, this story I mean ... Edward, these are *comrades*, not apostates, traitors, renegades etc ... It's not right, and you are too big for it (*emphasis in original*).<sup>45</sup>

Miliband also suggested Thompson was exaggerating his own isolation from the British left in a somewhat self-pitying manner:

Is it really true that you 'belong to an irrelevant and silenced alien political tradition' [?] I doubt it. But I object much more to your saying that 'if this letter is printed it will be only because the editors bear me an old friendship'.<sup>46</sup>

Thompson shot back an eight-page letter which described the collapse of the first New Left, the 'coup' that saw Perry Anderson consolidate his control of the *New Left Review* and dissolve the New Left Board, and Thompson's own withdrawal from political engagement in the second half of the 1960s and the early 1970s.<sup>47</sup> Thompson wanted to make clear the connection between his critique of Kolakowski and his critique of the second New Left:

[I]n both theoretical and practical ways I think *NLR II* must be not only examined but actively opposed. I cannot argue with [Kolakowski] from an undefined position: but to define my position I must at the same dissociate myself from that of *NLR II*.<sup>48</sup>

In *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, Thompson would refer to the asides of his 'Open Letter' in more self-deprecating terms. He made it clear, though, that the text was his attempt to find a way out of the political disillusionment and isolation he had felt in the years

since the collapse of the first New Left and the publication of ‘The Peculiarities of the English’:

I should perhaps apologise for some of the content of that letter, and for writing what was in fact a very general argument (in which many others were concerned) in the form of a private meditation ... But I don't apologise too much. The sense of isolation was real, this was my way of getting out of the tent; and I had to write it in that way. For some years the intellectual ‘left’ had been in a state of overheated paranoia, and one could not simply signal an uncomplicated adhesion to it.<sup>49</sup>

### The problem of exceptionalism

Thompson's problem, in 1973, was not merely one of maintaining or restoring his own enthusiasm. We saw in chapter 3 how he had, in the mid-1960s, retreated into a rhetoric of English exceptionalism, and begun to prioritise scholarship over political activism. The ‘circuits’ which had connected his scholarship and his politics, and connected the English radical traditions which inspired him with international events, had been disrupted.

Thompson's concept of Marxism-as-tradition was intended as a way of conceding Kolakowski's criticisms of the second New Left, without accepting the Pole's wholesale anti-Marxism. Thompson considered Kolakowski's arguments relevant to those who conceived of Marxism as a ‘doctrine’ or as a ‘method’, but not to the notion of Marxism-as-tradition.

Thompson's ‘Open Letter’ thus attempted to differentiate its author's beliefs from the Marxisms of the ‘New’ New Left – Marxisms Thompson understood only imperfectly – as well as the Stalinism that had been rejected in 1956 and the anti-Marxism of Kolakowski and the NATO professors who gathered at Reading in April 1973. Thompson was struggling to find a way to assert the ideas that he had absorbed during the ‘decade of heroes’ in a period when the left had changed greatly and many old comrades from the first New Left had succumbed to either the apathy or the acquiescence in the status quo that ‘Outside the Whale’ had inveighed against. By locating adversaries like Perry Anderson within the same tradition as himself, yet maintaining that this tradition was based as much on disagreement as assent, Thompson was trying to open a dialogue between himself and others on the Marxist left. Eight years after the brutal rejections of ‘The Peculiarities of the English’, he wanted to find a way of getting out of his ‘tent’.

'An exercise in attacking the left'?

Thompson's criticisms of the New New Left and of trendy Continental Marxists like Sartre and Althusser did not win him many friends. Writing in *History Workshop Journal* a quarter century later, Jonathan Ree remembered the reaction of his friends and colleagues to the 'Open Letter':

They regarded socialist humanism as obsolete, and EP Thompson as an obsessive individualist stuck in the past. To put it politely, the 'Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski' bored them.<sup>50</sup>

Even some old allies were alienated by the 'Open Letter'. Ralph Miliband's concerns about the tone of the text had initially been balanced by enthusiasm about some of its arguments. By 1975, though, Ralph Miliband's misgivings about the text had grown. In a letter to Saville, he decided that Thompson had been far too hard on the New New Left:

Edward ... is not at all on my wavelength politically. Of course, he is 'radical' and all that, but the Kolakowski piece, at least in the final version, serves to hide how anti-New Left ... he has become. I have found him more and more cranky, wayward [and] given to pontifical statements ... he and I don't begin to talk the same political language, or write it.<sup>51</sup>

How can we explain the judgement Miliband made against the 'Open Letter', and against Thompson himself? Tony Judt's suggestion that Thompson's text was designed to flatter an adoring New Left audience will clearly get us nowhere. It is better to consider the contradictions in the text itself and the deteriorating outlook for Thompson's politics in the 1970s.

We saw in chapter 3 that the historical insights and suggestive meditations of 'The Peculiarities of the English' were marred, and often even overshadowed, by unnecessary caricatures of opponents, and by a rhetoric of English exceptionalism that at times seemed almost Anglophilic. The same problems haunted 'An Open letter to Leszek Kolakowski', and would soon haunt 'The Poverty of Theory'. Thompson's rhetorical excesses belied the subtlety of his argument for 'Marxism-as-tradition' over 'Marxism-as-doctrine', and probably helped restrict the influence of his text.<sup>52</sup>

Although Thompson's rhetoric was sometimes gratuitously extreme, it expressed a real contradiction in the 'hardcore' of his thought. From

the mid-1960s, at least, he struggled to reconcile his commitment to a politics based on English history and institutions with a world that seemed increasingly oblivious to the legacy of the Chartist and William Morris. Thompson's redefinition of Marxism in the 'Open Letter' was an attempt to deal with the chasm that had opened up between the reality of the second New Left and Thompson's own politics. Using Lakatosian terminology, we can call the new definition an addition to the protective 'softcore' of Thompson's thought. But Thompson's elegant exercise in redefinition could not disguise his deep discomfort with an increasingly alien left and an increasingly alien Britain. His jibes against the second New Left and the counter-culture may have been tasteless and tactically foolish, but they did express genuine feelings.

As the 1970s went on, Thompson's backward-looking conception of an alliance of 'the people', modelled on the Popular Fronts of the 'decade of heroes', began to seem even less suited to a Britain increasingly riven by class, gender, racial, and sectarian conflicts. Minorities like women and blacks began to challenge the traditional left, as well as the right. Economistic, public sector labour struggles of the sort criticised by Eric Hobsbawm's famous lecture *The Forward March of Labour Halted?* pitted worker against worker, and led to serious suffering in working-class communities deprived of public services.<sup>53</sup> The war in Ireland divided the left, and challenged traditions of non-violent political struggle. The rise of 'ultra-left' Trotskyist and Maoist challenges to social democracy and 'official' Communism balkanised the left and led to fractious scenes at trade union conferences. Dennis Dworkin has summed up the problems that beset Thompson's political project in the 1970s:

Thompson's ... image of a socialist transformation depended on a weakening coalition of workers and middle class sympathisers. The political and cultural forms of resistance that emerged in the sixties and seventies – the student movement, the counterculture, working class youth subcultures, the feminist and gay rights movements, and anti-racist politics – were never seen by him as suitable substitutes ... Thompson saw the working class in heroic terms: an authentic radical culture that resisted ideology and embodied democratic traditions ... Thompson's political analysis did not acknowledge contemporary workers who preferred the Tories to Labour, were preoccupied with consumer goods, and harboured racist resentments against their immigrant neighbours.<sup>54</sup>

In the next chapter we will see how Thompson's problems with the left would grow worse and worse, as the 1970s went on, and prompt him first to modify and then abandon the complicated commitment to Marxism-as-tradition that he had made in 'An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski'.

### Explanatory or rhetorical power?

Let us leave aside the weaknesses of 'An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski', and return to our discussion of Tony Judt's (mis)interpretation of the text. It should be clear that Tony Judt is guilty of distorting the meaning of the 'Open Letter'. It is absurd to try to characterise the text as a defence of Stalinism and the 'excesses' of left politics in the late 1960s, written by a lazy and cloistered intellectual who wanted only to impress an adoring New Left audience. The 'Open Letter' is the work of a long-time critic of Stalinism who wanted to both dialogue with and distance himself from the contemporary British left and from most contemporary Marxisms. Writing for a large-circulation publication about an obscure and still mostly out of print text, Judt failed to give his readers an accurate summary of Thompson's argument against Kolakowski, let alone an accurate account of the circumstances surrounding the clash between the Polish philosopher and the English historian.

A charitable person might suggest that Judt did not (re)read the 'Open Letter' before writing about it. Leszek Kolakowski, though, did not have the same excuse when he wrote 'My Correct Views on Everything'. Kolakowski had been acquainted with Thompson's writing for at least a decade, and had seen the 'Open Letter' even before it was published. Despite these advantages, Kolakowski also failed to engage with the substance of Thompson's arguments. Like Judt, he ignored Thompson's efforts to work out an original and nuanced notion of Marxism, and instead launched a series of attacks on Stalinism and on a parody of the New Left. In the notes to *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, Thompson would justly complain that Leszek Kolakowski's text 'did not engage with me'.<sup>55</sup>

Another explanation can be advanced for the spectacular failure of Judt and Kolakowski to deal with Thompson fairly. Both men have an understanding of Marxism that is so simplistic that it cannot hope to accommodate the nuances of Thompson's thought, or the thought of most other important Marxist thinkers. Whatever other flaws it

possesses, Thompson's pluralist, anti-essentialist notion of Marxism-as-tradition cannot be written off as a species of 'uncompromising historical determinism' or 'Romantic illusion'. Kolakowski and Judt must replace it with straw men, lest it undermine their own dogmatic 'explanations' of Marxism.

The last part of Judt's piece highlights the poverty of his theory of Marxism. In a twenty-first-century world of 'pre-emptive' wars and savage neo-liberalism disguised as 'globalisation', Judt fears that the 'moral appeal of some refurbished version of Marxism is likely to grow'.<sup>56</sup> Since 'no one else seems to have anything very convincing to offer', a 'renewed faith in Marxism' is becoming the 'common currency of international protest movements'.<sup>57</sup> For Judt this twenty-first-century Marxism is simply a rehash of the creed Kolakowski denounces: with its 'fantasy' of revolutionary change it is no better than the neo-conservative doctrine in favour in Washington. Kolakowski's reply to Thompson and his history of Marxism can be 'read with much profit' by liberals who want to lance the new Marxist boil, Judt insists.

It can be argued, though, that Kolakowski's radically reductionist definition of Marxism has even less explanatory value today than it had in the early 1970s. With the demise of the Soviet Union and the decline of its former satellite parties the forces calling themselves Marxist have become far more fragmented and diverse. Judt's essay refers to the popularity of Marxism in Latin America, in the wake of the upsurge in social conflict there, but even in the Latin American countries that have moved farthest leftwards no brand of Marxism has achieved hegemony. In Venezuela and Bolivia, the most popular left ideology appears to be syncretic, blending elements of Guevarism and Trotskyism with certain 'bourgeois nationalist' ideas and – in Bolivia at least – traditional indigenous beliefs. It would be quixotic indeed to make the 'Bolivarian socialism' espoused by Hugo Chavez an epiphenomenon of *What Is To Be Done?* or *Capital*.

Whatever flaws it has, Thompson's notion of Marxism-as-tradition seems better able to accommodate the diversity of 'actually existing socialism' in the first decade of the twenty-first century than the caricatures drawn by Judt and Kolakowski. Tony Judt believes that Kolakowski relieves us of the duty of having to read EP Thompson. In fact, the shortcomings of the account of Marxist thought and history which Kolakowski advances in texts like 'My Correct Views About Everything' should spur us to re-examine the alternative notion of a 'Marxist tradition' that is advanced in 'An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski'.



Notes

- 1 Dorothy Thompson, interview with the author, 22/05/05.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 A fine example of Thompson's continuing solidarity in the early 1970s with the trade union movement and the left is the article 'Sir, Writing by Candlelight', which defended a strike wave from the calumnies of the Tory press (EP Thompson, *Writing by Candlelight*, Merlin, London, 1980, pp. 39–49).
- 4 Thompson summarises some of these verbal onslaughts in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, Merlin, London, 1978, pp. 98–100.
- 5 Dorothy Thompson, interview with the author, 22/05/05.
- 6 *Socialist Register* 1973, ed. John Saville and Ralph Miliband, Merlin, London, 1973, pp. 1–99.
- 7 Leszek Kolakowski, 'My Correct Views on Everything', *Socialist Register* 1974, pp. 1–24.
- 8 'My Correct Views on Everything', p. 24. Saville and Miliband made their judgment in a note at the beginning of *Socialist Register* 1974.
- 9 The debate was described in *Radical Philosophy*, 10, Spring 1975, pp. 43–44 and recalled by Terry Eagleton in his essay 'The Poetry of EP Thompson' in *Literature and History*, 5, 2, 1979, pp. 143–144.
- 10 Leszek Kolakowski, *My Correct Views on Everything*, ed. Zbigniew Janowski, St Augustine's Press, South Bend, Indiana, 2004.
- 11 Tony Judt, 'Goodbye to All That?', *The New York Review of Books*, 53, 14, 21/9/06.
- 12 Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism* (three volumes), Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1978.
- 13 Tony Judt, 'Goodbye to All That?'
- 14 For a look at Kolakowski's early career, see Stanley Pierson, *Leaving Marxism: Studies in the Dissolution of an Ideology*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2001, pp. 128–132. Pierson discusses the young Kolakowski's polemics against Catholicism, bringing out their highly confrontational language and their reliance on essentialist definitions of Catholicism and Christianity in general – definitions which derive from very selective readings of vast theological literatures. In his early and later writings, Kolakowski's approach is both scholastic and vulgarly reductionist – scholastic, because it understands the history of ideas as the history of texts, rather than as something with a sociological dimension, and reductionist, because texts are not consulted in either a systematic or a fair-minded manner.
- 15 Leszek Kolakowski, *My Correct Views on Everything*, St Augustine's Press, South Bend, Indiana, 2005, p. 42.
- 16 For a good account of Marx's dialectical method – an account we will

- dwell on in part III, when we will consider certain Marxological questions in detail – see Bertell Ollman’s *Dialectical Investigations*, New York, Routledge, 1993.
- 17 For a taste of Lenin’s voluntarism – his refusal to insist, in the way that Karl Kautsky and Georgi Plekhanov insisted upon the ‘ineluctably necessity’ of the coming of socialism – see his *April Theses*, online at the Marxist Internet Archive, [www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/apr/04.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/apr/04.htm), accessed 13/02/08.
- 18 Judt, ‘Goodbye to all That?’
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 John Saville, letter to EP Thompson 20/9/72, Saville papers.
- 21 EP Thompson, letter to John Saville 29/5/72, Saville papers.
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 EP Thompson, letter to Ralph Miliband, 17/10/63, Saville papers.
- 24 Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, Merlin, London, 1978, p. 109.
- 25 EP Thompson, letter to John Saville 15/3/73, Saville papers.
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 John Saville, letter to Victor Kiernan 1/5/73, Saville papers.
- 28 EP Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, Merlin, London, 1978, p. 93.
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 *Ibid.*
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 98.
- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 99.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 116.
- 36 *Ibid.*
- 37 *Ibid.*
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 132.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 139.
- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 139–140.
- 41 *Ibid.*, p. 184–5.
- 42 *Ibid.*, p. 185.
- 43 *Ibid.*, pp. 181–2.
- 44 *Ibid.*, p. 187.
- 45 Ralph Miliband, letter to EP Thompson 15/6/73, Saville papers.
- 46 *Ibid.*
- 47 EP Thompson, letter to John Saville and Ralph Miliband 20/5/73, Saville papers.
- 48 *Ibid.*
- 49 EP Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, Merlin, London, 1978, p. ii.

- 50 Jonathan Ree, 'EP Thompson and the Drama of Authority', *History Workshop Journal* 47, Spring 1999, p. 215.
- 51 Ralph Miliband, letter to John Saville 15/7/75, Saville papers.
- 52 For a forceful argument that the 'Open Letter' is Anglocentric, see David A Wilson, 'Old and New Left', *Radical Philosophy*, 10, Spring 1975, pp. 29–31.
- 53 Eric Hobsbawm *et al.*, *The Forward March of Labour Halted?*, New Left Books, London, 1981.
- 54 Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 1997, pp. 216–217. Robert Gray points in the same direction when he writes that Thompson's work 'presses us towards culture-as-resistance, the integrity of popular tradition ... Thompson perhaps evades some hard questions about these traditions, which might be raised, for example, in the light of black and feminist politics. The central figure of the "freeborn Englishman" is limited by gender, race, and ... by religion' ('History, Marxism and Theory', in *EP Thompson: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Harvey J Kaye and Keith McClelland, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1990, p. 172). Peter Linebaugh recalls that Thompson was conspicuous by his absence from debates about feminism in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Linebaugh and many other male leftists attended feminist conferences, but Thompson did not (Peter Linebaugh, email to the author, 31/01/05).
- 55 Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, p. 400.
- 56 Tony Judt, 'Goodbye to All That?'
- 57 *Ibid.*

## Part III

# Crisis and creativity



## The road to St Paul's

From a scholarly perspective, at least, the 1970s are a surprisingly obscure period in Thompson's life: little has been written about them, in comparison to the many memoirs and critical studies which cover the first years of the New Left, or the 1980s, or even the years of Thompson's stint in the Workers Education Association. In this chapter we will try to fill in a few blanks.

### Still in the tent?

We have seen that 'An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski' criticised Kolakowski's withdrawal from political activism in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and that Thompson claimed, in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, that he wrote the letter as a way of getting out of the 'tent' where he had been isolated since the mid-1960s, and re-engaging with left-wing political activism.<sup>1</sup>

There is little evidence, though, to suggest that the 'Open Letter' helped to end the political isolation that Thompson had suffered after the collapse of the Old New Left: on the contrary, it appears to have bemused many of its readers and antagonised some of Thompson's old comrades. We have noted Jonathan Ree's claim that many younger socialist intellectuals regarded the text without excitement, and considered Thompson's 'socialist humanist' politics irrelevant to the world of the 1970s.<sup>2</sup>

As we saw earlier, the 'Open Letter' was only published in the *Socialist Register* after a strained correspondence between Thompson and his editors John Saville and Ralph Miliband. Saville and Miliband were concerned about Thompson's attacks on old foes like Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn, and his hostility to the politics of the

student and countercultural groups which had played such a big role in the political upheavals of 1968 and subsequent years. Miliband would come to see the 'Open Letter' as a sort of Rubicon separating his politics from those of Thompson.

Thompson was certainly unsuccessful in provoking a productive discussion with his old comrade Leszek Kolakowski. Publishing the Polish exile's reply to Thompson in the 1974 *Socialist Register*, Miliband and Saville described it as 'a tragic document'.<sup>3</sup> Kolakowski used the *Register's* pages to repudiate any sort of commitment to Marxism; in December 1974, at a joint seminar with Thompson at Balliol College, he rebuffed the arguments of the 'Open Letter' again. In his essay 'The Poetry of EP Thompson', Terry Eagleton would recall the debate bitterly, ridiculing Thompson's belief that he could coax Kolakowski the Cold Warrior back to the politics of 1956.<sup>4</sup>

### Into exile

There is evidence, though, that Thompson was not resigned to political isolation, even after the failure of the 'Open Letter' to resonate with the left. Early in 1975, Thompson turned away from his flowers long enough to make a pitch for the editorship of *Socialist Register*. Visiting John Saville in March, Thompson suggested that the old editorial team might enjoy a 'sabbatical', and offered to edit the 1976 issue in partnership with his friend Basil Davidson. Saville liked the idea, but Ralph Miliband did not, and nothing came of it.<sup>5</sup>

By the time he made his offer to Saville and Miliband, Thompson had already accepted an invitation to lecture at Pittsburgh University. He and Dorothy would spend most of 1975 at Pittsburgh, and most of 1976 at Rutgers University in New Jersey. Their motivation was financial: without the injection of funds America promised, Edward would be unable to pursue the career of freelance writer that had lured him away from Warwick University after 1971.<sup>6</sup> If he had been disillusioned with the state of British politics, Thompson was horrified by what he found in the United States. Influenced by his reading of the circle of socialist intellectuals who produced the *Monthly Review*, Thompson decided that 'the stupid free market society' around him was suffering a severe crisis, and that American foreign policy was as a result becoming ever more aggressive.<sup>7</sup>

Thompson was appalled by the rise of 'modernisation theory' in academic departments, feeling that the doctrine acted as an

ideological justification for the depredations of US imperialism. When Saville asked him for copy for the 1976 *Socialist Register*, Thompson developed an ambitious plan for an essay marking the American bicentennial, and the 'corruption of the American revolution'.<sup>8</sup> The essay was never submitted, but Thompson's attitude to contemporary America was clear.

Writing to Saville in August 1976, shortly before his return home, Thompson remarks on how much he misses 'British politics, which is so much better than the awful politics over here, in this godforsaken free market society'.<sup>9</sup> Later in the same letter Thompson makes the arresting claim that 'British society is poised for a transition to socialism'.<sup>10</sup>

### The thaw

Thompson's much more optimistic assessment of British left politics seems to have been accompanied by a rapprochement with Perry Anderson and his *New Left Review*. In a 1976 interview with Michael Merrill Thompson described Anderson as a 'comrade' with whom he did not wish to argue; after returning home he published in the *New Left Review* for the first time in fourteen years.<sup>11</sup> In a letter to Saville written shortly after he returned home, Thompson enthused about Anderson's *Considerations on Western Marxism*, which he saw as a repudiation 'of all that philosophical stuff Perry has been publishing in the *Review* for years'.<sup>12</sup>

Anyone who reads the optimistic, conciliatory words of 1976 must ask themselves the questions: how could Thompson have expressed himself with such bitterness and such pessimism less than two years later, in 'The Poverty of Theory', and how could the reconciliations of 1976 have become the repudiations of the 1979 St Paul's debate? These questions are not answered in the secondary literature on Thompson, because its authors tend to take a simplistic view of Thompson's political trajectory in the 1970s. Dennis Dworkin, for example, makes some useful observations about Thompson's uneasiness with the 'new politics' of the 1970s, but treats Thompson's disillusionment and alienation as progressing steadily through the 1970s up to a climax at St Paul's.<sup>13</sup> Arguing for Thompson, Bryan D Palmer presents 'The Poverty of Theory' and the St Paul's debate as simple and inevitable extensions of Thompson's earlier clashes with the Communist Party and with Anderson and his circle. It is clear that



neither Dworkin's nor Palmer's teleologies can account for the 'thaw' of 1976.<sup>14</sup>

Later in this chapter we will see that EP Thompson's experiences in India, at the end of 1976 and beginning of 1977, did much to darken his political perspectives. Before we discuss Thompson's time in India, though, we should get a more nuanced view of the political opinions he held on the eve of his departure for that country. Such a view is available from Thompson's contribution to a large-scale seminar on 'The Just Society' held at Bradford University in September 1976.<sup>15</sup> Organised by the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation and several university schools, the seminar aimed, according to the opening address of Bradford's vice-Chancellor, to 'study the concept of the just society and contribute practically to its achievement'. Thompson made his intervention a reply to Tony Benn, who had spoken to the seminar on the subject of 'Democratic Socialism'.<sup>16</sup> Thompson does not attack Benn's rather anodyne paper frontally, but rather suggests several areas where it is 'unduly complacent'.<sup>17</sup> After criticising Benn for giving an overly favourable picture of the Labour Party's role in the world wars and the British Empire, Thompson suggests that his interlocutor is guilty of understating the extent of capitalism's problems in the 1970s.

The economic downturn gripping the West is removing the material basis for old-style social democracy, Thompson suggests, and leading to more aggressive Western behaviour in the Third World. Thompson builds on this point by insisting that the left needs some realistic programme to achieve a transition to socialism, in as little time as five years. Such a transition is being put on the agenda by economic crisis, but it cannot succeed unless there is a 'revolution in people's consciousness'.<sup>18</sup> Showing the influence of English radical traditions as well as Trotskyism, Thompson says that a transitional programme must avoid the ultra-leftism of those who want to smash the state overnight, and the gradualist complacency of Fabian socialism. Regrettably, he does not spell out the details of such a programme.

How can we characterise Thompson's contribution to the Bradford conference? John Saville may have been thinking about the struggles over the bitter and sectarian passages in 'Peculiarities' and the 'Open Letter' when he wrote to praise the 'comradely and constructive' tone of Thompson's contribution at Bradford.<sup>19</sup> On the surface, the optimism of Thompson's Bradford talk certainly seems light years from the pessimism of the 'Open Letter'. But the ideas Thompson

brought to Bradford were not new: the same uneasy mixture of catastrophism, hyper-optimism, and the agency of the intellectual and activist left had been his stock in trade on the platforms of the first New Left.

Thompson's optimism was as fragile in 1976 as it had been in 1960. In 'Revolution' and other New Left polemics, Thompson had warned that, unless the left was able to revolutionise the consciousness of Britons, catastrophe rather than victory would be its lot. The failure of the left to heed Thompson's words would, it seemed, almost guarantee catastrophe. As the 1960s wore on Thompson's fervent but frail optimism gave way to despair, as he found himself more and more disenchanted with the ideas and tactics of the dominant sections of the left. A similar process would unfold in the second half of the 1970s.

### The shock of India

The road from Bradford to St Paul's passed through Indira Gandhi's India. In December 1976 and January 1977 Thompson circumnavigated the country, giving lectures at universities from Delhi to Calcutta to Kerala. Thompson had been invited to India by the country's Historical Association, whose members were keen to hear him lecture, but he also found himself welcomed by the government, because his father had been a scholar of Indian society and a friend of Jawaharlal Nehru, who had been India's first Prime Minister as well as the father of Indira Gandhi. Indira was building a cult around her family in an effort to bolster her rule, and when Thompson visited a museum dedicated to Nehru he found himself being asked to put on tape his childhood memories of the cricket lessons the great man had given him during visits to the Thompson family home in Oxford.

In 1975, in response to major industrial unrest in the cities, a Maoist insurgency in the countryside, and declining popular support for her government, Indira Gandhi had introduced Emergency Law, locked up tens of thousands of her political opponents, and begun a period of dictatorial rule. In a long, angry, unpublished text called 'Six Weeks in India', Thompson describes the effects of Gandhi's misrule and analyses the social crisis that had made her suspension of democracy possible.<sup>20</sup>

As he travelled around India Thompson had quickly become disturbed by Gandhi's regime, which he had supported from afar in

Britain. Thompson was particularly shocked by the persecution of many left-wing students, including some of the students who turned out to see his lectures and seminars. In 'Six Weeks in India' he recalls one particularly upsetting incident:

On my third day in Delhi I had given a rather loose talk on the uses of folk-lore in social history: a member of the seminar took a perfectly proper (and, I think, justified) objection to the looseness of my thought ... I was glad he had stood up to me: and I can still see his sensitive face and nervous gestures. Even this, seemingly abstract academic question had a certain political relevance ... In any case, that man (a sociologist) was arrested a couple of hours after the seminar ... the incident had a sobering effect on me.<sup>21</sup>

At a university in Bengal, Thompson was shown the spot where an anti-government Maoist student had recently been knifed to death by campus police on the desk of the vice-chancellor; later in his trip he learned the story of a young opponent of the Gandhi regime who had been picked up by the police, forced to undergo a vasectomy, and dumped in the street. Thompson himself became a target of the Indian state: after he began to meet with groups of dissident students and trade unionists to hear their views, he noticed that people began following him. He was forced to take elaborate measures to cover his tracks whenever he left the relative safety of the lecture hall. He became, by his own admission, 'somewhat paranoid'.<sup>22</sup>

It is easy to understand how shocking Thompson must have found his experiences in India in the bloody twilight of the Emergency. An analogy can be made with the effect that the 'Krushchev speech' and the invasion of Hungary had twenty years earlier: once again, a party and an ideology which had long been dear to Thompson were shown in a new and shocking light, inviting denunciation and disillusionment. If anything, Thompson's father's long involvement with the Indian independence movement and friendship with the Nehru family probably made the shock of 1976 more profound.

If the degeneration of the Congress Party shocked Thompson, the role of the Communist Party of India and its intellectuals in the Emergency must have confirmed a number of beliefs he had held since 1956. 'Six Weeks in India' pillories the party's Moscow-directed support for Indira Gandhi's regime, and explores the role of party intellectuals in inventing airy 'theoretical abstractions' to justify the worst abuses of the Emergency.

'Six Weeks in India' evinces unease at the response of the British left to the Emergency. Thompson is particularly unhappy with Michael Foot's public support for Indira Gandhi; Dorothy has suggested that the essay was intended largely as a private rebuke to Foot, who was acquainted with the Thompsons, and had been an admirer of *The Making of the English Working Class*.<sup>23</sup> Thompson also worries about the influence of British Stalinism on Indian intellectuals, pointing out that Palme Dutt's dogmatic and voluminous writings on India had been staple reading material for many Indian intellectuals, thanks to the wide circulation the Communist Party of Great Britain and its allies gave them.

Thompson may also have perceived parallels between Indian Communist apologies for the Emergency and certain ideas popular amongst socialist intellectuals in Britain. Since at least 1974 Thompson had been suspicious of Althusser and the influence he wielded in Britain, and the popularity of Althusser amongst Indian Communist intellectuals did not escape his attention. The intense interest in theory amongst the Marxists of Britain's second New Left had sometimes led them towards a conceptual refinement and distance from empirical research that had rankled with Thompson, who was old enough to have unhappy memories of both Talcott Parsons and Lysenkoism. It was all too easy for Thompson to equate Althusserianism with the proponents of modernisation theory who seemed to be continuing the legacy of Parsons in the West's universities.

Thompson returned from India with his faith in the Popular Front renewed by the practice of the Janata opposition to Congress, which gathered the most disparate class interests under the banner of a defence of civil liberties.<sup>24</sup> The British left of the 1970s was not on the whole receptive to such a perspective, and in his introduction to *Writing by Candlelight*, a collection of political articles mostly written in the 1970s, Thompson would chide British socialists for their 'preoccupation' with issues of workplace struggle, gender and race, and their failure to recognise the binding importance of the defence of civil liberties.<sup>25</sup> At St Paul's, of course, Thompson would condemn socialist intellectuals in much angrier language for their supposed indifference to attacks on civil liberties.

### Defending 'historic rights'

It would be wrong to say that Thompson's experiences in India turned him overnight from his rapprochement with the British intellectual left. It took several years for the shock and anger that fill 'Six Weeks in India' to be transferred to the stage of St Paul's. Thompson did not even publish an account of his visit to India until September 1978, when 'The Nehru Tradition' appeared in *The Guardian*.<sup>26</sup> The timing of this article, which is in some respects an abridged and expurgated version of 'Six Weeks in India', appears curious: by September 1978 the Emergency was long over, and an anti-Congress coalition had been in power in New Delhi for more than a year. The wave of revived support that would sweep Indira Gandhi back into power in 1979 was not discernible to most commentators, and was not remarked upon by Thompson.

The timing of 'The Nehru Tradition' may have had more to do with events in Britain than in India: September 1978 was the month in which the Official Secrets Act was used to try two journalists and a soldier – the press referred to them as 'the three ferrets' – who had exposed top-secret military activities in the British press. Thompson, who had gotten to know the defendants in the lengthy lead-up to their appearance in the dock, was shocked when the trial brought the revelation that Sam Silkin, the Labour government's Attorney-General, had written secret rules which encouraged the 'stacking' of juries with pro-government members in politically sensitive trials. Shock turned to outrage when Thompson's attempts to write about the Attorney-General's directive were foiled by contempt of court rules.

Not to be silenced, Thompson turned to a version of what Lenin had called the 'cursed Aesopian language' of allusion and metaphor. Perhaps inspired by the veiled political statements which had been such a feature of responses to his lectures in India, Thompson produced 'An Elizabethan Diary', a pseudo-historical account of a trial written in mock-Elizabethan English, which he managed to get published in *New Society* late in 1978.<sup>27</sup> 'The Nehru Tradition' may have been intended partly as a similarly oblique comment on the trial that so angered Thompson.

Thompson's very unconvincing attempt to reclaim the 'the tradition of Nehru and Congress' from Indira Gandhi differentiates 'The Nehru Tradition' from 'Six Weeks in India', and looks intriguing when we remember that by 1978 Thompson had rejoined the Labour

Party.<sup>28</sup> Through 1978 and the first months 1979, Thompson would unconvincingly try to differentiate the 'real Labour Party' from the discredited administration of James Callaghan.<sup>29</sup>

It seems likely that the final revisions to *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, and the composition of the acidic 'A Note on the Texts', which was placed near the end of the book, took place at about the time the trial of the 'three ferrets' was exercising Thompson's imagination. In 'A Note on the Texts', Thompson sharply reverses the conciliatory attitude he had taken towards Perry Anderson in 1976. Thompson's sarcastic use of apostrophes whenever he attaches the adjective 'left' to Anderson's name contrasts with the claim that 'Perry is a comrade' that he made to Michael Merrill in 1976.<sup>30</sup>

We know that Thompson was angered by what he felt was a lack of interest by British Marxists in the Official Secrets Act trial, and in the revelations of jury-stacking. In an essay on 'Poetry and Commitment' written for Jon Silkin's journal *Stand* in 1979, Thompson complained that:

Some of us found ourselves, at the end of 1978, somewhat to our own surprise, defending passionately the jury system (one of our oldest institutions) against not only conservative judges and police but ... advanced intellectuals and Marxist-structuralists who saw us as entrapped within the ideological mystifications of bourgeois liberalism.<sup>31</sup>

There are parallels between this passage and 'Six Weeks in India', which excoriates not only the Communist Party intellectuals apologising for Congress, but also their 'ultra-left' foes who reject the fight for civil liberties as 'bourgeois'. The Naxalite movement, which had in many places rejected all forms of legal political activity, even before the imposition of the Emergency, was a particular target of criticism on this score.<sup>32</sup>

But it was not only Marxists who seemed to Thompson to be oblivious to a historic attack on democracy in Britain. In his introduction to a Merlin Press reprint of Harriet Harman's booklet *Justice Deserted*, Thompson claimed that:

[A]s 1978 comes to a close, a campaign of re-education as to the jury system has become most urgent ... historical rights are being nibbled away or actively corrupted in shameless ways which, in previous times would have provoked massive outrage.<sup>33</sup>

### Thompson's winter of discontent

In the 'winter of discontent' that was beginning, though, Britons showed little interest in the workings of the jury system: they were preoccupied by the effects of union struggles against the Callaghan government's attempt to hold down wage and salary increases. Like millions of his countrymen, Thompson experienced the privations of that winter. 'It has been very cold these past few weeks' he wrote in February 1979. 'There has been a lot of inconvenience ... and a few cases of real suffering.'<sup>34</sup>

Christmas must have brought little cheer that winter: it coincided with the assassination in Cambodia of Thompson's friend, Malcolm Caldwell. Caldwell, an expert on Third World agriculture and supporter of the Khmer Rouge government, was one of the last Westerners to be hosted by Pol Pot's government before its ouster by the Vietnamese army. The identity of Caldwell's assassins has never been established, but suspicion fell on the invading Vietnamese. Dorothy Thompson has recalled the impact of Caldwell's death:

Malcolm Caldwell ... was a good friend, very much associated with our lot on the new left, though in some areas he clearly had his own agenda. But his death was certainly a great shock – personally and ... politically.<sup>35</sup>

With the fall of the Khmer Rouge came the first hard evidence of their colossal blunders and crimes against humanity. Caldwell's name would forever be tarnished by his association with the Khmer Rouge; Thompson must have reflected bitterly on the way that his own history of mistaken support for Stalinism had repeated itself in his young friend's life.<sup>36</sup>

One of the more hysterical responses to the winter of discontent was an article which Conor Cruise O'Brien printed in *The Observer* in late January 1979 under the title 'No to a Nauseous Marxist-Methodist Cocktail'. On 4 February *The Observer* carried a short piece called 'The Great Fear of Marxism', Thompson's reply to O'Brien and one of his last pieces of writing explicitly concerned with the nature and meaning of Marxism.<sup>37</sup>

It is easy to see why O'Brien aroused Thompson's wrath: like Auden and Kolakowski, he was a former leftist who had strayed from the path, and now contrasted the 'loving' creed of Christianity with the 'hateful' doctrine of Marxism.<sup>38</sup> But Thompson's response to O'Brien's vitriolic article is curiously fractured: it moves uncertainly between a

weak defence of striking workers and of Marxist thinkers 'interested in intellectual values', and the frank admission that 'Marxism today is in crisis' and is 'splintering, into sharply opposed traditions'.<sup>39</sup>

Significantly, Thompson cites India and Cambodia to illustrate the depths of the crisis of Marxism, noting that 'In India one Marxist party supports Mrs Gandhi, another supports Janata (or used to do so), a third supports neither. Last month in Cambodia my friend Malcolm Caldwell, a Marxist, was murdered as a by-product (it seems) of a war between two Marxist states'.<sup>40</sup> Responding to O'Brien's charge that he has no place in the Labour Party, Thompson maintains that:

As a Marxist (or a Marxist-fragment) in the Labour Party, I have always tried to envisage a politics that will enable us, in this country, to effect a transition to a socialist society ... without rupturing the humane and tolerant disposition for which our working class has been noted.<sup>41</sup>

Thompson's recapitulation of his distinctive view of socialist transition was not accompanied by the optimism he showed at Bradford, however: the reply to O'Brien ends with the fear that Britain is headed 'into an 'abyss' in which the human restraints of our society would not survive'.<sup>42</sup>

Thompson's pessimism was only reinforced by the rest of 1979. The inevitable defeat of the Callaghan government brought Margaret Thatcher to power. When the media compared Thatcher to Indira Gandhi they were commenting on the novelty of a female Prime Minister; Thompson, however, may have seen other parallels. In October 1979 Thompson was galvanised by Thatcher's announcement that Cruise missiles would be sited in Britain: in a day he wrote a series of five articles, which he grouped and published together under the title 'The State of the Nation'.<sup>43</sup> These new texts, which treat the deployment of Cruise Missiles as a step towards dictatorship and total British subordination to US power, give a remarkable glimpse into the state of Thompson's thinking on the eve of his famous appearance at St Paul's. Thompson would later recall writing 'The State of the Nation' 'out of a pessimistic mood'. He recalled 1979 as 'a bad moment' when it seemed that 'Britain might be in the final year or two of its own 'Weimar''.<sup>44</sup> In the last of the five essays, 'The End of An Episode', Thompson's pessimism is sharpest:

Under the leadership of Mrs Thatcher ... we are entering a classic period of class war ... A few of my comrades on the left may take comfort in this. They will scent a 'revolution' ahead ... what we will all get is a foul



authoritarian state ... All I can say is that, since we have had the kind of history that we have had, it would be contemptible for us not to play out our old roles to the end.<sup>45</sup>

For EP Thompson at the end of 1979, the nightmare of Emergency India was threatening the home of the 'freeborn Englishman'. Democracy was under assault by the United States and an aggressive local bourgeoisie, backed by turncoat socialist intellectuals like Conor Cruise O'Brien. The left was not much better: its faux-radical contempt for democracy and ties to dictatorial regimes overseas made it complicit in the crisis facing Britain. The scene for the famous performance at St Paul's was set.

### Fan mail

We noted in the previous chapter how the young philosopher Jonathan Ree was one of the relatively few readers to respond enthusiastically to 'An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski'. In the memoir he wrote in 1999, Ree remembers being 'amazed' by Thompson's epistle. He felt 'accosted' by the text, and felt 'as if its eyes were following me as I read'.<sup>46</sup> In the aftermath of this experience, Ree wrote to Thompson, Kolakowski and Tom Nairn, asking them to develop the ideas in Thompson's polemic in the pages of *Radical Philosophy*, the journal Ree had co-founded in 1972. Kolakowski and Nairn both wrote to refuse the invitation; Kolakowski's letter was polite, but Nairn's compared Thompson to Enoch Powell, and described him as the representative of 'a village-idiot tradition' which was no longer 'politically pressing'.<sup>47</sup>

Thompson's response to Ree was friendlier. Attaching a subscription to *Radical Philosophy*, he wrote to say that he was keen to write for the journal, and suggested that Louis Althusser might be a suitable topic. At the end of 1974 Ree watched the Thompson-Kolakowski debate at Oxford, and noticed that Thompson worked a denunciation of Althusser and English Althusserianism into his presentation. Ree wrote to Thompson to press him for a piece on the French philosopher and his disciples; in response, Thompson promised to send a ten thousand word 'Communication to *Radical Philosophy*' early in 1975.<sup>48</sup>

John Saville and Ralph Miliband would have been able to tell Ree about the perils of soliciting material from EP Thompson. In February and then March Thompson wrote to Ree to apologise for not submitting his 'Communication to *Radical Philosophy*'; in the

March letter, he revealed that 'the piece has broken through any possible length boundaries'. After this piece of news, Ree appears to have given up hope of publishing the 'Communication'. When 'The Poverty of Theory' appeared near the end of 1978, though, Ree not unnaturally saw it as the final version of the essay Thompson had promised *Radical Philosophy* four years earlier.

It is not quite clear, though, whether Thompson had actually begun to write 'The Poverty of Theory' when he was corresponding with Ree. When Thompson told Ree in March 1975 that his essay 'had broken any possible length boundaries' he may have been referring to his conceptualisation of the piece. In considering his essay, Thompson may have come to realise that he needed to interrogate more texts, and bring in more issues, than ten thousand words could accommodate. In her introduction to the 1995 edition of *The Poverty of Theory*, Dorothy Thompson offers her own account of the making of the text:

It was the influence that Althusser's writings were having on scholarship that made Edward take up the uncongenial task of putting the case for history against his closed system.

Edward read up all the relevant published work and packed volumes and notes into a car and we set out to spend a fortnight out of the tourist season on the shore of Lake Garda. We walked in the hills each morning, had lunch and then spent the afternoon and evening writing. So this essay was actually written in two weeks of intensive work, being argued about and corrected as it went along. It was intended as a polemical statement and written for a political moment.<sup>49</sup>

Dorothy has suggested that her account may not actually clash with that of Ree: Edward may well have had detailed notes on Althusser, and perhaps even a draft essay, before he decamped to Lake Garda.<sup>50</sup> The copious footnotes attached to 'The Poverty of Theory' certainly show that Thompson had prepared thoroughly for his two week writing spree.

### Reading 'The Poverty of Theory'

'The Poverty of Theory, or: An Orrery of Errors' begins with a piece of self-justification. Thompson explains that the 'materialist conception of history' has been 'growing in confidence' for 'many decades'.<sup>51</sup> Now, though, it faces an attack on its 'theoretical lines of supply'<sup>52</sup> by the 'freak' of Althusserianism, which has 'lodged itself firmly in a particular social *couche*, the bourgeois lumpen-intelligentsia.'<sup>53</sup> Some

Marxist historians have attempted to ignore Althusserianism, hoping that it will go away; others have been conciliatory, believing that, as one amongst many varieties of Marxism, Althusserianism is worthy of tolerance. Thompson disagrees with both responses: for him, 'reason itself' is at risk from the 'freak'.

Thompson wastes no time in launching his first foray against the enemy. Most of the first twenty pages of 'The Poverty of Theory' are taken up by an attack on Althusser's account of the relationship between observation and theory. Thompson accuses Althusser of creating an account of 'knowledge-production' which effectively excludes meaningful input from observation. In his eagerness to supplant the naive empiricism of 'reflection' epistemology, Althusser places theory beyond the reach of empiricism.

After settling accounts with Althusser's epistemology, Thompson turns to the Parisian eagle's alleged hostility to the discipline of history. Thompson argues that Althusser's unfavourable contrast between history and 'science' is based upon the pretence that the social sciences can somehow approximate the natural sciences. But Althusser's 'scientific' Marxism is a folly, because the study of human behaviour can never proceed along the same lines as the natural sciences.

In section six of his polemic, Thompson compares Althusser's and Popper's views on the discipline of history. Although Popper and Althusser are in some respects very different figures, Thompson finds in both of them a profound ignorance about the way that historians work. Neither understands the subtle way the historian gathers and sifts evidence, or weighs sources against each other. Thompson objects to Popper's claim that the written sources of history are inevitably polluted by the fact that they are partial and ideologically motivated. Thompson rightly points out that 'by far the greater part of historical evidence' has survived for reasons unrelated to a desire by its authors to 'project an image of themselves for posterity'.<sup>54</sup> Even evidence which was created for ideological purposes can be interrogated – 'held upside down and shaken', in Thompson's words – so that it discloses deeper meanings.

Thompson declares part seven of 'The Poverty of Theory' an intermission, invites 'philosophers and sociologists' to leave if they wish, and announces that he will discuss 'historical logic'.<sup>55</sup> Many supporters of 'The Poverty of Theory' have cited Thompson's 'intermission' as the essay's highlight.<sup>56</sup> Thompson's discussion is certainly subtle and

measured, and unclouded by the animus found in most other parts of 'The Poverty of Theory'.<sup>57</sup> Perhaps because he is not so worried about defending history *in toto* from the threat he perceives massing on its borders, Thompson is prepared, in section seven of 'The Poverty of Theory', to concede that 'historical knowledge'<sup>58</sup> is difficult to extract from the past, and difficult to assess properly in the present. Thompson argues that 'historical knowledge may depart from other paradigms of knowledge, when subjected to epistemological enquiry', and repeats his view that history should not be considered a science.

After appearing to endorse the 'reflection theory' of epistemology against Althusser at the beginning of 'the Poverty of Theory', Thompson suddenly concedes, in section seven of his polemic, that 'the relation between historical knowledge and its object' – between interpretation and fact, in other words – 'cannot be understood in any terms which suppose one to be a function ... of the other'.<sup>59</sup> When Thompson suggests that interpretation and fact are 'mutually determining', he endorses the opinion that observation cannot be theory-free, and that 'pure' reality – or the 'pure' past – can never therefore be reached by the human mind. In terms of the Marxist tradition, we might say that the difference between the 'reflection theory' Thompson seems to endorse at the beginning of 'The Poverty of Theory' and the much more subtle viewpoint of section seven is the difference between Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-criticism* and his later and wiser *Philosophical Notebooks*.

Thompson goes on to insist, in language reminiscent of the meditation on Marxism and history in 'The Peculiarities of the English', that a constant dialogue between fact and interpretation is necessary to the creation and maintenance of historical knowledge. Because the past does not simply present itself whole, and because it is never something we experience free of prefabricated categories, historical knowledge can never be total, nor totally certain. But this does not mean, Thompson insists, that we need to retreat into some sort of epistemological nihilism, by thinking that history is nothing more than 'a consecutive phenomenological narration'.<sup>60</sup>

After inviting philosophers and sociologists to rejoin him, Thompson resumes his attack on Althusser. He examines Althusser's references to Engels' late *Letters on Historical Materialism*, and finds the Parisian eagle's contempt for them deplorable. Thompson argues that Althusser's hostility to Engels' use of the term 'historical materialism' is indicative of a deep hostility to the discipline of history.

Where Althusser sees Engels' late letters as a departure from the 'scientific' mature work of Marx, Thompson values them as correctives to reductionist readings of Marx.

The consideration of the late Engels turns into an extended excursion into Marxology in section nine. In this part of 'The Poverty of Theory', which we will discuss in detail in a later chapter, Thompson tries to replace Althusser's innovative but prescriptive 'reconsideration' of Marx with his own reading of the man's career.

Thompson moves, in the tenth section of 'The Poverty of Theory', into a discussion about the way that Marxism became 'infiltrated' by 'determinist' and 'teleological' modes of thought that reach their culmination in the work of Althusser. Moving abruptly from theory to the sociology of knowledge, Thompson argues that the end of the 'decade of heroes' of 1936–46 and the onset of the Cold War encouraged a 'vocabulary of structuralism' on both sides of the Iron Curtain.<sup>61</sup>

For Thompson, Althusser and 'bourgeois' social scientists like Talcott Parsons are simply two sides of the same coin: both have a structuralist vision of the world which leaves little place for human agency, and both can be used to legitimate exploitative and repressive practices by ruling elites. Thompson's discussion of the 'profound sociological conservatism' of both left- and right-wing 'structuralisms' has obvious parallels with his double-barrelled assault on Natopolitanism and Stalinism in 'Outside the Whale'.<sup>62</sup>

The eleventh section of 'The Poverty of Theory' is another unexpected detour, where Thompson discusses the eighteenth-century Italian thinker Giambattista Vico. In the work of this somewhat unlikely figure, who must have been a stranger to most readers of 'The Poverty of Theory', Thompson finds a 'superb expression of process', and therefore a welcome antidote to Althusserianism.<sup>63</sup>

Thompson's digression on Vico is interrupted by four satirical diagrams, which are labelled 'Vulgar Marxism, or Economism', 'Althusser's Marxist Orrery', 'The Motor of History: Class Struggle', and 'Mode of Production/Social Formation'. These diagrams became one of the most notorious features of 'The Poverty of Theory', and have often been cited by commentators who believe that Thompson's essay was intended to inflame rather than clarify intra-Marxist debate. Terry Eagleton, for instance, claimed that they 'amount to little more than crude and irresponsible tomfoolery'.<sup>64</sup>

The second diagram, 'Althusser's Marxist Orrery', reminds us that Thompson subtitled his polemic 'An Orrery of Errors'. Thompson has

taken a drawing of an orrery and attached a series of labels – ‘law’, ‘sex’, ‘science’, ‘religion’ and so on – to the various planets that turn on the device. Above the drawing he has written ‘Basis Superstructure’. The suggestion, of course, is that Althusser uses a mechanical and reductionist model to explain the relationship between economics and other features of human life. Thompson’s diagram is clever and funny, but also quite wrong. As we will see in the next chapter, he and Althusser had in common a strong rejection of the role that the ‘base–superstructure’ metaphor had played in much Marxist thought.

Whatever their shortcomings, Thompson’s diagrams prepare us for section twelve of his polemic, which convicts Althusser of mistaking Marx’s metaphors for mechanical models of human behaviour. In a passage that could be an extended caption to the diagram he called ‘The Motor of History: Class Struggle’, Thompson accuses Althusser of turning the *Communist Manifesto*’s famous opening line about the history of ‘all hitherto-existing societies’ being ‘the history of class struggle’ into a dogma, when it was supposed to be poetic rather than prescriptive.

Thompson argues that, because it is transhistorical, and assumed to be the automatic result of certain ‘objective’ economic conditions, Althusser’s notion of class struggle has little in common with real, historically particular struggles by workers. For Althusser, class struggle exists as a mere ‘motor’ with which to drive forward history. In a passage which we will discuss in detail later in this book, Thompson links Althusser’s mechanical reading of Marx to a forgetfulness about dialectics.

In section thirteen of ‘The Poverty of Theory’, Thompson turns his sights on Althusser’s critique of ‘humanism’.<sup>65</sup> Thompson remembers denunciations in the Soviet Union of his 1957 essay ‘Socialist Humanism’, and links these rebukes from behind the Iron Curtain to Althusser’s criticisms of ‘philosophical humanism’ in texts like his ‘Reply to John Lewis’. Althusser’s writing, Thompson claims, is part of a ‘general police action within ideology’ – an attempt, by the Soviet Union and Soviet allies like the Communist Party of France, to counter the growth of socialist humanist ideas in the decades since 1956.

In the fourteenth section of ‘The Poverty of Theory’, Thompson makes another foray against the Althusserian bestiary. In passages that retrace the steps of sections ten, twelve and thirteen, he once again condemns Althusser as a foe of history and ‘human agency’. By now Thompson’s language has reached new levels of vituperation.

The hostility is leavened somewhat by humour: Althusser is likened to a dalek, who wants to 'exterminate men'; even Thompson's cat finds his ideas laughable.<sup>66</sup> Above all, Thompson labours to connect Althusser's ideas to the politics of Stalinism. In a sentence whose sheer insouciance was bound to annoy many of his readers, Thompson insisted 'the Althusserians ... are working hard, every day, on the theoretical production-line of Stalinist ideology'.<sup>67</sup>

Thompson turns away from knockabout polemic at the end of section fifteen, where he proposes to 'bring this argument together'.<sup>68</sup> Instead of summarising his case against Althusser, though, he continues the interpretation of Marx's life and work that he began in section nine of 'The Poverty of Theory'. Thompson's readers must wait another twenty pages for a repetition of the charges against Althusser. In the penultimate, sixteenth section of his polemic, Thompson reminds us that Althusserianism is a self-sufficient theoretical system, closed off from the healthy flow of empirical evidence; that it is hostile to history, and to human agency; and that it explains the infinite variety of human culture as mere epiphenomena of economic forces. Althusserianism, Thompson concludes, is a 'straightforward ideological police action'.<sup>69</sup>

After this summary, Thompson breaks some new ground. In what he calls 'an autocritique', Thompson relates Althusserianism to wider trends in Marxist theory and practice, and decides that he must abandon the definition of Marxism that he put forward at such length in 'An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski'. Thompson decides that Althusserianism is not a severe but isolated deformation of Marxism, so much as a manifestation of a more general crisis on the left.

Althusserianism, Thompson tells his readers, is 'only one, sophisticated form of a number of "Marxisms"' which have pushed the 'unfinished agenda' of socialist humanism aside. Thompson talks of 'Maoisms, Trotskyisms, and innumerable Marxist academicisms' which share the 'religious cast of thought' of Althusserianism. They, too, are self-enclosed systems, impervious to evidence and reason. They, too, can be turned to nefarious ends by repressive regimes and arrogant vanguard parties. A chasm has appeared in Marxism, and in the left in general, between a tradition of 'reason' and a tradition of 'irrationalism', against which Thompson declares 'unrelenting intellectual war'.<sup>70</sup>

Thompson's declaration of war did not go unnoticed. Terry Eagleton noted that, for Thompson, 'there can be no dialogue' with Althusserianism and other 'irrationalist' Marxism. 'The conclusion of

“The Poverty of Theory” is, in effect, a closing down of communication,’ he complained.<sup>71</sup> Writing in a *New Statesman* forum devoted to Thompson’s polemic, Gavin Hitching observed that:

Thompson sees himself engaged in something approaching a struggle for our souls in which he is a lonely, even sole, voice of reason crying out against the voices of darkness.<sup>72</sup>

Thompson’s struggle for the souls of Marxists like Gavin Hitching would reach a climax in a dilapidated Oxford church, on a chilly evening near the end of 1979. It is significant that Thompson chooses to illustrate his worries about the potential for the (mis)use of the ‘Marxisms’ he has been describing by referring to India, the scene of his shocking experiences a year before the composition of ‘The Poverty of Theory’. In sentences that might be taken directly from ‘Six Weeks in India’, Thompson muses that Althusserianism is ‘exactly tailored’ to the needs of a ruling class in a country like India, where:

[A] section of the intelligentsia, greatly distanced from the masses, adopts policies which demand ruthless ‘modernisation’, Marxist and anti-imperialist rhetoric, contempt for democratic practices, and effective reliance on the economy and military protection of the Soviet state.<sup>73</sup>

If Althusserianism achieves hegemony on the Indian left, or even in the Indian Communist Party, then we can expect, Thompson warns, ‘nothing less than the re-enactment of the full repertoire of high Stalinism within the raging inferno of Indian “scarcity”’.<sup>74</sup>

### An unlikely polemicist

At about the time Thompson was typing beside Lake Garda, his fellow historian Richard Johnson was posting an essay called ‘Thompson, Genovese, and Socialist-Humanist History’ to *History Workshop Journal*. On the surface, at least, Johnson’s text, which appeared in the autumn 1978 issue of the journal, was everything ‘The Poverty of Theory’ was not: calm, scrupulously polite, and suggestive rather than prescriptive.<sup>75</sup> It nevertheless managed to ignite an intense debate in the pages of the *History Workshop Journal*, and helped to set the stage for the debate at St Paul’s.

Johnson was a member of the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies. The Centre had been founded by Richard Hoggart in 1964, and had pioneered cultural studies in Britain. Under Stuart Hall, who had become Director in 1968, the Centre had launched a series of



ambitious projects, and become associated with political as well as intellectual radicalism. In the 1970s, the Centre had organised a team of scholars to study Marx, Thompson and other key British Marxists, and esteemed Continental Marxists like Althusser. Richard Johnson was allotted the task of studying Thompson, and relating him to the 'structural Marxism' of Althusser, because he was sympathetic to the work of both men. Johnson had trained as a historian, and had been influenced by *The Making of the English Working Class* but, unusually for an English historian of his generation, he had developed a strong interest in Continental Marxism.

Johnson's essay for *History Workshop Journal* paid tribute to Thompson's strengths as a historian, but suggested that the insights of Althusser could have improved *The Making of the English Working Class*.<sup>76</sup> Johnson dubbed Thompson's work 'culturalist', and argued that it suffered from an excessive preoccupation with the 'lived' experience of workers. Like many of the Marxists who would review *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, Johnson felt that Thompson did not understand Marx's method of dialectical abstraction.<sup>77</sup> He had a tendency, for instance, to reduce 'class' to 'class consciousness', when the concept should be understood partly in terms of economics and social structure.<sup>78</sup> Johnson wanted to see Thompson abstracting and studying reality at other levels, beyond the 'lived' and 'experiential'. Thompson was determined to avoid the sin of economism, which was all well and good, but he risked falling into the opposite trap of a simplistic 'humanism'. Althusser, by contrast, was aware of both dangers – in fact, he saw them as two sides of a single coin.

Johnson's arguments were bound to cause considerable controversy in a journal whose readers and contributors considered *The Making of the English Working Class* as a work of almost Biblical authority. *History Workshop Journal* had grown out of seminars and conferences organised by Raphael Samuel, a social historian inspired by Thompson's commitment to involving non-academics in the study of the past. In 1978, many of the contributors to *History Workshop Journal* were still working-class autodidacts, and most of the rest were academics committed to the sort of methodology exemplified by *The Making of the English Working Class*.

As the stream of essays and letters which Johnson's essay prompted showed, few of the readers and contributors to *History Workshop Journal* felt that an abstruse Parisian philosopher like Louis Althusser had anything to teach a giant of English historiography like EP

Thompson.<sup>79</sup> The arrival of *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* late in 1978 only raised the temperature of the debate in the pages of *History Workshop Journal*. It is no surprise that Raphael Samuel would refer to Johnson's essay and 'The Poverty of Theory' as the two triggers for the St Paul's debate.<sup>80</sup>

The thirteenth annual *History Workshop* conference was held in Oxford in December 1979, and given the theme 'People's History and Socialist Theory'. The conference attracted hundreds of academics, graduate students, and autodidacts, and its 'centrepiece', according to Raphael Samuel, was an evening session called 'Culturalism: Debates around *The Poverty of Theory*'. In his introduction to the published version of the session, Raphael Samuel described the peculiar atmosphere in which it took place:

Over the years, there have been some odd venues for workshop discussions, but the oddest of all was ... St Paul's ... a crumbling neo-classical ruin near the Oxford University press which looks down into the streets of the Jericho district of the town ... scarved and gloved historians clustered shivering amidst the dust and peeling paintwork of this cavernous church ... Almost every word spoken was wafted to the ceiling in a blurred echo ... with an audience of hundreds, the temperature boosted by the biggest blow heater imaginable, with a public address system installed ... Bright spotlights increased the sense that a theatrical performance was demanded, not a closely-knit discussion.<sup>81</sup>

In the first part of the session, which was chaired by historian Stephen Yeo, Stuart Hall, Richard Johnson and EP Thompson delivered short papers.<sup>82</sup> In his contribution, which he called 'In Defence of Theory', Stuart Hall balanced criticism of Althusserianism with reservations about Thompson's long critique of the Parisian eagle and his followers.

Hall wanted to take the heat out of the debate around 'The Poverty of Theory'. For him, 'structuralism' and 'humanism' were not irreconcilably opposed offspring of Marx, but limited positions which needed to be transcended, once their positive insights had been absorbed. Hall's paper even identified some similarities between Althusser and Thompson: both, for example, were trying to reverse the tendencies toward economics and reductionism that Stalin had bequeathed to Marxism. 'Anyone familiar with Thompson's historical work knows that, for him too, "relative autonomy" is the name of the game', Hall pointed out.<sup>83</sup>

Like Thompson himself, Hall was a good public speaker; the large audience and theatrical atmosphere at St Paul's did not faze him.

Richard Johnson, though, was used to smaller audiences and less charged debates, and he did not enjoy the challenge of speaking between Hall and Thompson. One observer noticed him shaking uncontrollably, as he prepared to go onstage. Johnson read his paper, 'Against Absolutism', in a low monotone, so that audience members had to strain to hear him. Like Hall, Johnson was unimpressed with the polemical zeal of 'The Poverty of Theory'. He called Thompson's essay "mischievous", "absolutist" and "extremist", and warned of bringing "the dynamics of the boxing match" into Marxist debate.<sup>84</sup> Instead of the "absolute partisanship" and "non-accumulative" criticisms of 'The Poverty of Theory', Johnson wanted to see careful, exploratory discussions of ideas on the left. Rather than rejecting rivals' views *in toto*, leftists should try to learn from each other, by assimilating each other's strongest positions.

Surveying the last twenty years of English Marxist scholarship, Johnson perceived a 'moment of culturalism' in the 1950s and 1960s, represented by works like *The Making of the English Working Class*, followed by a 'moment of structure' in the 1970s. Johnson echoed Hall when he insisted that 'there are complementarities between "structuralist" and "culturalist" traditions as well as oppositions'.<sup>85</sup> The 'absolutism' that Thompson preached and practised was preventing culturalists and structuralists from learning from each other.

The debate took an extraordinary turn when Thompson took the stage. 'Thompson exploded', Jonathan Ree remembered. To Ian Carter, who was also in the crowd, Thompson 'seemed to be imploding'.<sup>86</sup> In 'The Politics of Theory', the title which he gave to his reply to Hall and Johnson, Thompson angrily rejected 'without reservation' the label of 'culturalism', accused his opponents of a sinister rewriting of history, and inveighed despairingly against what he saw as the abdication of English Marxists from engagement with the increasingly desperate situation of contemporary Britain.<sup>87</sup>

Thompson turned Johnson's argument on its head, accusing the mild-mannered lecturer from Birmingham of being guilty of the sort of 'absolutism' he diagnosed in others. Pointing out that he had been a strong critic of Raymond Williams in the 1960s, and a proponent of *Capital* when the book was deeply unfashionable, Thompson warned Johnson against rewriting history, reminding him that 'not only MI5 keeps files: some of *us* have files too'.<sup>88</sup>

Thompson accused Johnson, Hall, the Centre for Cultural Studies at Birmingham, and Marxist academics in general of being too inter-

ested in the minutiae of theory, and too little concerned with burning political issues like the erosion of civil liberties in Britain. A disregard for the world outside academia had led, Thompson claimed, to a chronic over-sensitivity. Because it had never had to attend to the demands of practice in the real world, the sort of theory promoted by Hall and Johnson was 'little more than a psycho-drama within the enclosed ghetto of the academic left'. 'The Poverty of Theory', on the other hand, was addressed to 'another political world'.<sup>89</sup>

Thompson explained the sharp tone of 'The Poverty of Theory' by talking about the same worldwide crisis of Marxism that he had mentioned near the end of his polemic against Althusser, and in his reply to Conor Cruise O'Brien in *The Observer*. In a passage that reflected his abandonment of the notion of a single 'Marxist tradition', Thompson noted that 'in huge territories of the world' repressive governments used Marx's concepts to justify their hold on power. The ghost of Malcolm Caldwell seemed to haunt Thompson's address, as he went on to warn against using the notion of 'solidarity' as a 'gag', by refraining from discussing the dark side of governments that employed Marxist language and took up anti-imperialist stances.<sup>90</sup> It was necessary that Marxism, as much as any other ideology, be subjected to ruthless criticism.

After Thompson had delivered his paper, Stephen Yeo opened a general discussion. Yeo, who had begun the evening session by praising Thompson fulsomely, now pointedly called for a 'calm' and 'considerate' debate.<sup>91</sup> This was enough to anger Thompson's old comrade John Saville, who jumped to his feet to mock Yeo in an 'impromptu speech delivered at maximum volume'.<sup>92</sup> Saville, who was 'interrupted by more outbursts of dismay than approval', agreed with Thompson that distaste for sharp polemic was a sign of political weakness. But Saville appeared to be in a minority. As Dennis Dworkin has noted, most of the audience seemed unimpressed by Thompson's performance:

[Discussion] focused on what one speaker described as Thompson's 'offensive and hurtful criticism'. Indeed, while the evening began by recognising Thompson's immense stature and authority, by the time he had finished speaking, many in the audience felt he had abused it ... what had begun as a debate about Althusser was transformed into a debate about Thompson.<sup>93</sup>

When several women objected to the 'masculine' way the debate had been run, and asked why a woman had not been involved, the historian Jane Caplan revealed that she had been invited to share the stage with Thompson, Hall, and Johnson. Telling Thompson that she was happy to have declined, Caplan wondered aloud 'which foot the Stalinist boot is on.'<sup>94</sup> Jonathan Ree was another who was disappointed by Thompson's performance:

My memory suggests it was an exhilarating, heroic exchange, but the notes I took at the time say something very different ... it struck me that Thompson's dramatisation of himself as a stage-Englishman was making sensible discussion impossible ... His polemic boomeranged and he was reduced to his caricature of himself as a crusty English buffoon. 'I was disgusted' I wrote.<sup>95</sup>

Yeo invited Hall, Johnson and Thompson to respond to comments from the floor. Johnson was too upset to speak, and Hall expressed his disappointment that Thompson had not responded to the substance of his arguments. Despite Hall's criticism and the complaints from the floor, Thompson was unrepentant: taking the stage again, he refused to apologise either for his manner or his arguments. Ironically, he invoked Althusser to defend his manner – even if they had nothing else in common, he and the arch-structuralist had both learned politics in 'Leninist' parties, where theory was linked to practice and fierce polemics were commonplace.<sup>96</sup>

Thompson's reply to his critics then took an apocalyptic turn. He talked darkly of threats to civil liberties and the coming of Cruise missiles to Britain, and warned, in terms reminiscent of 'The End of an Episode?', of a coming catastrophe. Thompson chided audience members for their lack of interest in this dire situation, and predicted that many of them would soon be serving long jail terms. Many in the audience at St Paul's must have found this prediction alarmist in the extreme; Thompson, though, had experienced the nightmare of Emergency India, where students could be arrested for asking the wrong question at a lecture discussing the finer points of Marxist historiography.

The St Paul's debate upset many who participated in and watched it. Dorothy Thompson called it 'an emotionally-charged evening whose repercussions would continue for months if not years.'<sup>97</sup> Stephen Yeo wrote of his 'sadness' and 'bewilderment' at the turn events took, and lamented that the evening was so 'empty of sisterly/brotherly

qualities.<sup>98</sup> Annoyed by what he considered Thompson's unconstructive attitude and flagrant misrepresentation, Stuart Hall froze contact with his old New Left comrade after St Paul's.<sup>99</sup> Thompson complained of the 'bad vibes' of the event in a letter written shortly afterwards.<sup>100</sup> St Paul's would be the last time Thompson made a public statement of any length about Marxist ideas. The 'unrelenting intellectual war' declared at the end of 'The Poverty of Theory' had proven short lived.

### Notes

- 1 EP Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, Merlin, London, 1978, p. ii.
- 2 Jonathan Ree, 'EP Thompson and the Drama of Authority', *History Workshop Journal*, Spring 1999, pp. 211–231.
- 3 John Saville and Ralph Miliband, 'Acknowledgements', *Socialist Register*, 5, 2, 1974, p. i.
- 4 See 'The Poetry of EP Thompson' in *Literature and History*, no. 5:2, Autumn 1979.
- 5 Ralph Miliband, letter to John Saville 15/7/75, Saville papers.
- 6 Dorothy Thompson, email to the author, 21/10/05.
- 7 EP Thompson, letter to John Saville 15/8/76, Saville papers.
- 8 EP Thompson, letter to John Saville 5/5/76, Saville papers.
- 9 EP Thompson, letter to John Saville 31/8/76, Saville papers.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 EP Thompson, 'Romanticism, Utopianism and Moralism: The Case of William Morris', *New Left Review* 99, September/October 1976. The interview with Merrill Moore was collected in *Visions of History*, ed Henry Abelove et al., Pantheon, New York, 1984.
- 12 EP Thompson, letter to John Saville 24/9/76, Saville papers. At the end of this letter, Thompson looks forward excitedly to the six-week lecture tour of India he was due to begin near the end of 1976.
- 13 Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1997, p. 217–218.
- 14 Bryan D Palmer, *EP Thompson: Objections and Oppositions*, Verso, London, 1994, pp. 107–125. One of the few commentators to recognise the transition Thompson made from hyper-optimism to despair in the second half of the 1970s was Perry Anderson. In *Arguments within English Marxism* Anderson notes that, for Thompson, 'euphoric prospects' gave way to the 'cataclysmic visions' of 'The Poverty of Theory' within 'rather less than five years' (Verso, London, 1980, p. 193).
- 15 The proceedings of this conference were gathered in Ken Coates and Fred Singleton, *The Just Society*, Spokesman Press, Nottingham, 1977.

- 16 *Ibid.*, pp. 25–35.
- 17 EP Thompson, ‘Response to Tony Benn’, in Coates and Singleton, *The Just Society*, p. 36.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 39.
- 19 John Saville, letter to EP Thompson 1/2/77, Saville papers.
- 20 EP Thompson, ‘Six Weeks in India’, unpublished manuscript, Saville papers. Thompson appears to have composed ‘Six Weeks’ shortly after returning from India, because on the 30<sup>th</sup> of that month John Saville mailed him a letter that commented on the text (John Saville, letter to EP Thompson 30/1/77, Saville papers).
- 21 EP Thompson, ‘Six Weeks in India’, unpublished manuscript, Saville papers, p. 6.
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 Dorothy Thompson, email to the author, 21/10/05.
- 24 In his response to ‘Six Weeks in India’, John Saville tells Thompson that ‘The case you make for the central importance of civil rights seems to me absolutely right ... the campaign for civil liberties could be the great unifying factor for all social classes and groupings in opposition. After all a great part of the anti-British struggle revolved around what were in effect civil rights’ (John Saville, letter to EP Thompson 30/1/77, Saville papers).
- 25 EP Thompson, *Writing by Candlelight*, Merlin, London, 1980.
- 26 ‘The Nehru Tradition’ was collected in *Writing by Candlelight*, pp. 135–149.
- 27 ‘An Elizabethan Diary’ was first published in *Vole* in February 1979 and was collected in *Writing by Candlelight*, pp. 91–99. For an explanation of the purpose of the text, see p. 284 of *Writing by Candlelight*.
- 28 Perry Anderson notes Thompson’s shuffle back to Labour in *Arguments within English Marxism*, p. 112. Anderson points out that Thompson offered ‘no public explanation’ of his move, and that it is very hard to be sure of when he joined the organisation. Dorothy Thompson remembers becoming involved in the party after the end of the first New Left in the mid-1960s (interview with the author, 22/05/05). Neither Dorothy’s nor Edward’s involvement in the organisation had the intensity of their old engagements with the Communist Party and the New Left. Thompson almost never mentions his party membership in either his published writings or his correspondence with John Saville. As we will see later in this chapter, he does allude to attending Labour branch meetings in his late 1970s text ‘The Great Fear of Marxism’.
- 29 Thompson attributed some of the blame for deficient Labour policies to the machinations of the MI5 and other shadowy elements within the British establishment who were supposedly able to blackmail the Callaghan government. See Thompson, *Writing by Candlelight*, p. 120.

- 30 Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, p. 399.
- 31 EP Thompson, *Persons and Polemics*, Merlin, London, 1994, pp. 340–341.
- 32 Thompson describes the repression of the Naxalites, but maintains that the movement was ‘rather more foolish than some Western admirers suppose’ (‘Six Weeks in India,’ p. 46).
- 33 Harriet Harman and John Griffith, *Justice Deserted: The subversion of the jury*, introd. by EP Thompson, National Council for Civil Liberties, 1979, p. 5.
- 34 Thompson, *Writing by Candlelight*, p. 183.
- 35 Dorothy Thompson, email to the author, 05/04/06.
- 36 For a good overview of the Khmer Rouge era, see Philip Short’s *Pol Pot*, John Murray, London, 2004. Some of the internal documents of the Khmer Rouge regime have been made available in English translation *Pol Pot Plans the Future*, ed. David P. Chandler et al, Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, New Haven, 1988.
- 37 ‘The Great Fear of Marxism’ was originally published in the *Observer*, 4/2/79. Thompson collected the text in *Writing by Candlelight*, pp. 181–186.
- 38 Like Thompson, O’Brien had been a strong critic of the shift to the right that took place in the postwar Anglo-American intelligentsia. ‘Disenchantment or Default?’, Thompson’s meditation on the causes of political despair amongst Wordsworth and his twentieth century successors like WH Auden, was first published in a book O’Brien co-edited with VD Vanech called *Power and Consciousness* (University of London Press, London, 1969).
- 39 Thompson, *Writing by Candlelight*, p. 181.
- 40 *Ibid.*
- 41 *Ibid.*, p. 185.
- 42 *Ibid.*, p. 186.
- 43 The texts were collected in *Writing by Candlelight*, pp. 189–259.
- 44 Thompson, *Writing by Candlelight*, pp. ix–x.
- 45 *Ibid.*, p. 256.
- 46 Jonathan Ree, ‘EP Thompson and the Drama of Authority’, *History Workshop Journal* 47, Spring 99, p. 214. For Ree’s review of ‘An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski’, see ‘Socialist Humanism’, *Radical Philosophy* 9, Winter 1974, pp. 33–36. Ree echoes a number of Thompson’s criticisms of Perry Anderson and the *New Left Review*; he also asks why Anderson’s journal has never discussed the reasons for its promotion of Louis Althusser as an important Marxist theorist (p. 35). Did Ree’s question help to prompt Thompson’s interest in Althusser? Was the young philosopher echoing a question Thompson asked him? For a rejoinder to Ree’s review, see David A Wilson, ‘Old and New Left’, *Radical Philosophy* 10 Spring 1975, pp. 29–31. Wilson cannot share Ree’s enthusiasm for ‘An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski’: he regrets Thompson’s ‘personal’ treatment



- of intellectual questions, and warns of the dangers of 'excessive preoccupation' with Englishness in the 'modern world' of the 1970s (p. 30).
- 47 *Ibid.*, p. 216.
- 48 *Ibid.*, p. 216–217.
- 49 Dorothy Thompson, introduction to EP Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory*, Merlin, London, 1995, p. x.
- 50 Dorothy Thompson, interview with the author, 21/05/05.
- 51 EP Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, Merlin, London, 1978, p. 1.
- 52 *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- 53 *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- 54 *Ibid.*, p. 218.
- 55 *Ibid.*, p. 229.
- 56 Ree, for instance, was so enthusiastic about the 'intermission' that he wrote to Thompson urging him to expand it into a new book ('EP Thompson and the Drama of Authority', pp. 217–218).
- 57 Later, I will make the same claim for the two sections of 'the Poverty of Theory' which discuss the problems of Marxology.
- 58 Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, p. 231.
- 59 *Ibid.*, p. 232.
- 60 *Ibid.*, p. 242
- 61 *Ibid.*, p. 243.
- 62 *Ibid.*, p. 266.
- 63 *Ibid.*, p. 290.
- 64 Terry Eagleton, 'The Poetry of EP Thompson', *Literature and History*, 5, 2, Autumn 1979, p. 141.
- 65 Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, p. 321.
- 66 *Ibid.*, p. 332.
- 67 *Ibid.*, p. 333.
- 68 *Ibid.*, p. 354.
- 69 *Ibid.*, p. 375.
- 70 Thompson's talk of a Marxist tradition of 'reason' helps us understand why he gave his polemic a title that alludes to Marx's critique of Proudhon's wild philosophical speculations, and why he introduces his text by quoting Marx's dictum that 'To leave error unrefuted is to encourage intellectual immorality'. The same quote adorned the masthead of *The Reasoner* in the fateful year of 1956.
- 71 Eagleton, 'The Poetry of EP Thompson', p. 143.
- 72 Gavin Hitching, 'A View from the Stalls', *New Statesman*, 14/3/80, p. 398.
- 73 Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, pp. 379–380.
- 74 *Ibid.*, p. 380.
- 75 Richard Johnson, 'Thompson, Genovese, and Socialist-Humanist History', *History Workshop Journal*, 6, Autumn 1978, 79–101.

- 76 Johnson also takes Thompson's friend and former student Eugene Genovese to task, but we will pass over this part of his article.
- 77 We will discuss this misapprehension at length later.
- 78 Johnson, 'Thompson, Genovese, and Socialist-Humanist History', p. 97.
- 79 This may be why Samuel solicited it. See Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain*, p. 224.
- 80 Raphael Samuel, ed., *People's History and Socialist Theory*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1981, p. 376. *People's History and Socialist Theory* includes the proceedings of the 13<sup>th</sup> History Workshop conference, including the texts Stuart Hall, Richard Johnson, and Thompson delivered at St Paul's, along with Samuel's commentary.
- 81 *Ibid.*, p. 377.
- 82 I am indebted to Dennis Dworkin's very detailed account of the St Paul's debate (*Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1997, pp. 232–245).
- 83 Samuel ed., *People's History and Socialist Theory*, p. 381.
- 84 *Ibid.*, p. 394..
- 85 *Ibid.*, p. 395.
- 86 Conversation with the author, 2004.
- 87 Samuel ed., *People's History and Socialist Theory*, p. 396.
- 88 *Ibid.*, p. 397.
- 89 *Ibid.*, p. 400.
- 90 *Ibid.*, p. 402.
- 91 Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain*, p. 239.
- 92 *Ibid.*, pp. 239–240.
- 93 *Ibid.*, p. 239.
- 94 *Ibid.*, p. 241.
- 95 Ree, 'EP Thompson and the Drama of Authority', p. 220.
- 96 Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain*, p. 241.
- 97 Dorothy Thompson, introd. to EP Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory*, Merlin, London, 1995, pp. x-xi.
- 98 Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain*, p. 243.
- 99 *Ibid.*
- 100 *Ibid.*

## 6

# The eagle and the bustard: EP Thompson and Louis Althusser

One of the peculiarities of intellectual history is the way that those thinkers who clash most fiercely tend to be linked in the minds of scholars of later generations, and sometimes in popular imagination too. Sometimes polemic ends up keeping alive the name, if not the reputation, of its target. We only recall Euthyphro because he argued with Socrates; Duhring is remembered for the criticism he received from Engels.

In other cases, two important thinkers are forever associated by the arguments they aimed at each other. It is difficult to think for long about either Sartre or Camus without considering their epic clashes over Algeria and communism. CP Snow and FR Leavis survive in popular consciousness largely because of the famous ‘science and culture’ debate they waged in the 1960s. *The Poverty of Theory’s* title essay is a venomous polemic, even by the standards of the British left, yet it has ensured that the names Thompson and Althusser have been linked, even if antithetically, in the minds of successive generations of leftists.

We have noted how Thompson wrote ‘The Poverty of Theory’ in two weeks in February 1978. By the end of the following year Stuart Hall felt able to describe it, in a contribution to the debate at St Paul’s, as ‘a remarkable political and intellectual event’.

‘The Poverty of Theory’ was seen as one salvo in a larger battle, a battle fought by armies gathered under the rival banners of ‘humanism’ and ‘scientism’, ‘early’ and ‘late’ Marx, and ‘French structuralism’ and ‘English empiricism’. Although Althusser himself never replied publically to Thompson’s volley, his status as an enemy combatant was never really questioned. Commentators remembered his 1973 ‘Reply to John Lewis’, an uncharacteristically caustic attack on a self-

proclaimed socialist humanist who had rehearsed some of Thompson's arguments in the Communist Party of Great Britain's journal *Marxism Today*.<sup>1</sup> One of Althusser's biggest English proponents was Thompson's old foe Perry Anderson. Thompson himself had contributed to the atmosphere in which 'The Poverty of Theory' was received. In 'An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski', which was published in the same year as the 'Reply to John Lewis', Thompson declared 'I reject in form all, and in content most, of the work of Althusser'.<sup>2</sup> Readers had been prepared for 'The Poverty of Theory'.

We have seen that Thompson's attack on 'Stalinism in theory' climaxed at the session of the 1979 History Workshop conference on People's History and Socialist Theory devoted to 'The Poverty of Theory'. Thompson's biographer Bryan D Palmer has suggested that the St Paul's debate marked the end of his subject's interest in Marxism. Certainly, Thompson refused subsequent invitations to discuss 'The Poverty of Theory' and the controversy it had stirred.<sup>3</sup>

Althusser's ability to intervene in public debates ended in November 1980, when he was committed to a psychiatric hospital for strangling his wife in the flat that they shared in the Ecole Normale. By the time of his death in 1990 Althusser was a hate figure for France's increasingly right-wing intelligentsia, who saw the fall of the Berlin Wall as a refutation of every proposition in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*.

Althusser did not help his cause by writing two ostensibly autobiographical texts, which were collected posthumously under the title *The Future Lasts A Long Time*.<sup>4</sup> Claiming that he had hardly read Marx, Althusser insisted that he conducted all his research by sitting in university cafeterias and eavesdropping on gifted graduate students. Old enemies leapt on such 'evidence', forgetting that Althusser also claimed to have held up a bank, to have planned the hijacking of a nuclear submarine, and to have been cruised by General de Gaulle in a Paris street.

Introducing the 1995 edition of *The Poverty of Theory*, Thompson's widow Dorothy was able to refer to the collapse of Althusser's reputation:

Readers of Althusser's autobiography, a strangely haunting volume ... may feel that the gulf between the two writers lies not only in their different intellectual approaches but in their whole lives.<sup>5</sup>

### Similarities amongst differences?

Readers can be forgiven, then, for approaching ‘The Poverty of Theory’ assuming that it marks out, however roughly and contentiously, a very significant divide. And, to be sure, the differences between Thompson and Althusser are many. But the careful reader of the oeuvres of Thompson and Althusser may begin to notice some intriguing correspondences – autobiographical, methodological and rhetorical, as well as doctrinal – between the English bustard and the Parisian eagle. Perhaps the best way to dramatise some of these correspondences is to compare the broad outlines of the lives and careers of Althusser and Thompson.

Althusser was born in 1918 in Algiers, where his grandfather was a colonial functionary and his father a banker. As we have seen, Thompson was born six years later, to a Methodist missionary family which had decamped to Oxford after many years of loyal service in the colonies. Thompson grew up steeped in Methodism. Althusser was deeply influenced by his family’s Catholicism – it was rumoured that the famous Marxist philosopher never shook off the habit of attending Mass.<sup>6</sup>

Given their dates of birth, it is hardly surprising that Thompson and Althusser were both marked deeply by World War Two. Thompson, of course, saw his elder brother become a national hero of Bulgaria, and himself fought in the Allies’ Italian campaign, commanding a tank unit in the battle of Monte Cassino.

Althusser was captured before he had the chance to fight, and spent more than four years in a prisoner of war camp (in *The Future Lasts a Long Time* he would characterise those years as the happiest of his life).<sup>7</sup> World War Two brought Thompson and Althusser firmly into the orbits of their respective communist parties. Both men identified with the Comintern’s Popular Front policy of total support for the war.

After the war, Thompson and Althusser found themselves involved in the cultural and intellectual subsections of their respective parties. Althusser had become a tutor at the Ecole Normale; Thompson would spend seventeen years as a Workers Education Association tutor in Yorkshire. Neither was closely involved in the concerns and campaigns of organised labour.

### The challenge of 1956

The year 1956 was a crucial one for both Althusser and Thompson, as it was for so many others around the world. Krushchev's denunciation of Stalin, the Soviet invasion of Hungary, and the Anglo-French attacks on Egypt created crises for the organisations of the left and right, in the East and West. Both Thompson and Althusser responded to 1956 by aggressively questioning orthodox interpretations of Marx, and by trying to foster a political movement which rejected Stalin and his successors in the Kremlin as well as both the liberal and conservative sections of the political establishment in the West.

Thompson left the Communist Party and became a founder of the first New Left<sup>7</sup>; Althusser stayed inside the much larger and more powerful Communist Party of France, but began an effort to develop an alternative to that party's line. Althusser eventually inspired the semi-secret 'Groupe Spinoza', which was, like the New Left Clubs Thompson helped to found, largely a movement of young, radicalised intellectuals.<sup>8</sup>

For both Thompson and Althusser, the rescue of Marxism from the clutches of communist and anti-communist orthodoxy was vital to the prospects of the left. The two men developed their characteristic interpretations of Marxism in the shadow of 1956. Both were strong critics of what they saw as mechanical and teleological traits in 'official' Marxist theory. Against grand narratives of history and economic reductionism, Althusser and Thompson emphasised the importance of analysing what Althusser called 'the conjuncture'.

Both Thompson and Althusser rejected orthodox interpretations of Marx's 'base-superstructure' metaphor, insisting that recognition be given to the importance of the 'superstructure' to the economic 'base'. In his essay on 'History and Anthropology', Thompson insisted that:

What I call into question is not the centrality of the mode of production (and attendant relations of power and ownership) to any materialist understanding of history. I am calling into question ... the notion that it is possible to describe a mode of production in 'economic' terms, leaving aside as secondary (less 'real') the norms, the culture, the critical concepts around which this mode of production is organised.<sup>9</sup>

For his part, Althusser famously argued that Marx's concept of 'mode of production' involved three levels – the economic, political and ideological – that combined in unpredictable ways. The economic level did not always dominate, but merely determined which of the

three levels would be dominant in any given mode of production. In feudal societies, for example, the economic level determined that the political level would be dominant.

To understand the impact that Althusser's work had in the 1960s, it is necessary to understand the competing versions of Marxism that existed in those days in France and in most other Western European countries. At the beginning of the decade, the theoretical discourse of France's pro-Moscow Communist Party was still dominated by what is often called 'mechanical Marxism'. Mechanical Marxists saw Marx's *Capital* as a set of rigid 'laws of history' that demanded that human societies pass through a series of 'stages' on the way to a communist utopia. The engine of this teleological process was the contradiction between the 'forces' and 'relations' of production. In other words, economics ensured that every society would tread relentlessly through 'stages' with the names primitive communism, feudalism, capitalism, and socialism. The victory of socialism and the flourishing of human culture were assured, despite the best efforts of capitalists, imperialists, and Trotskyists.

The 'mechanical Marxism' made into an orthodoxy by Stalin was opposed by socialists who inspired by some of the earlier, 'humanist' writings of Marx as well as *Capital*. For the likes of Jean-Paul Sartre, human willpower and the imagination were more important to the progress of the socialist cause than tractor production, and alienation was as bad as exploitation.

Althusser's work created a sensation because it rejected both mechanical and humanist Marxism, arguing that they were merely two sides of the same coin. Both creeds, Althusser argued, gave distorted pictures of reality, because both put the human being and a quasi-religious idea of progress at the centre of history. Influenced by Martin Heidegger's critique of Sartre as well as his own reading of Marx, Althusser announced that history was 'a process without a subject'. He insisted on the importance of the 'conjuncture' – the specific economic, political, and intellectual circumstances that determined, or at least placed limits on, thought and behaviour in a particular place and time. Althusser didn't like destiny, but he didn't like accidents either. He may have rejected teleology, but he was still a materialist.

Thompson and Althusser may have differed sharply over words like 'humanism', but they were as one in rejecting the mechanical materialism which Stalin had done so much to encourage. Besides challenging the base–superstructure metaphor, both Thompson and

Althusser criticised definitions of class which they regarded as tainted by economic reductionism. In *The Making of the English Working Class* Thompson famously insisted that:

We cannot have love without lovers, nor deference without squires and labourers ... class happens when some men ... feel and articulate the identity of their interests ... against other men whose interests are different than theirs.<sup>10</sup>

Althusser made a similar point when he wrote in the 'Reply to John Lewis' that:

It is impossible to separate the classes from class struggle. The class struggle and the existence of classes are one and the same thing.<sup>11</sup>

The ideas of Thompson and Althusser helped shape the New Left, but as the 1960s went on they found themselves increasingly at odds with some of the young radicals who revered them. In 'An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski', Thompson would castigate a "youth culture' of self-indulgent emotionalism and exhibitionist style" and describe May 1968 as a 'rich kid's revolutionary farce'.<sup>12</sup>

During May 1968, the slogan 'Althusser, where are you?' appeared on walls around Paris. Althusser had checked himself into a sanatorium; when he re-emerged, it was to chide his followers for their 'over-optimism' and 'ultra-leftism'. With political visions planted in the Popular Front years of the 1930s and 1940s, Thompson and Althusser found it hard to deal with the very different turbulence of the late 1960s and 1970s.

As we will see in part IV, after the late 1970s Thompson often rejected the label Marxist altogether, and always refused invitations to debate the problems of Marxist theory. Later in this chapter we will see that the older Althusser also seemed to stage a retreat: in the series of fragmentary and elliptical texts he wrote in the 1980s, the disgraced philosopher rejected 'the yellow logorhythms' of Marxism and advocated instead an 'aleatory materialism' that looked to thinkers as different as Epicurus and Machiavelli for inspiration.<sup>13</sup>

### Differences amongst similarities

Even this very cursory summary ought to make it clear that the lives and careers of Thompson and Althusser offer a number of intriguing correspondences. Yet few commentators have seen fit to discuss these



correspondences at any length. If we want to explain the similarities we see, as well as the undeniable differences that separate Thompson and Althusser, we need to return to the fateful year of 1956.

Thompson and Althusser welcomed Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin in 1956, but were suspicious of 'official' de-Stalinisation, as well as the opportunistic condemnations of Stalinism from Cold Warriors in the West. Both men were looking for a sort of middle way between the orthodoxy of the Kremlin and the orthodoxy of the ideology Thompson called 'Natopolitanism'. We can fairly call Thompson and Althusser 'left de-Stalinisers'. But Thompson and Althusser looked in very different places for their alternatives to Stalinism and Natopolitanism.

Althusser associated the ideology of Khrushchev's Soviet Union with a sort of neo-Hegelian humanism, represented in France by philosophers like Sartre and Althusser's great rival in the Communist Party, Roger Garaudy. Brandishing Marx's 1844 manuscripts and Khrushchev's doctrine of peaceful co-existence and a peaceful road to socialism, Garaudy was in Althusser's opinion guilty of using a shallow anti-Stalinism to justify the Communist Party's move to the right, into the territory of social democracy.<sup>14</sup>

Many of Althusser's most famous essays are attempts to go over the head of Stalin and reread Lenin and Marx, using the structuralism of Levi-Strauss, the psychoanalytic theory of Lacan and the conventionalism of French philosophers of science like Duhem and Bachelard. The goal of this rereading is the establishment of a 'scientific anti-humanist Marxist-Leninism' which can be turned into political practice by a disciplined vanguard party of the working class. Without the reconstruction of Marxist philosophy, the vanguard party could not do its work, and without the vanguard party the working class could not grow stronger, let alone take power.

Thompson shared Althusser's antipathy to the economism of Stalinism and the teleology of Hegel, but he tended to associate both errors with the very scientism and vanguardism that Althusser demanded. For Thompson, the humanism of post-Stalinist philosophers like Garaudy and Lewis was culpable because it was half-hearted.<sup>15</sup>

Thompson was powerfully attracted to the practice of the Communist Party of Great Britain of his youth, which he regarded as an incarnation of a venerable English tradition of popular and democratic dissent epitomised by his heroes William Blake and William Morris. Thompson wanted the New Left Clubs he helped set up after 1956 to

galvanise British society, but he was reluctant to speak of vanguards. In his 1960 essay 'The New Left' he predicted that:

The bureaucracy [of the trade unions, and the Labour Party] will hold the machine; but the New Left will hold the passes between it and the younger generation.<sup>16</sup>

The different political strategies of Thompson and Althusser reflect their very different debts to Marxism. We have seen that, under the influence of the Popular Front policies maintained by Communist Parties during the 'decade of heroes,' Thompson broke with Marxist orthodoxy by making the subjectivity – the experiences and consciousness – of the working class and 'the people' more important than the 'objective factors' of political economy. Althusser, on the other hand, followed 'orthodox' tradition in locating the justification for his Marxist politics in the objective interests of the working class and its allies. (If anything, Althusser's account of Marx's theory of ideology actually valourised a sharp disjunction between Marxist 'science' and working class politics, insisting as it did upon the 'inescapability of ideology'.)

We have seen that both Thompson and Althusser developed models of Marxism and political strategies that emphasised the importance of ideas, ideology and intellectuals to both the maintenance and possible transformation of post-war society. At the same time, we have seen that there are considerable differences between the ways Thompson and Althusser chose to express this importance. How can we explain this mixture of correspondences and sharp differences? Returning to 1956, we can note that the crises that the events of that year caused in Western communist parties tended to impact differently on workers, especially industrial workers, and intellectuals.

In Britain and in France, intellectuals – academics, journalists, teachers, freelance writers – dominated the opposition to the invasion of Hungary and to the refusal to address properly the legacy of Stalin. Commenting on the schism in the British party from the safe distance of 1976, Malcolm MacEwan remembered the way that the special party conference of 1957 endorsed the whitewash of the 'Majority Report' of the Commission on Inner-Party Democracy, against a 'Minority Report' produced by dissident intellectuals:

[T]he enormous exodus of members after Hungary, which decimated the Party's intellectual membership, had produced a strong reaction among those who remained, and particularly amongst the industrial

working class members. The majority report was carried, according to an official report, by a margin of 20 to 1.<sup>17</sup>

In Britain and in France, the hundreds of intellectuals who resigned or were expelled found themselves isolated from the most militant section of a not-very-militant working class. Even those intellectuals who chose to stay inside the party, like Althusser in France and Eric Hobsbawm in Britain, found themselves isolated by the party leadership.<sup>18</sup>

Leading relatively small groups of radicalised intellectuals, isolated from a bureaucratised and largely apathetic working class, Thompson and Althusser not unnaturally tended to emphasise the possibility that intellectuals and intellectual work could bring political change by creating a 'thaw' in the Cold War and breaking up the rival blocs of Europe. Discussing Thompson's proposals for the Old New Left, Wade Matthews wrote that:

Thompson did not so much undertake a proper examination of problems by placing them in their objective economic and social context, as make a 'voluntarist wager' on a process by which the consciousness of 'men' would be transformed ... by the work of 'consciousness upon consciousness'.<sup>19</sup>

Althusser proposed a more torturous line of march, but his commitment to the work of 'consciousness upon consciousness' is not in doubt.

### Different worlds

The sharp differences between the Marxisms and the political strategies of Thompson and Althusser remain to be explained. To understand these differences, we need to look at the quite different environments in which Thompson and Althusser tried to deal with the legacy of 1956. Thompson regarded Althusser and his disciples as an arrogant and otherworldly posse of poseurs, while Althusser believed the empiricist and humanist tradition Thompson identified with was shot through with philistinism and obscurantism. This mutual incomprehension can ultimately be related to the very different contexts of intellectual life in Britain and France.

Since the first decades of the Third Republic, at least, intellectuals have existed as a distinct stratum in French society, with their own culture, rituals, and independent institutions. The intensity of the struggle against feudalism in France, and the continuing struggle to

safeguard the achievements of 1789, led to the intelligentsia becoming, in Regis Debray's phrase, a 'secular clerisy', conscious of its mission to defend the revolution and the Enlightenment. The 'Dreyfus affair' at the end of the nineteenth century symbolised the role of the new layer in French society.

The regional and rural character of France and the country's late industrialisation made a strong central government and bureaucratic apparatus essential, helping to guarantee the strength of the intelligentsia. Intellectuals have tended to be integrated with the state, rather than directly with the bourgeoisie, large sections of which remained hostile to the legacy of 1789 for over a hundred and fifty years.

In Britain, by contrast, intellectuals have tended to be integrated cosily with the bourgeoisie, to the extent that they have lacked even a sense of separate identity for long periods. The weakness of the British intelligentsia has been linked by Perry Anderson to the absence of a 'totalising view', or comprehensive sociology, of British society. Until relatively recently the closest approach to an overarching view of British society could be found in the literary criticism of the likes of Leavis and Raymond Williams, and in the social criticism of writers like William Morris and DH Lawrence.<sup>20</sup> We have noted that Thompson took much from the tradition these writers represent.

Sunil Khilnani has argued that Althusser 'aspired to produce a counter-technocracy or elite, concerned with ascertaining the scientific principles of revolution.'<sup>21</sup> Khilnani's words point to the link between Althusser's project and the traditional role of intellectuals in French society. Althusser proposes a sort of revolutionary adaptation of the 'secular clerisy' beloved of liberal French intellectuals. Althusser's debt to thinkers like Levis-Strauss, Lacan, Bachelard, and Duhem reminds us of the national roots of his project. And although Althusser's semi-structuralist anti-humanism represented a rejection of post-war French philosophical orthodoxy, his lofty conception of the role of the philosopher would have prompted little dissension from Sartre and Garaudy.

Thompson, of course, favours a much less hierarchical, and indeed much less structured, relationship between Marxist intellectuals and the rest of the left. Thompson's focus on the experiences and consciousness of the working class leads him to see literature and history – vision and excavation – as the two most important parts of radical intellectual work. For Thompson, writers like William Morris and William Blake were able to produce a vision of British society

which is irreducible to mere political formulations, yet at the same time capable of transforming the consciousness of those lucky enough to encounter it. Thompson's mentors are visionaries, not vanguardists.

Along with the visions of literature, Thompson favours the excavations of historians as a way of inspiring changes in consciousness. Thompson wrote *The Making of the English Working Class* partly because he was worried that the English working class was losing its memory of its heroic past in the face of the onslaught of American consumer culture. Thompson hoped that the memory of the past could help to spark an apathetic working class into action that went beyond the routines of 'meat and veges' trade union and Labour Party economism. Like Althusser, then, Thompson developed a conception of Marxism and a political strategy that was rooted in the history of his own country.

### Notes

- 1 The 'Reply to John Lewis' is collected in Louis Althusser, *Essays in Self-criticism*, trans by Graeme Lock, New Left Books, London, 1974. EP Thompson would not have failed to notice his old foe Anderson's role in bringing Althusser to the attention British readers, via New Left Books and the *New Left Review*, which published regular commentaries on and excerpts from Althusser's work in the 1970s.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 142.
- 3 Bryan D Palmer, *EP Thompson: Objections and Oppositions*, Verso, London and New York, 1994, pp. 120–125. We will discuss Thompson's post-St Paul's retreat in detail in part IV.
- 4 Louis Althusser, *The Future Lasts A Long Time*, trans. Richard Veasey, Chatto and Windus, London, 1993. For a perceptive account of the dubious claims in Althusser's 'autobiography', see Ned Jackson's 'The First Death of Louis Althusser', in *History and Theory*, 35, 1, 1996, pp. 131–146. For a discussion of the way in which some reviewers seized on the book in an effort to discredit not only Althusserianism but Marxism in toto, see Gregory Elliott, 'Ghostlier Demarcations: On the Posthumous Edition of Althusser's Writings', *Radical Philosophy* 90, July/August 1998, pp. 20–32.
- 5 Dorothy Thompson, introduction to *The Poverty of Theory*, Merlin, London, 1995, p. xi.
- 6 I am indebted to Douglas Johnson's introduction to *The Future Lasts a Long Time* for the details of Althusser's biography relayed in this chapter.
- 7 Althusser, *The Future Lasts a Long Time*, pp. 100–110.
- 8 For an account of the rather quixotic activities of the Groupe Spinoza, see GM Goshgarian's introduction to Louis Althusser, *The Humanist*

- Controversy and Other Essays*, trans. Goshgarian, Verso, London and New York, 2003.
- 9 EP Thompson, *Persons and Polemics*, Merlin, London, 1994, p. 221.
- 10 EP Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Victor Gollancz, 1963, p. 9.
- 11 Louis Althusser, *Essays in Self-criticism*, p. 50–51.
- 12 Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, p. 99.
- 13 The late work is collected in *The Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978–87*, trans. GM Goshgarian, Verso, London and New York, 2006.
- 14 Althusser's confrontation with Garaudy is the main subject of *The Humanist Controversy and other Essays*.
- 15 Thompson makes this point in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, pp. 320–330.
- 16 EP Thompson, 'The New Left', *New Reasoner*, 9, Summer 1959, p. 17.
- 17 Malcolm MacEwan, 'The Day the Party Had to Stop', *Socialist Register* 1976, p. 41.
- 18 For Hobsbawm's account of his lonely and low-profile decades as a muted dissident in the Communist Party, see *Interesting Times: A Twentieth Century Life*, London, Allen Lane, 2002, pp. 216–218.
- 19 Wade Matthews, 'The Poverty of Strategy: EP Thompson, Perry Anderson, and the Transition to Socialism', *Labour/Le Travail* 210, Fall 2002, p. 233.
- 20 Anderson makes these points in his famous essay 'Components of the National Culture', *New Left Review*, 50, July/August 1968, pp. 3–58.
- 21 Sunil Khilnani, *Arguing Revolution: The Intellectual Left in Postwar France*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1993. Khilnani's assessment of Althusser is quoted by Gregory Elliott in his typically insightful review-article 'Contentious Commitments: French Intellectuals and Politics', *New Left Review* 206, July/August 1994.

## 'Mountainous inconsistency': EP Thompson, Marx, and 'The Poverty of Theory'

'The Poverty of Theory' could not avoid being, in part at least, an exercise in Marxology. The Althusserians that EP Thompson was criticising in his essay had usually wrapped their arguments in close readings of key texts by Marx. Althusser's claim to have discovered the true path of Marx's career, and to have differentiated the 'scientific' and 'non-scientific' aspects of his thought, was perhaps the most inflammatory of the many inflammatory arguments that the Parisian philosopher made famous.

In the 1960s and 1970s Marx's oeuvre seemed to be growing. A new generation was giving the *1844 Manuscripts* the attention they deserved, and the *Grundrisse* was finally being widely translated and interpreted. Althusser's curt dismissal of the *1844 Manuscripts* and the rest of Marx's early work, and his claim that not even *Capital*, let alone the *Grundrisse*, was 'fully' Marxist, struck many scholars and activists as a renewal of the attempts that the leaderships of 'official' Communist Parties had made to limit the reading and discussion of Marx in the bad old days when 'comrade Stalin' had set the parameters for Marxology. Even if he used intellectual rather than bureaucratic methods, Althusser seemed to many of his detractors to be determined to impose a single, inflexible interpretation of Marx on a new generation which had little time for the orthodoxies of the past, and to proscribe those parts of Marx's oeuvre which did not fit with his interpretation.

Of course, EP Thompson makes it abundantly clear throughout 'The Poverty of Theory' that he does not accept Althusser and his followers' claims to be 'completing' Marx's thought. It would be difficult for him to maintain such a stance without at least sketching an alternative view of the meaning of Marx's life and work. Thompson provides such

a view in sections nine and fifteen of 'The Poverty of Theory'. These two sustained excursions into Marxology take up thirty-four pages, or about a sixth of the total text, and are complemented by remarks scattered through most of the other fifteen sections of 'The Poverty of Theory'.<sup>1</sup>

A pattern emerges when we examine the responses reviewers made to the Marxological sections of 'The Poverty of Theory'. Critics of Thompson's text have tended to make the interpretations of Marx a focus of their attacks. Supporters of Thompson, by contrast, have tended to pass over the Marxology, and discuss other aspects of 'The Poverty of Theory', like its eloquent defence of the art and craft of history, or the elaborate and occasionally amusing lampoons of Althusser and his theoretical progeny. Both defenders and critics of 'The Poverty of Theory' have made many references to the supposed unorthodoxy of Thompson's interpretation of Marx. More than a few commentators from both camps have decided that the essay is the work of an ex-Marxist.<sup>2</sup>

### Anderson's gloss

Perry Anderson's *Arguments within English Marxism* includes a chapter on the Marxological arguments in 'The Poverty of Theory'.<sup>3</sup> Like the book to which it belongs, Anderson's chapter is a careful mixture of sympathy and firm criticism. Because Anderson's discussion does a generally good job of summarising Thompson's dispersed and lengthy interpretation of Marx, and because his response to that interpretation mirrors the responses of many commentators, we will make it the basis for our own discussion of the Marxology of 'The Poverty of Theory'.

Anderson begins by suggesting that 'The Poverty of Theory' 'proposes a complete new account of Marx and of Marxism'.<sup>4</sup> As Anderson notes, Thompson believes that Marx was the inventor of historical materialism, and that the goal of historical materialism is a 'unitary knowledge of society'.<sup>5</sup> The 'charter' for historical materialism was set out in the 1840s, in texts like *The German Ideology*, *The Poverty of Philosophy* and *The Communist Manifesto*. Those works were tremendously promising, but in the 1850s Marx wandered off the trail they had opened up. He had become 'hypnotised' by bourgeois political economy, and the result was the *Grundrisse*, a text that substitutes arid economic categories for the real world, and (mis)understands history



as the faux-Hegelian self-unfolding of these categories, rather than as the product of the ideas and actions of real men and women. In the 1860s Marx partially 'corrected himself', in Thompson's words, as the influence of the First International, the British labour movement, and Darwin's *Origin of Species* made him think in less economic and less teleological terms.

Despite the advances of the 1860s and the fact that it is considered Marx's magnum opus, *Capital* is for Thompson a 'mountainous inconsistency'.<sup>6</sup> Tour de forces like the chapter on primitive accumulation are juxtaposed with the sort of arid, reductionist abstractions that filled the *Grundrisse*. Anderson puts it well when he says that Marx was guilty, in Thompson's eyes, of the 'extrapolation of the purely economic categories of capital from the full social process'.<sup>7</sup> In other words, Thompson believes that Marx sometimes confuses capital with *capitalism*. The metaphor of base and superstructure contributes to this error, because it encourages the tendency to reduce the intricate ideological, cultural, political, and legal 'superstructures' of a society to mere epiphenomena of a simplified model of that society's economic system.

Anderson notes Thompson's argument that the elderly Engels became aware of the weakness in *Capital* and tried, in his famous *Letters on Historical Materialism*, to rectify the dogmatic schematism it was helping create in a generation of self-proclaimed Marxists.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, the warnings in Engels' letters were not always heeded. In the twentieth century, according to Thompson, Marxist historians have resumed the quest for a 'unitary knowledge of society' that Marx began so brilliantly in the 1840s.<sup>9</sup> In the process, they have discovered a crucial lacuna in Marx's ideas. Without an explanation for how the conceptual modes of production Marx discovered and the real 'historical process' actually correspond, Marxists have struggled to avoid either economic determinism, which reduces diverse societies to a few simple economic formulae, or a sort of hopeless particularism, which treats every society as unique, and struggles to make useful generalisations across time and space.

Thompson compares the absence in Marx's thinking to Darwin's inability to explain how mutations are transmitted during the process of evolution. Just as Mendelian genetics filled the absence in Darwin's thinking, so the Marxist historian's concept of 'human experience' has filled the gap in Marx's thinking. It is human experience which relates the conceptual models Marx created to the real world and its

history. To understand human experience, though, it is necessary to go beyond the writings of Marx and Engels, and encounter the ethical, utopian socialism of William Morris. Morris' emphasis on the importance of culture, ideas and ethics to the lives of individual humans and the movement of history is taken up, according to Thompson, in the work of twentieth-century Marxist historians. The result is the crucial concept of human experience, which becomes a sort of mediation between the 'objective' world of economics and the 'subjective' life of the individual. In one of the more famous passages of 'The Poverty of Theory' Thompson explains that:

Experience walks in without knocking at the door, and announces deaths, crises of subsistence, trench warfare, unemployment, inflation, genocide. People starve: their survivors think in new ways about the market. People are imprisoned: in prison they meditate in new ways about the law.<sup>10</sup>

Thompson insists that the shortcomings of Marx and Engels mean that Marxism as a science or 'high theory' must be rejected. Nor can the notion of a single Marxist tradition, which Thompson advanced in the 'An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski', be sustained. Althusser and his cohorts comprise one of many strains of a 'theological' and 'irrational' Marxism which is locked in mortal combat with the 'reasoning' Marxism that Thompson identifies with. Thompson's tradition is marked by 'open, empirical inquiry, originating in the work of Marx, and employing, developing, and revising his concepts.'<sup>11</sup> Both tendencies, or traditions, can be traced back to Marx and his inconsistencies.

### Anderson's response

Perry Anderson thinks that the Marxological sections of 'The Poverty of Theory' represent the 'most novel' part of the whole essay. Thompson has produced 'a quite new reading of Marx's intellectual trajectory' because he privileges 'neither the early philosophical writings nor the late economic works, but instead accords central importance to the polemical texts of the mid-1940s'. It is hard not to take Anderson's talk of the originality of Thompson's Marxology as a rather backhanded compliment. 'Novel' seems a proxy for 'eccentric', because Anderson's praise is followed by a series of attacks on the credibility of two key points in Thompson's argument.

Anderson argues that the 'unitary knowledge of society' that Thompson expects from Marx was simply not possible in the middle of the nineteenth century, when the human sciences were in their infancy and much of the world of political economy remained a mystery even to Marx and Engels. Had Marx tried to write the encyclopedic text that Anderson associates with the goal of a 'unitary knowledge of society', then he would have ended up with something like Kautsky's, rambling, speculative, pretentious *The Materialist Conception of History*, rather than the rigorous work of science that is *Capital*. Marx had to launch the project of historical materialism somewhere, and he chose the field of political economy, because historical materialism asserted that the economy played the ultimately decisive role in any society. The intense studies in political economy recorded rather artlessly in the *Grundrisse* were the foundation stone of the house of historical materialism:

To establish a secure notion of the 'economic structure' of society is not thereafter to preclude or compromise historical study of its cultural or political 'superstructures', but to facilitate it. *Without* the construction of a theory of the mode of production in the first instance, any attempt to produce a 'unitary knowledge of society' could only have yielded an eclectic interactionism.<sup>12</sup>

Anderson also upbraids Thompson for his objections to the base-superstructure metaphor and the use of the concept of mode of production, unmediated by the concept of 'human experience', outside the discipline of political economy. Anderson feels that Thompson's objections are irrational, given that he (supposedly) accepts the 'determinate nature of the base of modes of production'.<sup>13</sup> Anderson perceives that Thompson is afraid of the prospect of economic reductionism, but he insists that this is not a necessary consequence of using the concept of mode of production or the base-superstructure metaphor in a field like history. (In one of the best passages in *Arguments within English Marxism*, Anderson goes on to show that Althusser's notion of mode of production is compatible with Thompson's own work as a historian in *Whigs and Hunters*.<sup>14</sup>)

### Anderson's misunderstandings

We have noted that Anderson gives a reasonable summary of Thompson's arguments about Marx, and that he outlines reservations that

seem common amongst both admirers and critics of 'The Poverty of Theory'. But Anderson's case against Thompson's reading of Marx is redundant, because it rests on a misinterpretation of Thompson's concept of 'unitary knowledge of society'. Anderson takes 'unitary' to mean something like 'total' or 'comprehensive', and assumes that Thompson wanted Marx to follow *The Communist Manifesto* up with some sort of communist encyclopedia. (Anderson is quite correct, of course, when he says that such an undertaking would be quixotic; he is also justified in ridiculing *The Materialist Conception of History*, which nowadays reads less like a history and description of the world than a catalogue of the prejudices of Second International Marxism.)

What Thompson actually means by a 'unitary knowledge of society' is a knowledge that takes into account the diverse levels – ideological, political, cultural, economic – on which any society exists. Thompson has nothing against detailed investigations of a particular aspect of a society, but he insists that the subject under investigation should not be isolated in the sort of conceptual pigeonholes that the base–superstructure metaphor encourages. Thompson rejects the base–superstructure metaphor not because he rejects political economy *in toto*, but because he denies that the economy can be usefully analysed for long in isolation from 'superstructural' phenomena like culture and the law. When Thompson talks of a 'unitary knowledge of society' he is not naively expecting the impossible of Marx, but rather making an argument against the *abstractions* that Marx often chose to employ in the *Grundrisse* and in *Capital*.

We can grasp the last point more firmly if we remind ourselves of the nature of Marx's dialectical method of analysing and presenting his material. As Bertell Ollman has explained, this method is based upon the abstracting of discrete elements of the very complex reality which surrounds human beings:

[T]he role Marx gives to abstraction is simple recognition of the fact that all thinking about reality begins by breaking it down into manageable parts ... Our minds can no more swallow the world whole at one sitting than can our stomachs ... 'Abstract' comes from the Latin, *abstractere*, which means 'to pull from'. In effect, a piece has been pulled from or taken out of the whole and is temporarily perceived as standing apart ... a focus is established and a kind of boundary set.<sup>15</sup>

Anderson, of course, is suggesting that Thompson did not understand the sort of point Ollman makes here. According to Anderson,

Thompson did not understand that Marx could not study ‘everything at once’, and had to abstract certain features of capitalism and its pre-history to write *Capital*.<sup>16</sup> Other commentators on ‘The Poverty of Theory’ have levelled the same charge. In a long, angry essay called ‘The Necessity of Theory’, Paul Q Hirst accused Thompson of believing that ‘*Capital* is doomed’ because ‘its method of analysis of economic relations through categories in abstraction contradicts the nature of historical research.’<sup>17</sup> In his generally more positive response to ‘The Poverty of Theory’, Bill Schwartz convicts Thompson of the same mistake:

[N]o-one can deny that problems exist in *Capital*, but what Thompson does is reject the text itself, in its totality ... for the reason that it is built up out of abstractions ... Abstraction itself is ahistorical [according to Thompson], as it disrupts the real historical process and is thus inherently reductionist.<sup>18</sup>

Charges like these are not upheld by a careful reading of ‘The Poverty of Theory’. Thompson does not reject *Capital* ‘in its totality’, and he does not convict Marx of failing to write an encyclopedia. Near the end of the Marxological discussion in section nine of his essay, he explains that *Capital*, while ‘immensely fruitful as *hypothesis*’, requires ‘supercession’ at the hands of contemporary historical materialism:

How could it be otherwise? To suppose differently would be to suppose, not only that everything can be said at once, but that immanent Theory (or Knowledge) found its miraculous embodiment in Marx, not fully mature to be sure (it had yet to develop to Althusser’s full stature), but already perfectly formed and perfectly proportioned in its parts. This is a fairy story, recited to children in Soviet primary classes, and not even believed by them.<sup>19</sup>

Thompson’s ridicule of the idea that ‘everything can be said at once’ makes it clear that, to him at least, ‘unitary knowledge’ does not mean *complete* knowledge. And, far from dismissing dialectics and the method of abstraction at its heart, Thompson criticises his opponents for being insufficiently dialectical:

The eviction of dialectics from the Althusserian system is deplorable ... in my own work as a historian I have ... come to bring dialectics, not as this or that ‘law’ but as a habit of thinking ... into my own analysis.<sup>20</sup>

Insisting that ‘the dialectic was not Hegel’s private property’, Thompson points to William Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, and to

a related tradition of poetic and mystical writing, arguing that they influenced Marx, and should be read today by scholars of Marx. For Thompson, the static, ultra-structural quality of Althusserian thought is partly the consequence of a forgetfulness about dialectics.

What Thompson is questioning in 'The Poverty of Theory' is not Marx's dialectical method, but rather the restricted range of the dialectical abstractions Marx employs in parts of *Capital* and in the *Grundrisse*. He believes that too many of these abstractions suffer from 'stasis' and 'closure', because they have separated economics from the rest of human activity.

Thompson is quite correct when he writes that different parts of *Capital* employ quite different levels of abstraction. He appreciated the chapters of the book which understood aspects of political economy by abstracting them as part of historical processes involving non-economic forces. Many commentators on *Capital* have noted the sudden and dramatic entrances that history makes into the text. Discussing the chapter on the length of the working day that occurs about halfway through the first volume of *Capital*, Anthony Brewer notes that:

A much larger and more dramatic canvas emerges [here] ... the concepts here have not been given the same rigorous theoretical foundations as the strictly economic concepts used so far. The argument is much looser.<sup>21</sup>

The chapter on primitive accumulation that closes volume one of *Capital* was admired by Thompson for its fusion of political economy and history. By bringing together the concept of capital accumulation and the actual history of the enclosures in one abstraction, Marx provides a foundation for concrete historical investigations into the transition from feudalism to capitalism, modernisation, and urbanism. The moral outrage present in Marx's discussion of primitive accumulation would also have delighted Thompson. Yet there is, for Thompson, a tension present in even the best parts of *Capital*:

[T]he history in *Capital* ... is immensely fruitful as hypothesis; and yet as hypothesis which calls into question, again and again, the adequacy of the categories of Political Economy.<sup>22</sup>

It should be obvious that Thompson's objections to the base-superstructure model are intimately connected to his objections to the categories of 'stasis' and 'closure' that mar the *Grundrisse* and parts of *Capital*. Thompson opposes the model not because he is an idealist

who thinks that the 'superstructure' fell from the sky, or because he resists the necessity to abstract discrete aspects of reality, but because he contests the possibility of usefully thinking about 'basis' and the 'superstructure' in isolation from one another. In 'History and Anthropology', an essay based on a lecture he gave in Emergency India on the last day of 1976, Thompson outlined the case against the basis-superstructure model:

However much the notion is sophisticated, however subtly it has on many occasions been employed, the analogy of basis and superstructure is radically defective. It cannot be repaired. It has an in-built tendency to lead the mind toward reductionism or a vulgar economic determinism, by sorting out human activities and attributes and placing some (as law, the Arts, Religion, 'Morality') in a superstructure, others (as technology, economics, the applied sciences) in a basis, and leaving yet others (as linguistics, work-discipline) to float unhappily in-between.<sup>23</sup>

In 'The Poverty of Theory' the same argument is levelled at much greater length; Anderson does not grasp its terms, because he does not understand that Thompson objects not to abstraction per se, but to *a certain type of abstraction*.

### The missing Marx

The two false moves in Anderson's argument are connected to a small but telling omission from his summary of Thompson's account of Marx's career. Anderson gives a great deal of attention to Thompson's praise for some of Marx's 1840s texts and criticisms of the 'classic' works of political economy, but he ignores Thompson's suggestion that in his last decade Marx reconsidered some of the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*, and retreated from the 'whirlpool' of political economy that had threatened to swallow him. Thompson writes that:

I have argued that Marx himself was, for a time, trapped within the circuits of capital – an immanence manifesting itself in 'forms' – and that he only partly sprung that trap in *Capital* ... How far Marx himself ever became fully aware of his imprisonment is a complex question ... we should note that Marx, in his increasing preoccupation in his last years with anthropology, was resuming the projects of his Paris youth.<sup>24</sup>

These sentences are intended to draw attention to the vast amount of energy that Marx expended studying pre-capitalist and semi-capitalist societies during the last decade of his life. Thompson's reference to

these late and still relatively obscure labours plays a crucial part in the account he offers in 'The Poverty of Theory' of the development of Marx's thought.

Without the reference to the late work, Thompson might easily seem to be taking a quite negative view of the course of Marx's career. If *Capital* is the endpoint of that career, then Thompson's unfavourable comparisons of *Capital* to some of the works of the 1840s might suggest that Marx's was a story of a promise lost in the 'whirlpool' of political economy. When the reference to the late Marx is considered, though, then Thompson seems to be saying that Marx reached a sort of nadir in the 1850s with the *Grundrisse*, then recovered some of his balance and scope with *Capital*, and then, his detour into political economy over, resumed the quest for the 'unitary knowledge of society' that the 1840s had promised. If his career took this shape, then Marx made an implicit but profound self-criticism, and perhaps even took a view of the *Grundrisse* and *Capital* not entirely dissimilar to the one Thompson advances.

By ignoring Thompson's reference to Marx's post-*Capital* work, Anderson misrepresents Thompson's entire account of Marx's career. It is no surprise that commentators who have deemed 'The Poverty of Theory' an exercise in post- or anti-Marxism have also ignored the reference to Marx's late work.

### An aside on Marx's late work

If a reference to the late work of Marx plays such an important role in 'The Poverty of Theory', then it is necessary to discuss this late work carefully. Since EP Thompson was a historian, preoccupied with the causes and consequences of historical change, we will focus our discussion on the view of history found in the late Marx. In his entertainingly unsympathetic biography of Marx, Robert Payne notes that one of his subject's favourite works of literature was Goethe's *Faust*. Marx could talk about the play endlessly, and when he was drunk he liked to disturb the other patrons of London bars by loudly chanting its lines in his 'rough, guttural, unlovely German'.<sup>25</sup> It is easy to see how Marx might have been fascinated by the character of Faust, who makes a deal with the Devil in an effort to attain knowledge and power and change the world to his liking. For Marx – the pre-1871 Marx especially – capitalism was a Devil with which a deal might be made.

The contradictions in Marx's attitude to capitalism are perhaps



most clearly evident in *The Communist Manifesto*, a work whose structure was modelled on Goethe's *Faust*.<sup>26</sup> The *Manifesto* has often been remembered only for the rousing call to revolution in its final sentence, but its first few pages are devoted to a paean to capitalism. Marx and Engels see capitalism as an engine for progressive change – for drawing 'even the most barbarous of nations into civilisation' and abolishing 'the idiocy of rural life' – yet they also believe that, once established, it became an obstacle to historical progress. For the Marx of 1848, capitalism had strong positive as well as negative qualities. The view of history as a series of 'stages' triggered by changes in the economic 'base' of one society after another has its most confident expression in the famous 1859 Preface to the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*:

No social order ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed; and new, higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society itself. Therefore mankind always sets itself only such tasks as it can solve; since, looking at the matter more closely, it will always be found that the task itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution already exist or are at least in the process of formation. In broad outlines Asiatic, ancient, feudal, and modern bourgeois modes of production can be designated as progressive epochs in the economic formation of society.<sup>27</sup>

Even before the time these solemn and dogmatic words were penned, there were counter currents flowing through Marx's writing about history. In 1853, as a commentator for the *New York Daily Tribune*, Marx discussed China's Taiping rebellion in a series of articles.<sup>28</sup> Researching his subject in the London press and the reading room of the British Museum, Marx was forced toward a partial reconsideration of the sanguine view of European incursions into the peripheries of capital that had been such a feature of *The Communist Manifesto's* famous first section. Four years later, Marx's response to the Indian Mutiny showed how far he had already come from the *Manifesto's* rhetoric about the role of capital in 'civilising' the 'barbarian nations' outside Western Europe:

However infamous the conduct of the Sepoys, it is only the reflex, in a concentrated form, of England's own conduct in India ... There is something in human history like retribution: and it is a rule of historical retribution that its instrument be forged not by the offended, but by the offender himself.<sup>29</sup>

Thompson may have seen the *Grundrisse* as the nadir of Marx's career, but the introduction to that massive work included a subtle discussion of pre-capitalist societies, during which Marx speculated that there were at least three or four different 'routes' out of primitive communist society into class society. By sketching these alternate paths, Marx was clearly rejecting a unilinear, 'stagist' history of pre-capitalist, if not capitalist, history.

When it was first published in 1867, *Capital* seemed decided about the universality of the model of capitalism it presented. In the original preface to his book, Marx argued that 'the country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its future'. In one of *Capital's* more notorious footnotes, Marx mocked the communes of the recently emancipated Russian peasants, suggesting that they would be broken up as capitalism inevitably spread to Russia. In a tone that recalled the references to the 'idiocy of rural life' in *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx argued that the destruction of the communes could not come too soon. (Marx would quietly remove his comments from the 1875 French edition of *Capital*, the last edition of the book he would revise and see through the press.)<sup>30</sup>

Marx's decisive move away from a unilinear model of history came after the momentous year of 1871. The Paris Commune established and then destroyed in that year was both a triumph and a disaster. The Commune showed that the working class could make a revolution, but it also indicated that the final victory of the 'gravediggers of capitalism' was far from inevitable. The violence that the bourgeois French state inflicted upon the Communards naturally horrified Marx, and made him think hard about the significance of the state to the maintenance of capitalism. The failure of the international working class, and the British working class in particular, to rise up in support of the Communards also greatly perturbed Marx, who had sometimes imagined the radicalisation of that class to be the near-automatic result of capitalist development.

Marx paid great attention to the failure of the Communards and the French peasantry to build a workable alliance against the French and Prussian bourgeoisies. The workers of Paris could begin a revolution, but they could not hold onto power without the assistance of the class that still made up the vast majority of France's population.

When he meditated upon what the Commune had achieved during its brief existence, Marx was struck by the gap between its negligible economic programme and the grassroots democracy and alternate

structures of power it established across Paris. Marx maintained that it was these innovations which entitled the Commune to be considered revolutionary:

The great social measure of the Commune was its own working existence. Its special measures could but betoken the tendency of a government of the people by the people. The financial measures of the Commune, remarkable for their sagacity and moderation, could only be such as were compatible with the state of a besieged town.<sup>31</sup>

In this passage, Marx announces a much more 'subjective' turn in his thinking about socialist revolution. Political forms and mass consciousness were as important, if not more important, than economic reorganisation to the establishment of socialism.

Marx's new anti-statism, his more 'subjective' vision of socialism, his partial disillusionment with the notion that capitalism automatically lays the foundation for socialism, and his new awareness of the importance of the peasantry to revolution are all reflected in the massive, unfinished researches into pre-capitalist societies that he began in earnest in the early 1870s.

Marx became particularly fascinated by Russia during the last decade of his life. After teaching himself Russian and making contacts amongst both the Populist and Marxist wings of the movement against Tsarism, he wrote two letters which gave his views not only on Russian development but on the scope and limits of *Capital*. In an 1877 letter intended for the Russian journal *Otechestvennye Zapiski*, Marx denied that his book had proposed a universal model of historical progress that the non-Western world must pass through.<sup>32</sup> The Russian Marxists who were already turning the book into a template for universal history were the target of a carefully crafted letter Marx sent to the exiled Russian activist Vera Zasulich in 1881. In his message, which took four drafts and several weeks to write, Marx excoriated Georgi Plekhanov and the other 'defenders of capitalism' who claimed that the destruction of pre-capitalist economic forms like the peasant communes was necessarily progressive. Marx insisted that:

The analysis in *Capital* ... provides no reasons either for or against the vitality of the Russian Commune. But the special study I have made of it, including a search for original source-material, has convinced me that the commune is the fulcrum for social regeneration in Russia.<sup>33</sup>

In this passage and others like it from the 1880s, the innovations of the introduction to the *Grundrisse* have been extended, so that Marx now

perceives a number of possible routes from class society to socialism. History has become multilinear, and the negative comparison of pre-capitalist to capitalist societies which is such a feature of texts like *The Communist Manifesto* has been abandoned.

Marx's work on Russia is developed in his *Ethnological Notebooks*, which document his readings, in the early 1880s, in the work of Lawrence Henry Morgan and other exponents of the young discipline of anthropology. A torrent of quotation and impassioned interpolation, the *Notebooks* move from language to language and continent to continent with disconcerting speed, so that they sometimes read more like *Finnegans Wake* than *Capital*.<sup>34</sup> Stanley Rosemont has explained the significance of this unfinished work:

At the very moment that his Russian 'disciples' – those 'admirers of capitalism', as he ironically tagged them – were loudly proclaiming that the laws of historical development set forth in the first volume of *Capital* were universally mandatory, Marx himself was diving headlong into the study of (for him) new experiences of resistance and revolt against oppression – by North American Indians, Australian aborigines, Egyptians and Russian peasants.<sup>35</sup>

### Thompson's prescience

We have noted that Thompson's invocation of Marx's late work has an important place in his account of Marx's career. It might be reasonably asked, though, why Thompson didn't spend more time discussing Marx's late work in 'The Poverty of Theory'. Two answers to this question can be ventured. Thompson disliked Althusser's claim to be the 'true' interpreter of Marx, and the arbiter of what was essential and inessential in the Marxist canon. He was wary of countering Althusser by indulging in his own claims of unique insights into Marx. He even warns, in a sentence adjacent to his discussion of Marx's late work, that he is interested 'in the understanding of history, and not in Marxology'.<sup>36</sup> Thompson's account of Marx's career is careful and insightful, but it is painted with a fairly broad brush.

In any case, the resources necessary to paint a detailed picture of the last part of Marx's career were not easily available to scholars in 1978. It would have been difficult to expand upon the brief reference to the late work without a good deal of the special pleading and speculative reading that Thompson had found Althusser guilty of committing. In 1978, it was a mere four years since Lawrence Krader had published

the *Ethnological Notebooks* for the first time. Raya Dunayevskaya would not publish her pioneering study of the *Notebooks* until 1982.<sup>37</sup> At the end of the 1980s her work would be supplemented by Stanley Rosemont's long, impassioned essay 'Marx and the Iroquois', which urged the relevance of the *Notebooks* to fin-de-siecle struggles against globalisation and primitive accumulation in the Third World.

Teodor Shanin and Haruki Wada's acclaimed presentation of Marx's late researches into Russia would not be published until 1983. In 1996, three years after Thompson's death, James D White took late Marx studies another step forward, by publishing a careful reading of Marx's mostly unpublished notes and draft articles on Russian agriculture.<sup>38</sup>

'The Poverty of Theory' has not been ignored by those interpreting Marx's late work. In an essay that dissented from the claim that a very distinctive late stage existed in Marx's thought, Derek Sayer and Philip Corrigan linked Shanin and Wada's ideas to Thompson's account of Marx. Rosemont's essay included a frank acknowledgement of the significance of the reference to Marx's late work in 'The Poverty of Theory'.<sup>39</sup>

The tribute Rosemont paid is well deserved. With the benefit of a quarter century of scholarship by a succession of advocates of Marx's late work, we can see the full meaning of the account of Marx's career that Thompson gave in 'The Poverty of Theory'. Most importantly, we can see the relationship between Thompson's criticisms of *Capital* and his endorsement of Marx's late work. Thompson's view that the concepts in much of the *Grundrisse* and parts of *Capital* needed to be broadened to take in history and the 'superstructure', his insistence on the necessity of investigating the uniqueness of individual societies and events, and not subordinating them to the prescriptions of some universal history, and his inveterate opposition to economic reductionism have all been echoed in the work of a series of Marxologists. The reading of Marx that Perry Anderson and many others considered eccentric and obviously mistaken has proved remarkably resilient.

Scholars of Marx's late work have been divided on the question of its relation to the rest of his oeuvre. David Ryazanov, the great Soviet archivist, believed that the *Ethnological Notebooks* and the letter to Zasulich were signs of the decay of Marx's mental powers, after the triumph represented by the first volume of *Capital*.<sup>40</sup> Stanley Rosemont takes the opposite view, contrasting the late work favourably with *Capital*. Raya Dunayevskaya rejects both these views, and

insists on seeing the late work as a development, albeit a radical development, of Marx's canonical text. She argues that the *Notebooks* and the late writings on Russia fill out rather than contradict the writing on political economy, and that, if he had only had the time, Marx would have incorporated them in some way into volumes two and three of *Capital*, or into some supplement to *Capital*.<sup>41</sup>

It is tempting to see a similarity between Dunayevskaya's perspective and Thompson's argument that the concepts in *Capital* need to be placed inside dialectical abstractions that partake of larger slices of the world and its history and thus help to create a 'unitary knowledge of society'. Dunayevskaya was, though, frustratingly vague about how exactly Marx would, or indeed could, have incorporated the material gathered in his late manuscripts into *Capital*.<sup>42</sup>

It was not until 1996, when James D White published *Karl Marx and the Intellectual Origins of Dialectical Materialism*, that English language readers, at least, got a good hint of how Marx's late work might have entered volumes two and three of *Capital*, had illness, death and Engels not intervened. In the course of a long, meticulous chapter on 'Marx and the Russians', White guides his readers' attention towards an unfinished text Marx wrote in 1881, around the same time he was wrestling with his letter to Vera Zasulich.<sup>43</sup>

In 'Notes on the 1861 Reform and Russia's Post-Reform Development', Marx struggled to relate his studies of Russian economic development since the emancipation of the peasantry to the schemas laid out in the drafts of volumes two and three of *Capital*. Marx was particularly preoccupied with the relation of events in Russia to the 'circuits of capital' he had sketched in volume two. By 1881, he had long since abandoned his old view of the inevitability of the break-up of the peasant commune and its supersession by capitalism; the data he had accumulated showed that, far from occurring automatically, as a part of some sort of faux-Hegelian 'destiny' of capital, the destruction of pre-capitalist economic forms in Russia was taking place due to heavy and sustained government intervention in the economy. The levying of massive taxes on landowners was a far greater contributor to the break-up of the commune than the 'natural' processes of capital accumulation which had been announced in volume one of *Capital* and elaborated in volume two. The state had been only a ghostly presence in those texts, but it could not be excluded, even at a preliminary stage of abstraction, from accounts of the growth of capitalism in Russia.

In 'Notes on the 1861 Reform and Russia's Post-Reform Development', Marx sketched a new schema for the circulation of capital that included pre-capitalist as well as capitalist economic forms, and pictured the activity of the state as an indispensable part of the process. White notes that:

The account of the circulation of capital in 'Notes on the 1861 Reform and Russia's Post-Reform Development' represented a significant departure ... For here the circulation was not simply that of one capital among many, but of the whole national economy. By taking the nation as his unit, Marx seemed to indicate that the circuit of capital by which the peasantry was increasingly expropriated and which expanded the capitalist class was one which was completed only on a national scale, and which involved the agency of the government ... This position was of course consistent with Marx's failure to discover any instance of original accumulation that did not involve state intervention.<sup>44</sup>

By making state intervention a necessary condition for the accumulation of capital, Marx's new circuit of capital brought 'superstructural' elements like ideology and politics into the heart of his economics. Capitalism did not develop automatically, according to strictly economic laws: it had to be constantly supported by state action. In a country like nineteenth-century Russia, which was overwhelmingly pre-capitalist, the use of the state to build up capitalism was dictated by pro-capitalist ideology, not the inherent logic of capital. Capitalism was a political creation, not the inevitable working out of economic laws.

Although it is a half-finished work which examines capitalism in Russia, rather than capitalism in general, 'Notes on the 1861 Reform and Russia's Post-Reform Development' shows how the insights of the late Marx might have tempered some of the excesses that EP Thompson criticised in *Capital*. It shows Marx enlarging the rather hermetic abstractions of the second volume's circuit of capital so that they include the 'superstructural' features Thompson considered essential to any understanding, no matter how preliminary, of capitalism.

### An isolated achievement

We have seen that, far from being the work of an eccentric outcast who misunderstood some of Marx's most basic concepts, 'The Poverty of Theory' contains a profound and prescient contribution to Marxology.

It must be acknowledged that the influence of the Marxological sections of 'The Poverty of Theory' on Thompson's own wider thinking, and on his practice as a historian, was very limited. As we will see in part IV, Thompson's late political thought and historical work would be notable for a steady withdrawal from the territory 'The Poverty of Theory' fights so hard to win from Althusser.

Even within 'The Poverty of Theory', Thompson's careful, nuanced discussions of Marx's life and work were somewhat isolated, amidst long passages of knockabout satire and impassioned defences of a very traditional conception of the historical method. The qualities of sections nine and fifteen of 'The Poverty of Theory' were also lacking from 'The Politics of Theory', the ill-tempered talk Thompson gave at St Paul's. The Marxological sections of 'The Poverty of Theory' are in fact without parallel in the whole of the rest of EP Thompson's known oeuvre. Their isolation calls for explanation.

We have discussed in earlier chapters how Thompson rejected many Marxist ideas, even during his time as a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain. Before 'The Poverty of Theory' he had tended to avoid Marxological discussions, and even in 'The Poverty of Theory' he several times apologises for mentioning the subject. The crisis in Thompson's thinking – in what we have called the 'research programme' of radical liberalism – in the 1970s has been described and discussed in several earlier chapters. This crisis both prompted and curtailed Thompson's excursion into Marxology. As we noted at the beginning of this chapter, Thompson could not avoid offering his interpretation of Marx's career and thought, if he wanted to polemicise against Althusser, Althusserianism, and other false claimants to Marx's mantle like the Communist Party of India.

Yet the core ideas that Thompson had adopted during the 'decade of heroes' from 1936 to 1946 differed in important places from any tolerably faithful interpretation of Marx. In order to defend Marx from the claims of the Althusserians and Stalinists, Thompson was forced to lay aside quietly some of his most cherished notions. When he invoked his own work in history and his own political positions to support his interpretation of Marx, Thompson was careful to pick out examples that were consistent with that interpretation. He ignored parts of his scholarly work and historical writing that obviously contradicted Marx's views. Often in the past Thompson had 'cherry picked' useful parts of Marx and the Marxist tradition and incorporated them into his own historical and political writing; in the Marxological sections



of 'The Poverty of Theory' he cherry picks parts of his own work according to their compatibility with Marx.

Consider, for example, Thompson's invocation of his book *Whigs and Hunters* during his discussion of Marx. In *Whigs and Hunters* Thompson had exposed how the 'Black Act' that countered foraging and hunting in royal woods was used as a tool by a corrupt circle of politicians associated with Robert Walpole, Britain's first Prime Minister. After exposing the class nature of the Act, and explaining how it was related to the drive by the English ruling classes to counter the claims of peasants and small freehold farmers to lands that had been widely considered 'commons', Thompson concludes *Whigs and Hunters* by climbing out onto a 'precarious ledge' and defending the rule of law 'as a basic good' in any society.<sup>45</sup>

The ambivalence in *Whigs and Hunters* about the role and value of the law reflects a wider ambivalence in Thompson's thought about the status of Britain's traditional legal and political institutions. While Thompson was always well aware of the ways that institutions like parliament and the courts have been used to serve the interests of one class over another, he also valued them as defences, albeit weak and sometimes malfunctioning ones, against tyranny and anarchy. Thompson's conflicted attitude to the law reflects his often-contradictory 'hardcore' beliefs in the nobility of British history and democratic institutions, on the one hand, and his voluntarist vision of the revolutionary transformation of society by 'the people', on the other. How could the democratic inheritance of past popular struggles be defended *and* transcended?

When he invokes *Whigs and Hunters* in 'The Poverty of Theory', Thompson mentions only the book's discussion about how the law was used to serve the interest of a part of the ruling classes. He is able to show, without too much difficulty, the inextricable connection that the supposedly 'superstructural' feature of the law had with economic interests rooted in the 'base' of eighteenth century English society. By doing so, he is able to boost his argument about the futility of separating 'basis' from 'superstructure' in Marxist analysis.<sup>46</sup>

Thompson makes no reference, though, to the paean to law and order as a universal good that ends *Whigs and Hunters*. This part of his book not only flatly contradicted Marx's views about the role of law in a society, but also equally contradicted Thompson's argument against separating 'superstructure' and 'basis'. How, after all, can we decide that a 'superstructural' feature of society like the law is always

something positive, no matter what society it occurs in, unless we assume that the law can be understood in isolation from the 'basis' of any society in which it is found?<sup>47</sup>

By laying aside contradictory 'hardcore' beliefs and taking on some Marxist assumptions he had usually rejected, Thompson ensured that the Marxological sections of 'The Poverty of Theory' would be exceptions in his writings. It would be a mistake, then, to try to read Thompson's interpretation of Marx as a sort of 'key' to his historical work, or to his political career. It is, instead, a glimpse of a body of thought that other scholars would bring into being, in the decades after the publication of 'The Poverty of Theory'.

### Notes

- 1 For section nine of 'The Poverty of Theory', see pp. 247–262; section fifteen can be read on pp. 354–373 (*The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, 1978).
- 2 Later in the chapter we will discuss the arguments to this effect from Paul Q Hirst, who is hostile to Thompson's whole essay, and Bill Schwarz, who is much more sympathetic towards 'The Poverty of Theory'. Other Thompson supporters who questioned the fidelity of 'The Poverty of Theory' to Marx included David Montgomery, who claimed that Thompson questions 'some of the master's most famous concepts' (David Montgomery, 'History as Human Agency', *Monthly Review*, October 1981, p. 43).
- 3 Perry Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism*, New Left Books, London, 1980, pp. 59–99.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 59.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, p. 257.
- 7 Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism*, p. 60.
- 8 Friedrich Engels, *Letters on Historical Materialism 1890–94*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1980.
- 9 Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, p. 257.
- 10 *Ibid.*, pp. 200–201.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 384.
- 12 Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism*, p. 66–67.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 *Ibid.*, pp. 71–77.
- 15 Bertell Ollman, *Dialectical Investigations*, Routledge, New York and London, 1993, p. 24. See also Ollman's *Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx's Method*, University of Illinois Press, Chicago, 2003, online at [www.nyu.edu/projects/ollman/books/dd.php](http://www.nyu.edu/projects/ollman/books/dd.php), accessed 13/01/08.

- 16 Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism*, p. 62.
- 17 Paul Q Hirst, *Marxism and Historical Writing*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London and Boston, 1985, p. 63.
- 18 Bill Schwarz, *Sociology*, 13, 1979, p. 546.
- 19 Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, p. 258.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 306.
- 21 Anthony Brewer, *Guide to Marx's Capital*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, 1984, p. 44.
- 22 Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, p. 258.
- 23 EP Thompson, *Persons and Polemics*, Merlin, London, 1994, p. 222.
- 24 Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, pp. 219–220.
- 25 Robert Payne, *Marx*, WH Allen, London, 1968, pp. 286–287 and 317.
- 26 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1967.
- 27 Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1977.
- 28 Marx's articles on China have been translated and collected online at [www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1853/china/index.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1853/china/index.htm), Marxist Internet Archive, accessed 13/01/08.
- 29 Karl Marx, 'The Indian Revolt', *New York Daily Tribune*, 16/9/1857.
- 30 I am indebted here to Teodor Shanin and Haruki Wada's fine presentation *Late Marx and the Russian Road* (Monthly Review Press, New York, 1983), which includes an account of the changes that Marx made to both *Capital* and *The Communist Manifesto* as his views evolved in the last decade of his life.
- 31 Karl Marx, from 'The Civil War in France', in *Karl Marx Friedrich Engels Collected Works*, volume 22, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1986, p. 339.
- 32 Marx's letter is reproduced in translation in *Late Marx and the Russian Road*, pp. 134–138.
- 33 The letter(s) to Zasulich is the centrepiece of *Late Marx and the Russian Road*. See pp. 97–123.
- 34 Karl Marx, *Ethnological Notebooks*, translated and edited by Lawrence Krader, Assen, Netherlands, 1974.
- 35 Franklin Rosemont, 'Karl Marx and the Iroquois', online on the *Class Against Class* website at [www.geocities.com/cordobakaf/marx\\_iroquois.html](http://www.geocities.com/cordobakaf/marx_iroquois.html), accessed 13/01/08.
- 36 Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, p. 220.
- 37 Raya Dunyaveskaya, *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation, and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution*, Harvester Press and Humanities Press, New Jersey, 1982.
- 38 James D White, *Karl Marx and the Intellectual Origins of Dialectical Materialism*, Macmillan, London, 1996.
- 39 Rosemont, 'Karl Marx and the Iroquois'.

- 40 Ryazanov's account of his discovery of the drafts can be found on pp. 127–134 of *Late Marx and the Russian Road*. Kevin Anderson discusses Ryazanov's opinion in his interesting essay 'Uncovering Marx's Yet Unpublished Writings' (*Critique*, 30–31, 1998, pp. 179–187). Dunayevskaya criticises Ryazanov's reading of the late Marx on pp. 177–178 of *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation, and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution*.
- 41 Dunayevskaya, *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation, and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution*, pp. 175–197.
- 42 Engels, of course, claimed that Marx had wanted to incorporate his reading on Russia into *Capital's* chapter on ground rent. James D White has correctly argued that this claim trivialises the importance of the Russian studies to Marx (*Karl Marx and the Intellectual Origins of Dialectical Materialism*, p. 282). The publication in the mid-1990s of Marx's drafts of *Capital's* second and third volumes confirmed many scholars' suspicions that Engels had played down the very important role he had in shaping the published texts, and exaggerated the coherence of what Marx had left (see Michael Heinrich, 'Engels' Edition of *Capital* and Marx's Original Manuscript', *Science and Society*, 60, 4, 1996–97, pp. 452–466). Engels' reluctance to admit the importance of the Russian studies seems to be related to his desire to present *Capital's* second and third volumes as essentially complete works.
- 43 *Karl Marx and the Intellectual Origins of Dialectical Materialism*, Macmillan, London, 1996, pp. 255–256. White read Marx's text, which was written in Russian and has never been fully translated, in the Marx archive at the Institute for Social History in Amsterdam.
- 44 White, *Karl Marx and the Intellectual Origins of Dialectical Materialism*, p. 256.
- 45 EP Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1975.
- 46 Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, pp. 288–290.
- 47 Perry Anderson makes a similar point, when he complains that: '[S]ome of the most sweeping despotisms in history have promulgated and enforced comprehensive legal systems. A tyranny can perfectly well rule by law: its own laws. The Mongol Empire is a famous case in point. The great Yasa of Genghis Khan stipulated juridical equality of all before provisions of its code. 'Law' never rules – to imagine that it could is to reify social relations in a classic formalist fallacy' (*Arguments within English Marxism*, p. 71).

## 'Don't Tread on Me': the other side of Thompson's critique

As the first text in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* shows, EP Thompson was keenly interested in George Orwell. Some commentators – Christopher Norris, for example – have suggested that there are many similarities between the writing and thinking of Thompson and Orwell.<sup>1</sup> Thompson would not, of course, have appreciated that comparison. Even if other comparisons are not justified, we can certainly say that Thompson's and Orwell's most controversial works have met with strangely similar misinterpretations. Like Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 'The Poverty of Theory' was a work that was intended as an attack on important parts of the right, as well as swathes of the left. Both texts have frequently been treated, though, as simple assaults on the left; more than occasionally, they have been interpreted as renunciations of all forms of left-wing politics.

Orwell aimed *Nineteen Eighty-Four* at many targets. He ridiculed US consumer culture, for example, in his descriptions of his female character's work at a 'factory' which mass-produced porn novels for the 'proles'; the dreary austerity of post-war Britain was satirised in the Chestnut café; and the increasingly remote leadership of the post-war Labour Party, with its tendency to take on the trappings and habits of the British bourgeoisie, was lampooned in Orwell's description of the division between the 'inner' and 'outer' sections of the party of Ingsoc. Yet it is only targets to Orwell's left, namely the Soviet Union and the Communist Parties loyal to it, which have been popularly identified as the targets of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.<sup>2</sup>

An analogy can be made with 'The Poverty of Theory'. Thompson's full-blooded attack on 'Stalinism in theory', and his bitterness toward the Soviet Union and its satellite parties has not been lost on reviewers and scholars. What has been ignored, by most commentators at least,

is Thompson's less obvious critique of important trends in 'bourgeois' science like econometrics, positivism and modernisation theory.

Without recognising Thompson's targets on the right, we cannot understand the attacks on the left in 'The Poverty of Theory'. Thompson sees his enemies on the left as interdependent with, rather than truly opposed to, his enemies on the right. We can explain his view with another comparison to Orwell.

By the time he wrote *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell believed that the world of the near future would be divided between mutually reinforcing totalitarian power blocs of the left and right; as we have seen, Thompson increasingly believed, in the late 1970s, that such a world was coming to pass. Just as Orwell sees the superpowers of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as ultimately complicit in each other's tyranny, so Thompson sees the superpowers of the late Cold War as interdependent. As Thompson explained in an essay which reminded Raymond Williams of Orwell, the 'logic of exterminism' locked Stalinism and American imperialism into an unloving embrace. Military confrontation sustained the power of a 'military-industrial complex' that thrived on a 'permanent arms economy', and a 'security' bureaucracy that became largely autonomous from the rest of the state. Gestures of conflict kept a precarious peace, and reinforced the power of small but strategically placed minorities who had to perpetuate the Cold War to protect their positions. Attenuated command chains and increasingly sophisticated military hardware meant that life and death decisions were more and more likely to be made automatically, in accordance with the 'logic of exterminism'.<sup>3</sup> This pseudo-logic was connected to trends that increasingly infected the academy, and the social sciences in particular.

Thompson saw a convergence between the ideology, or ideologies, of Stalinism, and certain ideas popular amongst many social scientists in the West. Like Orwell, Thompson hated Stalinism, not because he had suddenly become a violent anti-communist, but because he believed Stalinism had become complicit in the threat to world peace that Western imperialism had always represented.

### Border disputes

Thompson's hostility to positivism and to sanguine narratives of capitalist progress was not, of course, a new feature of his thought in the 1970s. *The Making of the Working Class* had been written partly as a polemic against scholars who had praised the industrial revolu-

tion as an ultimately ennobling process, and who used quantitative methods that Thompson felt contributed to a forgetfulness about the actual experience of industrialisation. In a 'Postscript' he added in 1968 to his book, Thompson had warned of the dangers of the static, ahistorical models of explanation popular in post-war American sociology. Thompson saw a parallel between the methods and world-views of sociologists like Talcott Parsons and those of Stalinists. Both groups, he felt, reduced individuals to statistics, worshipped an abstract notion of historical progress, saw history as a teleology of ascending stages, and had an unreasonably sanguine attitude toward the modern state and its bureaucratic outgrowths.<sup>4</sup>

From the mid-1960s onward, Thompson was increasingly concerned about the expansion of certain quantitative research methods from disciplines like sociology and economics into history. In 1966 he contributed an eloquent defence of 'history from below' to the *Times Literary Supplement*; in the same issue, an article by the gifted young historian Keith Thomas loudly advertised the value of the techniques of econometrics to historians.<sup>5</sup> Thomas claimed that large sets of data crunched by computers could be invaluable tools for historians. Although Thomas himself would become less evangelical about the new methods, many other historians would come to share the enthusiasm expressed in his article. In a string of book reviews written in the second half of the 1960s and early 1970s, Thompson conducted a running battle against the type of history Thomas had advertised.<sup>6</sup>

Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerine's 1974 book *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* seemed to sum up everything that Thompson disliked about the new approach to history that Keith Thomas had championed.<sup>7</sup> Despite its dense layers of statistics, *Time on the Cross* became a huge popular success, earning its authors notices in *Time* and *Newsweek*, as well as appearances on TV talk shows. The book was controversial amongst historians at large because of its application of statistical methods to a morally sensitive subject, and because it seemed determined to downplay some of the worst aspects of slavery. Fogel and Engerine produced statistics that they claimed proved that slaves were not whipped by their masters as often as had been thought; they also insisted, on the basis of fiercely contested economic data, that slaves had received far more money from their owners than had previously been realised.<sup>8</sup>

In 1975, one of the authors of *Time on the Cross* used an article in the *Times Literary Supplement* to quibble with the work of Thompson's

American friends Eugene Genovese and Herb Gutman. Thompson responded with a letter that made clear his views on the new 'science' Fogel and Engerine were popularising:

Describing the 'new style of historical research' represented by his own *Time on the Cross*, Robert William Fogel has invoked the names of Gene Genovese and Herb Gutman in ways which I find questionable. The unwary reader may be left with the impression ... [that] ... their errors have now been transcended, and their insights placed in correct perspective, by the 'scientific' procedures of Fogel ... judgment in this matter rests, where it has always rested, in the procedures of evaluation and criticism of the historical discipline. They will not be cut short by gestures at databanks and 'hardware'.<sup>9</sup>

### The Pittsburgh polemic

Thompson's hostility to the 'new' history, and to similar trends in neighbouring disciplines, was heightened after he accepted a teaching post at Pittsburgh University in the mid-1970s. Amongst Thompson's colleagues at Pittsburgh were aggressive advocates of the methodologies he detested, and he soon became enmeshed in arguments which culminated in the writing of an important text which can be considered a sort of unpublished supplement to 'The Poverty of Theory'. Dorothy Thompson has described the background to the work:

The modernisation thing arose partly from British academic experience pre-1975 but above all from his spell at Pitt ... the term 'Modern' came increasingly to mean US/industrial ... Edward was critical of the concept of modernisation but also of the methods of research – or methodology as they called it – used to support it. Numbers were excessively crunched ... The outstanding work of the time, which more or less justified slavery, was *Time on the Cross* ... in the States and in Britain modernisation theory was immensely fashionable, particularly in Economic History departments.<sup>10</sup>

As Dorothy explained, modernisation theory was a direct challenge to some of EP Thompson's most cherished beliefs:

Academically modernisation theory was restrictive and theoretically flawed. Politically it reinforced imperialism of course. Edward was also interested in peasant societies and long-term customs and myths. All these things could be shunted into a siding by modernisation theory. The good society was modern society. The most modern society was the USA. Hence we have reached the end of history.<sup>11</sup>



Dorothy remembered that even some old friends and comrades had succumbed to the fad:

John [Saville] was ... rather keen on number crunching, as was Eric Hobsbawm. Chuck Tilly was enthralled by it – it overlapped with the school of empirical sociology which was driving us all nuts at the time.<sup>12</sup>

EP Thompson was not, of course, prepared to let friends and colleagues off without a stern polemic:

Edward wrote a long paper at Pitt addressed to one of the economic historians. It was called 'Don't Tread on Me' and had a picture of that coiled snake on the front ... he would have sent John [Saville] a copy.<sup>13</sup>

The coiled snake and the motto 'Don't Tread on Me' were made famous by Christopher Gadsden, who placed them on the flag that was widely flown by Americans during their war for independence. Gadsden's words would have appealed to Thompson, who was unhappy at the way disciplines like economics and sociology were 'treading' on his beloved history. The reference to Gadsden also reminds us that, despite his distaste for the United States of the 1970s, Thompson was an admirer of the American radical tradition. In the preface to a book published by his former student Staughton Lynd in 1967, Thompson wrote enthusiastically of the 'good American, who combines a Yankee energy and irreverence with a moral toughness which comes from older, more puritan, timber'.<sup>14</sup>

John Saville and Ralph Miliband were keen for Thompson to contribute something to the 1976 issue of the *Socialist Register* but, as usual, Thompson found it hard to submit a text promptly. In May 1976 Thompson wrote to Saville to apologise for not having sent material, and to suggest a possible belated contribution:

What I do have is an argument with an economic historian at Pittsburgh on 'modernisation theory': if I put this together with some already-written stuff ... and a new more political conclusion, it might have the makings of a double 'Bicentennial' piece: i.e. the way 200 years have bought a kind of 'Wealth of Nations' up to date as official USA ideology of the 1970s. If I can get it off to you by *end May* it will be up to you and Ralph to *decide* whether to use it or not (emphasis in original).<sup>15</sup>

The year 1976 was, of course, the date that the United States was celebrating the two hundredth anniversary of the revolution Gadsden had helped make. Saville was enthusiastic about the proposed 'Bicentennial' piece, but in the first week of June Thompson wrote to

withdraw his suggestion. In between apologies, he gave a hint at the scope of 'Don't Tread on Me':

I think the last two pieces I have done for the *Register* ['The Peculiarities of the English' and 'An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski'] have vitality, and this is a *tired* piece of writing ... I wrote a seventy page polemic against modernisation theory while in Pittsburgh in reply to a colleague there. But this was unusable in that form (being a private intramural polemic): and the attempt to extract thirty usable pages and rework them for a very different audience has failed (emphasis in original).<sup>16</sup>

Thompson's 1976 letters to Saville suggest that he did not send 'Don't Tread on Me' to his friend in any form; certainly, the polemic has never been published, has never been cited by Thompson scholars, and has not turned up in Saville's papers. The text's continuing unavailability is a pity because, like 'Six Weeks in India', it was clearly a stepping stone on the way to the composition of 'The Poverty of Theory'.

### A 'double-sided critique'

We have noted in previous chapters how Thompson witnessed the convergence of the worst aspects of the bourgeois social sciences and Stalinism in India during the dying days of Indira Gandhi's regime. In 'Six Weeks in India' Thompson dwells angrily on the strange alliance that he found on the subcontinent:

It is necessary to drive home this point about the coincidence in style and even in ulterior assumptions between some Western 'modernising theory' and orthodox (Moscow) theory ... Both see 'modernity' and 'progress' as being imposed upon nations by an elite with the 'know-how' of history: both represent the outlook of 'modernised' urban intelligentsias; both tend to place priority upon capital-intensive heavy-industrial, or state-bureaucratic developments, either to generate the pre-conditions for 'take-off' or to supply an industrial 'basis' upon which a superstructure will supposedly arise. Both have a mentality of planning from above (the jet-setting, the three-weeks industrial consultant from America, the Soviet ideologue and technologist) ... both desire a disciplined workforce.<sup>17</sup>

Dorothy Thompson has said that EP Thompson's campaign against modernisation theory and econometrics 'feeds into the Althusserian controversies'. In 'History and Anthropology', the talk he gave in India on the last day of 1976, Thompson warned that 'vulgar economic

determinism' was leading Marxism into an 'alliance with utilitarian and positivist thought'. After this unmistakable allusion to the connection between the Gandhi regime and India's Stalinised Communist Party, Thompson turns his fire on Althusser with some sarcastic remarks:

The good society can be created simply (as in Stalinist theory) by building a heavy industrial 'base': given this, a cultural superstructure will somehow build itself. In more Althusserian form ... the problems of historical and cultural materialism are not so much solved as shuffled away or evaded.<sup>18</sup>

In the title essay of *The Poverty of Theory* Thompson's main focus may be on 'the enemy on the left', but there are a number of places where he links his onslaught against Althusser with his antipathy towards 'bourgeois' trends in the social sciences. Lamenting the way that the 'decade of heroes' of 1936–46 gave way to the Cold War, Thompson suggests that the dominant trends in the Western social sciences and the Stalinist ideology from the East are both products of the 'structural stasis' created by the post-war order. Both Althusserianism and Parsonian sociology use 'the vocabulary of structuralism'.<sup>19</sup> Near the end of his polemic, Thompson insists that Althusser has 'always' worked by taking over 'a reigning fashion of bourgeois ideology' and renaming it 'Marxism'.<sup>20</sup>

In October 1979, only a couple of months before the confrontation with 'Stalinism in theory' at St Paul's, Thompson wrote a short preface to a new edition of *The Making of the English Working Class*. Thompson took the opportunity to remind readers that *The Making* was part of a continuing 'double-sided critique'. Thompson's description of his targets uses language common in 1970s polemics like 'Six Weeks in India':

[I targeted] on the one hand ... the positivist orthodoxies then dominant in the more conservative academic schools of economic history – orthodoxies more recently marketed under the name of 'modernisation theory'; on the other hand ... a certain 'Marxist' orthodoxy (then waning in this country), which supposed that the working class was the more-or-less spontaneous generation of new productive forces and relations.<sup>21</sup>

It is a shame that Thompson did not include such an explicit acknowledgement of his enemies on the right in 'The Poverty of Theory'. With 'Don't Tread on Me' and 'Six Weeks in India' unpublished, and his

attacks on modernisation theory and similar trends buried in obscure book reviews and letters to periodicals, the 1980 'Preface' is probably the most widely circulated corrective to the view that 'The Poverty of Theory' is no more than a one-sided attack on a section of the left. In an era when the 'end of history' is being proclaimed by a new wave of admirers of US capitalism, and when the government of China mixes Marxist slogans with neo-liberal practice, Thompson's critique of the left and the right wings of the ideology of modernisation deserves attention.

### Notes

- 1 Christopher Norris, 'Language, Truth and Ideology: Orwell and the Post-war Left', in *Inside the Myth*, ed. Norris, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1984, pp. 247–249.
- 2 A minority of readers has recognised the Western targets of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In his biography of Orwell, Bernard Crick acknowledges that the beginning of the novel is 'full of images of immediate post-war London, albeit with grim but not gross exaggeration' (*George Orwell: A life*, Secker and Warburg, London, 1980, p. 20). Edward S Herman's essay 'From *Ingsoc* to *Newspeak* to *Amcap*, *Amerigood*, and *Marketspeak*', examines the implications of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* for Western societies in general, and the United States in particular. Herman's essay was published in *On Nineteen Eighty-Four: Orwell and Our Future*, ed. Abbott Gleason et al., Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2005, pp. 112–125.
- 3 See EP Thompson, 'Notes on Exterminism, the Last Stage of Civilisation', in *Exterminism and Cold War*, ed. New Left Review, Verso and New Left Books, London, 1982, pp. 1–35. Williams makes his comparison in the essay 'The Politics of Nuclear Disarmament', which was published on pages 65–85 of the same book. Williams accuses Thompson of a 'technological determinism' which is a 'form of intellectual closure' (pp. 67–68). For Williams, it is 'Orwellian nightmare' ('1984' as 'exterminism') which is now being revived' in Thompson's writings (p. 69).
- 4 EP Thompson, 'Postscript', *The Making of the English Working Class*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1968, pp. 916–939.
- 5 EP Thompson, 'History from Below', *Times Literary Supplement* 4/7/66, p. 279; Keith Thomas, 'Tools and the Job', *Times Literary Supplement* 4/7/66, p. 276.
- 6 Consider, for instance, 'Testing Class Struggle', *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 8/3/74, pp. 1–2; 'The Book of Numbers', *Times Literary Supplement* 9/12/65, pp. 117–118; and 'Anthropology and the Discipline of Historical Context', *Midland History*, 1, 3, 1972. All of these texts are

- collected in *Persons and Polemics*, Merlin, London, 1994.
- 7 Robert William Fogel and Stanley L Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery*, Little and Brown, Boston, 1974.
- 8 For the argument about wages, see *Time on the Cross*, 1974, pp. 237–238. For the argument about whipping, see pp. 144–147. For an overview of the controversy *Time on the Cross* provoked and a critique of the book, see Herb Gutman's *Slavery and the Numbers Game*, University of Illinois Press, Chicago, 1975.
- 9 EP Thompson, 'Time on the Cross', *Times Literary Supplement*, 4/7/75, p. 730.
- 10 Dorothy Thompson, email to the author, 21/10/05.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 EP Thompson, 'Preface', in Staughton Lynd, *Class, Conflict, Slavery and the US Constitution*, Bobs-Merrill, Indianapolis, 1967, p. x.
- 15 EP Thompson, letter to John Saville 15/5/76, Saville papers.
- 16 EP Thompson, letter to John Saville 4/6/76, Saville papers.
- 17 EP Thompson, 'Six Weeks in India', unpublished manuscript., Saville papers, pp. 18–19.
- 18 EP Thompson, *Persons and Polemics*, Merlin, London, 1994, p. 222.
- 19 Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, pp. 264–265.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 206.
- 21 EP Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Penguin, London, 1980, p. 14.

## Between Zhdanov and Bloomsbury: the poetry and poetics of EP Thompson

It may seem eccentric to write about Thompson's poetry and poetics. Poems comprise only a tiny part of Thompson's immense oeuvre. In his lifetime, the corpus of Thompson's published poetry was confined to a small number of obscure journals and a couple of self-produced chapbooks. When a lengthy introduction by Fred Inglis is discounted, the posthumous *Collected Poems* from Bloodaxe Books runs to less than a hundred pages, and that volume did not garner any belated critical reputation for Thompson's verse.<sup>1</sup>

On the surface, Thompson's writing on poetics seems similarly marginal. It is true that Thompson wrote intermittently about his favourite poets – Blake and Wordsworth were especially important to him – but these studies often seem far removed from the controversies of twentieth-century poetics.<sup>2</sup> Thompson's careful readings of Blake's ballads or his explanation for Wordsworth's 'turn' in the 1790s do not resonate with the polemics of the contending schools of modernist and postmodern poets. Only in a handful of little-known texts did Thompson offer his gloomy verdict on contemporary poetry, along with suggestions for the reform of the art.

But we must take the *Collected Poems* and the texts on poetics seriously, because EP Thompson himself took them very seriously. Until the middle of the 1950s, at least, Thompson considered himself first and foremost a poet, rather than a scholar or teacher or political activist. In the years when the legendary Communist Party Historians' Group was flourishing, Thompson was putting his energy into the much more obscure Communist Party Writers' Group. Although Thompson's output of poetry declined after the early 1950s, he continued to write about his favourite poets, and in the 1970s he developed a theory of poetry that played an important part in the last

two of the texts collected in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*. In a 1988 interview Thompson was able to claim that ‘the future of civilisation’ depended upon poetry.<sup>3</sup>

### ‘Man’s will to win’: the early poetry

In this chapter we will look at EP Thompson’s career as a poet, and at the evolution of his poetics. We will see that Thompson’s poetry and his poetics were intimately related to the political and intellectual challenges he faced, as he struggled to relate his scholarly investigations and core political ideas to the times he lived through.

The first stanza of ‘Redshank’, the schoolboy piece from 1940 which opens the *Collected Poems*, reveals the undigested influence of Gerard Manley Hopkins:

Reeling from the reedbanks, you cry your outcast cry, like three curls  
on a girl’s forehead or a lonely spiral of peat smoke,  
and beating fish-silver, flashing fins, you scatter tokens  
like feathers of weather-worn wilderness, the wide-wind skirl.<sup>4</sup>

But ‘Redshanks’ was not entirely derivative. Thompson quickly introduces references that would look out of place amidst Hopkins’ metaphysical preoccupations:

your call when you have ceased  
waits in the air, – no warning, but an unanswered question, of lost lover  
of war, and women weeping, and the wonder of wet valleys,  
that wanders with geese, firm in formation, to the haunt of heron  
and black-coated duck and brigand the whole world over.<sup>5</sup>

When ‘Redshanks’ was published world war had been raging for a year; Edward’s other brother Frank was in uniform, and he was determined to fight as soon as he was able.<sup>6</sup> By 1942 he would have his chance. Not surprisingly, World War Two dominates Thompson’s early poems. It is not only the details of the conflict – the ‘vast armoured city’ of the army which Thompson’s tank brigade joins in Italy, the ‘ghastly night lights at Cassino’ – but a particular conception of it that gives the poems of the first half of the 1940s their unity.

Whether he is frightened, irritated, or eager for action, Thompson the war poet is always conscious of playing a part – a bit part, but a meaningful part, nonetheless – in a struggle to remake the world. The war poems are filled with a keen sense of historical destiny: ‘Time is action, movement, Time is what we do’ he writes in 1943.<sup>7</sup>

The optimism implicit in this statement is brought out in an untitled poem written early in 1944, when Thompson was preparing to leave North Africa for Italy:

I could see no promise in this country, but I've changed my mind;  
I know they'll tell you rain and smiling aren't the stuff of politics,  
and I'll agree, but such things answer me that even in this land  
you'll not set back man's will to win, nothing will cancel out, not  
plague or sand  
the laws of history and matter or, if you like, of Marx,  
and any place that men can live they'll someday make a home that's  
pretty grand.<sup>8</sup>

These lines are sentimental, patronising and clumsy, but they have an optimism which is as moving as it is naive. They were written by a young man who had joined the Communist Party because he had seen in the Soviet Union's British supporters the latest and greatest expression of a romantic tradition of radicalism that had been forsaken by the rest of British society. Thompson's opposition of 'man's will to win' to 'the laws of history, or of Marx' shows that even in 1944 he was a voluntarist, who believed that human will and not impersonal economic or political forces was the key to change.

In his New Year's poem 'Song for 1945' Thompson aims a call to action – political, as much as military action – at his countrymen and women. Although the war is nearly over, the wider struggle for the transformation of the world must continue. The tone of Thompson's poem is both optimistic and urgent:

A wind from Europe batters at the door.  
Get up, man, stand up, rouse yourself to fight,  
For if you join us now we'll never stop ...  
Get into step, friend, get yourself into step!<sup>9</sup>

Only a couple of months after penning this dirge, Thompson was able to write his most subtle and successful poem of the war years. 'Casola Valensio: the Cat' tells the story of an unfortunate animal caught in the middle of fighting:

She patrolled, like us, at night,  
And often in the dark we started up in fright,  
Thinking that we were the enemy inside the wire.  
But still we let her be, until she tripped a flare,  
And spent its light, and showed the Germans where we were.  
I ordered that the cat be shot. 'There is no time



In war to exhaust one's heart on animals, I said ...  
She cried and all night wandered crying in the snow.  
Her blood thawed crimson patches in the bitter white.<sup>10</sup>

Unlike 'Song for 1945', 'Casola Valensio' acknowledges the messiness and horror that is part of the prosecution of any war. Thompson's awareness of the complexity of his war is communicated in a supple, conversational language that contrasts with the tub-thumping abstraction of 'Song for 1945'.

### After the war

The unease of 'Casola Valensio: The Cat' resurfaces in several poems written shortly after the end of the war. In 'New Fashions', a poem whose Francophobia seems a distant premonition of the tirades against 'Parisian philosophers' in 'An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski' and 'The Poverty of Theory', Thompson comments bitterly on the speedy revival of the old bourgeois fashion industry in Paris after the liberation of the city. 'Was this what we fought for?' he seems to be asking.<sup>11</sup> 'Chemical Works', a 1947 sequence that breaks with the iambic feet of Thompson's war poems, looks balefully at the consumer society developing in post-war Britain:

There's more in life than in a simple equation.  
There's Jean in Woolworth's, Sally at the mill,  
Trams and cosmetics, the conquest of skill  
In setting your hair or minding a machine ...  
There's money enough to buy whatever the cinemas sell.<sup>12</sup>

By 1947 it was clear to Thompson that his hopes for the post-war world had been misplaced. German and Italian fascism had been defeated, but the world had not been transformed. Socialism had not come to Western Europe, unless the word could be made elastic enough to signify the timid reform programme and pro-American foreign policy of the Attlee government. The North Africans Thompson had saluted cheerfully in 1944 had swapped one colonial regime for another; the Italians he had fought to liberate had a corrupt pro-American government that would first use and then marginalise the local Communist Party.

Perhaps worst of all, the Soviet Union in which Thompson had invested such hopes was beginning to cause concern amongst British communists recruited to the party during the 'decade of heroes'. As the

Cold War began in earnest in 1947, the Kremlin had ordered its satellite parties to adopt an approach to culture and science which broke decisively with the relaxed line followed during the era of the Popular Front. The culture of the West, in both its mainstream and highbrow forms, was deemed 'bourgeois' and 'decadent', and communist writers were urged to look East, toward the school of didactic 'socialist realism' for their models. The new policy was named Zhdanovism, in honour of Stalin's sometime commissar for culture Andrei Zhdanov. Thompson has described its effects in his party:

In retrospect it can be seen that the shadows of the Cold War were closing in, the radical 'populist' euphoria of 1944 was collapsing ... That time produced one of the sharpest mental frosts I can remember on the Left ... we had become habituated to the formal rituals of 'criticism and self-criticism' – in origin an admirable democratic process, but one which had become perverted into a ritual in which the criticism came always from the Party's senior spokesmen on cultural matters ... and the self-criticism was intoned by congregated intellectuals in response.<sup>13</sup>

*Our Time*, the journal that had published several of Thompson's war poems, was an early victim of Zhdanovism. At the end of the war *Our Time* was selling 18,000 copies an issue, but demobilisation of the armed forces and the beginning of the Cold War made its blend of short stories, poems, and left-wing opinion pieces less viable. By the middle of 1947 sales had halved; Emile Burns, the Communist Party's geriatric commissar for culture, presided over a meeting where the journal's editors, Randall Swingler and Edgell Rickword, were denounced. Both Swingler and Rickword combined a love for modernist literature with a commitment to the sort of broad alliance of the left and 'progressive' parts of the right that had been the goal of the Communist Party during the Popular Front era. Before he had joined the party, Rickword had made a name for himself as the editor of the influential *Calendar of Modern Letters*, and as author of the first English-language book about Arthur Rimbaud.

At that July 1947 meeting Emile Burns used a group of young members of the Communist Party's Writers' Group to attack Rickword and Swingler; in response, the two old hands resigned their positions. Thompson was one of the Young Turks appointed to the editorial collective which made a brief and unsuccessful attempt to save *Our Time* by moving its politics leftwards. Writing to Rickword shortly after the change of guard at *Our Time*, the poet and novelist Jack

Lindsay expressed his anger at the 'recklessly discourteous' behaviour of the youngsters.<sup>14</sup> In his biography of Rickword, Charles Hobday confirms that Thompson was one of those discourteous youngsters:

[Arnold] Rattenbury and his ex-army friends Thompson and Holbrook ... maintained that such an in-gathering of progressive opinion [as Rickword proposed for *Our Time*] would only follow upon a more aggressive and polemical editorial policy, and that to ensure this policy was vigorously put into effect the younger generation (themselves) should be represented on the editorial board.<sup>15</sup>

In his study of the Communist Party's sometimes uneasy dealings with culture, Andy Croft fills out some of the details of the dispute:

Rickword wanted to open the pages of the journal still wider while Rattenbury, Edward Thompson, and David Holbrook wanted a more aggressive, political magazine. Chastised for the decline in circulation, Swingler and Rickword resigned.<sup>16</sup>

Thompson himself admitted his involvement in the meeting, in the tribute to Rickword he wrote three decades later:

I attended a disgraceful meeting, at which Emile Burns scolded Rickword and Swingler for their political, cultural, and financial sins and omissions ... It was a shameful episode and I shared in the shame, for, however 'youthful' I was, I had allowed myself to be made use of as part of the team of uncultured yobbos and musclemen under the command of the elderly Burns.<sup>17</sup>

It would be rash to accuse Thompson of sustained and wholehearted support for Zhdanovism. The year after the *Our Time* meeting, Jack Lindsay was attacked at a party conference on culture for his unorthodox views on art and his advocacy of Marx's 1844 manuscripts. Lindsay remembers that Thompson, who had arrived at the conference 'travel-worn, having just returned from Yugoslavia', was his sole supporter.<sup>18</sup>

In 1950 a more serious cultural controversy broke out in the party, when the *Daily Worker* attacked Key Poets, a series of pamphlets produced by the long-suffering Randall Swingler's Fore Pubs publishing company. By publishing very cheap editions of work by a mixture of party and non-party writers, Key Poets aimed to wrest the post-war literary initiative away from the 'Bloomsbury modernism' associated with the likes of TS Eliot and John Lehmann.

Swingler's taste was Catholic, and Key Poets published work by

Edith Sitwell and George Barker as well as more predictable names like Jack Lindsay. The *Daily Worker* refused to publish reviews of Key Poets publications, but it did run a series of letters complaining about the 'musty' and 'unintelligible' verse that Swingler was giving to the world. In an article called 'The Fight for Culture', Emile Burns gave this philistinism a Zhdanovist justification. EP Thompson submitted three letters to the *Daily Worker* during the 'poetry controversy'; all three were censored, which suggests that they did not toe the party line.<sup>19</sup> The attacks on Key Poets were followed by a campaign against Christopher Caudwell, the young communist polymath who died in the Spanish Civil War, leaving behind a string of ambitious and half-finished studies of philosophy, poetry, and science. In the superb study of Caudwell he published in 1977, Thompson puts the episode into context:

In those worst years of the intellectual Cold War the international Communist movement had embarked on a rigorous campaign to correct or expose all 'bourgeois' heresies, and the assault on Caudwell was perhaps seen, by the director of the Party's press, as a small purgative exercise in the Zhdanov mode.<sup>20</sup>

Even if he opposed the campaigns against Key Poets and Caudwell, though, Thompson did not escape some of the influence of Zhdanovism. In 1949 he published 'Comments on a People's Culture', an essay which contrasted the healthy culture of the new people's republic of Yugoslavia with the decadence and sterility of post-war British culture in a rather mechanical fashion.<sup>21</sup> In the same year, in another piece for *Our Time* called 'Poetry's not so Easy', he surveyed the work of a number of young British versifiers, and found most of them guilty of an impenetrability and frivolity which he deemed characteristic of modern British literature.<sup>22</sup> How can we relate arguments like these to Thompson's support for Jack Lindsay's heresies, and his apparent opposition to the campaigns against Key Poets and Caudwell?

### Towards a 'third camp' poetics

For Thompson, dissatisfaction with Zhdanovism did not equal approval of the dominant literary and cultural trends in London, let alone Paris or New York. In his study of the literature classes Thompson taught for the Workers Education Association, Andy Croft notes that the reading lists the young communist drew up for the retired miners and

housewives of West Riding were largely devoid of modernist writers. Thompson was especially determined to avoid TS Eliot, the star of British modernism. But Thompson's courses were also devoid of the sort of 'socialist realist' literature being promoted by the Communist Party as the 'healthy alternative' to 'bourgeois' modernism. The tutor focused on the Romantic poets, Shakespeare and Victorian novelists.<sup>23</sup>

The late 1940s and early 1950s brought a major reorientation in Thompson's thought. By moving north and pursuing research into the history of working-class Yorkshire, in particular, he attempted to escape the increasingly restrictive Communist Party regime in London, and establish a stronger connection with British working class and radical traditions. By turning to the past rather than the present for inspiration Thompson may have been attempting to compensate for the deep disappointments that the post-war era had brought him.

In two important works written in the first half of the 1950s Thompson appears to be trying to reconcile his support for the Communist Party with his belief in the importance of British literature and British radical political traditions. In 'The Place Called Choice', a long poem written in 1952, Thompson explores the topography and history of England's industrial north. Where poems like 'Song for 1945' had been full of airy rhetoric about the future, 'The Place Called Choice' is heavy with a sense of the past:

England, buried somewhere under bricks, oddments, worn tyres:  
Under the shady transactions clinched in the flashy roadhouse:  
Buried with Arnald and Lockyer: with Holberry: with Linell:  
With the charred bodies of the pieceners scorched in the  
weaving-shed:  
With the victims of anthrax: in the back courtyards of Bradford.<sup>24</sup>

Through the judicious collection of historical and contemporary detail, the first section of 'The Place Called Choice' achieves a power which foreshadows some of the best passages in *The Making of the English Working Class*. Later in 'The Place Called Choice' Thompson veers into a discourse on poetics that is often rather vague:

What should a poet say?  
Poet, a pretty thing,  
Philatelist of words,  
Playing with sets of rhyme,  
Sticking in kings and birds,  
Sensing behind the wall

And the technicolour murals  
The silverfishes crawl  
Nests of digits mate,  
Throughout the state  
A stench of blocked morals  
And at the top of all  
The wittol and the stall?

... It's time to speak one's mind.  
I'm sick of an 'anxious age'.  
I'm fed to the teeth with the cant  
Of 'guilt' and original sin.<sup>25</sup>

A contempt for contemporary British literature is insinuated, and the importance of human will to the unfolding of history is maintained, but the vagueness of Thompson's generalisations contrasts with the concreteness of the rest of his poem. 'The Place Called Choice' is unable to make a credible case for a poetics independent of both 'decadent' modernism and Zhdanovism.

By the time he had written 'The Place Called Choice', Thompson was beginning work on *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, whose nine hundred pages would see the light of day in 1955, courtesy of the Communist Party publishers Lawrence and Wishart. In a 1980 interview Thompson recalled that the book had been prompted by the attempts of right-wingers to trivialise Morris' commitment to socialism and deny the import of the work of the last twenty years of his life.<sup>26</sup> Many commentators have considered that the book is also a coded reply to Zhdanovist hardliners within the Communist Party.

But Thompson did not make Morris any more than an implicit critic of Zhdanovism. The surface of his text restricted itself to arguing for the compatibility of Morris and 'orthodox' Marxism:

Critics of Marxism constantly aver that there can be no meaningful morality, to which men and women can attach conscious and passionate value, within a materialist conception of reality ... [but] Morris's moral criticism of society is not only entirely compatible with dialectical materialism, and parallel to the criticisms developed in Marx's early writing, and then in *The Communist Manifesto*, *Capital*, *The Origin of the Family* and *Ludwig Feuerbach*; it is also the theme of his most vigorous and original writings within the Marxist tradition.<sup>27</sup>

Thompson's manoeuvre did not endear him to the guardians of 'bourgeois culture', but it did attract the sympathy of some influential

Communist Party members. When the *Times Literary Supplement* ran a McCarthyite hatchet job on *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, Arnold Kettle came to the young comrade's defence with a stern letter.<sup>28</sup> Kettle was a rising star in the party, and enjoyed considerable input into cultural policy. His support for the Morris biography may well have encouraged in Thompson a belief that Zhdanovism was on the retreat inside the party.

Only a year after the publication of *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, though, Thompson and Kettle were on opposite sides of much more important debates, as first Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin and then the Soviet invasion of Hungary tore the Communist parties of the West apart. Thompson, it seemed, had been trying to renovate a thoroughly rotten house. Along with many old comrades from the Writers Group, he left the party. When he co-founded the *New Reasoner* at the beginning of 1957, Thompson was relying partly on a fifty-pound donation from Randall Swingler's Fore Pubs Company.

### After 1956

We have seen that Thompson tried, in the aftermath of 1956, to foster a 'third camp' politics hostile to both the neo-Stalinism of the Kremlin and the 'Natopolitanism' of the capitalist West. In the field of literature, Thompson became an explicit third campist after 1956, arguing openly rather than tacitly against Zhdanovist 'socialist realism' while maintaining his hostility to the 'decadent' literary establishments of London and New York.

In 'Outside the Whale', Thompson tilted against the bards of Natopolitanism, convicting them of first losing the faith in the possibility of historical progress and social justice that was a feature of the 'decade of heroes', and then slipping into an apathy that easily became acquiescence in the status quo. 'Outside the Whale' argued that a turn back to political engagement by British intellectuals, and especially British writers, could help to end the 'deep freeze' of the Cold War, and set history in motion once again. In chapter two we noted the very exalted conception of the role of intellectuals implicit in that belief.

It was not only the situation of British writers and intellectuals that concerned Thompson. In 'Socialist Humanism', the 1957 essay we discussed in chapter 5, he had made his distaste for the Zhdanovism

that afflicted Eastern bloc writers explicit. In 'Socialist Humanism' he argues that the recent revolts against Soviet domination in Poland and Hungary were precipitated partly by hostility to Zhdanovism:

This is – quite simply – a revolt against the ideology, the false consciousness of the elite-into-bureaucracy ... Searching for the roots of dogmatism – the imposition of a system of authorised pre-conceptions upon reality rather than the derivation of ideas from the study of reality – the revolt (especially amongst the intellectuals) turned against institutional 'Zhdanovism'.<sup>29</sup>

If 'Socialist Humanism' derided the sterile didacticism Zhdanovism demanded from writers, then 'Outside the Whale' condemned the solipsistic self-indulgence that Thompson found in the later work of WH Auden and too many other Western writers. It was still not clear, though, that Thompson possessed a coherent alternative to the two approaches to literature he condemned. In 'Outside the Whale', Thompson had presented Auden's *Spain* as a model for the politically engaged modern poem.

*Spain* was undoubtedly one of the best things Auden wrote, and Thompson was right to champion its original version against the revisions that progressively diminished it. The poem's simultaneous acknowledgement of the horror and necessity of the war against fascism did not prevent Auden's lines achieving an almost declamatory quality and a sense of conviction which ensured them a wide public audience. Thompson must have been excited by Auden's balancing act.

Thompson's poems of the late 1950s show no signs of innovation. 'In Praise of Hangmen', a bitter poem written in response to the execution of Imre Nagy in 1958, merely applied the didactic, satirical method used in a number of late 1940s pieces to the new target of Stalinism:

So giving honour we  
Who moralise necessity  
With slate of sophistry erect  
A gibbet of the intellect  
And from its foul and abstract rope  
Suspend all social hope  
Until with swollen tongue  
Morality itself is hung.<sup>30</sup>



### Commitment and poetry in the 1970s

We have seen that EP Thompson's thought underwent a profound crisis in the 1970s, and this crisis manifested itself in 'The Poverty of Theory', an essay which distanced its author from the political positions and intellectual work of most Marxists. One of the side effects of the crisis in Thompson's thought in the 1970s was his development of a fully formed poetics. As we have noted, poetry had always been important to Thompson, but by the end of the 1970s it occupied a more significant place than ever before in the structure of his thought.

The fruition of Thompson's ideas about poetry is bound up with his reconsideration of the life and work of William Morris. By the mid-1970s Thompson's biography of Morris had become an accepted classic, helping revive scholarly interest in its subject. When Thompson was invited by Merlin Press to prepare a second edition of the book he chose to cut more than a hundred pages from the original, and add a long postscript in which he refined his interpretation of Morris. Looking back on his first edition, Thompson decided that his desire to counter right-wingers who downplayed Morris' politics had led him to assert too easily the 'equivalence' of 'Morrisism and Marxism'.<sup>31</sup>

In 'Postscript: 1976' Thompson argues that Morris did not leave Romanticism behind when he became a socialist, but instead fused that tradition with Marxism:

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 its juncture, and seal it with action.<sup>32</sup>

Morris' daring fusion was rejected by most Marxists, and this rejection has had grave consequences:

As tendencies [within Marxism] towards determinism and positivism grew, so the tradition suffered a general theoretical closure, and the possibility of a juncture between traditions which Morris offered was denied. I should not need, in 1976, to labour the point that the ensuing lack of moral self-consciousness (and even vocabulary) led the major Marxist tradition into something worse than confusion.<sup>33</sup>

Thompson believes that the 'scientific' utopianism of Morris' late writing, and in particular his novel *News from Nowhere*, which depicted a post-revolutionary society in the then-distant future of

1952, could have been an important asset for Marxists. In Thompson's view, the free play of the imagination that Morris practised and demanded fills a gap in ordinary, overly rational Marxist thought, and helps prevent socialists succumbing to the siren calls of utilitarianism and economism. For Thompson, *News from Nowhere* is not a piece of whimsy but a sort of grand, poetic thought experiment that 'educates desire' and discloses 'new values' that can guide the movement for socialism. Ruth Kinna takes the same view in *William Morris: the Art of Socialism*, a book heavily influenced by Thompson:

*News from Nowhere* was neither intended as a model for socialism nor as an idealised picture of the historical process: it was designed to stimulate the imagination.<sup>34</sup>

In a little-known but important text written more than two years after 'Postscript: 1976' Thompson offers the most detailed and coherent statement of his poetics. 'Commitment and Poetry' was written for a forum in *Stand*, a little literary magazine edited by the left-wing Jewish poet Jon Silkin. In 1977 and 1978 Silkin had quarrelled with the politically conservative proprietors of the rival *Poetry Nation Review*, or *PNR* as it was and is more commonly known, about the relevance of politics to literary judgment. After some heated exchanges with *PNR* luminaries Donald Davie, CH Sisson, and Michael Schmidt, Silkin sought to broaden the debate he had begun by inviting a number of writers not connected closely with either publication to give their views on the following questions:

Is a writer the deterministic product of his environment, or, on the contrary, is he capable of deploying a (relatively) new consciousness upon his immediate society? If such a deployment is possible, does it have any effect? And if so, how is the effect manifested?<sup>35</sup>

EP Thompson's contribution to the forum in *Stand* appears to have been written shortly after 'The Poverty of Theory', and it is marked by the anger at the left, and the Marxist left in particular, which suffuses that text. Thompson works hard to put some distance between himself and other left-wing contributors to the forum, claiming that 'the left in the last fifteen years has been becoming a very odd place' and confessing that he 'can't assume, as Jon Silkin seems to do, that intellectual violence and elitism are only to be found on the right'.<sup>36</sup>

In 'Postscript: 1976' Thompson had seen the imaginative, utopian quality of William Morris' best work as a corrective to the disastrous

tendency of both the social democratic and Leninist lefts towards 'positivism and utilitarianism'. In 'Commitment and Poetry' he imagines that poetry might be able, at least in theory, to perform a similar function. The sort of 'committed' poetry Thompson would like to see would not tow this or that party line, nor reject political engagement altogether, but rather situate itself 'adjacent to public and social life' and make itself a 'pathfinder for culture' able to 'state relevant values' that are 'stubborn and palpable'. Thompson believes that the failure of poets to find such values has serious consequences:

If we had better poetry we might have less bad sociology and less empty and mendacious politics. People with cleansed perception would no longer tolerate ... offences against language ... [and] trivialisations of values.<sup>37</sup>

Thompson does not cite precedents for his argument, but the poetics of 'Poetry and Commitment' is surely influenced by the cultural and literary critique of English society developed by the Romantics and extended by William Morris and others. As Raymond Williams argued out in his classic study *Culture and Society*, this tradition frequently charges writers and artists with the task of forging and promulgating not only cultural but political alternatives to the status quo it criticises.<sup>38</sup> Shelley was in earnest when he called poets 'the unacknowledged legislators of the world'. When he fused the Romantic tradition with Marxism, Morris did not forget the lofty conception of the poet and artist beloved of Shelley and other Romantic luminaries like Blake. First published by instalment in Morris' political journal *The Commonweal, News from Nowhere* is both a literary and an urgently political work.<sup>39</sup>

When he wrote his most famous line, Shelley was not imagining some sort of caste of poet-kings performing the function Plato had once imagined for philosopher-kings. He believed that poets could and should influence politics in a deeper and more subtle sense, by forging and expressing new values worthy of a new world. Shelley was as vague as Thompson would be when it came to explaining what these new values were, and how they would be turned into political action.

'Poetry and Commitment' has no truck with those who would judge a poet's political import by the political stances expressed in his or her work. Thompson uses Yeats as an example of a poet with 'pitifully bad' political 'opinions' who nonetheless wrote poetry marked by a

'compassion' that can never be considered reactionary. In Thompson's view, there was a disjunction between the opinions Yeats 'tried on' and 'the values that impelled his choice.'

By making a distinction between immediate political 'opinions', on the one hand, and 'values' that are anterior to these opinions, on the other, Thompson is able to insist upon the relevance of politics to poetry without succumbing to the didactic 'socialist realism' he had learned to hate in the Communist Party. 'Poetry and Commitment' seems, then, to propose a poetics that steers a safe course between the Scylla of Zhdanovism and the Charybdis of the apolitical hermeticism that Thompson unfairly associated with modernism.

The main problem with 'Poetry and Commitment' is its vagueness about how poetry is actually supposed to cleanse perception and disclose new values, and about how new perception and new values are supposed to have such an impact on the rough and tumble world of politics. Thompson's meagre output of poems in the 1970s suggests that he struggled with these questions. The only pieces from that troubled decade which rate inclusion in the *Collected Poems* were both written in 1973.

'Homage to Salvador Allende' is an elegy written at the beginning of Pinochet's bloody counter-revolution in Chile; 'In My Study' reflects on the periods of solitude that were a feature of Thompson's new life as an independent man of letters after his departure from the University of Warwick in 1971.<sup>40</sup> Both poems are interesting, but neither adds much that is new to Thompson's oeuvre. In the 1980s Thompson would write a few more essentially occasional poems, but he never advanced past the achievements of 'The Place Called Choice', a piece he wrote before he turned thirty.

The third and fourth texts in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* are better places to look for the concretisation of the arguments in 'Poetry and Commitment'. Both 'An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski' and 'The Poverty of Theory' are punctuated by quotes from the poetry of Thompson and a host of better-known practitioners of the art. The quotes are seldom strictly necessary, in a narrow sense at least, to the arguments of Thompson's essays. They are not, as a rule, offered up as evidence for his interpretation of this or that subject. (In this sense, at least, they are obviously very different from the passages of poetry that punctuate 'Outside the Whale'.)

In 'An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski' and 'The Poverty of Theory', poetry exists as an alternative stream of discourse, a stream

which flows separately from but parallel with the discourse contained in Thompson's prose. What is Thompson aiming at, with such a technique? It would be simplistic to suggest that he is simply padding out his arguments, or using poetry as a sort of rhetorical flourish in an attempt to drive his arguments home. Thompson's prose is, after all, more than capable of both prolixity and rhetorical flourishes. It is fairer to say that Thompson is using poetry to express what he thinks is inexpressible in the more rational medium of prose. In 'Commitment and Poetry' he warns us against trying to paraphrase poetry:

I do not argue that in all periods and places poetry must be a pathfinder for intellectual culture. I am only arguing that we are in such a period now ... If there were such poetry [as could be a 'pathfinder for culture'] what would it be doing, what would it say? The question is ridiculous: if one knew, in prose, there would be no need for poets.<sup>41</sup>

Thompson's new use of poetry in the 'Open Letter' and 'The Poverty of Theory' seems to be bound up with his declining faith in the powers of 'rational' discourse in general, and the discourses of Marxist politics and theory in particular. Thompson must turn to poetry to (re)state the principles of true socialism.

It is not always clear, though, what the passages of poetry in the 'Open Letter' and 'The Poverty of Theory' achieve. Many of them are fine pieces of verse, but their virtues are usually either too easy or too hard to relate to the arguments of Thompson's essays. When Thompson quotes Yeats' 'Among School Children' in the 'Open Letter', the lines he chooses seem merely to embroider meaning already present in the prose passage preceding them:

I am not jibing at those who associate themselves with Marxism as method. Many of those whose work commands my respect would define their position in this way. But I am not persuaded as to the adequacy of the definition. If by 'method' we are using the word in a loose and metaphorical sense – that I associate myself, very generally, with Marx's way of working, with some of his premises, his terms of historical analysis, and with certain conclusions – then we are really saying that we are associated with a 'tradition' or school of thought: this is a different position, and one which I will soon discuss. But if by "method" we mean something more exact we will find, in the end, that method inextricable from the work:

O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,  
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?

O body swayed to music,  
O brightening glance,  
How can we know the dancer from the dance?<sup>42</sup>

At other times the passage of poetry Thompson quotes seems incidental, and the reader wonders whether its placement is arbitrary. Ultimately, Thompson's use of poetry in the 'Open Letter' and 'The Poverty of Theory' contributes to the rambling quality of both texts. It is tempting to believe that poetry really serves not to enrich the texts, but to point toward lacunae that have appeared in Thompson's worldview and arguments in the difficult decade of the 1970s.

### Assessing Thompson's poetics

Some of the problems of EP Thompson's poetics, and of the poems he wrote, come from his overly hostile attitude towards modernism. Thompson did not reject the modernist tradition *in toto* – had he done so he could hardly have defended the work of Yeats – but he was critical of some of its more stylistically radical members, like TS Eliot, and as a scholar and teacher he devoted most of his attention to writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Thompson's admiration for Edgell Rickword and defence of Jack Lindsay did not translate into an enthusiasm for the French modernists that both those older men translated and promoted. It is significant that the post-war poet Thompson most admired was Tom McGrath, a maverick American whose work lacks a large critical reputation and is often seen as a throwback to days before modernism.<sup>43</sup>

Thompson's own poems show little attention to the subtle eddies of language and consciousness that have preoccupied so many modernist and postmodernist poets. His forms are generally traditional, and his voice is public and confident. Michael Schmidt has commented on the sheer self-assurance of the *Collected Poems*:

What strikes me is the way in which Thompson uses, even in his more quiet poems, a very public rhetoric, speaking as though Milton could still live and apparently, for the most part, un-deflected by the poetic revolutions of the first part of this century. I at once admire and am to some extent chilled by the assurance of the poems, so strange at this time of day and, for me, in the end, so curiously partial in relation to the experiences they directly or obliquely allude to.<sup>44</sup>

It is an absence of this sort of self-assurance that defines much twentieth-century poetry – and many of the greatest twentieth-century novels too. Perhaps it is not surprising that Thompson did his best writing in non-fictional prose. In his histories, in particular, the rhetoric that makes some of the poems seem bombastic sits on a solid foundation of empirical research. In the poems it frequently sits on nothing except the poet's ego.

EP Thompson's poetics represents an ingenious fusion of elements of the Romantic and Marxist traditions of aesthetics and literary criticism. It was the crisis that Thompson experienced in the 1970s which forced him to elaborate his poetics in its fullest detail in the postscript to the second edition of his biography of Morris.

Ultimately, the arguments in 'Poetry and Commitment' are undermined by their author's inability to uncover, in his poetry, the 'palpable values' he wants poets to nourish, and his related failure to specify mechanisms by which such values might travel the long distance that separates literary from political discourse, and thus affect the course of political events in some palpable way.

Even if it was imperfect, though, Thompson's poetics at least enabled him to escape from the clutches of Zhdanovism without succumbing to the sort of apolitical aestheticism that vitiated the later work of WH Auden and a number of other 'Natopolitan' poets. By steering a course between Zhdanovism and Bloomsbury Thompson was at least able to write his biography of William Morris, the important studies of William Blake and other Romantic poets, and the flawed but powerful study of Auden and Orwell that opens *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*. And, of course, an understanding of Thompson's poetics and an appreciation of its changing place in the structure of his thought help us to make sense of some of the more baffling aspects of the concluding two texts in the same volume.

### Notes

- 1 EP Thompson, *Collected Poems*, Bloodaxe Books, Newcastle, 1999.
- 2 See the posthumous books *The Romantics: England in a Revolutionary Age*, New Press, New York, 1997, for the work on Wordsworth and *Witness Against the Beast*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, for the writing on Blake.
- 3 See Benjamin Demott, 'The Poet that Fell to Earth', *New York Times Book Review*, 25/9/88, p. 13.

- 4 Thompson, *Collected Poems*, p. 31.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 For the story of Frank's war, see EP Thompson, *Beyond the Frontier: The Politics of a Failed Mission*, Merlin Press, London, 1997.
- 7 Thompson, *Collected Poems*, p. 34.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 35.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 38.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 39.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 42.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 50.
- 13 EP Thompson, 'Edgell Rickword', *Persons and Polemics*, Merlin, London, 1994, pp. 238–239.
- 14 Lindsay's letter is quoted in Charles Hobday's *Edgell Rickword: A Poet at War*, Manchester, Carcanet, 1989, p. 242.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 241.
- 16 Andy Croft, *A Weapon in the Struggle*, Pluto Press, London, 1998, pp. 152–153.
- 17 Thompson, *Persons and Polemics*, p. 237.
- 18 See Jack Lindsay, *The Crisis in Marxism*, Moonraker, Bradford-on-Avon, 1981, p. 126.
- 19 See Croft, p. 143.
- 20 EP Thompson, 'Caudwell', *Socialist Register*, 1977, p. 232.
- 21 EP Thompson, 'Comments on a People's Culture', *Our Time*, October 1947.
- 22 EP Thompson, 'Poetry's Not So Easy', *Our Time*, June 1947.
- 23 See Andy Croft, 'Walthamstow, Little Gidding, Middlesborough: Edward Thompson the Literature Tutor', in *Beyond the Walls: 50 Years of Adult and Continuing Education at the University of Leeds*, ed. Richard Taylor, University of Leeds Press, Leeds, 1996, pp. 145–148.
- 24 Thompson, *Collected Poems*, p. 56.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 63.
- 26 Peter Scott, 'Voluntary Exile from History's Mainstream', *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 27 June 1980, p. 7.
- 27 EP Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1955, p. 832.
- 28 Arnold Kettle, 'William Morris', *Times Literary Supplement*, 22/7/55, p. 413.
- 29 EP Thompson, 'Socialist Humanism', *New Reasoner* 1, Summer 1957, p. 109.
- 30 Thompson, *Collected Poems*, p. 75.
- 31 'Postscript: 1976', in *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, rev. 2nd edn, Merlin, London, 1977, pp. 770–771.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 786.



- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 Ruth Kinna, *William Morris: the Art of Socialism*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2000, p. 162.
- 35 John Silkin, 'The Symposium', *Stand*, 20, 2, 1979, p. 11.
- 36 EP Thompson, 'Commitment and Poetry', *Stand*, 20, 1979, 2, p. 53.
- 37 *Ibid.*, p. 50.
- 38 Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780–1950*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1958.
- 39 See Ruth Kinna's study for a good account of the making and meaning of Morris's classic.
- 40 Thompson, *Collected Poems*, p. 78; *ibid.*, p. 80.
- 41 EP Thompson, 'Commitment and Poetry', 1978, p. 53.
- 42 EP Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, p. 113.
- 43 See EP Thompson, 'Homage to Tom McGrath', in *Thomas McGrath: Life and the Poem*, ed. Reginald Gibbons and Terrence Des Pres, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1992.
- 44 Quoted on p. 20, Thompson, *Collected Poems*.

## Part IV

# Making peace



## After St Paul's: EP Thompson's late work

'The Poverty of Theory' is an unusual work in the EP Thompson canon. Preoccupied with the rarefied worlds of the philosophy of history and Marxology, and full of abstract, rather difficult language, the essay contrasts with Thompson's famous exercises in social history and political polemic. Thompson himself seemed discomfited by the text: in the foreword to *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* he apologised for 'abstraction', and promised a companion volume, which he planned to call *Reasoning*, as a sort of amelioration:

In the second volume, which may be published next year, I will bring together directly-political writings from the last twenty years, and will write a more thorough account of the political context and practical initiatives of the first New Left. This may afford some correction to a certain abstraction and lack of realist texture in the present collection.<sup>1</sup>

But *Reasoning* never appeared.<sup>2</sup> As we have seen, Thompson's thought had reached a political and intellectual breaking point by the end of the 1970s, and after the 'bad vibes' of the tumultuous St Paul's debate in December 1979 he was disinclined to engage in sustained polemic with the Marxist left again. In the first years of the 1980s Thompson devoted almost all of his energy to Europe's reviving anti-nuclear movement.<sup>3</sup> By the time he stepped back from that struggle his health was breaking down, and a series of half-finished historical and literary projects beckoned.

Without the second, illustrative volume Thompson promised, 'The Poverty of Theory' has remained an enigmatic text in his oeuvre, a work which cannot be readily connected to the famous histories and straightforwardly political works.

### A detour from history?

We have seen that the literature on ‘The Poverty of Theory’ is exceptionally disputatious. Thompson’s essay inspired furious debate in print, and in the freezing hall of St Paul’s. Even today the text inspires fervent admirers and equally fervent detractors. But if they have disagreed passionately about the arguments of ‘The Poverty of Theory’, commentators have tended to agree, albeit tacitly, on certain matters relating to the text’s place in Thompson’s career and oeuvre. There are two points of agreement which are particularly worthy of note. The first has been expressed well by Eric Hobsbawm:

[Thompson] suspended the remarkable studies of eighteenth-century society begun after *The Making [of the English Working Class]* ... to plunge into years of theoretical struggle against the influence of a French Marxist, the late Louis Althusser.<sup>4</sup>

Commentators have generally shared Hobsbawm’s view that Thompson set aside his historical work and took a fairly lengthy ‘detour’ to research and write ‘The Poverty of Theory’. Hobsbawm laments Thompson’s detour; others, like Bryan D Palmer and John Saville, have regarded it as necessary and valuable.<sup>5</sup> Few commentators, though, doubt that Thompson did indeed ‘suspend’ his historical work during the period in which he produced ‘The Poverty of Theory’.

The second commonly-held idea about ‘The Poverty of Theory’ concerns the text’s intentions. Commentators have tended to see the essay as an attempt to theorise Thompson’s practice as a historian. Thompson supposedly set aside his labours as a historian in order to bring out their implications for Marxology and the philosophy of history. In particular, Thompson wanted to show that his practice as a historian was incompatible with the tenets of Althusserian Marxism. *The Making of the English Working Class* and the other great histories were the practice; ‘The Poverty of Theory’ was the theory.

Of course, opinion has been divided about whether Thompson succeeded in finding the theoretical corollaries of the practice embodied in his great histories. Some commentators, like Palmer and Saville, have found ‘The Poverty of Theory’ the perfect complement to works like *The Making of the English Working Class*. Others, like Paul Q Hirst and Perry Anderson, have argued that Thompson’s contributions to the philosophy of history and to Marxology are actually at odds with all that is best in the histories.<sup>6</sup> In one of the best parts of *Arguments within English Marxism*, Anderson contrasts the practice

embodied in *Whigs and Hunters* with the criticisms of Althusserianism in 'The Poverty of Theory'. Anderson argues that Thompson's practice as a historian is actually compatible with Althusser's concepts, and that many of the points in 'The Poverty of Theory' are therefore invalid.<sup>7</sup> The implication of Anderson's argument is clear: if Thompson the historian had followed the prescriptions he laid down in 'The Poverty of Theory', then he would never have been able to write his masterpieces. But the disagreements of Palmer and Anderson about the arguments in 'The Poverty of Theory' should not obscure their agreement about the *intentions* of the text.

### Hidden histories

It is a little-known fact that EP Thompson did not put his historical research on hold to write 'The Poverty of Theory'. As we have seen, Thompson did spend two weeks near the beginning of 1978 solely focused on writing up the text. Through much of 1976 and 1977, though, he researched 'The Poverty of Theory' at the same time as he pursued major investigations into the background to William Blake's thought and poetry, and into the circumstances surrounding the death of his brother in Bulgaria in the middle of 1944. Besides countless hours in research libraries, the Blake project involved journeys to Kent to meet a retired fruit farmer called Philip Noakes, who was the last living member of the Muggletonian sect.<sup>8</sup> As we saw earlier, intensive research into the fate of Frank Thompson led Edward all the way to Bulgaria in the summer of 1979.

Both research projects bore fruit: in 1978 Thompson gave three lectures on Blake and Muggletonianism at the University of Toronto, and in 1981 he delivered three lectures on Frank Thompson at Stanford University. Thompson always intended to publish both sets of lectures, but first the peace movement and then ill health interfered with his plans. The work on Blake would be published as a slim book called *Witness Against the Beast* in 1993, the year of Thompson's death; four years later, the lectures on Frank would see the light of day as an even slimmer volume called *Beyond the Frontier*. The Toronto lectures on Blake were reworked in 1988 and 1989, when Thompson was a visiting scholar at the University of Manchester, but the lectures on Frank have come down to us barely altered.<sup>9</sup>

The time it took the two sets of lectures to reach print no doubt helps to explain why so few people know that Thompson was engaged

in historical research at the end of the 1970s. It must be acknowledged, too, that *Witness Against the Beast* and *Beyond the Frontier* have not achieved the renown that belongs to Thompson's 'classics' like the *Making of the English Working Class*. The Blake study was respectfully reviewed in English literary studies circles, but failed to attract significant cross-disciplinary and non-academic audiences. *Beyond the Frontier* was only lightly reviewed, and has been called 'Thompson's least-known work' by Bill Schwarz.<sup>10</sup>

The neglect of *Witness Against the Beast* and *Beyond the Frontier* is lamentable. Entertaining and informative in their own right, these books open a door on Thompson's practice as a historian in the period when he researched, penned, and defended 'The Poverty of Theory'. We will see that the two books, and the best of Thompson's subsequent historical and political writings, can be considered a sort of de facto 'companion' to 'The Poverty of Theory', because they concretise some of the theoretical points made in that work. We will also see that *Beyond the Frontier* and *Witness Against the Beast* are very different from the more famous histories of the 1960s and early 1970s. Like 'The Poverty of Theory' itself, they record a fundamental break in Thompson's thought. It may not be going too far to say that all three works represent the start of a distinct 'late' period in Thompson's work.

Arguments about whether or not 'The Poverty of Theory' is a faithful expression of the theory behind texts like the *Making of the English Working Class* are thus misconceived. 'The Poverty of Theory' may be inconsistent with the great histories of the 1960s and early 1970s and may still be a faithful reflection of Thompson's practice as a historian, because that practice had changed fundamentally by the end of the 1970s.

### Characteristics of the late work

It may be useful to recount briefly the account given in earlier chapters about the structure of Thompson's ideas and the collapse of this structure at the end of the 1970s. Until the end of the 1970s, Thompson's work was united by a set of beliefs he had adopted during the 'decade of heroes' between 1936 and 1946. Thompson found the grounds for his political beliefs in 'subjective', not 'objective' factors – in the consciousness and traditions of 'the people', and in particular 'the people' of Britain. For Thompson, 'the people' were the carriers of the

set of ideas we have called radical liberalism. Drawing on indigenous radical traditions like the ones recorded in the *Making of the English Working Class* and *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, Thompson's politics stressed the importance of transcending narrow sectional, confessional and class differences in the name of national salvation through the reorganisation of society.

For Thompson and his co-thinkers, the working class, not the middle classes, the intelligentsia, or a liberal section of the bourgeoisie, was the key component of the coalition of different social strata – the Popular Front – known as 'the people'. Elements of Marxism that were contiguous with radical liberalism were assimilated by Thompson and became part of the texture of his thought.

Thompson's 'hardcore' beliefs were never consistent, and they required constant elaboration, amendment and defence. We have seen that Thompson's career can be looked at as a series of attempts to counter the problems posed for his worldview – his 'Research Programme', in Lakatosian terms – by new political, social, and intellectual developments. Thompson's decision to go north and work for the Workers Education Association after World War Two, the shape that *The Making of the English Working Class* assumed, the 'turn' to academia represented by 'The Peculiarities of the English' – all these were, to a certain extent at least, the products of Thompson's need to defend the validity of the 'hardcore' beliefs he adopted during the 'decade of heroes' against the slings and arrows of an unpredictable and often unfriendly world.

We have seen that by the late 1970s Thompson's worldview was coming under unbearable pressure. The crisis and collapse of Thompson's long-time 'Research Programme' was recorded in 'The Poverty of Theory', and confirmed by the dramatic events at St Paul's. After St Paul's, Thompson was never able to achieve a new ensemble of 'hardcore' beliefs. He was not able to connect his political and scholarly work in the old way, nor connect history with the present in the way that *The Making of the English Working Class* and (to a lesser extent) *Whigs and Hunters* could do. Although Thompson's 'late' writing has many virtues, it cannot be described as easily as the work that preceded it, simply because it lacks the same unity. There is a temptation to describe the late work in negative terms, by contrasting it with Thompson's earlier productions.

Let us try, nonetheless, to talk about the general characteristics of Thompson's late period. Let us look first at Thompson's late scholarly



work – that is, at his historical and literary-historical studies. There are five key characteristics which these studies can be said to share.

The first and most general characteristic of the late scholarly work is a deep pessimism. Thompson always emphasised that human history was the product of a dialectic between agency and structure, but in works like *The Making of the English Working Class* he argued that humans determinedly and frequently resisted oppressive social, economic and political structures. The late histories still celebrate human agency, but they are much more pessimistic about the ability of individuals and groups to change the world.

A second characteristic of the late scholarly work is a dramatic loss of confidence in the possibility of useful cross-cultural and trans-historical comparison and generalisation. We have seen already how Thompson's early optimism about the relevance of his historical work to times and places far beyond eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England was qualified in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the late scholarly work, resistance to generalisation across historical and cultural contexts becomes still more marked. Linked to this loss of confidence is a new reluctance to connect the causes and actors of the radical past with radical causes in the present-day world. Discussing some of the more recent work in *Customs in Common*, Philip Levine asks:

Do we see a shift between an 'early Thompson', who celebrated the moral superiority of past moments of popular culture, and a 'late Thompson', who recognises the distinctiveness of the past in order to see it in its own terms? The formulation has some merit.<sup>11</sup>

Levine's review-essay of *Customs in Common*, Thompson's 1991 collection of some of his key historical writing since the *Making of the English Working Class*, is called 'Proto-Nothing', after a phrase that occurs in one of the sentences where Thompson introduces the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century subjects of his book:

These men (and these women) were for themselves and not for us: they were proto-nothing.<sup>12</sup>

Reviewing *Customs in Common*,<sup>13</sup> Thompson's 1991 collection of historical essays and papers, Peter Mandler finds the occasional 'dropped hints at a thread' between the studies in *Customs in Common* and contemporary political events 'hard to take seriously':

Is there really any connection between agricultural labourers defending their rights to common [land] and the Greenham Commons women's protest against the siting of Cruise Missiles in Berkshire?<sup>14</sup>

A third characteristic of the late scholarly work is a greatly increased caution about the use of sources. *The Making of the English Working Class* became famous for its bold uses of contested or obscure sources. Thompson's insistence on the progressive qualities of Luddism, for instance, was based on a very optimistic reading of a handful of sources, and a good deal of speculation. Thompson had become much more circumspect in later books like *Whigs and Hunters*, and in his very late scholarly work this circumspection reaches new levels. Linked to it is Thompson's concern about the proliferation of interpretation amongst scholars in the humanities.

The man who had once promulgated bold new interpretations of historical phenomena with a sort of mischievous glee could worry, in *Witness against the Beast*, that the proliferation of rival readings of Blake might stop scholars from 'picnicking in the same place'.<sup>15</sup> The early Thompson railed against intellectual conformity; the later model worries about incommensurability. Bryan D Palmer notes that Thompson abandoned attempts to redraft his classic paper on 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd' for *Customs in Common*, because he found the diverse and disputatious literature that had grown up around the subject 'overwhelming'. Palmer reveals that Thompson's new lack of confidence affected his teaching as well as his writing:

He battled back into his historical writing on the eighteenth century ... [but] ... felt insecure about his knowledge of eighteenth-century demographic, economic, industrial, and social history, deciding that he could not tackle teaching a graduate seminar ... around 'Customs in Common' in 1988.<sup>16</sup>

Peter Mandler remarks on one of the side-effects of this lack of confidence:

*Customs in Common* is written by candlelight ... the light cast is partial but authentic and it hugs the author close, binding him to his subjects and shutting out disturbing contemporaneity. But what does this sort of history tell us about our present and our future? For that we may need a different kind of illumination.<sup>17</sup>

Mandler is in no doubt about the trajectory of Thompson's career:

Thompson will hold out. He will remain the scholar-artisan, faithful to his materials ... He was once self-consciously a voice in the crowd, but now he sounds more like a voice in the wilderness.<sup>18</sup>

A fourth characteristic of Thompson's late scholarly work is the gradual abandonment of Marxist concepts. Thompson's use of these concepts had always been idiosyncratic, but in his late work even his own renderings of concepts like 'class' become progressively less important. An increased hostility toward Marxist and radical historiographical traditions is also notable. The flipside of this hostility is a warmth towards liberal historiography and the straightforwardly empiricist methodology employed by most liberal – and for that matter conservative – historians.

A fifth characteristic of the late scholarly work is a change in the tone and style of Thompson's writing. Thompson remains a magisterial stylist in the late histories and literary studies, but the tub-thumping of the 'classic' histories gives way to a lighter, self-deprecatingly ironic tone, and even at times to a certain tentativeness. Michael Merrill noted the change:

Near the end he seemed tired ... he wrote with more diffidence than confidence. He did not thrust himself upon polite company, as he once would have done, demanding first to know why he and his comrades had not been invited and then pointing out why they should have been. Instead he rang the bell and waited, somewhat apologetically, to be admitted.<sup>19</sup>

It is possible to relate the key characteristics of Thompson's late scholarly and political work to the arguments he made with such feeling in 'The Poverty of Theory'. It was in 'The Poverty of Theory' that Thompson rejected the notion of a single Marxist tradition; bewailed the ability of social scientists influenced by Althusser and other malign Marxists to manipulate source materials into multiple proliferating systems of interpretation; aggressively emphasised the particularity of all historical milieu, and the danger of shallow generalisations across historical and cultural barriers; expressed pessimism about the very future of the left and its emancipatory political project; and reached out to the liberal political tradition of his father and the homely empiricism of mainstream British history. It can be argued that the late scholarly and political writings only put some of the more disenchanting arguments of 'The Poverty of Theory' into practice.

### From utopianism to exterminism

Thompson's late political writing is also importantly different from what came before it. His writings for the peace movement in the first half of the 1980s are both more urgent and less ambitious than the political journalism of the 1970s, or the articles written for the presses of the first New Left in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Mere survival has replaced socialism as a revolutionary aspiration, as the language of Marxism gives way to a besieged sense of 'human beingism'. This passage from the 1982 essay 'Notes on Exterminism, the Last Stage of Civilisation,' is representative:

Imperialism calls into being its own antagonist in the movement for self-determination of the people of the subjected country. Exterminism does not. Exterminism simply confronts itself ... It is a non-dialectical contradiction, a state of absolute antagonism, in which both powers grow through confrontation, and which can only be resolved through mutual extermination.<sup>20</sup>

A much more pessimistic outlook, then, lay behind the shift in Thompson's politics. Texts like 'Notes on Exterminism' reflected the imminent final triumph, in Thompson's analysis at least, of the impersonal structures – bureaucracy, the machinery of war, the corporation, the war economy – over the free individual and the remnants of the anti-Stalinist left. Peter Mandler summed up the significance for Thompson's career of the studies of the 'nuclear shadow' and the 'logic of exterminism' when he noted that:

These writings have been filled with a dependency, a fatalism which sits uneasily with the work of the social historian committed to human agency as a motor of history.<sup>21</sup>

After St Paul's, Thompson's discussions of Marxism were unsystematic and unconvincing. They suggested a loss of serious interest in, let alone enthusiasm for, the subject. 'Agenda for a Radical History,' the talk given in October 1985 to a meeting sponsored by the *Radical History Review*, counts as Thompson's most systematic post-St Paul's statement on Marxism and its relationship to the practice of history, yet it is a vague and surprisingly non-committal affair. At one point in his talk Thompson appears to lose interest completely:

I'm less and less interested in Marxism as a Theoretical System. I'm neither pro nor anti so much as bored with some of the argument that goes on.<sup>22</sup>

At the end of the 1980s Thompson found himself with time to reflect on his experiences in the peace movement and on the gradual winding down of the Cold War. The result was a series of ambitious articles, written at the behest of progressive publications *New Statesman and Society* and *The Nation*, which attempted to take stock of the past and gaze into the future. Although they attracted some attention at the time, texts like 'Break Up the Blocs of Europe' and 'History Turns on a New Hinge' have a dated feel today, more than a decade and a half after the end of the Cold War.<sup>23</sup> Without the Marxist-influenced categories and grounding in empirical research that inform Thompson's classic political writing they seem vague and unsystematic, and their references to green politics and political decentralisation come across as faddish. It is significant that neither Edward nor Dorothy Thompson collected any of the 'prophetic' articles of the late 1980s and early 1990s in book form.

### Reading *Beyond the Frontier*

*Beyond the Frontier* exemplifies the style and attitudes of the 'late' EP Thompson. In one hundred and three pages of taut prose Thompson probes the circumstances surrounding his brother's untimely death, sifting through sources with a caution borne of an awareness of the duplicity and myth-making inherent in all the official accounts of World War Two and its complicated subplot in the Balkans.<sup>24</sup>

The basic narrative of the last weeks of Frank Thompson's life is not in dispute in *Beyond the Frontier*. We saw in chapter 1 how Frank, a brilliant classical scholar and linguist and the hub of a circle of Oxford undergraduates that also included Iris Murdoch and MRD Foot, had volunteered for service against his parents' wishes shortly after the outbreak of World War Two. After serving as an Intelligence Officer in North Africa and Sicily, he parachuted into south Serbia in January 1944 with the mission of liaising with Yugoslav partisans and aiding the fledgling Bulgarian partisan movement, which had been sheltering in parts of Serbia liberated from the Nazis.

In May Frank Thompson entered Bulgaria with the small group of partisans which he hoped would be the nucleus of an anti-fascist army capable of changing the government in Sofia. After being identified and attacked by local fascist forces loyal to the Bulgarian government the partisans were forced to undertake an epic and ultimately futile march into the interior of the country in search of allies. Thompson

was taken prisoner on 21 May, and executed on 5 June, after torture and a show trial had failed to make him cooperate with his captors.

The speedy identification of the partisans after they crossed the Bulgarian frontier and the decision of the fascists to execute a uniformed British officer have given rise to rumours that Frank Thompson and his comrades were betrayed, but there has been no consensus about who the culprit might have been. In *Beyond the Frontier* EP Thompson is unable to find definitive proof of an act of betrayal, but he shows that both the Soviet and British governments had reasons to wish that Frank Thompson's mission failed.

It is instructive to compare *Beyond the Frontier* with the conclusion the young EP Thompson wrote to *There Is a Spirit in Europe*, the collection of his brother's writing he edited for publication by Victor Gollancz in 1947. In the heady aftermath of the war, Frank was acclaimed in Bulgaria as a communist hero, and in Britain as a martyr of the struggle for democracy against fascism. A train station in Bulgaria was named after him, at the same time as *Beyond the Frontier* received an admiring review in the *Times Literary Supplement*.<sup>25</sup>

Frank Thompson was one of the martyrs of the 'decade of heroes' that lasted from the eruption of the Spanish Civil War in 1936 to the beginning of the Cold War. The 'decade of heroes' was a time when the will of millions of men and women seemed to be turning history on a new hinge, as the forces of democracy and communism – the relationship between the two words did not yet seem problematic, to either the left or a large part of the right – sought to defeat the menace of fascism, and open up a path for a new post-war world. Reviewing *Beyond the Frontier* in the *London Review of Books*, Arnold Rattenbury remembered that:

[A]fter the war Frank became for many of us an emblem of anti-fascist heroism – a glorious simplicity where much was soon to become murky.<sup>26</sup>

The title of Frank Thompson's posthumous book comes from a letter he wrote to his family on Christmas day, 1943:

My Christmas message to you is one of greater hope than I have ever had in my life before. There is a spirit abroad in Europe which is finer and braver than anything that tired continent has known for centuries, and which cannot be withstood ... It is the confident will of whole peoples, who have known the utmost humiliation and suffering and who have triumphed over it, to build their own life once and for all ...

There is a marvelous opportunity before us, and all that is required from Britain, America and the USSR is imagination, help, and sympathy.<sup>27</sup>

Considering these words three and a half decades later, Frank's younger brother is filled with sadness:

Nothing now reads as a sicker epitaph for the Second World War than that. It was a young man's illusion, cancelled utterly within a few years by the oncoming Cold War.<sup>28</sup>

In her introduction to Frank Thompson's *Selected Poems* Dorothy Thompson unhappily charts the vicissitudes of Frank's reputation since the end of the 'voluntarist decade', noting how in Bulgaria the war hero soon became an agent of Anglo-American imperialism, before being ritually rehabilitated, and then castigated as a stooge of the Soviet Union by the new, anti-communist generation of Bulgarians that emerged in the 1990s.<sup>29</sup> Edward did not live to record the latest turn in his brother's posthumous fate, but *Beyond the Frontier* does treat the preceding vicissitudes in a manner that is both sad and sardonic.

It is not only the Bulgarian government and its pet historians who are charged with multiple distortions of Frank Thompson's memory in *Beyond the Frontier*. EP Thompson's research has made him aware that, even in 1944, there were figures within the Churchill government and its War Office who saw Frank as a communist subversive, not a brave young man determined to fight fascism, and who would prefer to see his mission in Bulgaria fail rather than contemplate a communist-dominated government in Sofia. *Beyond the Frontier* shows that the bureaucrats in the Kremlin also acted with abominable cynicism, pressuring Yugoslav communists to encourage ill-advised operations across the border with Bulgaria out of selfish Soviet concerns. It seems that both the principal players in the Balkans theatre of the war were determined to pursue courses of action inimical to Frank Thompson's principled anti-fascism:

There were the strongest reasons of state – of both states – why the British mission and its leader, Frank Thompson, in particular were seen to be expendable.<sup>30</sup>

Where *There is a Spirit in Europe* showed Frank Thompson as a hero of a global anti-fascist struggle, a man honoured in both East and West, *Beyond the Frontier* presents him as an isolated, tragic figure, a victim of the machinations of both sides of an already-descending

Iron Curtain. The Frank Thompson of *Beyond the Frontier* is still a hero, but he is a hero who works on the margins of history, against near-insuperable odds, rather than inside a historical juggernaut. The political voluntarism reflected in Frank's commitment and sacrifice is still celebrated, but its power to change history is not exaggerated. In the eyes of the late EP Thompson, human agency is no match for states and their war machines.

The style of *Beyond the Frontier* also marks the distance its author had travelled by the late 1970s. Thompson's contribution to *There is a Spirit in Europe* is almost rhapsodic, a hymn to heroic sacrifice and a glorious future; the author of *Beyond the Frontier* is restrained, preferring irony to rhapsody, and suspicious of generalising too far from the historical details he has laid his hands on. The book is full of references to 'anti-historians' – sinister figures who have impeded EP Thompson and other scholars by pre-emptively 'weeding' documents from archives in the name of 'national security' and feeding false leads to investigators. One of these 'anti-historians' is a high-ranking officer in the Bulgarian army, who 'offers' Edward and Dorothy Thompson a ride in his large black Volga car and a line in dissimulation; another is a faceless MI5 hack who has torn pages out of War Office records.

It is tempting to believe that Thompson sees these 'anti-historians' as the real-life cousins of the theoretical anti-historians he inveighed against in 'The Poverty of Theory' at about the same time as he was writing *Beyond the Frontier*. The view that *Beyond the Frontier* is a sort of corollary of 'The Poverty of Theory' is bolstered by a passage on its very first page:

I am not so much concerned with historical epistemology – with what is 'fact', what is interpretation – as with more humdrum questions: the activities of anti-historians, how sensitive evidence is destroyed or screened, how myths originate, how historical anecdote may simply be a code for ideology, how the reasons of state are eternally at war with historical knowledge.<sup>31</sup>

### A word about *The Sykaos Papers*

A word must be said about *The Sykaos Papers*, Thompson's one and only published novel.<sup>32</sup> Thompson began work on the book in 1973, but wrote most of it in the years immediately preceding its publication in 1988. *The Sykaos Papers* tells the story of Oi Paz, an alien astronaut who crash lands on earth, becomes a pawn in the Cold War, and



falls in love with an anthropologist assigned the task of studying him. Paz is a member of the Oitarian species, which is distinguished by its coldly rational, rather structuralist outlook on life. His eventual union with the sensual and intuitive Professor Helen Sage suggests, on the surface at least, some sort of fusion of worldviews.

*The Sykaos Papers* met with a bewildered reaction from some readers. Reviewing for *The New Republic*, Paul Berman found the book both familiar and disconcerting:

Studying *The Sykaos Papers* is like coming on the brain of an admired and familiar author, and peering inside to find all the beloved customary figures of the author's imagination engaged in satanic deliriums ... [perhaps] [t]he novel was FAXed from outer space.<sup>33</sup>

Peter Mandler also found *The Sykaos Papers* chaotic. Rejecting any easy symbolic interpretations of the book, he emphasised how difficult Thompson's characters found it to show solidarity with one another:

Men misunderstand women; the military cuts itself off from civilians, and even within the army officers can't communicate with other ranks ... race and nationality divide even comrades.<sup>34</sup>

Mandler and Berman are right: *The Sykaos Papers* is a thoroughly chaotic work, in which attempts at satire and polemic are hamstrung by Thompson's collapsing faith in the international and transhistorical causes that once sustained him. The set of polemical oppositions – agency–structure, internationalism–nationalism, solidarity–authority, scholarship–propaganda – that are supposed to frame Thompson's satire are themselves undermined by this loss of faith. *The Sykaos Papers* is written by the light of the same candle as *Customs in Common*.

Perhaps sensing that *The Sykaos Papers*' equivocations threatened to make it politically incoherent, Thompson used an interview with the *New York Review of Books* to frame the novel in different terms:

I was afraid people would read it as a political tract ... What I'm saying is that human civilisation depends upon laughter and poetry. That's not very political, is it?<sup>35</sup>

### Valedictions

EP Thompson was in poor health during the last few years of his life, and his very late work often seems to have a valedictory quality. In four important very late works Thompson sums up his views on a range of issues important to him, and in doing so reinforces some of

the key themes of his late work in general.

Early in 1993, *History Workshop Journal* published a letter which Thompson had written to protest a Raphael Samuel article which the journal had recently published. Samuel had claimed that Thompson's essay on the sale of wives in *Customs in Common* had focused in an arbitrary fashion on an interpretation of wife sale as a form of divorce. Against Samuel's reading, Thompson insisted that interpretation could not 'be decided by the flip of a coin':

Writing history demands an engagement with hard evidence and is not as easy as some post-modernists suppose ... Theory and evidence must always be in dialogue with each other.<sup>36</sup>

Thompson's letter, which *History Workshop Journal* gave the title 'Theory and Evidence', can in some ways be considered a capsule version of 'The Poverty of Theory'. Thompson repeats his old warnings about the danger of structuralist theory-mongering to the correct practice of history, and extends his disapproval to the newer trend of post-structuralism. But the passion of 'The Poverty of Theory', and Thompson's old belief that his polemics could shift the social sciences on their axis, have given way to a weary fatalism, a fatalism which is perhaps a corollary of Thompson's political pessimism:

[T]he modish subjectivism and idealism now so current [are] ... likely to be with us for the next twenty years, and it would be sad if Raphael Samuel or History Workshop gave in to it.<sup>37</sup>

Thompson's last book review provides dramatic evidence of his abandonment of Marxist concepts, and suggests a rapprochement with mainstream British historiography. Considering Linda Colley's *Britons: Forging the Nation* for *Dissent*, Thompson responds very mildly to the sort of interpretation of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British history that he would once have excoriated.

Colley's book attempts to rehabilitate late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century British patriotism by suggesting it had a complex and often partly progressive value. To this end, it argues that Thompson and other radical historians have exaggerated the extent of class conflict and popular disenchantment with the government in the Britain of the Napoleonic wars. In her chapter on popular support for the wars, Colley offers what looks suspiciously like token praise to Thompson's greatest work at the same time as she questions one of its sustaining theses:

Only one English county deviates conspicuously from [the] general rule that population density and industrialisation were actually more congenial to mobilisation [in support of the government] during the invasion crisis ... And it is Yorkshire, of course, that supplies much of the evidence for mass alienation during the Napoleonic Wars in Edward Thompson's marvellous classic *The Making of the English Working Class*.<sup>38</sup>

In her concluding chapter Colley reflects on the revisionist nature of her arguments, suggesting that 'so many historians have written so extensively and so well' on 'riots, on Jacobinism, on Jacobinism and on the various manifestations of class conflict' that the conservatism and patriotism that were allegedly widespread in the Britain of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries have been ignored.<sup>39</sup> In his review of Britons Thompson makes a startling concession to Colley by claiming that the 'concept of class' was 'worked over extensively' by radical historians in the 1960s and 1970s, and 'has perhaps now become boring'.

Nobody who watches Penelope Corfield's long and reverential interview 1993 interview with Thompson can be in any doubt about the fragility of her subject's health.<sup>40</sup> The man famous for his full-throated oratory sometimes struggles for breath as he answers Corfield's questions in a thin, failing voice. Thompson uses the interview to reiterate some familiar themes of his 'late' work. He condemns both structuralism and post-structuralism, confessing that their excesses make him 'run howling back' to the tradition of 'British empiricism'. Thompson endorses his father's liberalism in terms redolent of the almost anarchistic hatred of central government and bureaucracy that is one of the features of his own late political writing.

Thompson's complicated relationship with his father was a subtext of *Alien Homage*, his book-length study of Edward John Thompson's friendship with the Nobel-winning Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore. Drawing extensively on Edward John's correspondence with Tagore, Thompson tries to rebut accusations that his father held patronising attitudes toward Bengali culture and Indian nationalism. The man who had castigated the Methodist creed of his father as 'psychic masturbation' in a famous passage of *The Making of the English Working Class* now insisted that the second-generation Methodist missionary had engaged in a respectful cross-cultural dialogue with Tagore:

Some in the West today are prisoners of vast indiscriminating categories – the Third World, blacks and whites, racism, unsubtle definitions

of imperialism – and bring these ready-made slide-rules to measure, and often to obliterate, the complexities of the past. Even the more subtle category of ‘Western Orientalism’ can obscure the actual inter-rogation and interpenetration which went on in the 19th and early 20th centuries between English and Bengali cultures. This was, like all historical contexts, unique.<sup>41</sup>

In the introduction to a 1991 reprint of Tagore’s 1915 lectures on nationalism, Thompson warmed to his theme:

The pre-war decade had seen the high tide of a rhetoric of benevolent liberalism and a universalism which offered to comprehend the great achievements of the cultures of both West and East. Tagore himself was deeply influenced by this moment.<sup>42</sup>

This remarkably sanguine passage indicates the extent of the late EP Thompson’s reconciliation with the liberal political and cultural tradition his father represented.

### Notes

- 1 EP Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, Merlin, London, 1978, p. ii.
- 2 At the beginning of *Writing by Candlelight*, his 1980 collection of occasional pieces, Thompson apologises for the non-appearance of the second volume, explaining that ‘there seem to be more important things to do’ (Merlin, London, 1980, p. xiv).
- 3 In a talk he gave on 20 October 1985 at a forum organised by the *Radical History Review*, Thompson dates the cessation of his research by remembering that ‘I don’t even have a valid ticket to the British Library or the Public Record Office ... I am at least five years behind in my reading’ (EP Thompson, ‘Agenda for a Radical History’, *Critical Inquiry*, 21, 2, 1995). In their obituary for Thompson in *Past and Present*, Paul Stack and Joanna Innes remember that ‘in 1986 he marked his return to his historical desk from his work for the European peace movement with a *Past and Present* Open Meeting. He spoke on ‘Law, Use-Rights and Property in Land’, outlining work which fed into *Customs in Common*’ (Joanna Innes and Paul Stack, ‘EP Thompson’, *Past and Present* 142, February 1994, pp. 3–5).
- 4 Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, Allen Lane, London, 2002, p. 215.
- 5 In an obituary for Thompson, Saville remarks that ‘Edward was partly deflected [from history] by his brilliant polemic against Althusser in *The Poverty of Theory* (John Saville, ‘EP Thompson’, *International Review of Social History*, 38, 1993, supplement one, p. iv).
- 6 Paul Q Hirst, ‘The Necessity of Theory’, in *Marxism and Historical Writing*,

- Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1985, pp. 57–91; Perry Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism*, Verso, London, 1980, pp. 59–99.
- 7 Perry Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism*, pp. 71–77.
- 8 We will meet Mr Noakes in the last chapter of this book.
- 9 In her introduction to *Beyond the Frontier*, Dorothy Thompson records that Edward did little work on his material after the summer of 1978, and virtually none after delivering the lectures at Stanford (*Beyond the Frontier*, p. 5). Even the book on Blake remains a torso, as Bryan D Palmer notes in *Objections and Oppositions: 'Witness Against the Beast'* was written as Thompson's time ran out ... Rather than a set of definite proofs, we have the exploration of a set of affinities' (p. 150). Thompson's fascination with Blake had a long history. We have noted how in 1958 he pseudonymously published an explication of Blake's poem 'London' in the *New Reasoner*, a journal better known for political polemic than literary studies. In 1968, Thompson gave a well-received lecture on Blake at Columbia University. In 1978, the same year he delivered the Toronto lectures, he reproduced his explication in the anthology *Interpreting Blake*, ed. Michael Phillips, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 5–31.
- 10 Bill Schwarz, 'Not Even Past Yet', *History Workshop Journal*, 57, 2004, p. 102.
- 11 Philip Levine, 'Proto-Nothing', *Social History*, 18, October 1993, p. 389.
- 12 Quoted in *ibid.*
- 13 EP Thompson, *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture*, The New Press, New York, 1991.
- 14 Peter Mandler, 'Written by Candlelight', *Dissent*, Spring 1993, p. 259.
- 15 Thompson takes a more acerbic approach to the 'attenuated discourse of analytic academicism' he finds in the Blake industry in his review-article 'Blake's Tone' (*London Review of Books*, 28/1/93).
- 16 Bryan D Palmer, *Objections and Oppositions*, Verso, London, 1994, pp. 144–145.
- 17 Mandler, 'Written by Candlelight', p. 259
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 Michael Merrill, 'EP Thompson: in Solidarity', *Radical History Review*, Spring 1994, p. 156.
- 20 'Notes on Exterminism: The Last Stage of Civilisation', in *Exterminism and Cold War*, edited by New Left Review, Verso Books, London, 1982, p. 24. 'Notes on Exterminism' was first published in the *New Left Review*, and was the product of a guarded rapprochement with Perry Anderson and other key figures at the journal. Because of its site of publication and its use of Marxist jargon, the essay might seem on the surface like a sign of the erosion of the hostility that Thompson showed toward much of Britain's Marxist left at St Paul's. It is important to remember, though, that Thompson used Marxist jargon satirically, to spoof what he regarded as

the heavy-handed theoreticism of many *New Left Review* contributors. More importantly, the essay's arguments reject both class analysis and the 'classical' theory of imperialism, which they regard as outmoded in the new 'exterminist' era.

- 21 Mandler, 'Written by Candlelight', p. 258.
- 22 Thompson, 'Agenda for a Radical History', p. 302.
- 23 'History Turns on a New Hinge: END and the Beginning', *New Statesman*, 29/1/90; 'Our Mission Remains: Break up the Blocs in Europe', *The Nation*, August 1990.
- 24 EP Thompson, *Beyond the Frontier: The Politics of a Failed Mission*, Merlin, London, 1997.
- 25 'A Parachutist in Bulgaria', *Times Literary Supplement*, 20/9/47.
- 26 Arnold Rattenbury, 'Convenient Death of a Hero', *London Review of Books*, 8/5/97, p. 12.
- 27 Frank Thompson, *There Is a Spirit in Europe*, Victor Gollancz, London, 1947, p. 8.
- 28 Thompson, *Beyond the Frontier*, p. 102.
- 29 Frank Thompson, *Selected Poems*, with an introduction by Dorothy Thompson, Trent Editions, Nottingham, 2003, pp. xi-xii.
- 30 Thompson, *Beyond the Frontier*, p. 97.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 14
- 32 EP Thompson, *The Sykaos Papers*, Bloomsbury, London, 1988.
- 33 Paul Berman, 'Space Oddity', *The New Republic*, 9–16 January 1989, p. 40.
- 34 Peter Mandler, 'The Last Cold War Novel', *Dissent*, Summer 1990, p. 411.
- 35 Suzanne Cassidy, 'A Historian's Alternative Culture', *New York Review of Books*, 25/9/88, p. 12.
- 36 EP Thompson, 'Theory and Evidence', *History Workshop Journal*, 35, pp. 274–275. It is important to note that Thompson's text does not reprise the discussion of the problems of Marxist theory that was such a feature of 'The Poverty of Theory'.
- 37 *Ibid.*
- 38 Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1992, p. 298.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 371
- 40 *Interviews with Historians*, 'Penelope Corfield and EP Thompson', Institute of Historical Research videowork, 1992.
- 41 EP Thompson, *Alien Homage*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1993, p. 69.
- 42 Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism*, introduction by EP Thompson, London, Macmillan, p. 5.

## Conclusion

### The last Muggletonian Marxist: EP Thompson's paradoxical triumph

This book has attempted to explain the texts of *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, by putting them into contexts – historical, social, political and biographical – which have not been identified by most commentators. In this chapter we will attempt a few generalisations about Thompson's career, without pretending to reduce it to a schema or a set of slogans.

#### The 'decade of heroes'

Our first chapter highlighted the importance of the 'decade of heroes' between 1936 and 1946 to Thompson. The decade was crucial because, in England especially, it was a crucible in which diverse political and intellectual traditions and tendencies were melted down and synthesised into an ideology that appealed to a generation of intellectuals. This ideology would guide EP Thompson's political, scholarly and literary work for decades.

We noted in chapter 1 how the Popular Front policy which the Communist Party of Great Britain adopted in the middle of the 1930s encouraged the mingling of ideas from England's liberal, Romantic and Marxist traditions. Invoking William Morris, the Diggers, and the young Coleridge as well as Stalin, and calling for a grand national alliance against fascism, war, and 'monopoly capitalism', the party won the support of many members of an intelligentsia that had become disillusioned with the political establishment's failure to offer any solution to Great Depression and the rise of fascism. The Communist Party and the international movement to which it belonged came to seem like a 'twentieth century ark' which might preserve the best parts of English and European civilisation, even as the world was

revolutionised. When the apathy of British society in the 1930s was broken by a new world war, the Chamberlain government was ousted and an alliance was forged with the Soviet Union, some of the rhetoric of the Popular Front seemed to have become reality. The new war was an apocalyptic struggle to defeat fascism and usher in a new world.

In many ways, the 'decade of heroes' was the most dramatic and important of Thompson's life. It included the years when he became politically conscious, experienced the intensity of the wartime Communist Party, commanded a tank brigade in the campaign to liberate Italy, absorbed the deaths of his beloved brother and father, and shared in the euphoria that came with the election of the Attlee government in Britain and the establishment of new 'people's democracies' in Eastern Europe.

We have seen that, up until the end of the 1970s, Thompson's work has an essential unity, which is based upon a set of ideas he learned during the 'decade of heroes'. These ideas are stamped upon that classic work of scholarship *The Making of the English Working Class*, as much as little-read poems like 'A Place Called Choice' and the ephemeral editorials and polemics Thompson wrote as a political agitator in the Communist Party and then the first New Left.

### Thompson's core ideas

Loosely adapting the terminology of Imre Lakatos' model of theory formation and change, we have talked of 'hardcore' and 'softcore' parts of Thompson's thought. The 'hard core' was the set of guiding ideas he adopted during the 'decade of heroes'; the 'soft core' was a series of dispensable ideas and claims designed to protect the indispensable ideas from refutation at the hands of events.

We have identified five 'hardcore' ideas Thompson adopted as a young man and held until the 1980s. We cannot arrange these hardcore beliefs in any hierarchical way, because each is dependent on the others.

The first 'hardcore' idea we will mention is a belief in the continuity between England's liberal and Romantic traditions of thought and culture, and the imported tradition of Marxism. A second hardcore feature of Thompson's thought was the belief in the necessity of a political unity that transcends the barriers of class. Popular Front rhetoric habitually invoked 'the people', a shifting ensemble of forces that was led by the working class but usually included the middle classes, the intelligentsia, and 'progressive' members of the bourgeoisie, too.



Another 'hardcore' feature of Thompson's thought was his belief that 'the people' were to be motivated by 'subjective factors' – that is, by a vision of a better world and by ideas like justice and liberty. In Marxist terms, Thompson was always a voluntarist. A fourth 'hardcore' feature of Thompson's thought was his belief in the essential unity of political, scholarly and imaginative work. For Thompson, literary and scholarly work was just as important as political agitation. All were part of a single project, and they might intersect in the most interesting and useful ways.

We have also noted the importance of England and of English culture and history, to Thompson. He absorbed the Popular Front view of English progressive history, and dissident English cultural movements like Romanticism, as a storehouse of radical democratic struggle, and a living model and inspiration for the present.

Thompson also acquired a certain methodology during the 'decade of heroes'. Inspired the tradition of social commentary and moral and imaginative protest represented by the likes of Blake and Morris, he brought a strong belief in moral sensibility and judgement to scholarship, as well as poetry.

### After the war

We saw in chapter 2 how the 'decade of heroes' was followed, for Thompson and for many thousands of others on the left, by disappointment and, eventually, disillusionment. The beginning of the Cold War and the rightward drift of the Attlee government brought the realisation that the victory over Hitler would not be a prelude to any transformation of Britain. Many young men and women deserted the Communist Party and the left itself, as the slogans that had made the Popular Front so important seemed to be mocked by the post-war world.

Thompson, though, fought to hold on to the core beliefs he had adopted during the 'decade of heroes'. Using Lakatosian parlance, we can say that Thompson tried, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, to reconstruct the 'soft core' of his 'Research Programme' to deal with the new post-war situation. Thompson relocated to Yorkshire, a traditional bastion of the English left, and began to unearth the radical past of his country. If he could not find much that was radical in 'Natopolitan' England, he would at least prove that the postwar era was an historical aberration.

Thompson focused some of his attentions on Eastern Europe, where several 'people's democracies' had been established in the aftermath of the war. A journey to Bulgaria and Yugoslavia in 1946 enthused Thompson, and in texts like 'Comments on a People's Culture' he contrasted the decadent, disappointing post-war England with the healthy new societies in the East.<sup>1</sup> Thompson's voluntarist disdain for invocations of 'objective interests' and 'false consciousness' meant that he had to point to real movements and societies, rather than economic data or theoretical schemas, to make the case for the desirability of socialism over capitalism and imperialism. In the decade after the war, Moscow and its new allies became a rhetorical link between the glorious radical past of England and the present. It is significant that Thompson argued, in a notorious passage of his first great book, that William Morris' ideas were being realised in Stalin's Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup>

### 1956 and the New Left

We have seen that 1956 was a crucial year for Thompson, and for thousands of other English Communists. Thompson was badly shaken by the revelations of Stalin's crimes, and by Krushchev's invasion of Hungary, and soon left the party to whose service he had devoted such energy. But Thompson was energised, rather than enervated, by the disasters of 1956. He did not follow the lead of other high-profile Communists by repudiating 'the God that failed'. He was able to hold on to his 'hardcore' beliefs, and refortify these beliefs by substituting the anti-Stalinist uprisings in Eastern Europe and the emergent 'New Left' in Britain as new exemplars of the ideas he had learned in the 'decade of heroes'.

The year 1956 was an infamous one in British, as well as communist, history. The Eden government's blundering neo-colonial attack on Egypt was hurriedly curtailed under US pressure; the fiasco came to symbolise Britain's decline as a world power. Marx's vision of England as the seedbed of revolution, and the Communist Party's old belief that the country's imperial power could make it a nerve centre for world revolution both now seemed dated. But Thompson did not abandon his belief in the centrality of his country to world events. In a series of New Left texts he pictured post-war Britain as a sort of neo-colony of an ascendant United States. Thompson thought that Britain might be the nation to break the deadlock of the Cold War by splitting from the United States and NATO. Even if it no longer

dominated the world, the country could be an example to the world.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Thompson published a series of texts – political, historical, and, on one occasion, literary – which show him reaching a kind of creative peak. In *The Making of the English Working Class* his blazing belief in the relevance of English history to contemporary politics helped him to break through methodological and historiographical barriers and reanimate the radical past with extraordinary vividness and urgency. Despite its flaws and its smaller scope, 'Outside the Whale' reanimated 1930s history in a similar fashion. Even seemingly-ephemeral political pieces from the first New Left era like 'Socialist Humanism' and 'Revolution' can reach an uncommon pitch of intensity, because of the way that Thompson's 'hardcore' beliefs allow him to connect past and present, imagination and analysis, the English and the international.

We have seen that the collapse of the first New Left was a disaster for Thompson. It compounded the deep disappointments of the late 1940s and of 1956. This time, though, Thompson had no new English political movement to whom he could transfer his loyalties, and no new 'model' to hold up overseas. It may on the surface seem strange that Thompson drifted into a sort of quietism during the period of the Vietnam War, 'student power' and the biggest general strike in history. As we have seen, though, the 'New New Left' that made these causes its own had little sympathy for the 'hardcore' beliefs that still guided Thompson's politics. For the first time, Thompson seemed an anachronism to many members of the English left. Chartism and William Morris seemed to have little to offer the Viet Cong's Western supporters.

Thompson attempted, in 'The Peculiarities of the English', to use his new-found academic renown to settle scores with some of his enemies from the first New Left, but succeeded only in making himself more politically isolated. As we saw in chapter 3, the circuit in Thompson's thought between historical investigation and contemporary politics had been broken in the mid-1960s. At the root of the problem was Thompson's reinvention of himself as an English exceptionalist, and his new hesitancy in generalising his investigations into English history to the history of other countries and to contemporary events.

Thompson's scholarly work became disassociated from his politics, as his dense academic explorations of the details of English history seemed increasingly remote from a world in ferment. Giving a guest lecture on William Blake at Columbia University in 1968, Thompson

startled a crowd of revolutionary students by proclaiming that Blake was ‘the founder of the obscure sect to which I myself belong, the Muggletonian Marxists.’<sup>3</sup>

The real Muggletonians were a tiny group of dualist Christians who traced their history back to the white heat of revolutionary seventeenth-century England. They believed that most humans descended from both God and the Devil, but that the government, the police and the Quakers were descended exclusively from the Devil. Thompson had his tongue in his cheek at Columbia, but it can be argued that his words had a serious side. In 1968, a year of revolutionary upheaval from France to China, Thompson was asserting his fidelity to a very English tradition.

### The crisis

In 1973, Thompson made an attempt to get out of the ‘tent’ in which he had been ‘sulking’ by publishing ‘An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski’. In this text Thompson tried to stake out a political middle ground between the conservative quietism of Kolakowski and the enthusiasms of the young men and women of the second New Left. Thompson talked of a disorderly and disputatious ‘Marxist tradition’, which was unified by argument and common problems rather than concepts. This redefinition helped him to deal with the contradiction between his ‘hardcore’ beliefs and those of many members of the ‘New’ New Left.

In the mid-1970s it looked like Thompson might be once again about to play a central role in England’s activist left. His feud with Perry Anderson appeared over, and he seemed to have a new optimism about the prospects for progressive change in Britain. The ‘thaw’ would not last, though. From Thompson’s perspective, the second half of the 1970s was a grim period. Economistic, unpopular trade union struggles and fissures over race and gender seemed to be pulling ‘the people’ apart, not uniting them in a new Popular Front. Stalinist ideologues and young, arrogant scholars in love with ‘scientific’ theory seemed determined to isolate Marxism theory from the liberal and Romantic English traditions that could replenish it. Civil liberties that Thompson viewed as historic conquests and tools for change were whittled away. Emergency India seemed a harbinger of Britain’s future. The vituperative passages in ‘The Poverty of Theory’ and Thompson’s performance at St Paul’s reflected the implosion of

his intellectual and political project. St Paul's would be Thompson's last attempt to defend the beliefs he had synthesised during the long-ago 'decade of heroes'.

About a year before the drama of St Paul's, Thompson had his first meeting with a man he later called 'the last of the Muggletonians', the fruit farmer from Kent named Philip Noakes. Thompson helped Noakes, who was elderly and in poor health, find a haven for the Muggletonians' three-hundred-year-old archive in the British National Library. In an appendix to *Witness Against the Beast*, his study of the influence of Muggletonian ideology on Blake, Thompson gives an account of his friendship with Noakes. 'There was not the least bit of the crank or fanatic in his manner', writes Thompson. It was, nevertheless, 'a strange situation ... Mr Noakes frequently said 'We believe' – and yet he could not point to another believer ... Mrs Noakes (while sympathetic) was not herself a believer, and it seemed that Mr Noakes was indeed the last Muggletonian.'<sup>4</sup> A sense of kinship can be detected behind these words. By the end of the 1970s Thompson had become something like the last Muggletonian Marxist – an isolated, embattled and somewhat embittered figure, respected but not heeded by his peers.

### Exterminism and withdrawal

In the 1980s Thompson tried to transcend troublesome class categories and the mess that was left-wing politics by making supercharged appeals for action against the 'logic of exterminism'. While the conflicts begun in the late 1960s and 1970s were being settled by the great miners' strike of the mid-1980s, Thompson was standing on Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament platforms insisting on the need not for class politics but for 'human beingism'.

Thompson's very pre-eminence in the anti-nuclear movement was the product of working-class defeats. The worker-based organisations that had bureaucratically dominated post-war social movements were by the middle of the 1980s seriously weakened. Both the Communist Party and the Labour Party were consumed by infighting; like the trade unions whose members they bureaucratically represented, they were haemorrhaging members. The sad paradox of Thompson's political career is that the decade of his greatest fame and apparent influence was the decade of the greatest defeats for the class with which his name is still identified.

After the decline of the anti-nuclear movement Thompson resumed his studies of English history, but made little claim for their relevance to contemporary political issues. Thompson refused invitations to discuss Marxist theory, and stopped using many Marxist concepts in his writing. We have noted how, at the end of his life, he even came to feel that the concept of class had become 'boring'.

### A peculiar triumph?

The story of EP Thompson's life might seem, from one perspective, like a record of frustration and failure. Certainly, EP Thompson's political hopes were dashed again and again. As a poet, he failed to make any sort of reputation for himself. Even as a historian, Thompson suffered frustrations: he lived to see the tide of historiographical fashion turn against him, and he even lost faith in some of the insights of his masterpiece, *The Making of the English Working Class*.

In other ways, though, Thompson's life was a triumph. In his three score years and ten he managed to write at least half a dozen books of permanent value. His immense energy, and the fidelity with which he held for so long to the ideas his formative political experiences gave him, make him an inspiring figure. As an adult education tutor he inspired hundreds of workers to become intellectuals; as the author of *The Making of the English Working Class*, and a curmudgeonly mentor to the New Left and Warwick University students, he inspired hundreds of young intellectuals to take a serious interest in working-class politics and history. Thompson's immense popularity with historians, sociologists, anthropologists, geographers and literary scholars in North America, South Asia and parts of Africa belies the fierce particularism of *The Making of the English Working Class* and its successors.

Thompson was a flawed giant. His contradictions and crankiness alienated some of the admirers he attracted, derailed his political ambitions, and ultimately made him a somewhat isolated, bitter figure. Nevertheless, as this book has tried to show, some of Thompson's best work was done because of the contradictions in his thought. By staying true to the vision he had adopted as a young man, rather than treading the path of disillusion and default he described in 'Outside the Whale', Thompson created something permanent out of his imperfections. Even if the core premises of his thought proved untenable, they inspired some remarkable insights. Even if they do

not seek to reanimate the whole complicated apparatus of Thompson's 'Research Programme', new generations of left-wing scholars can make great use of some of the results of the investigations and speculations that programme inspired.

Thompson may have romanticised the English working class, in a manner common amongst radicalised intellectuals of the 1930s, but his romantic impulse helped him to write *The Making of the Working Class*, a book with extraordinary insights as well as obvious oversights. Thompson may have helped sink the first New Left, but that disaster spurred him to write 'The Peculiarities of the English', a wonderfully compressed and eloquent survey of English history since the Middle Ages. Thompson may have over-estimated the importance of the art of poetry to the hurly-burly world of politics, but this over-estimation enabled him to write the fine piece of committed literary criticism that is 'Outside the Whale' as well as studies of William Morris and Blake. Thompson may have exaggerated the congruence between the work of Marx and the vision of William Morris, but when he realised his mistake he was able to write the searing yet sympathetic critique of *Capital's* 'inverted political economy' which is a highlight of 'The Poverty of Theory'. By modern standards, at least, EP Thompson died prematurely. Certainly, many of his friends, comrades, and colleagues have outlived him by some distance. John Saville, for example, died in June 2009 at the age of ninety-three, after continuing his scholarship and his political activism into his late eighties. At the time of writing, Eric Hobsbawm is in his ninety-second year, and still publishing his historical research and political opinions. If he were alive today EP Thompson would, by comparison, by a mere eighty-six years old.

Thompson's oeuvre has of course survived him, and it has much to teach us in the twenty-first century. We have become so accustomed to rhetoric about globalisation and modernisation that we often forget that the process the words describe began long before our own era. In *The Making of the English Working Class* and many of his other great studies of early modern England, Thompson described the same 'enclosures' of countryside, breakneck urbanisation and industrialisation, and violent political confrontation that we see today in places as distant from one another as Bolivia, India, and Nigeria.

Thompson was not content simply to describe the process of modernisation – he also offered, in texts like the unpublished 'Six Weeks in India' and the widely-circulated 1979 introduction to *The Making*, a staunch critique of the ideologies that legitimate 'develop-

ment from above'. Thompson lived to see the collapse of the Soviet Union, but he was unimpressed by the triumphalists who proclaimed the 'end of history' and the universal validity of US-style free market capitalism as a model for human development. Today, when global financial crisis, a string of imperialist wars in the Middle East, and the threat of environmental catastrophe have persuaded many more people that capitalism is not the panacea for all the world's problems, we gave much to learn from EP Thompson.

In some ways the label 'Muggletonian Marxist' suits EP Thompson. It is pompous as well as self-deprecating, funny as well as sad. Thompson would certainly have empathised with the likes of Philip Noakes, and yet the marginality which he often felt so strongly inspired him to create a body of work which has a well-deserved place in the hearts of scholars and left-wing activists around the world.

### Notes

- 1 EP Thompson, 'Comments on a People's Culture', *Our Time*, October 1947.
- 2 Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, 1955 edn, p. 760.
- 3 Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast*, p. xxi.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 183.



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