DEFAMILIARIZATIONS

"Postscript: 1976": E. P. Thompson and the River of Fire

KENT PUCKETT

> Truth to tell, it isn't that we are afraid to produce a general blueprint for a future society—such things are to be found, and to be found in the political sphere. It is the *details* of that society we will not give, and this is where utopian thinking and desire is lacking, for utopias—this is their particular nature—are *minutely detailed*. Utopian thinking imagines timetables, places, practices; it is *romanesque*—novelistic—like the fantasy, of which it is ultimately simply the political form.
>
> —Roland Barthes, "Utopias" (1974)

THIS new section of *Victorian Literature and Culture* focuses on apparently minor works of criticism, works that have fallen out of view but that might deserve another look. I want to talk about an almost aggressively minor instance of very Victorian scholarship, minor not only because it isn't often read but also because minorness is built into its very design: E. P. Thompson's "Postscript: 1976," a longish essay that followed the second and revised edition of his 1955 biography, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*. When seen in the reciprocal contexts of Thompson's career and the story of the British left (when, in other words, theory is seen not as opposed to but rather as a part of history), the apparently minor and belated qualities of Thompson's postscript emerge as a source of critical and even utopian promise. I want to argue that Thompson's lifelong engagement with the life of William Morris and with Morris's late conversion to socialism led him to a

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powerful and counterintuitive account of the lived threshold (what he and Morris call the "river of fire") as essential to the methods of history and historical materialism.

Although Thompson's close engagement with the later part of his career revealed Morris as central to the intellectual history of radical and anti-imperialist thought (and not simply as "an eccentric, isolated figure, personally-admirable, but whose major thought was wrong or irrelevant and long left behind by events"), *William Morris*'s apparently incommensurate appeals to English literary and historical scholarship, on one hand, and to the practical goals of "really existing socialism," on the other, may have obscured both the book's argument and its address, a fact that, in turn, may have contributed to its relatively minor reputation.[1] As Perry Anderson suggests in his 1980 essay on the Morris book and "Postscript: 1976": "My recollection is that, strangely, this book never acquired the same centrality or currency within the New Left—at least its youngest recruits—as Williams's *Culture and Society* or *The Long Revolution*, or even Hoggart's *Uses of Literacy*. Looking back, this seems incomprehensible. Probably, however, the accidents of dating and idiom had something to do with their different fortunes."[2]

In terms of idiom, then: literary biography is a much if undeservedly maligned genre, particularly when seen in the light of frankly muddled feelings about the evidentiary value of authorial intention and the politics of lingering still with the lives of those once referred to as "great men." With notable exceptions (Boswell's *Johnson,* Gaskell's *Brontë*, Edel's *James*, Ellmann's *Joyce*, Sartre's *The Idiot of the Family*, maybe Thompson's *Morris* are a few), literary biographies are often taken (and taken for granted) as products of a basic, difficult, and slightly embarrassing labor that stands behind or prior to or quietly alongside the freestanding work of original scholarship or critical interpretation. (It is, perhaps, telling that the postcritical moment hasn't yet called for a return to that most apparently unsuspicious of modes, biographical criticism. Is it, one wonders, pre- or postcritical to ask, "What porridge had John Keats?") And, as important as Thompson's biography is, its place in the overlapping contexts of his subsequent work as a radical historian and the rise of the New Left and cultural studies has been overshadowed by the justly immense reputation of 1963's *The Making of the English Working Class*, a text that, along with *Culture and Society* and *The Uses of Literacy*, is invoked by rote as a trinitarian presence in the origin story of British cultural studies.

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As opposed to that later, eclectic work of critical antiheroism, the earlier book must come across as too limited, too particular, too *invested* in the experiences, idiosyncrasies, and desires of its subject. And, although he wrote it while working alongside and learning from Dona Torr, Maurice Dobb, Eric Hobsbawm, and the other members of the Communist Party Historians' Group, the biography doesn't really do the "history from below" that one associates with Thompson.[3] After all, given his subject's polymathic facility, his famous friends, his social eccentricities, his domestic foibles, and, frankly, his considerable inherited wealth, it is hard to imagine Thompson's first book as having much to say about the structure of feelings belonging to anyone other than William Morris.

And if a literary biography can thus look like a necessarily minor idiom, a scholarly postscript to a literary biography must seem even more so. A scholarly postscript to a literary biography is, as it were, a doubly parasitic form insofar as it relies on that which has already battened on the life of another. Rather than making an original contribution, a postscript is typically written to justify yet another edition, to take the measure of subsequent scholarship, and to offer a few fresh ideas about the shifting consequence of the work and the work's subject. In fact, Thompson's postscript dutifully acknowledges, with varying degrees of admiration and irritation, recent writing on Morris by J. W. Hulse, Stanley Pierson, Paul Meier, Miguel Abensour, John Goode, and others; he registers with resigned contempt the Cold War context of his book's first chilly reception; and he notices briefly that twenty years of writing on Morris have produced some good things on art and design and not much good on poetry.

Fair enough. I want, however, to argue, starting with its title's seemingly unnecessary number, that Thompson's "Postscript: 1976" might be read as a significant contribution to the theory and practice of what Thompson understood as historical materialism; I want to argue, too, that it helps reveal what was already more than merely instrumental about the 1955 biography: "But what," Thompson wondered in 1976, "if my book was not a quarry but a construction meriting attention in its own right?" (768). That is, and in ways that tacitly evoke the evolution of Thompson's sustained thinking about Morris, his arguments within and against the British and the European left, and the influence of his work with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, Thompson uses the compressed and minor idiom of the scholarly postscript to a literary biography to work once again through problems of history, politics, and

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art that had occupied the whole of his career. Writing the life of William Morris forced Thompson to confront messy relations—a threshold—between concept and fact, past and present that formed the basis of his historiography and, as we will see, his engagement with the theory and practice of historical materialism.

So, what does the "1976" in "Postscript: 1976" mean? For one, the incorporated date marks out the simple but hard fact that one version of E. P. Thompson is looking back across a temporal divide—across the threshold of a single political, intellectual, and personal event—at another version of E. P. Thompson; he is looking back at himself when his career, his education, his investments were at a significantly different but ultimately related place.[4] In 1956, a year after the publication of *William Morris* and at the beginning of the twenty-one years that separate biography and postscript, Thompson broke publicly and acrimoniously from the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), a move that both led him and others to establish what would become the New Left and shaped his subsequent efforts to see Morris, William Blake, and others as offering a humanistic and particularly British alternative to Stalinism and its ideological legacy, a project that runs through his own early responses to the Morris book, to *The Making of the English Working Class* and the polemical essays of the 1950s and '60s, and then on to "Postscript: 1976" and "The Poverty of Theory or An Orrery of Errors" (1978), his livid essay on Louis Althusser and his status as (for Thompson) a problematic touchstone for the "new" New Left.[5]

The highlighted material specificity of the printed number "1976" encourages us to look more closely at the other moments that punctuate the genetic development of *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*. There is Thompson's early and polemical 1951 address to the National Cultural Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain, "William Morris and the Moral Issues Today," in which he uses the very English figure of Morris to argue against the Americanization of social and political life in Britain (anticipating Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* as well as the anger of the Angry Young Men).[6] There is the text of the first 1955 edition of the work, published by Lawrence & Wishart, a publishing house then affiliated with the CPGB; there is also Thompson's wary 1959 defense of the book as delivered to the William Morris Society. And then there is, as we have seen, the book's second, significantly revised edition, which includes "Postscript: 1976" and is informed by Thompson's experience as one of the founders of the New Left and *The New Left Review* as well as his subsequent and largely self-imposed intellectual

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exile. We could also track *William Morris* beyond 1976 to see how these several versions of Morris and his Romantic rejection of system still shaped Thompson's thinking in 1978's *The Poverty of Theory*, in which he casts the New Left's attachment to Althusser as a voguish betrayal of values he associates with Morris. Whereas, he argues, Althusser would reduce anything and everything human to an expression of bourgeois ideology, Morris took full stock of human agency as a real problem for history and theory. "I pondered," says Morris in a line Thompson endorses, "all these things, and how men fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name."[7] With all that said, the self-evident historical continuity of these numbers (1951, 1955, 1959, 1976, 1978) only begins to get at their possible connotative value and, more to the point, the meaning of "1976."

To return then to that titular number: in addition to calling our attention to the general if uncertain value of specific years to the historian as well as to special significance of dates that serve as quilting points fixing the history of a book to the history of the left in Britain, we might see other, more obscure reasons behind Thompson's decision to foreground 1976.[8] Thompson begins the postscript, "In twenty-one years (the interval between the book's first publication and this revised edition) the terrain of scholarship changes, and so also do the preoccupations of scholars" (763). For one, the interval between 1955 and 1976 is meaningful insofar as "twenty-one" is not only a historically neutral fact but also a span that carries symbolic value as a biographical index of development. Seen, that is, within the cultural context of European literature and the bildungsroman, turning twenty-one stands not only for the brute fact of one's biological age but also for a special and overdetermined relation to maturity, possibility, the past as past, the present as full, and the future as rich with potential. In *Père Goriot*, Rastignac's moment of greatest triumph turns on the talismanic power of his age: "Eugène threw down the hundred francs on the same number as his age, twenty-one. A cry of amazement went up before he had time to get his bearings. He had won without knowing it."[9] At the beginning of *Emma*, we're informed that "Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her."[10]

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It could not have been lost on Thompson, a very literary historian, that including a year in the title of his postscript would call attention to the age of his book, an age bound up with a range of ideas about human potential, political futurity, and a developmental logic of commitment and conversion that underwrites his biography. In addition to making much of the fact that Morris, as apparently evergreen as Goethe, made himself into a socialist at fifty, Thompson begins a section on Morris's early writing and his past-perfect conversion to medievalism like this: "*A Dream* was written when Morris was twenty-one: the year, 1855" (7). The sentence's rhetorically heavy use of the colon (it sounds less like a history book and more like the History Channel) anticipates the punctuated structure of the title, "Postscript: 1976," and perhaps reveals a feeling of occult fellowship between the historian writing in 1955 and the artist writing exactly a century before.

Maybe. But can it really mean anything that, when Morris discovered the past as a model for the future (a moment that anticipates and, as it were, *announces* his conversion to socialism thirty years later), he was twenty-one, and that he turned twenty-one exactly one hundred years before the appearance of *William Morris*, and that Thompson's "Postscript: 1976" appeared exactly twenty-one years after that? In the nature of things, I want to say both that it can't mean anything and that it must nonetheless have meant something to Thompson and thus should, after all, mean something to us. This idea, that Thompson extravagantly dated his postscript so as to be able to evoke his Morris book as a kind of developing subject, as a nearly living thing that had, as it were, come into its own over the course of twenty-one years, is even more suggestive given the biography's unique relation to Thompson's other books. Unlike *The Making of the English Working Class* or *Whigs and Hunters* or *Witness Against the Beast*, *William Morris* was written *before* the defining event of Thompson's political and intellectual life: his 1956 split with the CPGB. And, although that book was written before the break, Thompson does not in turn break with the book; in spite of everything, he remained committed to Morris and to his early account of him.

Thompson's reasons for leaving the party are familiar enough: following the revelations of Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" to the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in February 1956 and the Soviet repression of the Hungarian Revolution in October and November, Thompson, along with many, many others, resigned his party membership; he went on to co-found, first, *The New Reasoner* in 1957 and then, in 1960, *The New Left Review*.[11] Writing on

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the eve of his departure and in the short, written-to-the-moment essay, "Through the Smoke of Budapest," Thompson criticizes the party in terms that both recall Morris's Romantic rejection of mechanism and anticipate his later, vituperative attack on Althusser and structuralism in *The Poverty of Theory*:

> And the mechanical theory of human consciousness is wrong: the theory that historical science "can become as precise a science as, let us say, biology," the subordination of the imaginative and moral faculties to political and administrative authority is wrong: the elimination of moral criteria from political judgment is wrong: fear of independent thought, the deliberate encouragement of anti-intellectual trends among the people is wrong: the mechanical personification of unconscious class forces, the belittling of the conscious processes of intellectual and spiritual conflict, all this is wrong.[12]

There's far too much to say about all this, about the specific sources and sometimes wild animus of Thompson's turn from the party; about his sustained, willfully provincial, and frankly eccentric efforts to see not only Morris but also Geoffrey Chaucer, Gerrard Winstanley, William Blake, Robert Owen, Tom Mann, and John Ruskin as unofficial or counterfactual English founders of a better if unrealized socialism; and about how Thompson's emerging sense of socialist possibility was increasingly shot through with a lurid, almost ecstatic sense of the impending reality of nuclear war. For now, and in the context of the relation between *William Morris* and "Postscript: 1976," I want to focus on the immanent developmental status of 1956 as break and how he imagines that break as both presciently announced by the biography and, as it were, retroactively informed by his assertively dated postscript to that biography.

In a way that recalls both the developmental logic of the bildungsroman and—not coincidentally—the Freudian account of psychosexual temporality, the second edition of *William Morris: From Romantic to Revolutionary* depends not only on a narrative of continuous development from one edition to the next but also on the existence of a threshold across which development must take place (*from* this *to* that) if it is to express something more than its ostensibly given significance. In Freud, this threshold is the "latency period," that gap or break separating infantile and mature sexuality across which psychoanalysis does its interpretive work. I've argued elsewhere that the middle space of that latency period is necessary to the Freudian phenomenon of *Nachträglichkeit* or, as Jean Laplanche casts it, "afterwardsness," the push and pull of psychic

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causality that makes the past as dependent on the present as the present is dependent on the past: according to Laplanche, a whole and significant psychic life is made up of "two scenes linked by associative chains, but also clearly separated from each other by *a temporal barrier which inscribes them in two different spheres of meaning*."[13] To analyze the past in relation to the present or the present in relation to the past requires the supposition of the existence of a difference—real or phantasmatic—that would stand between them. It is thanks to just such a difference that, for Erich Auerbach, antiquity's ordinary figure-of-speech becomes *figura*, a kind of transcendent and temporally suspended type of meaning that works across the textual divide between Old and New Testaments: "Figural interpretation establishes a connection between two events or persons, the first of which signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second encompasses or fulfills the first. The two poles of the figure are separate in time, but both, being real events or figures, are within time, within the stream of historical life."[14] The later, revised version of *William Morris* makes something like this difference an aspect of its material design: a *postscript* is, as its name suggests, an *after-writing*, a self-consciously late mode that calls attention to the dialectical temporality of a second edition and the history of which a second edition and a postscript are an index.

This might, understandably, seem far-fetched if it weren't for the fact that Morris and Thompson shared an acute sense of historical analysis as reliant on a particular and fraught complicity between the past and the present. Morris spent much of his last decade—a decade otherwise occupied with the day-to-day work of attending socialist committee meetings, giving political speeches, editing the radical weekly *Commonweal*, and so on—more or less inventing literary modes that allowed him to see a utopian challenge to the capitalist present as stretched between an imagined communitarian past (*The House of the Wolfings*, *The Roots of the Mountains*, *The Wood Beyond the World*) and a wholly dreamt, if also wholly embodied, vision of a better future (*News from Nowhere*). Writing recently about Morris's typographical experiments at the Kelmscott Press, John Plotz casts this back-and-forth tendency in Morris as an "emergent residualism," an effort "to keep something alive and yet to do so by actively embracing the coming age."[15] Indeed, in an 1893 preface to Robert Steele's *Medieval Lore from Bartholomew Anglicus*, Morris writes explicitly about looking back to move forward: "[A]t the present time those who take pleasure in studying the life of the Middle Ages are more commonly to be found in the ranks of those who are pledged

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to the forward movement of modern life. . . . In short, history, the new sense of modern times, the great compensation for the losses of the centuries, is now teaching us worthily, and making us feel that the past is not dead, but is living in us, and will be alive in the future which we are now helping to make."[16] Almost a century later and in terms that owe much to Morris, Thompson writes, "In the end we also will be dead, and our own lives will lie inert within the finished process, our intentions assimilated within a past event which we never intended. What we may hope is that the men and women of the future will reach back to us, will affirm and renew our meanings, and make our history intelligible within their own present tense. They alone will have the power to select from the many meanings offered by our quarrelling present, and to transmute some part of our process into their progress."[17]

Maybe even more important to the temporal logic I'm trying to tease out in between Thompson's 1955 and his 1976, between *William Morris* and its postscript, is their shared emphasis on what emerges as a figure or concept central to both: the so-called river of fire. In a chapter of that name, Thompson takes the following from an 1881 lecture Morris delivered on "the prospects of architecture in civilization":

> We of the English middle classes are the most powerful body of men that the world has yet seen. . . . And yet when we come to look the matter in the face, we cannot fail to see that even for us with all our strength it will be a hard matter to bring about that birth of the new art: for between us and that which is to be, if art is not to perish utterly, there is something alive and devouring; something as it were a river of fire that will put all that tries to swim across to a hard proof indeed, and scare from the plunge every soul that is not made fearless by desire of truth and insight of the happy days to come beyond. (244)

This "river of fire" is a lot of things here: it is the millenarian divide that, for Matthew Arnold, separated us from "the promised land, towards which criticism can only beckon"; it is an apocalyptic figure that hints at Morris's budding sense that social change would depend not on parliamentary reform but on revolutionary violence; it is an image that invokes epic promise, biblical dread, and personal sacrifice. If Morris was just beginning to see the river in 1881, within a few years he had, as Thompson describes it in 1955, both identified its real quality and crossed it: "What was the 'river of fire,' the something 'alive and devouring,' but the class division within society? Morris's conversion was a true conversion. It was not sudden, unannounced, a bolt out of the blue.

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It was in every sense a qualitative change in understanding and in action, for which all his life had prepared the way" (271).

In 1976, Thompson returns to the figure to claim it as part of his own historiographic method:

> . . . in what sense did the new Socialist theory (and its strategies) constitute a critical break, or rupture, not with this or that point of liberal Victorian thought, but with the organising ideas of bourgeois Liberalism? If we argue that it did constitute such a rupture, it need not follow that the new Socialist theory was in all respects mature, coherent and without self-contradiction; it follows only that at critical points, and in certain controlling ideas, this theory was antagonistic to bourgeois ideology, and, specifically, proposed not the amelioration of the liberal capitalist state but its revolutionary transformation. [. . .] I'm not suggesting that there are some talismanic concepts (Marx's theory of value, the theory of the State) which allow us instantly to identify whether the controlling theory of any person or group is "bourgeois" or "revolutionary." Analysis will never be as easy as that. Still less am I suggesting that there is one single, "correct," immanent Socialist orthodoxy. I'm arguing, as I argued twenty-one years ago, that there *is* a "river of fire." (776)

Thompson struggles here to balance his sense of the reality and force of Morris's conversion with his sense, too, that events in life and politics are always too complicated to reduce to a single point or straight line. The river of fire serves in that case to name both a fact and a problem, the fact of Morris's conceptual break with bourgeois liberalism and the problem of his many earnest, thwarted, even Quixotic efforts to realize the break as political practice.

When Thompson wrote about it in 1955, the river of fire was the biographical, the ideological, the moral threshold that Morris had to cross on his way to becoming a socialist; in 1976, however, it returns for Thompson as a privileged if almost hopelessly complex form of historical evidence. As was the case with both Freud and Auerbach, it appears as a methodological threshold that secures the truth of and makes meaningful and putatively whole a psychic system, a theological promise, or, as is the case here, a historical account. The river of fire returns, in other words, as a present structural precondition not only for the meaningful, which is to say the interpretable, relation between the finished past and the imagined future but also for the necessarily empirical and yet still evaluative logic of historical materialism: "Only we, who are now living, can give a 'meaning' to the past. But that past has always been, among other things, the result of an argument about values. In recovering that process, in showing how causation actually eventuated, we must,

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insofar as the discipline can enforce, hold our own values in abeyance. But once this history has been recovered, we are at liberty to offer our judgement upon it" (*Poverty of Theory*, 42).

The "river of fire" thus runs through Thompson's work and out into the wider world of socialist controversy in Britain. First, his work on Morris and the river of fire seemed both to anticipate and, later, to give him terms by which to understand his own defining break from the CPGB: "When, in 1956, my disagreements with orthodox Marxism became fully articulate, I fell back on modes of perception which I'd learned in those years of close company with Morris, and I found, perhaps, the will to go on arguing from the pressure of Morris behind me" (810).[18] In a way that significantly recalls the double logic of *afterwardsness*, Thompson falls back to move forward. Second, it returned for Thompson in 1976 as a way to think more about what it means to see the threshold as a privileged form of historical evidence and as a figure conceptually necessary to the theory and practice of a historical materialism based in human agency and experience. Finally, as we shall see, Thompson subsequently drew on the impacted temporal logic of the river of fire to offer what he understood as an empirical, which is to say historical, alternative to his *bête noire* Louis Althusser's account of the epistemological break.

Althusser, we know, insists in *For Marx* on the existence of an "epistemological break" in Marx's work, a divide that coincides with 1845 and *The German Ideology* and that marks out the difference between what he took as the ideological confusion of the early, humanist Marx and the subsequent appearance of Marxism as the achieved resolution of the *science* of historical materialism, on one hand, and the *philosophy* of dialectical materialism on the other. For Althusser, it was Marx's mature ability to move past the seductions of residual Romantic categories like alienation and reification that allowed him to break "radically with every theory that based history and politics on an essence of man" and, consequently, to form "a theory of history and politics based on radically new concepts: the concepts of social formation, productive forces, relations of production, superstructure, ideologies, determination in the last instance by the economy, specific determination of the other levels, etc."[19]

I want to point here to just one aspect of Thompson's angry, dismissive, and, despite all that, oddly sustained response to Althusser.[20] Although he disagrees with the content of Althusser's claim about the 1845 break, he does not in fact deny that a break occurred or that

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Marx—like Morris—had crossed something like a river of fire. As opposed, though, to seeing his break as a break away from the humanism of the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Thompson argues that the definitive threshold in Marx's work was his belated *rediscovery* of historical and, indeed, humanist particularity in the wake of his aborted and "obsessive" attempt at unalloyed "Political Economy" in the unfinished *Grundrisse*: "There is an important sense in which the movement of Marx's thought, in the *Grundrisse*, is locked inside *a static, anti-historical structure*" (*Poverty of Theory*, 61). When, in other words, Marx crossed the river that marked the difference between the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*, it was not away from but rather on toward complexity, particularity, and the productive inconsistency of a life—for Thompson an essentially human life—that will inevitably and aesthetically exceed even the most apparently complete theory or structure:

> This turning round, I am arguing, involved not only adding a historical dimension to the work, and much greater concrete exemplification (derived from empirical investigation) but also attempting to bring under control and reduce to the rational explication of process the "idealist" (even self-fulfilling, teleological) formulations derived from the abstractionist mode. What comes into *Capital*, in a new way, is a sense of history, and a concretion of exemplification (accompanied, we recall, by "extraneous" expressions of wrath). (*Poverty of Theory*, 65).

For Thompson, Marx's move is once again both a falling back and a moving forward, a "turning around" that fills the abstract space of the break with a content that is concrete, heterogeneous, and, for that reason, dialectical: "In taking us across a threshold, [Marx] leaves us at a door; we leave old problems behind, and we gain, exactly, a perspective upon the further range of problems ahead, some of which he could see, but few of which he could (in anticipation) solve" (*Poverty of Theory*, 169). Thompson's account of both Marx and Althusser is, of course, partial and polemical; there is, accordingly, much too much to say about the details of, the aggression in, and the investments revealed by his account. I need, in that case, to bracket many questions in order to bring us back to *William Morris* and "Postscript: 1976."[21]

Thompson's Marx is polymathic in his attention to the varied and "organic" matter of history; he is willfully and beautifully inconsistent in a way that makes *Capital* look less like *The Wealth of Nations* and more like *A Tale of a Tub*; and he runs over with a "wrath" that made him "a moralist in every stroke of his pen" (171).[22] If this doesn't—and

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it surely won't—sound like everyone's Marx, it for sure sounds like Thompson's Morris, "our greatest diagnostician of alienation": "In Morris's critique of capitalist society, there is no sense in which morality is seen as secondary, power and productive relations as primary. The ugliness of Victorian social relations and 'the vulgarities of civilization' were 'but the outward expression of the innate moral baseness into which we are forced by our present form of society.'"[23] For Thompson, "morality" is not only a disposition but also a way to recast the terms of once-hot disputes about base and superstructure: Thompson invokes Morris's morality and Marx's "wrath" to put affective and empirical pressure on the who-came-first causality of vulgar and even not-so-vulgar Marxisms.

In the end, Thompson brings *his* historical materialism, a method dependent on an organic relation between past and present that he claimed to find in both Morris and Marx, to bear on what he calls the "Marx/Morris argument." Was Morris really a Marxist? Was he a good or a bad Marxist? Did Morris become Marx when he crossed the river of fire? Or, in a strange inversion of the same historical logic, did Marx somehow become Morris *avant la lettre* when he crossed the humanist and historical threshold between the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*? Did Marx and Morris happen to end up in more or less the same place though at different times because they shared both a native tendency toward moral wrath and a complicated affinity for the aesthetics of European romanticism? Or is it precisely the affective and radical autonomy of *Morris*'s communism that one needed after Khrushchev, "the cult of the individual," Budapest, and the bomb?

In "Postscript: 1976," Thompson comes to another conclusion, one that manages both to encompass and to negate these possibilities: "[I]t should now be clear that there is a sense in which Morris, as a Utopian and a moralist, can never be assimilated to Marxism, not because of any contradiction of purposes but *because one may not assimilate desire to knowledge*, and because the attempt to do so is to confuse two different operative principles of culture. So that I've phrased the problem wrongly, and Marxism requires less a re-ordering of its parts than a sense of humility before those parts of culture which it can never order" (807; my emphasis). Thompson's new emphasis on "desire" in Morris comes, in part, from his reading of Miguel Abensour, who argues that the formal project of *News from Nowhere* is best understood in terms of its ironic or "experimental" "education of desire": "Utopian writing, the oblique path that is foundational by definition, aims to maximize the lateral implications; it thus opens a specific path to this unthought and unsaid

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of theoretical texts, as if utopia fulfills an insufficiency of the theoretical text through its dual movement of construction and obliteration."[24] It is here, in Thompson's late embrace of a humanist Marxism informed by Morris and willing to confront *desire* as a necessary and indigestible supplement to theory, that the river of fire appears implicitly in its third and last and most polemical form; in addition to its status as a biographical threshold and a methodological necessity, the river resurfaces here as a limit dialectically and even violently immanent to even the best theory of what life is or should be; indeed, in terms that recall the pre-Marxist energy of the early Lukács, the river of fire is life itself, life understood as that which cannot be captured by any but the most ironic of forms.

As Perry Anderson points out in his response to "Postscript: 1976," it is in this late and arguably irrational turn to desire as a ruling concept that Thompson stakes out a claim for the continued relevance of an oddly empirical (because peculiarly English) form of utopian thinking: "Morris's utopian communism, independently derived from a Romantic tradition, had a generosity and confidence of vision missing from the mainstream of historical materialism, then or later—whose very definition as a science has restricted its human range."[25] Anderson goes on to argue that Thompson's fuzzy and uncharacteristically faddish reliance on "a fashionable philosophy of Parisian irrationalism" undermines his otherwise strong argument for the significance of Morris's thought.[26] This is, I think, partly fair, insofar as the unreconstructed and abstract language of desire can obscure what is peculiar to both Morris and Thompson: their efforts to imagine historical materialism as a synthesis of theory and practice, of the conceptual and the empirical. What Anderson misses, however, is *methodological* role of desire in Thompson, its status not as the irrational pursued glibly and for its own sake but rather as an empirical remainder that must expose the practical limits of concepts on which the historian must nonetheless rely.

What, after all, makes the river of fire an important and evocative figure for both Morris and Thompson is the fact that it refuses the difference between concrete and abstract, fact and concept, history and form, theory and life. *The point*, after all, about the river of fire in *William Morris* is that it *really happened* to William Morris, that Morris had to read a lot and to paint a lot, to found a design firm, to marry unhappily, and to rush naïvely into a political campaign he didn't fully understand before seeing that he could and should live through real history at the level of the concept; to put it bluntly, in the last decade of his life, Morris lived his idea, dedicating his time, money, and seemingly

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unlimited energy to the hard and, as it turns out, interminable work of "making socialists."[27] *The point* for Thompson about *Capital* is that Marx managed to find a literary form that could, in its very inconsistency, manage the relation between capital and capitalism, between history and political economy, between socialist theory and moral wrath. *The point* about the threshold in Thompson's own development was that 1956 was both a real year, a terribly real set of events, and the index of a concept or a thought that could not be subsequently unthought. And *the point* about Thompson's take on Morris's peculiar take on utopian communism is not that it fetishizes desire as such but rather that real utopian thinking must exist in the space between what already happened and what can happen still, between the *is* and the *ought*, between the radical empiricism of desire and life and the systematic ideality of theory and form.

It is in these terms that we should return to the problem with which I began, the apparent contradiction between the textual minorness and the political consequence of "Postscript: 1976." If it is, on one hand, an occasional and scholarly footnote to a little-read literary biography, it is, on the other hand, "one of Thompson's most important political and theoretical statements in its own right."[28] More than that it is also, as Anderson goes on to argue, Thompson's most explicit attempt not only to understand the nature and sources of William Morris's utopianism but also to offer a utopian program of his own, one that would, as Thompson puts it, "allow a little space, not only for literary Utopians, but also for the unprescribed initiatives of everyday men and women who, in some part of themselves, are also alienated and utopian by turns" (807). Alienated and utopian, minor and major, occasional and important, forward-looking and retrospective, empirical and abstract, historical and formal, entirely specific and wholly aspirational: if the postscript is a document that manages both to meet and to exceed its scholarly character, it might be in exactly those terms that it approaches (but, one has to admit, not nearly reaches) the aphoristic or fragmentary or negative utopianism of *Minima Moralia* or *The Principle of Hope* or the "Theses on the Philosophy of History." We might think here of John Goode's suggestion that, in his late works, Morris "discovers forms which dramatize the tensions of the revolutionary mind."[29] Although Thompson takes issue with Goode's hesitation on the subject of Morris's practical commitment to utopian politics, the phrase captures something important about Thompson's own use of the postscript as an unexpectedly and paradoxically utopian mode. That is, if

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Thompson's humanist historical materialism—steeped as it was in the "partial"[30] and yet avowedly utopian efforts of William Morris—means anything, it is that, alongside the reactionary utopias of feudal return and the radical utopias of the future one can't begin really to imagine, there is also a utopianism of the threshold, of human agency, political action, and personal risk, of learning that one can change one's mind when it matters, of doing something not because you know exactly what that something is, but because it is wrong to do nothing while others suffer.[31]

One of the strange and brave and, I think, truly utopian aspects of *News from Nowhere* is Morris's willingness to get specific about places and times. This is especially the case with 1952, the year that serves as his proleptic history's river of fire: "the spread of communistic theories, and the partial practice of State Socialism had at first disturbed, and at last almost paralysed the marvellous system of commerce under which the old world had lived so feverishly, and had produced for some few a life of gambler's pleasure, and for many, or most, a life of mere misery: over and over again came 'bad times' as they were called, and indeed they were bad enough for the wage-slaves. The year 1952 was one of the worst of these times."[32] In 1952 "bad times" lead to the rise of communistic ideas, which lead to economic crises, which lead to state violence, which leads, in turn, to revolution and, in time, the "minutely detailed" and practical utopia of Nowhere. As necessarily sketchy as his account is, it is nonetheless extravagantly specified, and what allows Morris to specify is neither beginning, nor end, but rather middle, a threshold that, under the sign of *1952*, allows us to imagine history as meaningful if also violent. This is one way in which Morris indexes a communist future as part of a real and already given past; it is also how, under the sign of "1976," Thompson, both a historian and a socialist, could imagine himself at a threshold, falling back into *William Morris* in order to look forward to something else.

Notes

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1. Thompson, *William Morris* (2013), 801. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.

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2. Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism*, 157.
3. For more on the Communist Party Historians' Group, see Hobsbawm, "The Historians' Group of the Communist Party," 21–48; and Kaye, *British Marxist Historians*, 11–15.
4. For more on Thompson's revisions—the excision of Shelley as a key influence, the softening of his earlier "Stalinist pieties," and, most importantly in my view, a shift in his account of Morris's anti-Parliamentarianism—see Goode, "E. P. Thompson and 'The Significance of Literature,'" 194–96; Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism*; and Peter Linebaugh's 2011 foreword to Thompson, *William Morris*.
5. The question of Thompson's Englishness is crucial and complex, particularly when seen now against the backdrop of Jeremy Corbyn's both dispiriting and internally consistent support *as a socialist* for a "kind of Brexit." Although it would be wrong to dismiss both the fact and the obvious limits of Thompson's national feeling, a reading of "The Peculiarities of the English," his 1965 response to Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn's "Origins of the Present Crisis," works to shift the grounds of his anglophilia away from the ethical particulars (or eccentricities) of his heroes to a forceful argument about national specificity and its relation to the protocols of historical materialism. He makes three related points: (1) that, contrary to Anderson and Nairn, Britain does indeed have a native socialist intellectual tradition going back to the seventeenth century and in which Morris plays an important part; (2) that the historical and economic particulars of British history and, thus, its organic forms of class consciousness require modes of analysis fundamentally different from those applied to the French context; and (3) that an engagement with and, perhaps, an appreciation of national particulars is not opposed to but is rather a precondition for a robust and socialist internationalism. While these arguments can't account fully for the nativist intensity of Thompson's emotional investment in Morris, Blake, and others, they might forestall some charges of mere *jingoism*, a word and a disposition that, like Morris, Thompson at least claimed to hate. Thompson, "The Peculiarities of the English," 245–301; see also Collini, *Absent Minds*, 171–75.
6. "In place of the great proletarian values revealed in class-solidarity and militancy, we now have, even among sections of our working-class movement, the values of private living growing up—the private fears and neuroses, the self-interest and timid individualism fostered

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by pulp magazines and Hollywood films." The talk appeared in print first in *Arena* 2, no 8 (June–July 1951) and later in a volume edited by Sam Aaronovitch entitled *The American Threat to British Culture*. This suspicion of America and American intellectuals appears in many of Thompson's writings: in, for instance, "A Letter to America," his 1981 essay against the American "defense scholars" who advocated sacrificing western Europe to the perverse logic of a "winnable" because "limited" nuclear war, he writes that, "I would . . . ask whether the discipline itself may not be suspect, corrupt and at enmity with the universal principles of humane scholarship; whether it was the business of scholarship; whether it was the business of scholars, at a time when civilization itself is threatened, to serve as the (well-funded, and -rewarded) apologists of military establishments and states?" This sustained campaign against the Americanization of Britain and Europe might be another reason why Thompson emphasizes the number "1976" in the title of his postscript: hopelessly but nonetheless pitting the appearance of his book's second edition against the media blitz that accompanied the American bicentennial (Bob Hope! Paul Anka! Ed McMahon!), he makes a tacit case for Morris's and his own place in a history not dependent on America and its suicidal commitment to the fantasy of successful nuclear combat. See Thompson, "William Morris and the Moral Issues Today"; Thompson, "A Letter to America," 10.

7. Morris, *A Dream of John Ball*, quoted in Thompson, *Poverty of Theory*, 88. Thompson famously took something very like this image of the impacted and internally riven productivity of human agency as the methodological basis of *The Making of the English Working Class*: "I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the 'obsolete' hand-loom weaver, the 'Utopian' artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity. Their crafts and traditions may have been dying. Their hostility to the new industrialism may have been backward-looking. Their communitarian ideals may have been fantasies. Their insurrectionary conspiracies may have been foolhardy. But they lived through these times of acute social disturbance, and we did not" (Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 12).
8. For more on the unsuspected because apparently unmotivated significance of dates, see my "Hardy's 1900," 57–75.
9. Balzac, *Père Goriot*, 131.

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10. Austen, *Emma*, 7.
11. For more on the influence of Hungary in 1956 on the Western communist parties and on the "left intelligentsia," see Fehér and Heller, *Hungary 1956 Revisited*, 46–49. See also Doris Lessing's memoir, *Walking in the Shade*, as well as *The Golden Notebook* where, in the sections "Free Women" and the "Red Notebook," Lessing works through these same events:

> "Yes. You don't want to hear about the comrades, I take it?"
>
> "In France and Italy the intellectuals talk day and night about the Twentieth Congress and Hungary, the perspectives of and the lessons of and mistakes to be learned from."
>
> "In that case, since it's the same here, though thank God people are getting bored with it, I'll skip it." (62)

12. Thompson, "Through the Smoke of Budapest," 44.
13. Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, 40 (his emphasis).
14. Auerbach, *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, 53.
15. Plotz, *Semi-Detached*, 167.
16. Quoted in Thompson, *William Morris*, 721.
17. Thompson, *Poverty of Theory*, 42. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
18. Thompson's sense of this break as a hermeneutic *event*, as a threshold into spiritual conversion or rebirth, is given ironically but no less significantly Christological expression in the opening to *The Poverty of Theory*: "I commenced to reason in my thirty-third year, and, despite my best efforts, I have never been able to shake the habit off" (Thompson, *Poverty of Theory*, i).
19. Althusser, *For Marx*, 227.
20. Harvey J. Kaye reminds us that "It is essential to recall the historical context in which Thompson wrote the essay. Though it now seems that Althusserianism was merely in intellectual fashion [in Britain], in the 1970s it appeared to be firmly rooting itself in Marxist social and cultural studies in Britain. . . . Though some have argued that Thompson over-reacted to the Althusserian 'menace,' such comments may be based on hindsight" (Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians*, 208–9).
21. Thompson's case for what we might consider the *immanent and formal humanism* of *Capital* recalls not only Morris's many aesthetic experiments but also a letter that Doris Lessing sent Thompson in 1956: "The reaction to the Twentieth Congress has been expressed in party circles throughout the world in the phrase 'the cult of the

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individual.' That these words should have been chosen as the banner under which we should fight what is wrong with the party seems to me a sign of the corruption in our thinking. For they suggest that what caused the breakdown of inner-party democracy was an excess of individualism. But the opposite is the truth" (Lessing, *Walking in the Shade*, 211). One can, I think, see both Thompson's turn to history and Lessing's turn to the novel as efforts to capture an embodied relation between revolutionary generality and humanist particularity, which Thompson saw at work in the literary form of *Capital*.

22. One finds a similarly and obscurely recalcitrant Marx in contemporary work by Claude Lefort: "I developed a relation to Marx's work in and through my questioning of it. No doubt what I found there responded to a desire within me whose origin I could not identify, but that is of little significance. The fact is that what attracted me to Marx was the ambiguity of his thinking and, more than that, his opposition to himself, the way in which his thought escapes from itself in the best of his works and from one work to another, the indetermination that undermined what was presented as a system, that undermined the commentary which he himself sometimes gave on his work in order to bring it together in the form of theses" (Lefort, *Political Forms*, 294).
23. Thompson, "The Communism of William Morris," 257; Thompson, *William Morris*, 803.
24. Abensour, "William Morris," 156.
25. Anderson, *Arguments*, 159.
26. Anderson, *Arguments*, 161.
27. This, as Thompson points out on several occasions, was the phrase Morris used to describe his tactical commitment to revolutionary politics: "The work that lies before us at present is to make Socialists, to cover the country with a network of associations composed of men who feel their antagonism to the dominant classes, and have no temptation to waste their time in the thousand follies of party politics" (Thompson, *William Morris*, 382). It's worth noting that Morris's craftsman's sense of revolutionary work as the act of "making" class consciousness returns in the title of Thompson's own great work, *The Making of the English Working Class*.
28. Anderson, *Arguments*, 158.
29. Goode, "William Morris and the Dream of Revolution," quoted in Thompson, *William Morris*, 797.

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30. "Partial" is John Plotz's word. Noting the way in which Morris's productions for the Kelmscott Press register their external and material conditions of production "on the inside," he writes, "Parsing that inside aspect of Morris's work requires noticing his sense that every artwork has to be understood as partially escaping its own day—and also partially lodged within the material world from which it arose" (Plotz, *Semi-Detached*, 172).
31. We might, in these terms, see both Morris and Thompson as trying to split what Fredric Jameson identifies as the difference "between the Utopian form and the Utopian wish: between the written text and something like a Utopian impulse detectable in daily life and its practices by a specialized hermeneutic or interpretive method" (Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 1).
32. Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 93.

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