

## Among the Romantics: E. P. Thompson and the Poetics of Disenchantment

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**Abstract** This article examines key themes in the political and intellectual life of E. P. Thompson. It argues for the centrality of romanticism to his work; it focuses on his unfinished study of the early Romantics. Thompson drew parallels between socialist hopes and disappointments of his own day and the reactions of the early romantic poets to the failed promise of the French Revolution. This article charts the trajectory of the early Romantics as they moved from political engagement to retreat, and relates this trajectory to Thompson's own politics. Thompson discerned a pattern whereby intellectuals and artists moved through stages from political engagement to disenchantment and then to "apostasy" or default. Disenchantment could be a productive condition; at issue was how the poet handled the "authenticity of experience," how disenchantment was dealt with in verse. Both Thompson and the Romantics privileged the concept of "experience" which they set in opposition to abstract theory. The article's final section turns to themes that Thompson had intended to address but left unfinished, including shifting views of patriotism and the defeated cause of women's rights. For Thompson the romantic impulse was ultimately linked to utopian desire, to the capacity to imagine that which is "not yet."

King of my freedom here, with every prop  
 A poet needs—the small hours of the night,  
 A harvest moon above an English copse ...

Oh, royal me! Unpoliced imperial man  
 And monarch of my incapacity

To aid my helpless comrades as they fall—  
 Lumumba, Nagy, Allende: alphabet  
 Apt to our age! In answer to your call

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

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

—E. P. Thompson, September 1973<sup>1</sup>

On the final page of *The Making of the English Working Class*, E. P. Thompson hails “a resistance movement in which both the Romantics and the Radical craftsmen opposed the announcement of Acquisitive Man.” He continues, “In the failure of the two traditions to come to a point of juncture, something was lost. How much we cannot be sure, for we are among the losers.” According to Thompson, “After Blake no mind was at home in both cultures, nor had the genius to interpret the two traditions to each other. It was a muddled Mr. Owen who offered to disclose the ‘new moral world,’ while Wordsworth and Coleridge had withdrawn behind their ramparts of disenchantment.”<sup>2</sup> The book ends as it starts, with the figure of William Blake, whose annotation from 1798, “The Beast and the Whore rule without control,” is the epigraph for part one, “The Liberty Tree.” The fiftieth anniversary of Thompson’s classic has come and gone, marked by conferences, journals, books, and broadcasts.<sup>3</sup> At this point, one could be excused for feeling that little more needs to be said. Yet few historians have explored what might be thought an odd conclusion to a book about the “heroic” culture of working-class radicalism.<sup>4</sup> This article takes as its starting point Thompson’s lament for a historical conjunction that failed to happen.

A number of related issues are at stake. First, this article explores key themes in the political and intellectual life of one of the twentieth century’s most influential historians. It argues that Thompson’s history of working-class resistance and his study of romanticism should be viewed as integral to a historical project informed by his desire to open alternatives for a socialist future. The place of the Romantics in *The Making* is neither incidental nor merely illustrative; rather it is seen as central to the republican challenge mounted against Britain’s ancien régime and to the forces opposed to the emergence of capitalist industrialization. For Thompson, the 1790s was a moment of enormous possibility ending in disillusion and “disenchantment.” As this article shows, the theme of disenchantment runs through much of Thompson’s writing. He was concerned with how the condition of disenchantment influenced the literary and political imagination. This article’s first section follows the Romantics’ route from political engagement to retreat and doubt, to the point at

<sup>1</sup> E. P. Thompson, “My Study,” in *Collected Poems*, ed. Fred Inglis (Newcastle, 1989), 80.

<sup>2</sup> E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963), 832.

<sup>3</sup> For a partial list of events, broadcasts, and publications, see Owen Holland and Eoin Phillips, “Fifty Years of E. P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class*: Some Field Notes,” *Social History* 39, no. 2 (June 2014): 172–81, 173n7. See also Roger Fieldhouse and Richard Taylor, eds., *E. P. Thompson and English Radicalism* (Manchester, 2014); Madeline Davis and Kevin Morgan, introduction to “Causes That Were Lost? Fifty Years of E. P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* as Contemporary History,” ed. Madeline Davis and Kevin Morgan, special issue, *Contemporary British History* 28, no. 4 (September 2014): 374–81.

<sup>4</sup> See, however, Michael Scrivener, “E. P. Thompson and Romantic Radicalism,” *Wordsworth Circle* 37, no. 2 (Spring 2006): 52–56.

which identification with democratic principles associated with France was no longer possible.

The second section of the article concerns the interplay between the lived present and historical past, as the disenchantment of Thompson's own era appeared to parallel both the failed aspirations of the age of revolution and the problem of political and literary reaffirmation. It underscores the importance of Communist Party priorities during the Popular Front, the Second World War, and the immediate postwar period. The Popular Front not only provided a model for popular mobilization, but the goal of Marxist intellectuals to recover a "people's" literary heritage was reflected in Thompson's later efforts to merge a version of England's literary past with a "people's history." Thompson viewed the final years of the "people's" war as opening a moment of internationalist hope, a prospect soon extinguished by the rise of Cold War culture. The crisis of 1956 marked a sharp break that forced political rethinking and the founding of the New Left.

In the third section, we return to the Romantics, to their trajectory from "disenchantment" to "default," terms that Thompson initially used with reference to twentieth-century writers and intellectuals. For Thompson, Wordsworth's poetry at the moment of sustained crisis, when political hopes confront a changed reality, illustrates the complex translation of "lived experience" into poetic language. "Experience" remained a key analytical category in Thompson's writing on both history and literature, and it was viewed as something that was lived through and articulated and that was thus available for interpretation. No British historian of his generation, with the possible exception of Christopher Hill, contributed more than Thompson to the field of literary studies. While his work crossed disciplinary boundaries, he remained largely indifferent to the fashions of academic literary scholarship. In debates over contested questions of political theory, he assumed the historian's privileged position. Yet his work provides an opportunity for ongoing exchange between historians and literary scholars and the enhancement of cross-disciplinary awareness.

Thompson died before he was able to finish his long-planned book on the early Romantics. This article's final section turns to the unfinished work. It engages with an absent text, elaborating on what Thompson left undone or what he might have done had he lived to complete his project; it seeks to offer some slight compensation for what we have lost.

### **"BLISS WAS IT IN THAT DAWN": FROM ROMANTIC REVOLUTION TO RETREAT**

Thompson's interest in romanticism spanned a lifetime: from his first book, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, published in 1955 with a revised edition in 1977, to his study, *Witness against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law*, published shortly after his death in 1993. He grew up within a family surrounded by poets and poetry; both his father and brother, and indeed Thompson himself, were poets.<sup>5</sup> Had he lived, a full-scale book on the Romantics during the age of revolution

<sup>5</sup> Bryan D. Palmer, *E. P. Thompson: Objections and Oppositions* (London, 1994), 25–27; Peter J. Conradi, *A Very English Hero: The Making of Frank Thompson* (London, 2012), 8–11, 43–48.

was promised.<sup>6</sup> We are left with the not insubstantial fragments of that book brought together by his wife, Dorothy Thompson. The signature essay, “Disenchantment or Default? A Lay Sermon,” originally published in 1969, focuses on the plight of William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge.<sup>7</sup> This essay is crucial to any discussion of Thompson’s interpretation of the romantic poets. It deals with the complicated relationship between literature and political commitment, with literary expression born of the shattered dream of new worlds and retreat from once-held ideologies deemed to be false. In delivering his “Lay Sermon” (a reference to Coleridge’s reactionary *Lay Sermon* of 1817), Thompson returns to themes, incidents, and poetry first introduced in *The Making* concerned with the Romantics’ active political engagement, their lingering disillusion, and their ultimate disavowal of former beliefs. In this context, he reflects more broadly on the situation of intellectuals and artists during times of intense political struggle.

In the first instance, Thompson countered a prevailing tendency among literary critics to press Wordsworth’s moment of political disenchantment earlier and earlier and to present the political break as catastrophic and total, decoupling poetic achievement from political engagement. In this way, romanticism’s own ideology, whereby romantic poetry stands beyond the historical conditions of its own production, was reaffirmed.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, Thompson dates Wordsworth’s decisive break as having come after the Peace of Amiens (1802–3), with an extended period of poetic creativity occurring before disenchantment turned to default. One cause of misunderstanding, writes Thompson, “has been an insufficiently close attention to the actual lived historical experience.”<sup>9</sup> At this point, “experience” is set against abstraction or theory, with William Godwin as the principal culprit. When it was published in February 1793, Godwin’s *Political Justice* caused a sensation among the radical intelligentsia. William Hazlitt later reflected, with a characteristic touch of irony, that Godwin “blazed as a sun in the firmament of reputation; no one was more talked of ... wherever liberty, truth, justice was the theme, his name was not far off.”<sup>10</sup> Wordsworth was deeply impressed and became one of Godwin’s regular visitors.<sup>11</sup> In 1794, Coleridge wrote Robert Southey that he had read Godwin “with the greatest attention.” He sought out Godwin in London, dedicating a poem to the philosopher in which he likened the power of *Political Justice* to the aurora borealis illuminating “a sunless world forlorn” with an “electric ... stream

<sup>6</sup> Thompson referred to a collection on the romantic poets in a number of places and over a long period. See, for instance, E. P. Thompson, interview by Mike Merrill, in *Visions of History*, ed. Henry Abelove et al. (New York, 1976), 3–25, at 22; and E. P. Thompson, *Persons and Polemics* (London, 1994), vii–viii.

<sup>7</sup> E. P. Thompson, “Disenchantment or Default? A Lay Sermon,” in *The Romantics in a Revolutionary Age*, ed. Dorothy Thompson (Woodbridge, 1997), 33–74.

<sup>8</sup> See Jerome J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago, 1983).

<sup>9</sup> Thompson, “Disenchantment or Default?” 34.

<sup>10</sup> William Hazlitt, *The Spirit of the Age* (1825), in *The Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe, 21 vols. (London, 1930–1934), 11:16.

<sup>11</sup> William Godwin, Diaries, for Wordsworth’s visits in 1795–1796, Abinger Papers, Bodleian Library, Oxford University, Oxford, <http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/dept/scwmss/wmss/online/1500-1900/abinger/abinger.html>.

of rosy light.”<sup>12</sup> Coleridge, ever quick to change his mind, had in fact already begun to see through Godwin’s system. Wordsworth’s break came somewhat later. For Thompson, the falling of the scales from the poets’ eyes did not mark the abandonment of republican principles but “a rejection of a mechanical psychology and an abstract enthronement of reason.”<sup>13</sup> The break with Godwin signaled a turn toward “real man and away from abstracted man ... away from the *déraciné* Godwinian intelligentsia but toward the common people.” This view lines up well with Wordsworth’s own version of his attraction to and subsequent rejection of the philosophy “That promised to abstract the hopes of man / Out of his feelings, to be fixed thenceforth, / For ever in a purer element” (*Prelude*, bk. 10, 806–9).<sup>14</sup>

Thompson captures the Romantics’ release from the grip of Godwin’s high rationalism; whether his hostile evaluation of Godwin is fully justified is a different question.<sup>15</sup> The critique of “abstract reason,” the opposition of “experience” to theory, can itself be viewed as an intellectual tradition rooted in British reactions to the French Revolution.<sup>16</sup> The privilege accorded to “experience” was a key element of romanticism. There is a sense in which Thompson casts Godwin as a stock character, the philosophizing intellectual of the Left sitting out the political struggle, risk-averse, and inconstant in his politics. Versions of this figure recur in his polemics aimed at contemporaries, most notably Louis Althusser. In 1963, the year that saw the publication of *The Making*, Thompson penned a lengthy memo addressed to the editorial board of *New Left Review* (a journal that he had helped to found in 1960) in which he detected among the editors “the same tendencies to deracination and intellectualization, in the name of higher socialist theory” that he disliked in Jean-Paul Sartre and “marxistentialism.”<sup>17</sup> As for Godwin, his grand notions of “Reason” and “Benevolence” lacked roots in the soil of social reality or support among the

<sup>12</sup> Coleridge to Southey, 21 October 1794, in *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. L. Griggs (Oxford, 1956), 1:115; “Godwin,” *Morning Chronicle*, 10 January 1795, quoted in Nicholas Roe, *The Politics of Nature: William Wordsworth and Some Contemporaries* (Basingstoke, 2002), 25–26.

<sup>13</sup> Thompson, “Disenchantment or Default?” 34–35.

<sup>14</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: The Four Texts (1798, 1799, 1805, 1850)*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth (London, 1995), 446. References are to the 1805 version and appear parenthetically in the main text.

<sup>15</sup> Compare Mark Philp, “Thompson, Godwin and the French Revolution,” *History Workshop Journal* 39, no. 1 (Autumn 1995): 91–101; idem, *Reforming Ideas in Britain: Politics and Language in the Shadow of the Revolution, 1789–1815* (Cambridge, 2014), 6, and chap. 8; and Jon Mee, “The Press and Danger of the Crowd: Godwin, Thelwall, and the Counter-Public Sphere,” in *Godwinian Moments: From Enlightenment to Romanticism*, ed. Robert M. Maniquis and Victoria Meyers (Toronto, 2011), 83–102. As Mee indicates, Wordsworth continued to share Godwin’s anxieties about the uncontrolled passions of the crowd.

<sup>16</sup> David Simpson, *Romanticism, Nationalism, and the Revolt against Theory* (Chicago, 1993).

<sup>17</sup> E. P. Thompson, “Where Are We Now?,” in *E. P. Thompson and the Making of the New Left*, ed. Cal Winslow (London, 2014), 215–46, at 236–37. Written in April 1963, the memo was not published. The differences between Thompson and Perry Anderson, the journal’s editor, soon spilled onto the pages of *New Left Review* and *Socialist Register*. See, most notably, Perry Anderson, “The Origins of the Present Crisis,” *New Left Review*, no. 23 (January–February 1964): 26–53; idem, “Socialism and Pseudo-Empiricism,” *New Left Review*, no. 35 (January–February 1966): 2–42; E. P. Thompson, “The Peculiarities of the English” (1965), in Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London, 1978), 35–91. Thompson links Godwin’s hyper-rationalism and Wordsworth’s rejection of abstract theory to his later attack on Althusser. E. P. Thompson, “The Poverty of Theory or an Orrery of Errors,” in Thompson, *Poverty of Theory*, 193–397, at 372–73.

ranks of artisan democrats. He opposed political activism; revolutions were experiments of the mind. Thompson's judgment of Godwin remained harsh. Toward the end of his life, he reiterated, "There is a sense in which the espousal of Godwinism represented an actual retreat from immediate political commitment. The very utopianism of *Political Justice* appealed in characteristic ways to the revolting intelligentsia."<sup>18</sup>

Opposition to what he regarded as retreat to the heights of theory formed a unifying theme in Thompson's life and writing. It is worth pausing, however, to remark on his reference to Godwin's utopianism. In his postscript to the revised edition of *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (1977), Thompson embraced Morris's "new Utopianism," an expressive mode that drew its imaginative force from romanticism. He observes that to vindicate Morris's utopianism "may at the same time be to vindicate Utopianism itself, and set it free to walk the world once more without shame and without accusations of bad faith."<sup>19</sup> Morris not only is freed from the critique of scientific Marxism but also provides the means for reopening the Marxist tradition to the realm of human desire. The trajectory taking Morris from "romantic to revolutionary" appears less of a break than Thompson had originally proposed, reflecting his own rejection of Marxist orthodoxy and establishing continuity with *The Making* and his transition to "socialist humanism."<sup>20</sup>

Of course, not all utopian visions are to be commended. Tellingly, Thompson dismissed Coleridge and Southey's plan to establish a utopian community on the banks of the Susquehanna as "fantasy."<sup>21</sup> "Pantisocracy" was Coleridge's coinage for a small community based on "equal government by all" and the abolition of private property ("aspheterization"). Plans emerged during the summer of 1794 from discussions between Coleridge and Southey and their Oxbridge circle of friends.<sup>22</sup> These plans were more serious than is often supposed. Plenty of British "Jacobins" toyed with the idea of moving to America to escape the tyranny of Europe. Thompson says little about America or its revolution. In Coleridge's case, his visionary republic was linked to his attack on the institutions of private property, commercial civilization, and slavery. The equalization of land was based on Hebraic law, with the restoration of lands every 50 years at the Jubilee. Coleridge's ideas on property, which in 1794 reflected Godwin's influence, arguably deserve to be placed beside the ideas of John Thelwall and Thomas Spence, whom Thompson regards as the only "considerable theorists" produced by the decade's artisan movement.<sup>23</sup> Pantisocracy

<sup>18</sup> E. P. Thompson, "Wordsworth's Crisis" (1988), in Thompson, *Romantics*, 75–95, at 88–89. See also idem, "Benevolent Mr. Godwin" (1993), in Thompson, *Romantics*, 96–106.

<sup>19</sup> E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, rev. ed. (London, 1977), 790–93.

<sup>20</sup> John Goode, "E. P. Thompson and 'the Significance of Literature,'" in *E. P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Harvey J. Kaye and Keith McClelland (Philadelphia, 1990), 183–203, at 190–98.

<sup>21</sup> Thompson, *Making*, 176, 159. See also idem, "A Compendium of Cliché: The Poet as Essayist" (1979), in Thompson, *Romantics*, 143–55, at 146.

<sup>22</sup> The scholarly literature on Pantisocracy is large, but for the background, see Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Early Visions, 1772–1804* (New York, 1989), chap. 4; and J. B. MacGillivray, "The Pantisocracy Scheme and its Immediate Background," in *Studies in English by Members of University College Toronto*, ed. Malcolm W. Wallace (Toronto, 1931), 131–69.

<sup>23</sup> Samuel Coleridge, *Collected Works of Samuel Coleridge*, vol. 1, *Lectures 1795 on Politics and Religion*, ed. Lewis Patton and Peter Mann (London, 1971), 124–30. Coleridge pulled together ideas from Godwin, Rousseau, Priestley, Locke, Hartley, Harrington, and Moses Lowman on Hebraic agrarian law. See

represented a withdrawal; it was not a plan for revolution but idyllic retreat. For Thompson, the plan was obviously a non-starter, without political significance in the real world. Yet its utopian desire reflected the uncertain horizon that momentarily seemed to separate present reality from future possibility. There was a deep radicalism at its core, as well as a deepening disappointment about the prospects for Europe once Britain entered the war against France and once the French Revolution turned violence upon itself.

It is the closing of that moment of perceived possibility, the point at which hope falters and reassessments must be made, that concerns Thompson. In the first instance, retreat and the slide from disenchantment to “apostasy” were the results of the French Revolution’s descent from *fraternité* to fratricide and of the course of European warfare. Like most British Jacobins, the radical intelligentsia’s allegiances were properly speaking Girondist; they were shocked by the spectacle of leaders such as Jacques-Pierre Brissot being led to the guillotine.<sup>24</sup> It is necessary to register, as Thompson does, the sustained commitment among the poets and their network of young friends to fundamental political change. Southey’s dramatic poem *Wat Tyler*, completed in late 1794, might well have landed him in prison had his would-be publishers, a consortium of radical press-men serving time in Newgate prison, not decided the work was too hot to handle.<sup>25</sup>

Wordsworth witnessed the Revolution firsthand—chronicling a version of his experience in books nine and ten of *The Prelude*. Writing in 1794 to William Matthews, he declared himself “of that odious class of men called democrats.” As an enemy of “monarchical and aristocratical governments” and “hereditary distinctions ... of every species,” Wordsworth commented, “I am not amongst the admirers of the British Constitution.”<sup>26</sup> Thompson cites this correspondence to underscore Wordsworth’s radicalism. This was heady stuff, written as the government was arresting more than thirty leaders of London’s main reform societies. Wordsworth and Matthews were looking to launch a journal, to be titled the “Philanthropist.” Wordsworth kept much hidden about his activities during these crucial years, and Thompson was subsequently able to throw new light on the mystery of Wordsworth’s possible involvement in a journal that appeared in 1795 under the same title, published by the Jacobin printer, Daniel Isaac Eaton. Eaton, recently acquitted on charges of seditious libel, was among the most intrepid radical publishers. It seems likely that Wordsworth sought out Eaton as a printer who might provide financial aid and safe cover for the young men’s publishing venture. As Thompson observes,

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John Morrow, *Coleridge’s Political Thought: Property, Morality and the Limits of Traditional Discourse* (New York, 1990), chap. 1; and Nigel Leask, *The Politics of Imagination in Coleridge’s Critical Thought* (New York, 1988), chap. 3. For Thelwall’s views on property, see Gregory Claeys, ed., introduction to *The Politics of English Jacobinism: Writings of John Thelwall* (University Park, 1995), xxxv–lvi.

<sup>24</sup> For Southey’s reaction to Brissot’s execution, see Charles Cuthbert Southey, ed., *The Life and Correspondence of Robert Southey* (New York, 1851), 67. For the “secret” importance to Wordsworth of the execution of the Girondist journalist, Antoine-Joseph Gorsas, see Roe, *Politics of Nature*, chap. 6.

<sup>25</sup> For the publication history of *Wat Tyler*, see Tim Fulford and Rachel Crawford, eds., *Robert Southey: Later Poetical Works, 1811–1838* (London, 2012), 3:441–60.

<sup>26</sup> Wordsworth to William Matthews, 23 May and [8] June 1794, in *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Early Years, 1787–1805*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, 2nd ed., rev. Chester L. Shaver (Oxford, 1967), 119, 123–24.

at this point, “intellectual radicalism and the popular societies were bumping against each other all the time.”<sup>27</sup>

While Wordsworth dabbled with radical publishing, Coleridge was more purposefully engaged. In 1795 he delivered his powerful series of lectures on politics and religion at Bristol. He condemned “the causeless Panic” created by the treason trials of Thomas Hardy, John Horne Tooke, and Thelwall, and concluded his diatribe “On the Present War” by asking, “shall we carry on this wild and priestly War against reason, against freedom, against human nature?” He reported to George Dyer, radical Unitarian and fellow poet, of the “furious and determined” opposition he faced at Bristol, where a mob threatened to attack the lecture hall “in which the ‘damn’d Jacobine was jawing away.’” The incident underscores the “unofficial” violence that reformers often faced.<sup>28</sup> The lecture that Coleridge delivered in November 1795 against the “Two Bills” came as close to sedition as one might risk before the Seditious Meetings and Treasonous Practices Acts made such speech unlawful.<sup>29</sup> He moderated his tone in his short-lived journal, the *Watchman*, but kept pressure on Pitt’s government. Thompson, in an essay on Coleridge’s revolutionary youth, maintains, “the curve of Coleridge’s commitment, in 1795–96, took him very close indeed to the popular societies—or towards their more intellectual component.” The trajectory was one that, “had [it] not been arrested by retirement to Stowey, would almost certainly have led him to prison.”<sup>30</sup> He cites Southey’s reaction to Coleridge’s later denial of his political sympathies: “It is worse than folly, for if he was not a Jacobine ... I wonder who the Devil was.”<sup>31</sup> As the “Two Acts” curtailed the public presence of plebeian radicalism by restricting public meetings and enlarging the definition of treason, the Romantics felt the blast. As Hazlitt observed in *The Spirit of the Age* (1825), “It was a misfortune to any man of talent to be born in the latter end of the last century.”<sup>32</sup> In his recent book on the lost literary generation of the 1790s, Kenneth Johnston argues that not only did Pitt’s “reign of alarm” devastate a generation of writers but government repression also affected the idiom of

<sup>27</sup> Thompson, “Wordsworth’s Crisis,” 78–83. See also Nicholas Roe, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years* (Oxford, 1988), 175–86, 276–79; Kenneth R. Johnston, *The Hidden Wordsworth* (New York, 2002), chap. 18; and Michael T. Davis, “That Odious Class of Men Called Democrats: Daniel Isaac Eaton and the Romantics, 1794–1795,” *History* 84, no. 273 (January 1999): 74–92.

<sup>28</sup> Samuel Coleridge, *Conciones ad Populum, or Addresses to the People* (1795), in Patton and Mann, eds., *Collected Works*, 1:61, 1:74; Coleridge to Dyer, [late February 1795], in Griggs, ed., *Collected Letters*, 1:152. See, more generally, Michael T. Davis, “The British Jacobins and the Unofficial Terror of Loyalism in the 1790s,” in *Terror: From Tyrannicide to Terrorism*, ed. Brett Bowden and Michael T. Davis (Brisbane, 2008), 92–113.

<sup>29</sup> Coleridge reworked the lecture into the pamphlet, *The Plot Discovered: An Address to the People against Ministerial Treason* (Bristol, 1795). For the legislative crackdown, see John Barrell, *Imagining the King’s Death: Figurative Treason, Fantasies of Regicide, 1793–1796* (Oxford, 2000), chap. 16.

<sup>30</sup> E. P. Thompson, “Bliss Was It in That Dawn—The Matter of Coleridge’s Revolutionary Youth” (1971), in Thompson, *Romantics*, 108–32, at 124–27.

<sup>31</sup> Southey to Charles Danvers, 15 June 1809, in *New Letters of Robert Southey*, ed. Kenneth Curry (New York, 1965), 1:511.

<sup>32</sup> Hazlitt, *Spirit of the Age*, 11:37.

English letters, washing out a “republican voice” left to flourish in America.<sup>33</sup> Here was part of the loss to which Thompson referred.

As the current of British Jacobinism was driven underground, the Romantics also sought cover. In *The Making*, as well as in later essays, Thompson follows Wordsworth and Coleridge to the Quantock Hills, where Thelwall—Jacobin lecturer, political theorist, and poet—visited them in summer 1797, soon after the Wordsworths had established themselves at Alfoxden House. The previous spring, Coleridge first wrote to Thelwall, “Pursuing the same end by the same means we ought not to be strangers to each other.” This began an intense correspondence between the two men that underscored differences as well as shared sympathies. As Coleridge observed, “We run on the same ground, but we drive different Horses. I am daily more and more a religionist—you, of course, more & more otherwise.”<sup>34</sup> Thelwall, whom Thompson describes as “one of the few who tried to straddle the world of letters and that of popular agitation,” was looking for a place to settle.<sup>35</sup> Thelwall figures as an intellectual who aligned himself with plebeian radicalism and who suffered from isolation and defeat without renouncing his former beliefs or self. As such, he becomes one of the heroes of Thompson’s grand narrative and a foil to Godwin. Thelwall’s stubborn retreat also tracks the struggle in Thompson’s life to sustain a commitment to socialist belief as conditions alter and hopes dim. Fittingly, the story of Thelwall’s silencing is the subject of Thompson’s final article, “Hunting the Jacobin Fox,” a reconnection to and expansion of his role in *The Making*.<sup>36</sup>

Thelwall’s visit to Nether Stowey coincided with the collaboration between Wordsworth and Coleridge that resulted in the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads* the following year. Summer 1797 is one of the two “spots in time” that Thompson revisits in his essay, “Disenchantment or Default?”<sup>37</sup> Not surprisingly, following the naval mutinies of the spring and with fears of a French invasion, Thelwall’s arrival caused alarm within the local community. Thelwall was, in fact, searching for tranquility, a “sequester’d dell” where he could live “in philosophic amity” alongside his fellow poets.<sup>38</sup> Coleridge remembered “sitting in a beautiful recess in the Quantocks,” and saying to his companion, “‘Citizen John, this is a fine place to talk treason in!’—‘Nay! Citizen Samuel,’ replied he, ‘it is rather a place to make a man forget that there is any necessity for treason!’” For Thompson, the exchange is emblematic, foreshadowing, as he writes in *The Making*, “the decline of the first Romantics into political ‘apostasy.’” A nervous Coleridge was unable to find a cottage for his friend, who

<sup>33</sup> Kenneth R. Johnston, *Unusual Suspects: Pitt’s Reign of Alarm and the Lost Generation of the 1790s* (Oxford, 2013), xvii. See also John Bugg, *Five Long Winters: The Trials of British Romanticism* (Stanford, 2014).

<sup>34</sup> Coleridge to Thelwall, [late April 1796], in Griggs, ed., *Collected Letters*, 1:204; Coleridge to Thelwall, 13 November 1796, in *ibid.*, 1:253.

<sup>35</sup> E. P. Thompson, “Hunting the Jacobin Fox” (1994), in Thompson, *Romantics*, 156–217, at 163; *idem*, *Making*, 157–61.

<sup>36</sup> Thelwall studies has become a crowded subfield. Thompson quipped, in a letter from 1993, “Thelwall is suddenly an O.K. subject.” Nicholas Roe, “The Lives of John Thelwall: Another View of the Jacobin Fox,” in *John Thelwall: Radical Romantic and Acquitted Felon*, ed. Steve Poole (London, 2009), 13–24, at 13.

<sup>37</sup> Thompson, “Disenchantment or Default?,” 40–49.

<sup>38</sup> Holmes, *Coleridge: Early Visions*, 155–60; David Fairer, *Organising Poetry: The Coleridge Circle, 1790–1798* (Oxford, 2009), chap. 10.

instead retired with his family to rural Wales. Shortly after the “Jacobin Fox’s” departure, James Walsh (“Spy Nozy”), who had helped to arrest Thelwall in 1794, arrived to sniff out the seditious “nest” of poets at Stowey.<sup>39</sup>

Thompson carefully monitors Wordsworth and Coleridge’s slow, anguished retreat from political engagement. The first spot in time illustrates how democrats were driven back into small, embattled enclaves. The second spot in time occurred in spring 1798. Thompson aligns the prosecution of Gilbert Wakefield, Unitarian divine and classical scholar, with Wordsworth and Coleridge’s situation.<sup>40</sup> Wakefield and the bookseller, Joseph Johnson, were imprisoned for Wakefield’s *Reply to Address to the People of England* by Richard Watson, bishop of Llandaff. Wakefield, who died within four months of his release from prison, had seen fit to question the government’s conduct of the war and to cast doubt on Pitt’s good faith in treating for peace. He described how the ministry protected itself: “they have engendered sham plots, false alarms, and visionary assassinations, for the purposes of deluding the unwary, and to establish their own power by a military despotism in England.”<sup>41</sup> Johnson, who up to this point had been careful to avoid prosecution, was a crucial linking figure among the radical intelligentsia. He was Wordsworth’s original publisher. Mary Wollstonecraft, who reviewed for his *Analytical Review*, first met Godwin dining at Johnson’s table alongside Paine. She also met Blake through Johnson.<sup>42</sup> Wakefield and Johnson were not the only oppositionists to find themselves in prison. Benjamin Flower, the editor of the *Cambridge Intelligencer* and publisher of Coleridge and Southey’s dramatic poem *The Fall of Robespierre* (1795), was also sent to prison for his attack on Watson. Thompson identifies Flower’s journal as “the last national organ of intellectual Jacobinism.”<sup>43</sup>

One can well imagine how Wakefield’s fate might have affected Wordsworth. In 1793, Wordsworth had written his own republican response to the bishop, which he left unpublished, perhaps on Johnson’s advice.<sup>44</sup> Interestingly, the figure of the Solitary from the *Excursion* can be linked to Wakefield. Thompson was to press the claims of Thelwall as one model for this dejected and reclusive character, a composite drawn from real persons, including the poet himself.<sup>45</sup> It has been compellingly argued that Wordsworth also had Wakefield in mind as a double for his own

<sup>39</sup> Thompson, *Making*, 176; S. T. Coleridge, *Table Talk and Omniana*, ed. T. Ashe (London, 1903), 103, 26 July 1830. For “Spy Nozy,” see Roe, *Wordsworth and Coleridge*, 248–62; and Johnston, *Unusual Suspects*, chap. 12.

<sup>40</sup> Thompson, “Disenchantment or Default?,” 50–57.

<sup>41</sup> Gilbert Wakefield, *A Reply to Some Parts of the Bishop of Llandaff’s Address to the People of Britain* (London, 1798), 23; Johnston, *Unusual Suspects*, chap. 10.

<sup>42</sup> Gerald P. Tyson, *Joseph Johnson: A Liberal Publisher* (Iowa City, 1979), chap. 5; Jane Worthington Smyser, “The Trial and Imprisonment of Joseph Johnson, Bookseller,” *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 77, no. 4 (Summer 1974): 418–35; Helen Braithwaite, *Romanticism, Publishing and Dissent: Joseph Johnson and the Cause of Liberty* (Basingstoke, 2003), 127–32, 162.

<sup>43</sup> Thompson, “Disenchantment or Default?,” 55.

<sup>44</sup> William Wordsworth, *A Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff on the Extraordinary Avowal of his Political Principles ... by a Republican*, in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser (Oxford, 1974), 1:29–49.

<sup>45</sup> Thompson, “Hunting,” 178, 192–203; idem, *Making*, 176. See also Judith Thompson, *John Thelwall in the Wordsworth Circle: The Silenced Partner* (New York, 2012), chap. 11.

predicament and for a fate that he had narrowly avoided.<sup>46</sup> As Wakefield awaited trial, the situation became precarious for Wordsworth and Coleridge in Somerset, as “volunteers” were being recruited into service to protect the coast against an anticipated French invasion. Thompson concludes that, in departing for Germany in September 1798, they were “hopping the draft”—a contemporary nod to young American draft resisters.<sup>47</sup> The poets arrived at Hamburg, a neutral city teeming with spies and “suspicious persons,” including Irish rebels fleeing the abortive rising of the summer. They were almost certainly on the British government’s local watch list.<sup>48</sup>

By this time, the final ties between “Jacobin” intellectuals and radical artisans had been severed. Here, according to Thompson, set in “that pattern of revolutionary disenchantment which foreshadows the shoddier patterns of our own century.” In the narrative arc of *The Making*, the Romantics’ withdrawal is linked to the earlier alienation of a reform-minded sector of the bourgeoisie that left artisans and wage-earners without allies to open the doors of revolution. While celebrating the movement’s independence, Thompson recognizes the important loss of “badly needed intellectual resources” as middle-class radicals retreated from the political field.<sup>49</sup> With the final suppression of the Corresponding Societies, with most of their leaders either in prison or in exile, British Jacobinism turned into a small underground stream. When popular radicalism reemerged in full force at the end of the Napoleonic wars, the movement would breed its own intellectual leaders drawn from inside as well as outside the incipient “working class.”

## TWENTIETH-CENTURY REVERSION: FROM THE POPULAR FRONT TO THE NEW LEFT

As for the “shoddier patterns” of the twentieth century, Thompson had much to say; he continually brought the past to bear on the present, or as some critics would have it, his interpretations of history and literature were clouded by projections of the present onto the past. Certainly, he discerned a pattern whereby intellectuals and artists had moved through stages from political engagement to disenchantment and then to apostasy or default. The connections between the disenchantment of his own age and that of the 1790s run through his writing. He was principally concerned about the role of the intellectual in movements of dissent and about what he regarded as an obligation to maintain truth to oneself even as confidence in previously held commitments and beliefs waned.

Thompson faced key moments of political doubt that challenged him to revise his beliefs and to reaffirm political and moral values as historical circumstances changed. Already a committed communist, he served as a tank commander during the Second World War and, on his return home, shared a general optimism about the prospects for building a socialist Britain. He recalled the war as “an

<sup>46</sup> Johnston, *Unusual Suspects*, 201–4; idem, “Wordsworth’s *Excursion*: Route and Destination,” *Wordsworth Circle* 45, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 106–15.

<sup>47</sup> Thompson, “Disenchantment or Default?,” 57.

<sup>48</sup> Johnston, *Hidden Wordsworth*, 444–49.

<sup>49</sup> Thompson, *Making*, 176, 179.

extraordinary formative moment in which it was possible to be deeply committed to the point of life itself in support of a particular political struggle which was at the same time a popular struggle ... one didn't feel a sense of being isolated in any way from the peoples of Europe or the peoples of Britain."<sup>50</sup> This optimism did not last long as Cold War patterns set in. Thompson wrote his study of Morris in the early 1950s, while he was an active member of the Communist Party living in Halifax and teaching English literature and history as a staff tutor in the extramural department of the University of Leeds.<sup>51</sup> Morris's significance was clear; he "was the first creative artist of major stature ... to take his stand, consciously and without compromise, with the revolutionary working class." Despite the book's awkward gestures to orthodoxy, as Thompson later commented, a "muffled 'revisionism'" can be discerned.<sup>52</sup> With the emergence of the New Left, Morris points the way to "socialist humanism;" to Thompson's call for a recognition of man's moral nature, as an irreducible moral consciousness denied by Stalinist ideology, and the human agency and experience of "real" men and women.<sup>53</sup> The New Left was born from the "conjuncture" of 1956: the twin shocks of the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian revolution and the British-French invasion of the Suez Canal Zone.<sup>54</sup> The New Left sought to build a movement for independent socialist renewal. For Thompson, leaving the Communist Party was to cross a threshold, akin to the "river of fire" across which Morris had moved; it meant abandoning ties of loyalty and comradeship. It was also liberating. Written with remarkable speed between 1959 and 1962, *The Making* reflected the loosening of ideological reins and the energy of the New Left and of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.<sup>55</sup>

The late 1950s and early 1960s were a period of reexamination. "Commitment" became a vogue word among left-wing authors, including Thompson. But it was one that he partially distrusted when connected to poetry because "it can slide all too easily into usages which defeat its apparent intention."<sup>56</sup> Yet the question of how art is produced as political confidence fades, how the condition of

<sup>50</sup> Thompson, "Interview," 11–12.

<sup>51</sup> Palmer, *E. P. Thompson*, 45–55; Peter Searby, John Rule, and Robert Malcolmson, "Edward Thompson as a Teacher: Yorkshire and Warwick," in *Protest and Survival: Essays for E. P. Thompson*, ed. John Rule and Robert Malcolmson (London, 1993), 1–23.

<sup>52</sup> E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (London, 1955) 841; Thompson, *William Morris* (1977), 727, 810.

<sup>53</sup> E. P. Thompson, "Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines," *New Reasoner*, no. 1 (Summer 1957): 105–43. Thompson's articles from this period are conveniently reprinted in Winslow, ed., *E. P. Thompson*. See also Kate Soper, "Socialist Humanism," in Kaye and McClelland, eds., *E. P. Thompson*, 204–32.

<sup>54</sup> Stuart Hall, "Life and Times of the First New Left," *New Left Review*, no. 61 (January–February 2010): 177–96; Dorothy Thompson, "On the Trail of the New Left," *New Left Review*, no. 215 (January–February 1996): 93–100. Earlier in the year, Nikita Khrushchev's "secret speech" had already led to internal dissent within the British Communist Party; Thompson was among those demanding an open and full account. See John Saville, "The Twentieth Congress and the British Communist Party," in *Socialist Register, 1976*, ed. Ralph Miliband and John Saville (London, 1976), 1–23.

<sup>55</sup> E. P. Thompson, preface to *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1980), 14.

<sup>56</sup> John Mander, *The Writer and Commitment* (London, 1961), 7; E. P. Thompson, "Commitment and Poetry" (1979), in Thompson, *Persons and Poetics*, 332–41. Compare idem, "Commitment in Politics," *Universities and Left Review*, no. 6 (Spring 1959): 50–55.

disenchantment is negotiated in literary terms, recurs in his writing. At the point of default, Thompson contends, “Disenchantment ceases to be a recoil of the responsible in the face of difficult social experience; it becomes abdication of intellectual responsibility in the face of all social experience.”<sup>57</sup> Thompson addressed this process at length and most directly in “Outside the Whale,” his contribution to *Out of Apathy* (1960), a collection that sought to reaffirm a socialist agenda amid the malaise of apathy. His essay is a reply of sorts to George Orwell’s “Inside the Whale,” and it marks his first linkage of the terms “disenchantment” and “default.”<sup>58</sup>

Published in 1940, Orwell’s essay made the case for ranking Henry Miller’s novel, *Tropic of Cancer*, among the few major works of contemporary literature. Orwell argued that Miller’s acceptance of a civilization in decay gave his work an authenticity missing in so much contemporary literature. In the face of defeat in Spain, the Moscow trials, the collapse of the Popular Front, the Russo-German pact, and the outbreak of the Second World War, Miller’s passivity constituted a justified reaction; his work rang true to the feelings of ordinary people.<sup>59</sup> Orwell concluded that on the whole the literary history of the 1930s “seems to justify the opinion that a writer does well to keep out of politics”—or at the very least that the writer does well not to confuse good writing with good politics, for “the cause” and the cause of literature were separate issues.<sup>60</sup> W. H. Auden had reached a similar conclusion and put it more eloquently: “For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives / In the valley of its saying.”<sup>61</sup>

In a sense, Thompson was, as Stefan Collini describes him, “a man of the 1940s.”<sup>62</sup> Because Thompson came of age politically against the backdrop of the end of the Popular Front and the onset of war, for him to return to Orwell, Auden, and the artist’s responsibility in troubled times came naturally. In “Outside the Whale,” Wordsworth’s Solitary arrives on cue. Whereas years of self-examination separated the romantic poet as “ardent revolutionary” from renunciation of his former political self, history now repeats itself as farce; the twentieth-century about-face took a mere decade to reenact. “To understand the first stage of this regress,” Thompson turns to Auden’s poem *Spain*, which was published in 1937 as a one-shilling pamphlet.<sup>63</sup> Whereas Orwell had expressed his scorn—he thought Auden’s reference to “necessary murder” came too readily for a poet who had not shouldered a rifle in Spain—Thompson admired Auden’s poem, which he thought

<sup>57</sup> E. P. Thompson, “Outside the Whale,” in Thompson, *Poverty of Theory*, 1–33, at 3–4. See also idem, “At the Point of Decay,” in Thompson, *Out of Apathy* (London, 1960), 3–15.

<sup>58</sup> C. Wright Mills first discussed the cultural “default” of intellectuals in “Culture and Politics: The Fourth Epoch,” *Listener*, 12 March 1959, reprinted in *Power, Politics, and People: The Collected Essays of C. Wright Mills*, ed. Irving Louis Horowitz (New York, 1963), 236–46.

<sup>59</sup> George Orwell, “Inside the Whale,” in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, vol. 1, *An Age Like This, 1920–1940*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (Harmondsworth, 1970), 548, 569–78.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 568.

<sup>61</sup> W. H. Auden, “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” (1939), in *Another Time* (London, 1940), 108.

<sup>62</sup> Stefan Collini, “Enduring Passions: E. P. Thompson’s Reputation,” in Collini, *Common Reading: Critics, Historians, Publics* (Oxford, 2008), 177. See also David Eastwood, “History, Politics and Reputation: E. P. Thompson Reconsidered,” *History* 85, no. 280 (October 2000): 634–54.

<sup>63</sup> *Spain* was published by Faber & Faber with a thin red dust jacket that stated, on the inside flap, that all of the author’s royalties were to go to medical aid for Spain.

was underappreciated. But by 1940, when Auden republished *Spain* in a collection of his poetry, he had changed his mind and revised his poem. Thompson subjects the amended version of *Spain* to close reading, detailing the omissions from and revisions to the original text (including the change of “necessary murder” to “the fact of murder”). With regard to two verses that Auden completely excised, Thompson observes that—stripped of specific reference to Madrid, “invading battalions,” “Our hours of friendship” blossoming “into a people’s army”—the refrain “But today the struggle” no longer refers to a pressing moral choice but to a universal human predicament; the poem had lost its focus and moral way. It is fair to say that Auden was ultimately unable to achieve a truthful resolution in his political poetry between private perception and public pronouncement. Thompson makes clear that it is not the “authenticity of Auden’s experience” that is in dispute “but the default implicit in his response,” his giving up on the problem and setting sail for America.<sup>64</sup>

At issue is how “authenticity of experience” is handled, how disenchantment is dealt with in verse. Thompson posits a correlation between artistic value and the complex experience of disenchantment; the tensions sustained before disenchantment succumbs to default impart an enhanced creative impulse. His treatment of Auden, of the demise of the Popular Front, and of the onset of the Cold War parallels his analysis of the trajectory of British Jacobinism, of Pitt’s regime of repression, and of the fate of romanticism. Political themes from the present and near past are transposed onto the 1790s, most centrally the relationship between disenchantment and art. In his own day, however, the final consequences of disenchantment were delayed by the Second World War. For Thompson, the socialist potential that arose during the war ended around 1948 with the capitulation to “Natopolis” and the surrender to Cold War culture, witnessing “a *trahsion des clerics* as abject as any that had gone before.” Inwardly, the “insurgent, popular-front-type moment” was destroyed by Stalinism.<sup>65</sup> On both sides of the Cold War divide, the words “romantic” and “utopian” became swearwords. The Labor government’s defeat in 1951 marked the coda to this surrender.

For Thompson, the narrowed vision of the 1950s could be traced back to 1939 and the end of the Popular Front. Not only was the “authenticity of experience” at issue; so was the history of the 1930s. What Orwell dismissed as a “swindle” and Auden dubbed “a low dishonest decade” no more did justice to the thirties “than the self-flagellation of Wordsworth’s Solitary is a true comment upon the men of the London Corresponding Society.”<sup>66</sup> Writing in the first issue of *Universities and Left Review* in 1957, Thompson proposed that the New Left’s goal should be to reopen the circuit that had been closed between intellectuals and the broader socialist movement, to reconnect the sort of lines of communication that had characterized

<sup>64</sup> Thompson, “Outside the Whale,” 4–13. The revised version of *Spain* was first published in *Another Time* and republished in *The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden* (London, 1945). For Auden’s inner conflict and political poetry, see Edward Mendelson, *Early Auden* (New York, 1981), chap. 9. For an illuminating discussion of the poem, see Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* (London, 1976), 251–56. Thompson’s poetry reflects Auden’s influence.

<sup>65</sup> Thompson, “Outside the Whale,” 20.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 18–21.

the 1930s.<sup>67</sup> As co-founder and co-editor of the *New Reasoner* (1957–59), Thompson insisted on the importance of literary contributions and poetry to the journal's make-up.<sup>68</sup> The leading Communist literary journal of the thirties, *Left Review* (1934–38), influenced his thinking on how to produce an activist journal.<sup>69</sup> There were direct personal links between the *New Reasoner* and Marxist literary journals of the 1930s and 1940s, including the poet Randall Swingler, who served for a time as editor of *Left Review*.<sup>70</sup>

Many of the questions concerning literature and politics that Communists raised during the 1930s and 1940s stayed with Thompson. "If poetry is to survive," wrote C. Day Lewis in 1935, "it must become necessary again to the people." In the classless society of the future, artists might realize their full potentials and regain their lost relationships to the people, but in the meantime, how was an authentic people's culture to be achieved? The problem of the poetry of the future was linked to recovering the poetry of England's past. Writing in *Left Review*, Swingler recommended Blake as "a good starting point for redeeming our revolutionary culture." Not only was Blake a craftsman who lacked a classical education, but "Jerusalem," the most widely known and sung of English poems, illustrated his "characteristic Englishness."<sup>71</sup> The writer Ralph Fox devoted the final chapter of his posthumously published book, *The Novel and the People* (1937), to the nation's cultural heritage, arguing that "[a] people cannot play its part in history if it renounces its cultural past, any more than if it renounces its political past." As a case in point, Fox cites Wordsworth's pamphlet, *The Convention of Cintra* (1809), as among the most sublime pieces of English prose. He finds Wordsworth's tract "revolutionary" and "heroic" in its passionate support for Portuguese and Spanish national resistance to Napoleon.<sup>72</sup> For a communist intellectual such as Fox soon to be killed fighting in Spain, Wordsworth's return to the cause of liberty via the uprising on the Iberian Peninsula was poignant. Thompson's older brother, Frank—whom he followed into the Communist Party at age seventeen—observed in his wartime journal that the key question for the younger generation of Soviet poets was whether they could "bridge the gulf between the poet and the public" and "make poetry once more the interest and property of the people."<sup>73</sup> Killed in the Bulgarian resistance in 1944, he wrote in one of his last letters of the need to build "a new communal ethic" to unite the people of postwar Europe, East and West.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>67</sup> E. P. Thompson, "Socialism and the Intellectuals," *Universities and Left Review*, no. 1 (Spring 1957): 31–36. See also idem, "Socialist Humanism."

<sup>68</sup> John Saville, *Memoirs from the Left* (London, 2003), 114–16; idem, "Twentieth Congress," 18–19.

<sup>69</sup> See E. P. Thompson, "Left Review" (1971), in Thompson, *Persons and Polemics*, 228–35.

<sup>70</sup> Swingler was a member of the *New Reasoner*'s editorial board and friend of Thompson. See Andy Croft, *Comrade Heart: A Life of Randall Swingler* (Manchester, 2003), chap. 15.

<sup>71</sup> C. Day Lewis, "Revolutionaries and Poetry," *Left Review* 1 (July 1935): 395–402, at 400; R. Swingler, "The Interpretation of Madness: A Study of William Blake and Literary Tradition," *Left Review*, no. 3 (February 1937): 21–28, at 22. Left-wing contemporary writing on this issue is copious, but see, for example, C. Day Lewis, ed., *The Mind in Chains: Socialism and the Cultural Revolution* (London, 1937); and Christopher Caudwell, *Illusion and Reality* (London, 1938), particularly chap. 12, "The Future of Poetry."

<sup>72</sup> Ralph Fox, *The Novel and the People* (New York, 1945), 115–16, 124–25.

<sup>73</sup> Frank Thompson, *There is a Spirit in Europe: A Memoir of Frank Thompson*, ed. T. J. Thompson and E. P. Thompson (London, 1947), 57–58.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 15; E. P. Thompson, *Beyond the Frontier: The Politics of a Failed Mission, Bulgaria, 1944* (Stanford, 1997).

Following the war, as Bill Schwarz shows, the Popular Front's orientation and its construction of "the people" took hold among the Communist Party's Historians' Group with a transition taking place from the characteristically literary to the historical component of what Antonio Gramsci theorized as the "national-popular."<sup>75</sup> In fact, Thompson did not play a significant part in the Historians' Group, but he was closely associated with the party's literary members; he contributed to *Our Time* and *Arena*, successor journals to *Left Review*.<sup>76</sup> One thinks of *The Making* as the fullest flowering of the Historians' Group's project, a panoramic counter-narrative of working-class struggle. But the embedding of the Romantics within the book's grand structure reflects the intersecting goals of historical and literary recovery and a partial merging of generational priorities.<sup>77</sup> Significantly, Thompson relates that one of the two or three books he carried with him during the war was *A Handbook of Freedom*, "an extraordinarily rich compendium of primary sources" compiled in 1939 by Edgell Rickword, former editor of *Left Review*, and Jack Lindsay, who later contributed to the *New Reasoner*.<sup>78</sup> Literary sources are brought together with other documents recording twelve centuries of "English Democracy"; extracts from *Piers Plowman* accompany reports of the Peasants' Revolt, Milton's poetry appears alongside Leveller debates and Digger tracts, and an anonymous Luddite song joins with Bryon's "Song for the Luddities."<sup>79</sup> Remembered for pioneering history as seen from below, members of the Historians' Group continued to pursue literary as well as historical studies. The intellectually versatile Victor Kiernan published a long essay, symptomatically entitled "Wordsworth and the People," that prefigured aspects of Thompson's later argument.<sup>80</sup>

In his autobiography, *Interesting Times*, Eric Hobsbawm notes the striking number of Marxist intellectuals of his generation who moved to historical analysis from literature. He suggests that their passion for literature helps to explain "the otherwise surprising influence of the anti-Marxist F. R. Leavis," adding, "Cambridge communists who read English swore by him."<sup>81</sup> Thompson took a degree in history at Cambridge, with a strong emphasis on the study of literature. There were, in fact,

<sup>75</sup> Bill Schwarz, "'The People' in History: The Communist Party Historians' Group, 1946–56," in *Making Histories: Studies in History-Writing and Politics*, ed. Richard Johnson et al. (London, 1982), 44–95. See also Eric Hobsbawm, "The Historians' Group of the Communist Party," in *Rebels and Their Causes: Essays in Honour of A. L. Morton*, ed. Maurice Cornforth (London, 1978), 21–47; and Wade Matthews, *The New Left, National Identity, and the Break-Up of Britain* (Chicago, 2014), chap. 2.

<sup>76</sup> See, for example, E. P. Thompson, "Comments on a People's Culture," *Our Time*, October 1947: 34–38; idem, "William Morris and the Moral Issues of 'To-day,'" *Arena* 2, no. 8 (June–July 1951): 25–30. The editorial boards of these journals included *Left Review* veterans.

<sup>77</sup> See Stuart Middleton, "E. P. Thompson and the Cultural Politics of Literary Modernism," *Contemporary British History* 28, no. 4 (September 2011): 16–34.

<sup>78</sup> E. P. Thompson, "Edgell Rickword," in Thompson, *Persons and Polemics*, 236–43. See also Charles Hobday, *Edgell Rickword* (Manchester, 1989), particularly chap. 12; and Ben Harker, "'Communism is English': Edgell Rickword, Jack Lindsay and the Cultural Politics of the Popular Front," *Literature and History* 20, no. 2 (Autumn 2011): 16–34.

<sup>79</sup> John Lindsay and Edgell Rickword, eds., *A Handbook of Freedom: A Record of English Democracy through Twelve Centuries* (London, 1939), 20–44, 126–50, 230–33, 235–38.

<sup>80</sup> V. G. Kiernan, "Wordsworth and the People," in *Democracy and the Labour Movement: Essays in Honour of Dona Torr*, ed. John Saville (London, 1954), 240–70. See also idem, "Wordsworth Revisited," *New Reasoner*, no. 7 (Winter 1958–59): 62–74.

<sup>81</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life* (London, 2003), 97.

more fundamental reasons than a passion for literature to recommend Leavis and *Scrutiny* to Cambridge Marxists. Without necessarily subscribing to a Leavisite vision of a lost organic community ruptured by industrialization, Marxists desired to reclaim a popular-national cultural tradition.<sup>82</sup> The appeal to a version of the opposition between the romantic and the utilitarian also struck a common chord, particularly with Thompson. Moreover, Leavis and *Scrutiny* provided a portable method of close reading as well as criteria for judging literary and cultural value.<sup>83</sup> The emphasis placed on the felt measure of “experience,” with “lived” experience set in opposition to abstraction, had an obvious appeal for Thompson as it did for Raymond Williams.<sup>84</sup> While the concept of experience may have been undertheorized, it remained central to Thompson’s analysis of the first generation of romantic poets as it did for his analysis of class. Thompson roundly rejected the idea of a shared evolutionary culture as opposed to ongoing struggle between cultures or ways of life.<sup>85</sup> What was at stake was the recovery and propagation of a national culture of opposition, with a shift in conceptual emphasis from “the people” to “the working class”—although the populist inflection persisted.

Cultural transformation was a major analytical concern of the first New Left, yet faced with the corrosive effects of consumer capitalism and the mass media on working-class culture, Thompson insisted on the place of workers in the struggle for socialism. The “affluent worker” was not simply to be written off as captive to a materialist ethos of individualism. He took issue with younger socialist intellectuals associated with *Universities and Left Review* for viewing working people as subjects of history: pliant victims of alienation and false consciousness. Writing in 1959, he maintained, “we are lacking, chiefly, in a sense of history,” a knowledge that working-class history “has always been a *way of struggle* between competing moralities” in which “the political minority has been the carrier of the aspirations of the majority.”<sup>86</sup>

*The Making* was his answer to this lack of historical understanding. But by the time the book was published in 1963, the forces of the first New Left had dispersed, and Thompson had entered the political wilderness. In the end, the New Left failed to inspire a broad-based socialist reawakening; the movement did not find a significant

<sup>82</sup> See Francis Mulhern, *The Moment of “Scrutiny”* (London, 1979); Schwarz, “The People,” 64–65; and Middleton, “E. P. Thompson,” 423–25.

<sup>83</sup> Mulhern, *Moment*, 329–30; Christopher Hilliard, *English as a Vocation: The Scrutiny Movement* (Oxford, 2012), 1–3, 256–57.

<sup>84</sup> Lesley Hardy, “F. R. Leavis, E. P. Thompson and the New Left: Some Shared Critical Responses,” *Socialist History* 30 (2007): 1–21. For the attraction of Leavis and a defense of the concept of “experience,” see Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review* (London, 1979), 65–67, 162–68.

<sup>85</sup> E. P. Thompson, review of *The Long Revolution* by Raymond Williams, *New Left Review*, no. 9 (May–June 1961): 24–34; idem, review of *The Long Revolution* by Raymond Williams, *New Left Review*, no. 10 (July–August 1961): 34–39. For Williams’ reflections on “populism,” see also Raymond Williams, “Notes on Marxism in Britain since 1945,” *New Left Review*, no. 100 (November–December 1976): 81–94, particularly 86–88.

<sup>86</sup> Thompson, “Commitment in Politics,” 51–53. Compare Stuart Hall, “A Sense of Classlessness,” *Universities and Left Review*, no. 5 (Autumn 1958): 26–32. See also Michael Newman, “Thompson and the Early New Left,” in Fieldhouse and Taylor, eds., *E. P. Thompson*, 169–77; Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the New Left, and the Origins of Cultural Studies* (Durham, 1997), 54–78.

working-class following; and no lasting alliance was forged between New Left intellectuals and the labor movement. The *New Reasoner* merged with *Universities and Left Review* in 1960 to form *New Left Review*, which under the editorship of Perry Anderson became a journal of Marxist theory detached from political activism.<sup>87</sup>

Thompson's lionization within the academy, where he never felt fully comfortable, coincided with his increased political isolation. In 1965, he became director of the Centre for the Study of Social History at the newly established University of Warwick; he resigned in 1970 amid protests against the university administration and its relations with corporate industry.<sup>88</sup> At Warwick, his interests turned to the study of eighteenth-century law and society. In 1967–68, he again collaborated with Williams, Stuart Hall, and others from the first New Left to issue the *May Day Manifesto*, “a socialist alternative” to the Labor government's reformist policies.<sup>89</sup> Thompson delivered “Disenchantment or Default?” at New York University in 1968 as part of the Albert Schweitzer lecture series, returning to the Romantics less in the euphoric spirit of revolution sweeping Europe and America than in a state of meditation on failed political aspirations and the relationship of political disenchantment to artistic expression.

## BETWEEN DISENCHANTMENT AND DEFAULT: THE ROMANTICS' RESPONSE

For Thompson, the recoil and ultimate “default” of intellectuals in the face of political disillusion was a phenomenon that bridged the histories of the Cold War and the 1790s. Viewed as a dishonest reckoning with former beliefs and allegiances, “apostasy” retained a strong resonance in his political lexicon. As applied to the Romantics, the charge of apostasy has been questioned by critics who discern underlying continuities as opposed to a sharp ideological break in thinking.<sup>90</sup> Nonetheless, much contemporary opinion, particularly among younger poets, registered a sense of betrayal.<sup>91</sup> Thus Lord Byron's denunciation of “Bob Southey” and “the Lakers” was matched by Shelley's response on reading the *Excursion*. Shelley expressed his disappointment as Wordsworth returned the poet to the traditional path of solitude and order in a poem dedicated to his patron, the Earl of Lonsdale, the most powerful landowner of Cumberland and Westmorland counties.<sup>92</sup> Hazlitt first used the

<sup>87</sup> Thompson remained on the editorial board through 1961 but felt that the former editors were excluded under Anderson's editorship. For the other side of this conflict, see Perry Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism* (London, 1980), 131–40.

<sup>88</sup> E. P. Thompson, ed., *Warwick University Ltd: Industry, Management and the Universities* (Harmondsworth, 1970); Palmer, *E. P. Thompson*, 100–13.

<sup>89</sup> Raymond Williams, ed., *May Day Manifesto, 1968* (Harmondsworth, 1968).

<sup>90</sup> Pamela Edwards, *The Statesman's Science: History, Nature, and Law in the Political Thought of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (New York, 2004), particularly the introduction and chap. 1; David M. Craig, *Robert Southey and Romantic Apostasy: Political Argument in Britain, 1780–1840* (London, 2007); James K. Chandler, *Wordsworth's Second Nature: A Study of the Poetry and Politics* (Chicago, 1984).

<sup>91</sup> Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and Its Background 1760–1830* (Oxford, 1981), chap. 6.

<sup>92</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, “To Wordsworth,” in *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford, 2003), 90–91. Byron's attack comes in his “Dedication” to *Don Juan* (1819).

term “apostate” with reference to Coleridge’s *Lay Sermons*; Hazlitt’s campaign “against literary apostasy” established an influential framework for distinguishing the generational conflicts and differences among the Romantics.<sup>93</sup> The essayist’s struggle to retain his radical principles placed Hazlitt among Thompson’s favorites. As for Blake, Thompson argues that his resistance to Enlightenment reason meant that he escaped the brand of disenchantment suffered by others. The intensity of his vision, which derived from the world of the Ranters and the Diggers, made it impossible for him “to fall into the courses of apostasy” as he withdrew into antinomian quietude. Blake’s own terrifying brush with the law in 1803–4, when he was charged for subversive speech on the information of two soldiers, drove Blake deeper into himself.<sup>94</sup>

For the Romantics, as for many radicals, the French Revolution had been a failure. A war mounted against European oppression had become a war of French conquest, and with Napoleon’s appointment as First Consul in late 1799, the republic succumbed to dictatorship. The French invasion of Switzerland brought Coleridge’s “recantation.” His “deep worship” of the “spirit of divinest Liberty” returns from the “profitless” pursuit of freedom among governments and human society to Nature’s inspiration belonging to the individual.<sup>95</sup> At this point, Thompson regards Coleridge as still “a man of the Left,” for his continued opposition to the war, but Coleridge soon turned on former friends and disavowed his past. Like Auden, Coleridge failed to come to terms with his former political self, foregoing a sustained period to reconcile past and present beliefs, a failure culminating in the “fine fiction” found in book ten of *Biographia Literaria* (1817), where he claims always to have been an opponent of Jacobinism.<sup>96</sup>

“Apostasy” may seem a blunt term for evaluating the motivations and work of creative artists. For Thompson the couplet “disenchantment” or “default” implies a question of choice as well as a trajectory. If “apostasy” marks an end point, then what most concerns Thompson is the disenchanted writer’s struggle to reconcile lost hopes and personal feelings with a changed reality. Unlike apostasy, disenchantment is a productive condition, a creative moment that precedes a final “imaginative failure” marked by forgetting or falsely manipulating “the authenticity of experience.” Thompson defines this condition as “a Jacobinism-in-recoil or a Jacobinism-of-doubt,” insisting on “both sides of this definition.” He sees Wordsworth and Coleridge caught in “a vortex of contradictions” that they were unable to resolve. Aesthetic complexity arises then from “a search for a synthesis at a moment of arrested dialectic”; “it is exactly within this conflict that the great

<sup>93</sup> William Hazlitt, *Examiner*, 29 December 1816, in Howe, ed., *Works of William Hazlitt*, 7:119; Kevin Gilmartin, *William Hazlitt: Political Essayist* (Oxford, 2015), 27, 49.

<sup>94</sup> E. P. Thompson, *Witness against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (Cambridge, 1993), 228–29; Jon Mee and Mark Crosby, “‘This Soliderlike Danger’: The Trial of William Blake for Sedition,” in *Resisting Napoleon: The British Response to the Threat of Invasion, 1797–1815*, ed. Mark Philip (Aldershot, 2006), 111–24.

<sup>95</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “France: An Ode” (1798), in *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Major Works*, ed. H. J. Jackson (Oxford, 2000), 89–92.

<sup>96</sup> E. P. Thompson, “Coleridge’s Revolutionary Youth” and “Compendium of Cliché,” in Thompson, *Romantics*, 114, 145–50.

romantic impulse came to maturity.<sup>97</sup> “The Ruined Cottage” (1798) opens Wordsworth’s extraordinary period of creativity from the *Lyrical Ballads* to the 1805 *Prelude*. Margaret, the abandoned wife and mother broken on the wheel of poverty and grief, stands in “The Ruined Cottage” as a text against war. She is this, according to Thompson, and “a great deal more.” For the poem “has leaped out of the rigid framework of paternalist sensibility, in which the interior life of the poor cannot be handled ... It was the transposed Jacobin impulse of *égalité* which broke out of the paternalistic frame.” Moreover, the impulse “is transmuted” from abstract political rights to something more local “but also more humanely engaged.”<sup>98</sup> There is nothing overtly “Jacobin” about the poem, but Wordsworth’s sensibility goes beyond romantic sympathy in his ability to get inside the life and feelings of the poor, closing the social distance between himself and his subject. Thompson confirms Hazlitt’s judgment that Wordsworth’s “Muse ... is a levelling one.”<sup>99</sup> “Experience” was a key term for Thompson, as it was for the Romantics. We are more accustomed to think about Thompson’s concept of “experience” in relation to his concept of class; experience mediates the relationship between material conditions of existence and consciousness.<sup>100</sup> Less attention has been paid to how “experience” relates to his writings on romanticism. For Thompson, Wordsworth crossed a threshold of understanding; he underwent an education in “real feeling and just sense” (Wordsworth’s words) as related in book 12 of the *Prelude*:<sup>101</sup>

When I began to enquire,  
To watch and question those I met, and held  
Familiar talk with them, the lonely roads  
Were schools to me in which I daily read  
With most delight the passions of mankind,  
There saw into the depths of human souls—  
Souls that appear to have no depth at all  
To vulgar eyes. (*Prelude*, bk. 12, 161–68)

Wordsworth’s ultimate achievement is then to be found in the intensity of this direct engagement and the turning of the cultural table against the “vulgar eyes” of the educated elite. The moral imagination of the poet derives from experience, drawing on the sensations and utterance of “men in real life.”<sup>102</sup> It was this sort of learning that Thompson valued in his adult classes and found largely absent from the educated culture of the university.<sup>103</sup>

<sup>97</sup> Thompson, “Disenchantment or Default?,” 37–38. See also the illuminating discussion in Charles Mahoney, *Romantics and Renegades: The Poetics of Political Reaction* (Basingstoke, 2003), 7–9.

<sup>98</sup> Thompson, “Disenchantment or Default?,” 36–37. The poem was composed from April 1797 to March 1798. The composition history is complicated with ongoing revisions until its publication in book one of the *Excursion*.

<sup>99</sup> Hazlitt, *Spirit of the Age*, 11: 87.

<sup>100</sup> His formulation has come in for criticism and revision. See, most recently, Carolyn Steedman, *An Everyday Life of the English Working Class: Work, Self and Sociability in the Early Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 2013), chap. 1.

<sup>101</sup> Wordsworth, *Prelude*, 496.

<sup>102</sup> William Wordsworth, Preface (1802) to *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (London, 1968), 255–61.

<sup>103</sup> E. P. Thompson, “Education and Experience,” in Thompson, *Romantics*, 4–32.

When compared to Wordsworth, Thelwall can come off badly. Thompson cites a passage in which the Jacobin orator reports dropping in at a village ale house to refresh himself, “[sitting] down among the rough clowns, whose tattered garments were soiled with their rustic labour ... I love the labourer then in his ragged coat, as well as I love the Peer in his ermine, perhaps better.” As Thompson observes, Thelwall “was far from transcending the condescending conventions of his class.”<sup>104</sup> In contrast, Wordsworth did not lapse into pastoral idealizations; his model “Was not a Corin of the groves ... / But for the purposes of kind, a man / With the most common.” Quoting these lines from the *Prelude*, Thompson notes the accent placed on the word “common.” Wordsworth’s enduring strength was that “he aligned himself *with* the common man ... The very word ‘common’ acquired significantly new notations: we are placed *with* the common against the [polite] culture.”<sup>105</sup> Wordsworth’s purpose and theory of poetic diction take him from the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* to the *Prelude*, in which subjects drawn from “Low and rustic life” provide the sources of “philosophic language.” The expression of common people found in a natural setting constitutes the universal language of humanity. Here, arguably, is where Wordsworth’s “experiment” in language and sensibility meets that of Paine.<sup>106</sup>

For a brief time, the romantic poets drew close to the fledgling republican movement that collapsed under the dual pressures of revolutionary betrayal and state repression. In Wordsworth’s case, Thompson regards the poet’s ability to work through and translate the experience of the disenchanting self—“the sense of philosophy as lived experience”—as a profound political, aesthetic, and moral achievement. In the *Prelude*, Wordsworth “faces the failure of utopian expectations,” while “he affirms and conveys the force of utopianism.” And while the transition from the *Prelude* to the *Excursion* may witness a decline in poetic energies, Thompson never judges Wordsworth an “apostate” in the same terms as Coleridge or Southey; his period of disenchantment was more protracted and complex.<sup>107</sup> Moreover, even as they retreated to the point of paternalism and embraced the verities of traditional authority, the early Romantics are seen to retain a measure of social radicalism. The romantic critique of industrialization—decrying the abnegation of traditional social responsibility, breakdown of family and community values, and loss of independence among small producers—shared common ground with popular radicalism. In *The Making*, Thompson warns readers against the mistake of assuming that paternalist feeling must always be detached and condescending. The passionate current of “traditionalist social radicalism” moving from Wordsworth and Southey, through Thomas Carlyle and beyond, contains “a dialectic by which it is continually prompting revolutionary conclusions.”<sup>108</sup> This dialectic forms part of the tradition that Williams mapped in *Culture and Society*.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 10, quoting *Tribune* 2, no. 16 (1796): 16–17; Thompson, “Hunting,” 167.

<sup>105</sup> Thompson, “Education and Experience,” 10–13, 28, quoting *Prelude*, bk. 8, 420–25. Compare Lindsay and Rickword, eds., *Handbook of Freedom*, xi–xii, where Rickword notes “how the word ‘common’ and its derivations ... appear and re-appear like a theme through the centuries.”

<sup>106</sup> See Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries*, 58–68; Olivia Smith, *The Politics of Language, 1791–1819* (Oxford, 1984), chap. 6; and John Bugg, “Revolution,” in *William Wordsworth in Context*, ed. Andrew Bennett (Cambridge, 2015), 175–81.

<sup>107</sup> Thompson, “Hunting,” 199.

<sup>108</sup> Thompson, *Making*, 342–44. See also David Eastwood, “Robert Southey and the Intellectual Origins of Romantic Conservatism,” *English Historical Review* 104, no. 411 (April 1989): 308–31. The

## AN UNFINISHED TEXT: THE ROMANTICS, PATRIOTISM, AND THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN

Following his departure from the University of Warwick, Thompson earned his living as a writer and an independent scholar with stints at various American universities. In the late 1970s, he emerged as a vocal critic of Britain's security-state. In his defense of civil liberties, he drew on the history of the "freeborn" Briton and the long struggle to establish the independence of the jury system.<sup>109</sup> During the 1980s, Thompson's life was dominated by his role in the European peace movement, triggered by plans to site American cruise missiles in Britain.<sup>110</sup> As the moral leader of the movement for nuclear disarmament, he became a national figure, delivering impassioned speeches at public rallies and appearing regularly on television and radio. His historical and literary scholarship was put on hold. Between 1971 and 1979, he reviewed successive volumes of the collective works of Coleridge, and from the late 1980s, he wrote two lengthy review essays on Wordsworth and Godwin for the *London Review of Books*; his final article on Thelwall was published posthumously.

Although the main lines of argument developed over his lifetime are fairly clear, we are left to ponder how Thompson would have pulled together and fleshed out his thinking on the Romantics in the age of revolution. There are some interesting hints. The literary historian, Marilyn Butler, recalled a conference in 1989 on the French Revolution as a literary event at which Thompson spoke on Wordsworth's 1802 patriotic sonnets, showing what might have been encompassed by the word "patriot."<sup>111</sup> Thompson spoke, as he usually did, from notes, and his thoughts were left unpublished. But one can well understand Thompson's attention to the historical and literary significance of the word "patriot" and the conflicted sense of national belonging set against the background of failed hopes for an internationalist cause of human liberation. He had, of course, experienced a similar sense of isolation from the nation, defending a cause in which he increasingly lost faith. Moreover, 1989 marked not only the 200th anniversary of the fall of the Bastille, but also, as Butler notes, the fall of the Berlin Wall. She might have added that, only a few years before, in 1982, the swelling of popular nationalist sentiment that accompanied the Falklands War reversed Margaret Thatcher's political fortunes. The "people" were seen as hijacked by the Right. Patriotism and constructions of national identity quickly moved onto the agenda of historians.<sup>112</sup> Thatcherite populism stood in

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reciprocities of paternalism formed a central theme in E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture* (London, 1991).

<sup>109</sup> See the essays collected in E. P. Thompson, *Writing by Candlelight* (London, 1980). His case for the importance of rule of law to democratic society was first articulated in E. P. Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters: The Origin of the Black Act* (London, 1975), 258–69.

<sup>110</sup> Palmer, *E. P. Thompson*, chap. 5; Michael Bess, *Realism, Utopia, and the Mushroom Cloud: Four Activist Intellectuals and Their Strategies for Peace, 1945–1989* (Chicago, 1993), 136–54; Meredith Veldman, *Fantasy, the Bomb, and the Greening of Britain: Romantic Protest, 1945–1980* (Cambridge, 1994), chap. 9. For his writings from this period, see E. P. Thompson, *The Heavy Dancers* (London, 1985); and idem, *Double Exposure* (London, 1985).

<sup>111</sup> Marilyn Butler, "Thompson's Second Front," *History Workshop Journal* 39, no. 1 (Autumn 1995): 71–78.

<sup>112</sup> For the most prominent example, see Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven, 1992). See also Raphael Samuel, ed., *Patriotism and the Making and Unmaking of British National*

stark contrast to the fusion of patriotic sentiment and socialist aspiration that Thompson had felt during and directly after the Second World War.

In the event, Thompson was out of sync with many in his audience. According to Butler, “The more sophisticated literary critics ... were not after dead writers’ intended meanings ... but after their unconscious: their self-delusions and linguistic self-betrays.”<sup>113</sup> Thompson was a contextual critic whose readings aimed to establish or fix meanings; he did not read for “displacement” or slippage in the text, for how, in Jerome McGann’s interpretation, romanticism suppressed its own historical context or, as Marjorie Levinson put it, for how the literary work “speaks of one thing because it cannot articulate another.”<sup>114</sup> This is merely to say that Thompson was an “old” historical rather than a “new historicist” critic.<sup>115</sup> He was an astute reader, alert to the measure of tone and nuance, to the sound on the page; he cast a wide textual net, from his interpretation of Methodist hymns, to his study of anonymous threatening letters, to his chapter-long reading of Blake’s poem, “London.” He sought meanings that were available to contemporary readers, believing that such meanings could be accessed through close, contextual reading of poetry just as he believed that, by attentive “listening,” archival material could speak to and eventually through the historian.<sup>116</sup> A parallel can perhaps be drawn with Wordsworth’s view of the poet’s situation as “translator” who necessarily falls short of language fitting the passion that “the real passion itself suggests.”<sup>117</sup>

Wordsworth’s return to the nation, his revived feeling for England, is a theme we might expect Thompson to have developed. While radical constructions of “patriotism” drew on England’s libertarian history, among supporters of the French Revolution, older chauvinistic and imperialist associations with the word “patriot” were supplanted by a cosmopolitan allegiance based on the universal principles of reason, liberty, and human benevolence. For Thelwall, to be a “patriot” in the narrow sense of mere loyalty to one’s own nation possessed no claim to virtue; it was a “contemptible and illiberal” feeling. A letter to Eaton’s *Politics for the People* observed that there were “few prejudices so firmly riveted in the hearts of men” as the attachments “to particular spots of earth, dignified with the founding name of patriotism,” sentiments opposed to the true principle of “philanthropy.”<sup>118</sup> By 1802, such universal values were difficult to sustain; the claim to citizenship of the

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*Identity*, 3 vols. (London, 1989); Hugh Cunningham, “The Language of Patriotism, 1750–1914,” *History Workshop Journal* 12, no. 1 (Autumn 1981): 8–33; and David Eastwood, “Patriotism and the English State in the 1790s,” in *The French Revolution and British Popular Politics*, ed. Mark Philp (Cambridge, 1991), 146–68.

<sup>113</sup> Butler, “Thompson’s Second Front,” 71–72.

<sup>114</sup> McGann, introduction to *Romantic Ideology*; Marjorie Levinson, *Wordsworth’s Great Period Poems* (Cambridge, 1986), 9, and introduction. See also Alan Liu, *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (Stanford, 1989). Compare M. H. Abrams, “On Political Readings of *Lyrical Ballads*,” in *Doing Things with Texts: Essays in Criticism and Critical Theory*, ed. Michael Fischer (New York, 1989), 364–91.

<sup>115</sup> Thompson aligned himself with the work of David Erdman and Carl Woodring. Of the “new historicists,” he shared most in common with Butler.

<sup>116</sup> Thompson, “Interview,” 14. For Thompson as a reader of texts, see Luke Spencer, “The Uses of Literature: Thompson as Writer, Reader and Critic,” in Fieldhouse and Taylor, eds., *E. P. Thompson*, 96–117.

<sup>117</sup> Wordsworth, Preface to Brett and Jones, eds., *Lyrical Ballads*, 257.

<sup>118</sup> *Tribune* 1, 18 April 1795, 132–33; “Plato,” *Politics for the People*, vol. 2, no. 4 (1794): 49–52. In his article, “Modern Patriotism,” Coleridge questioned Thelwall’s status as a “patriot,” an early indication of

world had lost its appeal. With the short-lived Peace of Amiens, Wordsworth returned to France, although he went no further than Calais.<sup>119</sup> The Calais sonnets record not only Wordsworth's yearnings for England but also patriotic feelings in conflict. Wordsworth's alienation from France is clear, but his nationalism is qualified: "Far, far more abject is thine enemy ... / Oh grief! that Earth's best hopes rest all with Thee!" Yet with the resumption of war and the threat of invasion, Wordsworth joined the Grasmere volunteers, a decisive step in resolving his ambivalent feelings toward the British nation. The same month he composed his sonnet, "To the Men of Kent, October 1803," concluding, "In Britain is one breath; We are with you now from Shore to Shore:— / Ye Men of Kent, 'tis Victory or Death!"<sup>120</sup>

In assessing the impact of the French Revolution, Thompson stressed that, whereas in France the cause of the Revolution became "entwined with that of national pride," the betrayal of its own principles had "traumatic consequences" on international Jacobinism, adding, "one thinks of Wordsworth at Calais, lamenting the imprisonment of Citizen Toussaint, the reinstatement of slavery in the French West Indies."<sup>121</sup> The reference is not pursued, but prompts us to ask what it meant for Wordsworth to hail the black revolutionary and victim of Napoleon's treachery as liberty's lost hero, and what bearing his lament might have on shifting constructions of nationalist and humanitarian sentiment. Wordsworth's elegy, "To Toussaint L'Ouverture," is accompanied by a sonnet entitled simply "September 1st, 1802." Sailing home from Calais with his sister, Dorothy, Wordsworth notices "a fellow passenger" sitting silently: "She was a Negro Woman driv'n from France, / Rejected like all others of that race." In contrast to the abstractions associated with the fallen leader—"Thy friends are exultations, agonies, / And love, and Man's unconquerable mind"—the woman of color is observed with directness and compassion for an ordinary person's dignity and sad fate: "Dejected, meek, yet pitifully tame, / She sate, from notice turning not away."<sup>122</sup> The two figures, Toussaint and an unnamed woman, are linked to the oppressions of slavery and of race and to the betrayed promise of universal liberty and equality.

Ten years earlier, in December 1792, Wordsworth had reluctantly returned from France, self-isolated from his native country. In *The Prelude*, he arrives to find "a whole nation crying in one voice" against "the traffickers in negro blood." The defeated effort to abolish the slave trade, "Had called back old forgotten principles" to the nation's conscience and "diffused some truths / And more of virtuous feelings through the heart / Of the English people" (*Prelude*, bk. 10, 205–07). At the time,

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their differences over religion. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Watchman*, no. 3, 17 March 1796, in *Collected Works of Samuel Coleridge*, vol. 2, *The Watchman*, ed. Lewis Patton (London, 1970), 98–100.

<sup>119</sup> Wordsworth went in order to visit his former lover, Annette Vallon, and their daughter, Caroline.

<sup>120</sup> William Wordsworth, *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford, 2000) 275, 289. For "national defense patriotism," the feeling that best describes Wordsworth's reaction, see J. E. Cookson, *The British Armed Nation, 1793–1815* (Oxford, 1997), introduction and chap. 8. For the difference between the invasion threats of 1797–1798 and 1803–1805, see also Mark Philp, "Introduction: The British Response to the Threat of Invasion, 1797–1815," in Philp, ed., *Resisting Napoleon*, 1–17.

<sup>121</sup> Thompson, "Disenchantment or Default?," 70.

<sup>122</sup> Wordsworth, *William Wordsworth*, 282–83. A recent statute banned all persons of color from France's continental territories. My comments draw on Cora Kaplan, "Black Heroes/White Writers: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the Literary Imagination," *History Workshop Journal* 46, no. 1 (Autumn 1998): 35–62.

this defeat did not trouble Wordsworth, who placed his faith in the success of the French Revolution, feeling “And this most rotten branch of human shame / ... Would fall together with its parent tree”<sup>123</sup> (*Prelude*, bk. 10, 225–27). In 1802, things looked very different. The Wordsworths were now close friends with the abolitionist leader, Thomas Clarkson, himself an early supporter of the French Revolution, and his wife, Catherine. The abolitionists scored their first victory in limiting the British slave trade with the government’s decision to restrict the sale of crown lands in the newly ceded colony of Trinidad. As the French reimposed slavery in their Caribbean colonies and attempted to reconquer Saint-Domingue, Britain appeared to represent humanity’s best hope. If the Revolution was to become central to French nationalism, then the abolition of the slave trade and slavery became matters of British national pride.

It is difficult to work from an absent text; we cannot determine whether Thompson would have addressed the tangled relationships among slave abolition, patriotism, and the Romantics. We know that popular support for the abolitionist movement does not figure in *The Making*. William Wilberforce appears only in the role of “Pitt’s moral lieutenant” and arch-evangelical opponent of Jacobinism.<sup>124</sup> Citizen Equiano receives no mention. It can be argued that, by deflecting attention and support from the cause of popular radicalism, slave abolition ultimately helped to conserve domestic authority and to consolidate nationalist feeling. Nonetheless, during the 1790s, British abolitionism momentarily brought plebeian radicals together with middle-class reformers and crossed paths with the young Romantics.<sup>125</sup> Thus Thelwall’s denunciations of the trade and support for racial equality were matched in 1795 by Coleridge’s lecture at Bristol’s Assembly coffee house, where he rebuked his audience for asking God to bless their meals, for “A part of that Food among most of you is sweetened with the Blood of the Murdered.” The power of “truth-painting Imagination” is politically charged to present the horrors of slavery and turn the heart to benevolent action. “True Benevolence,” Coleridge declared, “is the only possible Basis of Patriotism.”<sup>126</sup> In conjunction with Coleridge’s lecture, Southey wrote his poem, “To the Genius of Africa,” calling on the forces of slave rebellion, “Avenging Power, awake! Arise.”<sup>127</sup>

However he might have dealt with the meanings of patriotism, we do know that Thompson intended to include a chapter on the “woman question” in the 1790s, provisionally titled “The defeat of the rights of women.” According to Dorothy

<sup>123</sup> Wordsworth, *Prelude*, 410–12.

<sup>124</sup> Thompson, *Making*, 402, 146–47.

<sup>125</sup> Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 1776–1848* (London, 1988), chap. 4; Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston, 2000), 334–41. For a typical example associating abolitionists with “Jacobins,” see *A Very New Pamphlet Indeed! ... Containing Some Strictures on the English Jacobins* (London, 1792), 3–5.

<sup>126</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Lecture on the Slave-Trade,” in Patton and Mann, eds., *Collected Works*, 1:248–49. For Thelwall, see *Tribune* 3 (1795), xxxv, 47–48. See also Marcus Wood, *Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography* (Oxford, 2002), 169–80.

<sup>127</sup> *Robert Southey: Poetic Works, 1793–1810*, ed. Lynda Pratt (London, 2004), 5:54–56; Chine Sonoi, “Southey’s Radicalism and the Abolitionist Movement,” *Wordsworth Circle* 42, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 22–26. See also David Geggus, “British Opinion and the Emergence of Haiti, 1791–1805,” in *Slavery and British Society, 1776–1846*, ed. James Walvin (Baton Rouge, 1982), 123–49.

Thompson, the subject was to have formed “an integral part of the proposed volume.” In a short fragment from a lecture on women’s rights, Thompson proposed, “Something large was happening in feminine sensibility among the middle classes in the 1790s—perhaps even beginning to happen between men and women. But scarcely had this small wave begun to rise and crest than it was overtaken by the far deeper wave of counter-revolution.” Here Thompson might have told a different story to the masculine epic of class, alert to female sensibility, personal suffering, and loss.<sup>128</sup> Tantalizingly, Thompson suggests moving beyond the well-studied figure of Wollstonecraft and several other female writers such as Mary Hays, Anna Barbauld, and Mary Robinson to get at a wider shift in sensibility to be found through the correspondence columns of journals, letters, private diaries, poetry, and novels. Thompson more typically turned to the work of canonical (male) authors, but the literary output of a “lost generation” of female writers, their reputations tainted and works buried throughout the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries, constitutes an archive of brilliance, disenchantment, and personal struggle.<sup>129</sup> Such a study would have taken Thompson into the ranks of rational Dissent, including early female supporters of anti-slavery and a small group of men who endorsed women’s rights.<sup>130</sup> With a few notable exceptions, the rights of women and the cause of sexual liberation were not taken up among artisan radicals, but were, as Thompson acknowledges, mainly championed “within a small intellectual coterie” closely associated with Wollstonecraft and Godwin.<sup>131</sup> As can be gleaned from his review of Linda Colley’s book, *Britons*, rather than celebrating the activities of patriotic women as opening space for female participation in the nation, he underscores the “profoundly anti-feminist” side of loyalist culture, viewing the terms of inclusion as unfavorable to women. Maintaining a sharp distinction between the forces of radicalism and reaction, Hannah More remains “the well-supported anti-Jacobin and anti-feminist polemicist.”<sup>132</sup> Thompson never let readers forget the coercive side of patriotism and the active role that reaction and state repression played in stifling dissent.

Thompson reported that, if there were, in fact, a large number of lesser Mary Wollstonecrafts, then he had not found them. But in his review of Claire Tomalin’s biography, he countered the image of Wollstonecraft as an isolated thinker and criticized

<sup>128</sup> See Carolyn Steedman, “A Weekend with Elektra,” *Literature and History* 6, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 17–42; and idem, “The Price of Experience: Women and the Making of the English Working Class,” *Radical History Review*, no. 59 (Spring 1994): 108–19.

<sup>129</sup> E. P. Thompson, afterword to Thompson, *Romantics*, 221–23. For female literary casualties, see Johnston, *Unusual Suspects*, 113–16, and chap. 7, on Helen Maria Williams. See also Gary Kelly, *Women, Writing, and Revolution, 1790–1827* (Oxford, 1993).

<sup>130</sup> See Clare Midgley, *Women against Slavery: The British Campaigns, 1780–1870* (London, 1992), chap. 2; Moira Ferguson, *Subject to Others: British Women Writers and Colonial Slavery, 1670–1834* (London, 1992), chaps. 7–11; and Arianne Chernock, *Men and the Making of Modern British Feminism* (Stanford, 2010).

<sup>131</sup> Thompson, *Making*, 162–63. See also Andrew Cayton, *Love in the Time of Revolution: Transatlantic Radicalism and Historical Change, 1793–1818* (Chapel Hill, 2013).

<sup>132</sup> E. P. Thompson, “Which Britons?” (1993), in Thompson, *Persons and Polemics*, 321–32; Colley, *Britons*, chap. 6. See also Caroline Franklin, “Romantic Patriotism as Feminist Critique of Empire,” in *Women, Gender and Enlightenment*, ed. Sarah Knott and Barbara Taylor (Basingstoke, 2005), 551–64. For the feminist version of More, see, for example, Anne K. Mellor, *Mothers of the Nation: Women’s Political Writing in England, 1780–1830* (Bloomington, 2000), chap. 1.

biographers fascinated by her intimate life at the expense of her standing as an intellectual to be placed in the company of Paine, Godwin, Thelwall, Flower, and Coleridge: “she measured herself as an equal in the republic of the intellect.” And yet “she was reminded by every fact of nature and of society that she was a woman ... a human being exceptionally exposed within a feminine predicament.”<sup>133</sup> Wollstonecraft’s posthumous fate stands merely as the most symbolically charged sign of defeat. Five years after her death in 1798, her close friend and fellow feminist Mary Hays omitted Wollstonecraft from a list of three hundred “illustrious and celebrated” women covered in her six-volume *Female Biography*. The feminist tradition was not entirely extinguished; it was carried forward by Shelley, Owenite socialists, and radical Unitarians.<sup>134</sup> In her own lifetime, Wollstonecraft experienced the disenchantment of the age and suffered deep personal disappointment—“a female Werther” in Godwin’s estimate. Had she lived, she would perhaps have persuaded Godwin to start life anew in America, despite her disillusionment with the republic’s growing commercialism. As Thompson concludes, she never abandoned “the resilient assent to new experience.” In her *Letters Written during A Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796), she expresses a feeling of romantic renewal akin to the Pantisocratic vision of primitive independence and virtue. Deciding to press northward from Christiana, she envisions a utopian retreat among the farmers of Norway’s back-country.

The description I received of them carried me back to the fables of the golden age; independence and virtue; affluence without vice; cultivation of mind, without depravity of heart; with ‘ever smiling liberty’, the nymph of the mountain.—I want faith! My imagination hurries me forward to seek an asylum in such a retreat from all the disappointments I am threatened with; but reason drags me back whispering that the world is still the world.<sup>135</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Thompson was often enough drawn back by whispers “that the world is still the world.” A current ran between his writings on the Romantics and his own politics, a dialogue was maintained between past and present, a comradeship shared with Blake and Morris, and more tentatively with Wordsworth. As an intellectual who experienced his fair share of disenchantment, there are various moments in Thompson’s life that might be revisited—1939, 1948–51, 1956, 1968, 1989—points that tested left-wing beliefs and allegiances. In 1957, he observed, “Withdrawal from the extreme left has been a central motif within our culture ever since the French Revolution left the Solitary meditating upon a creed... ‘the light of false philosophy.’”

<sup>133</sup> E. P. Thompson, “Mary Wollstonecraft” (1974), in Thompson, *Persons and Polemics*, 1–9. From the large literature on Wollstonecraft, see Barbara Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (Cambridge, 2003), particularly chap. 6.

<sup>134</sup> Taylor, *Wollstonecraft*, 188, 246–55; idem, *Eve and the New Jerusalem: Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1983); Kathryn Gleadle, *The Early Feminists: Radical Unitarians and the Emergence of the Women’s Rights Movement, 1831–51* (Basingstoke, 1995).

<sup>135</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin, *A Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark and Memoirs of the Author of “The Rights of Woman,”* ed. Richard Holmes (Harmondsworth, 1987), letter 14, 148–49, and editor’s introduction, 20–21.

And then he made clear, “I remain a Communist.”<sup>136</sup> One is reminded of Thelwall, who in 1796 assumed the name “Jacobin” because it was “fixed upon us, as a stigma, by our enemies” and because despite the “sanguinary ferocity of the late Jacobins ... yet their principles ... are the most consonant with my ideas of reason, and the nature of man.”<sup>137</sup> Under the banner of “socialist humanism,” Thompson moved about as far as one could from Marxism while maintaining an allegiance to its main goals.

In 1973, Thompson published his prolix open letter to Leszek Kolakowski as a way to break out of the political isolation that followed the collapse of the first New Left, clarifying his allegiance to Marxism as “a tradition.” He also took the occasion to rearticulate his view of the romantic tradition’s centrality to a national culture of opposition. He confessed himself less alarmed than Kolakowski “to observe ‘the growing romantic nostalgia for a pre-industrial society,’” discerning an “affirmative impulse” beneath seemingly “irrational” forms reacting against technocratic society. He went on to add, “Romanticism in this country offered a more radical criticism of the values of industrial capitalism than you seem to suppose; and Wordsworth attained in *The Prelude* to an insight into the *égalité* of human worth which one would gladly see appropriated to a socialist culture.”<sup>138</sup> Thompson’s “Englishness” is on full display, a strain of nationalism that exposed him to criticism from the Left. English literature, particularly the romantic tradition, provided a national frame of cultural reference, a common literary language receding in its common resonance. Yet in addressing the Polish dissident, Thompson showed his dual identification with socialist internationalism and English popular nationalism, mirroring earlier tensions in the Communist left’s project of cultural appropriation.<sup>139</sup> Similarly, while defending history and the category of “experience” (or “the *dialogue* between social being and social consciousness”) against Althusserian structuralism, he did not reject theory or structural analysis *tout court* but rather opposed a level of static abstraction divorced from political activism and “real” processes of change.<sup>140</sup>

The general isolation of left-wing intellectuals from larger popular movements, their inability or disinclination to engage or learn from the experience or practice of ordinary people, was a recurrent complaint of Thompson’s. In the early 1980s, when Thompson reconnected with the grassroots as a leader of the European movement for nuclear disarmament, it was as a peace activist and an outspoken critic of

<sup>136</sup> Thompson, “Socialism and the Intellectuals,” 31.

<sup>137</sup> John Thelwall, *Rights of Nature, Against the Usurpations of Establishments ... Part the Second* (London, 1796), 32.

<sup>138</sup> E. P. Thompson, “An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski” (1973), in Thompson, *Poverty of Theory*, 92–192, at 176, responding to Leszek Kolakowski, “Intellectuals against Intellect,” *Daedalus* 101, no. 3 (Summer 1972): 1–15. The passage might be compared to Herbert Marcuse, of whom Thompson was critical, discussing the reduction of “the romantic space of the imagination.” Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston, 1964), 195–96.

<sup>139</sup> See Matthews, *New Left*, chap. 3; and Anderson, *Arguments*, particularly chap. 5. For a different take on Thompson’s “Englishness,” see Priya Satia, “Bryon, Gandhi and the Thompsons: The Making of British Social History and the Unmaking of Indian History,” *History Workshop Journal* 81, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 135–70.

<sup>140</sup> Thompson, “Poverty of Theory,” 196, 199–201; idem, “Interview,” 17; idem, “The Politics of Theory,” in *People’s History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Raphael Samuel (London, 1981), 396–408. Compare Stuart Hall, “In Defence of Theory,” in Samuel, ed., *People’s History*, 378–85.

Britain's security state. He became less inclined to describe himself as a Marxist, although his experience in the Communist Party had left an enduring mark. By the end of his life, he was apt to call himself a "Morrissist."<sup>141</sup> He was often criticized as an "idealist" prone to "voluntarism" or seen as a lone romantic figure of the Left. In a sense, he spent the better part of his life attempting to reconcile the traditions of the British Left and romanticism, to repair the loss he felt had been suffered during the age of revolution, and to regain the capacity to imagine that which is "not yet."

<sup>141</sup> See Thompson's roundtable comments, "Agendas for Radical History," *Radical History Review*, no. 36 (Fall 1986): 26–45, at 37–42. See also Michael Kenny, "Socialism and the Romantic 'Self': The Case of Edward Thompson," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 5, no. 1 (February 2000): 105–27.