Art against Alienation: William Blake, William Morris and the British New Left

John P. Murphy

'Marx's basic attitude […] was much closer to that of William Morris and William Blake than one would suspect from reading most Marxist literature'.[1] When literary scholar Kenneth Muir wrote the above for the *New Reasoner*, a journal of dissident English socialism, he assumed the pairing of William Blake and William Morris would be obvious to his readers. He further assumed that the pairing would illuminate aspects of Karl Marx's 'basic attitude' heretofore unsuspected. This owed to the robust postwar interest among British scholars and historians – especially those committed or sympathetic to Marxism – in a popular-national cultural tradition, with Blake and Morris given pride of place. Activist historian E.P. Thompson – author of *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (1955) and *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (1993) – summarised this view when asked to name his influences: 'Vico, Marx, Blake and Morris; the latter two showing how English I am'.[2]

Yet the pairing of Blake and Morris was not obvious or inevitable – few commentators prior to the 1950s drew parallels between them; rather, it depended on the contingencies of postwar British Marxism, particularly the availability of Marx's early writings in translation. To the generation of New Leftists forged in the crucible of 1956, Blake and Morris came to represent a strain of revolutionary

romanticism that could open a path forward out of the impasse between the capitalist west and the discredited Soviet east.

Internecine conflicts in the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) reached a crisis in February 1956 with Nikita Khrushchev's secret speech at the Soviet Twentieth Congress exposing Joseph Stalin's cult of personality, campaigns of political repression and the purges of the 1930s. The violent suppression in October 1956 of the Hungarian uprising by Soviet troops caused further outcry among English communists, exacerbated by the CPGB's stifling of debate and refusal to denounce the Soviet action.[3] Historians E.P. Thompson, Dorothy Thompson and John Saville launched the *New Reasoner* during the summer of 1957 as a platform for dissenting English socialists; its editors and contributors largely consisted of ex-members of the CPGB, including writer Doris Lessing, economist Ronald Meek and political scientist Ralph Miliband.[4] The *New Reasoner* became the main organ, along with *Universities and Left Review*, of the emerging British 'New Left', a loose and heterogeneous affiliation of historians, writers and intellectuals determined to reaffirm the humanist, anti-statist Marxist tradition.[5]

Over the course of ten issues published between 1957 and 1959 the *New Reasoner*'s contributors turned to Blake and Morris for inspiration as they waged a 'Mental Fight' against both western capitalism and eastern totalitarianism. Thompson opened his *New Reasoner* essay, 'The New Left', with a pointed epigraph from Blake: 'I am really sorry to see my countrymen trouble themselves about politics. Houses of Commons and Houses of Lords appear to me to be Fools; they seem to be something Else besides Human Life.'[6] Thompson connected Blake's time to his own: '[w]e share his dilemma today', he wrote, when the threat of nuclear holocaust rendered moot the 'specious rhetoric' of traditional party politics.[7] He dubbed the 1950s the decade of the 'Great Apathy', culturally expressed in the *au courant* writings of the Beat poets and 'Angry Young Man' John Osborne. To shake off this apathy, Thompson concluded, the New Left required a renewed, post-1956 socialist theory that not only opposed paternalism, authoritarianism and mechanical determinism, but which advanced a positive vision of human agency, creativity and moral imagination.

This process of renewal demanded fresh modes of cultural and political engagement. Having recently published his first major work, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, in 1955, Thompson had a model to hand for what such an engagement might look like. As he later reflected: '[w]hen, in 1956, my disagreement with Orthodox Marxism became fully articulate, I fell back on modes of perception which I'd learned in those years of close company with Morris, and I found, perhaps, the will to go on arguing from the pressure of Morris behind me'.[8] The 'pressure' Thompson described was specifically a *moral* pressure, generated by a sense of

revulsion from what Morris called capitalism's 'innate moral baseness'.[9] Thompson considered Morris's uncompromising moral critique of capitalism's acquisitive ethic a 'necessary complement' to Karl Marx's economic analysis.[10] In his 'New Left' essay, he expressed hope that the rediscovery of Morris's 'vision of a Society of Equals' – as imagined in the utopian romance *News from Nowhere*, for example – would offer heterodox Marxists a template for a 'voluntary, organic community of individuals' in contrast to capitalism's atomised individual, *and* to the Soviet Union's 'false community of the authoritative collective'.[11]

Blake proved likewise necessary, in the estimation of New Leftists, to a renewal of socialism by providing humanist ballast to Marx's economic theories. On the 1957 bicentennial of Blake's birth, the *New Reasoner* dedicated a twelve-page supplementary section to the poet (Figure 1). In the introduction, poet Randall Swingler called Blake 'one of the most extraordinary human beings who ever existed', and observed that his life spanned a period of time, 'like our own, when the whole pattern of human living passes through a crisis of catastrophic change: when new Energies break through old Ratios'.[12] The editorial accompanying the Blake bicentenary issue made 'no apology, in such a time, for giving up so large a part of [the journal's] space to the vision of William Blake and the thought of Karl Marx'.[13] The vision of Blake combined with the theory of Marx, the editors concluded, 'are the only forces which can keep the bombers grounded and which can make the fruits of men's ingenuity into sources of human enrichment'.[14]

Thompson called this politics of human enrichment 'socialist humanism'.[15] The *New Reasoner* came with the subtitle *A Quarterly Journal of Socialist Humanism*, and Blake and Morris became the standard-bearers for this concept. In the journal's first issue Thompson published 'Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines', a thirty-eight-page manifesto in which he claimed that poets like Blake 'were the tongues which – within the limitations of their time – spoke for *humanity*' and who showed 'a constantly developing *human potential*, which the false consciousness and distorted relations of class society deny full realisation'.[16] In the same essay he insisted that 'the insights of William Morris, his discoveries about man's potential moral nature, were not icing on the Marxist gingerbread, but were complementary to the discoveries of Marx'.[17] The example of Blake and Morris, Thompson argued, could help reclaim the human and moral potential of Marxism distorted and disfigured by Stalinism.[18]

Alienation

During the mid-twentieth century the stakes of recovering a Blake- and Morris-inspired socialist humanism could not have been higher. As early as 1951, in a speech delivered before the National Cultural Committee of the CPGB on 'William Morris

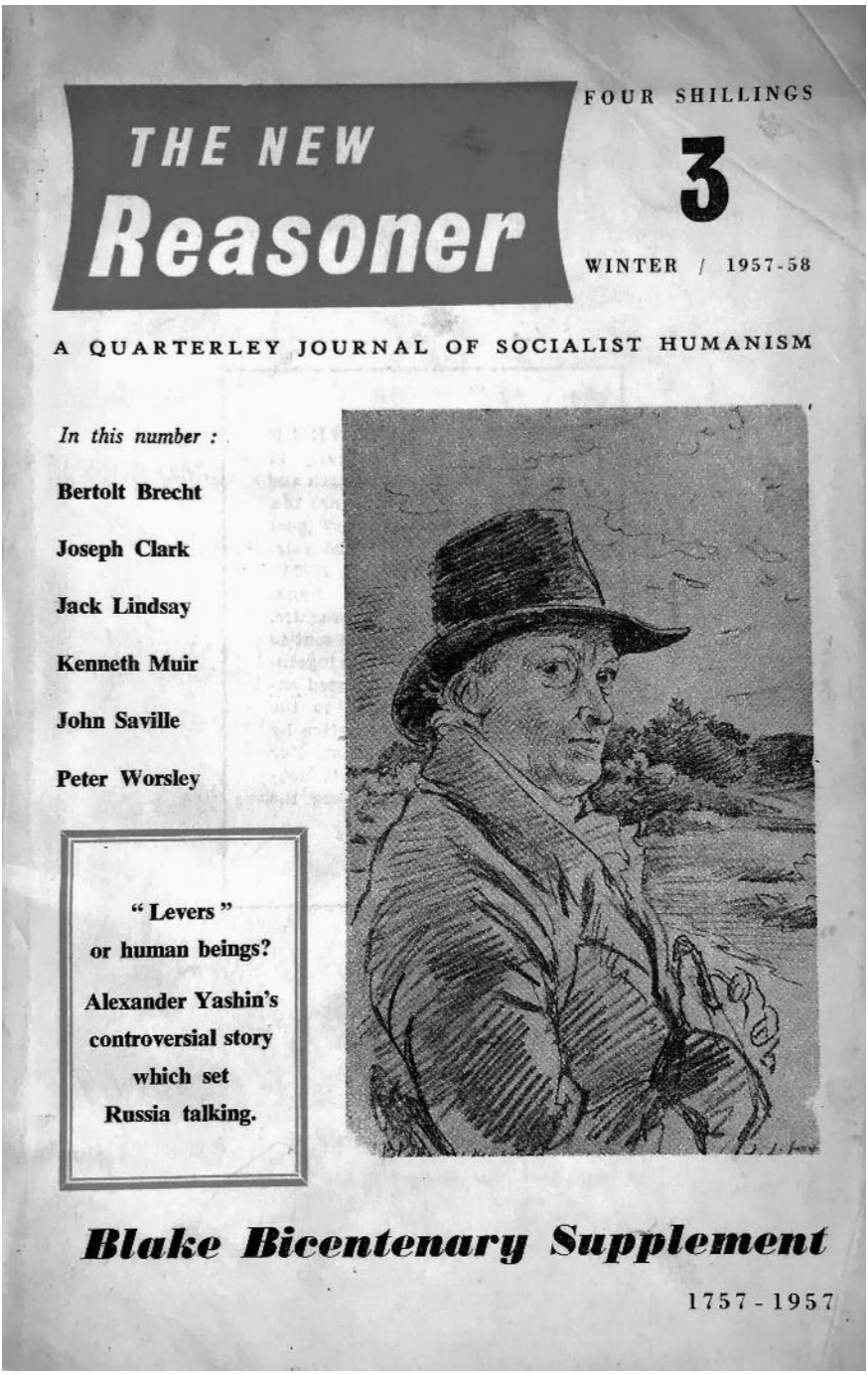

Figure 1: *New Reasoner*, 3 (Winter 1957-58), Blake Bicentenary Issue (photo: John Murphy).

and the Moral Issues of Today', Thompson announced, apropos the Cold War: '[n]ever has there been a time in the history of the world when the real moral issues before man have been clearer […]. We are offered Life or Death. On the one hand, the spreading stain of corruption and defeat in culture and human endeavour, on the other the liberation of the creative energies of whole peoples.'[19] Thompson turned to Morris not only as a prophet of 'napalm-democracy' who supplied a forceful critique of profit-driven imperialism, but more importantly as a visionary utopian willing to imagine life beyond capitalism. Thompson reminded his audience, CPGB members or sympathisers committed to cultural work, that 'if we wish to save people from the spreading taint of death, then we must win them for life'.[20] This meant carrying the message to the people that socialism represented more than economic change: it would entail 'the liberation of the creative energies of whole peoples', a richer, healthier, more fulfilling life based on the 'living British tradition'.

For the New Left, Blake and Morris were avatars of this 'living British tradition' and models of emancipated creative energy. While Thompson's Morris biography of 1955 established Morris as a major intellectual in the Marxist tradition, the groundwork had been laid during the cultural upsurge movement of the 1930s with the publication of works such as Robin Page Arnot's *William Morris: A Vindication* (1934), which recuperated Morris for the cause of revolutionary working-class socialism.[21] Blake experienced a similar recrudescence. Randall Swingler, writing in *Left Review* in 1937, suggested Blake as a 'good starting point for redeeming our revolutionary culture'.[22] Important studies in the ensuing decades, such as Jacob Bronowski's *A Man Without A Mask* (1944), Mark Schorer's *William Blake: The Politics of Vision* (1946) and David Erdman's *Blake: Prophet Against Empire* (1954), recast Blake from his role as esoteric mystic to that of engaged social critic and political firebrand.

In 1951, the same year Thompson delivered 'William Morris and the Moral Issues of Today', Canadian literary scholar Northrop Frye – author of the seminal Blake study, *Fearful Symmetry* (1947) – offered one of the first sustained comparisons of Blake and Morris in his essay on 'Poetry and Design in William Blake'. Their viewpoints coalesced around the 'social function of art', Frye argued, which should be 'directed toward the goal of a free and equal working society'.[23] Their art and writing expressed the idea 'that real work and creative activity were the same thing' and that 'the essential revolutionary act was the revolt of the creative artist who is also a manufacturer'.[24] New Leftists would reframe this essential insight in terms drawn from Marx's early writings to demonstrate how the creative work of Blake and Morris furnished examples of human energy liberated from capitalism's destructive and acquisitive logic.

When Kenneth Muir argued in the *New Reasoner* that Marx's sensibility was closer

to Blake and Morris 'than one would suspect from reading most Marxist literature', this owed to the fact that in 1957 'most Marxist literature' in English made little or no reference to Marx's early, untranslated writings.[25] (H.P. Adams's *Karl Marx in his Earlier Writings*, published in 1940, was one of the few studies in English of the untranslated manuscripts).[26] Muir called particular attention to Marx's *Political Economy and Philosophy* (more commonly cited as the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*), which to that point had only been published in German in 1932 as part of the Marx-Engels *Gesamtausgabe (MEGA)*. Recourse to these texts, in Muir's estimation, would reveal how Marx's conception of 'the nature of man' found its deepest resonance in the romantic visions of Blake and Morris, namely the hope 'that a society in which men could be fully human would eventually emerge'.[27]

The idea that Marx's early writings revealed a 'nature of man' closer to Blake and Morris than previously suspected relied on concepts such as alienation and species character (or species being) formulated in the 1844 manuscripts. 'The whole character of a species', Marx wrote, 'is contained in the character of its life-activity; and free, conscious activity is man's species character'.[28] Capitalism converted humanity's 'free, conscious activity' into a specific kind of commodity, wage labour, which is uniquely able to generate *more* value, expropriated by the capitalist as surplus value. Marx used the word 'alienation', a concept amended from Feuerbach and Hegel, to describe the relation of workers to the products of their labour under capitalism. Employed by a capitalist to produce a commodity, the worker 'confronts [the product of his or her labour] as *something alien*, as a *power independent* of the producer'.[29] Under these conditions the product of the worker's labour no longer belongs to his 'essential being', and 'he therefore does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind'.[30] Estranged from the human capacity for self-realisation through productive labour, workers subsequently experience a fourfold alienation: from nature, from themselves, from their work and from each other.

Stuart Hall credited philosopher Charles Taylor – *New Reasoner* contributor and editor of *Universities and Left Review* – with first making the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* available to New Leftists in 1958 through his translation from the French.[31] In an article on 'Alienation and Community' for *Universities and Left Review*, published in autumn 1958, Taylor parsed the distinction in capitalist society between active production (work) and passive consumption (leisure).[32] Where production is organised to profit capitalists, the worker is denied autonomy, pleasure and self-expression through work; 'pleasure' must be purchased as a commodity on the market and consumed outside of working hours. The editors of *Universities and Left Review* expanded on Taylor's insights for a pamphlet on 'The Democratisation of Power',

asserting that Marx's fundamental critique of capitalism was that 'every facet of capitalist civilisation combined to impair the wholeness of man's personality […]. This has meant that work has been considered a function which has little or no relation to the personal life and self-expression of the worker.'[33]

Another New Left conduit for Marx's early writings was Australian-born Jack Lindsay – editor of socialist cultural journals *Left Review* (1934-38) and *Arena* (1949-51) – who first encountered the 1844 manuscripts in German in the early-to-mid 1940s; and 'from that moment', he recalled, 'those early works continued to play an ever-greater part in my broodings: especially the pages dealing with Estrangement and Alienation'.[34] Lindsay contributed a *New Reasoner* essay on 'Socialist Humanism' in the winter 1957-58 issue in which he argued for the urgent application of Marx's concept of alienation to the historical distortions in the USSR of Marxism itself.[35] In relying on Taylorist methods of scientific management in order to accelerate production and compete economically and militarily with the United States, the Soviet Union had failed to heed Marx's insights on labour and alienation. Lindsay offered a contrasting vision of a communist society which 'overcomes alienation by its concentration on the whole man, by its creative development of Marxism as the unitary method of thought and action'.[36] He summarised this new society as the one imagined by Morris in *News from Nowhere*, a society in which labour furnished a source of free expression rather than exploitation.[37]

Revolutionary Romanticism

The discovery of Marx's early writings proved crucial to the New Left's embrace of Morris and Blake as socialist humanists *avant la lettre*.[38] As Thompson remarked in an interview: 'in the early Marx', the injury of advanced industrial capitalism and market society done to humanity 'is in defining man as "economic" at all […]. This kind of critique of industrial capitalism is found in Blake and Wordsworth very explicitly and is still present in Morris.'[39] In this view the romantic tradition stretching from Blake to Morris resisted the reduction of human relations to a system of competitive self-interest and Carlyle's callous 'cash nexus'.[40] Thompson contributed a pseudonymous article to the *New Reasoner*'s Blake supplement on the poem 'London' (Figure 2), which vividly conjured the city's 'charter'd' streets and the woeful faces of chimney sweepers, soldiers and diseased harlots. For Thompson 'London' amounted to a record of 'buying and selling – not only of goods, but of human values, affections and vitalities'.[41] The poem is ultimately an indictment, Thompson concluded, of 'the acquisitive ethic that divides man from man, leads him into mental and moral captivity, destroys the sources of joy, and brings, as its reward, death'.[42]

While Blake had struck at the heart of the 'acquisitive ethic', for most romantics

Figure 2: William Blake, 'London', *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1794), Plate 39. Colour-printed relief etching with watercolour on moderately thick, slightly textured, cream wove paper (Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1978.43.1570).

the recoil from capitalism remained personal, subjective and politically ineffectual. In a substantive essay on William Wordsworth published in the *New Reasoner*, historian V.G. Kiernan concluded that for all of his poetic genius Wordsworth ended in solipsistic defeatism, believing 'that an individual could sustain himself in isolation indefinitely by his own moral strength'.[43] Thompson's 1969 essay, 'Disenchantment or Default? A Lay Sermon', similarly chided the 'apostasy' of Coleridge and Wordsworth – in view of their reabsorption into 'traditional culture' after early commitments to revolutionary Jacobinism – as a 'moral failure, and an imaginative failure'.[44] Even radical poets like Percy Shelley, who had himself mourned Wordsworth's desertion of the revolutionary cause, merited only cursory mention in the *New Reasoner*, and none besides Wordsworth received sustained critical attention or were cited as direct influences in the journal's pages.[45]

Blake and Morris, in their ability to graft their lived experience as artisans onto their romantic critique of industrial capitalism, were not representative romantics to the New Left but rather exceptional romantics who returned poetry to its root in the Greek poesis, 'to make'.[46] In the conclusion to his classic study, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), Thompson lamented the historical lack of conjunction between romantic poets and radical craftsmen, with each group offering parallel resistance movements to the 'annunciation of Acquisitive Man', but which never converged to form a united front.[47] Blake, an artisan as well as poet, proved unique in his ability 'to interpret the two traditions to each other', while Morris, in spite of his bourgeois class position, came closest to Blake later in the nineteenth century in his ability to occupy the artisanal as well as aesthetic vantage point through his work for Morris and Co. and the Kelmscott Press.[48]

In their practice as artists, artisans and poets who made as well as wrote their books, Blake and Morris subverted the logic of industrial mass manufacture while offering glimpses of what might be possible if labour could be a source of nourishment and self-expression rather than misery and alienation. The books they produced, in their medievalising mingling of text, image and ornament, summon the pre-capitalist past as the key to the utopian future ('The Nature of my Work', Blake wrote, 'is an Endeavour to Restore what the Ancients called the Golden Age').[49] The design by Edward Burne-Jones for the frontispiece to Morris's novel *A Dream of John Ball* (Figure 3), published by the Kelmscott Press in 1892, depicts Adam and Eve labouring together to wrest their living from nature. The image and caption – 'When Adam delved and Eve span/ Who was then the gentleman' – reimagines the biblical injunction to burdensome toil as a proto-communist scene of mutual aid and unalienated labour prior to the advent of class divisions.[50]

Their antagonistic stance towards industrial society, coupled with a positive vision

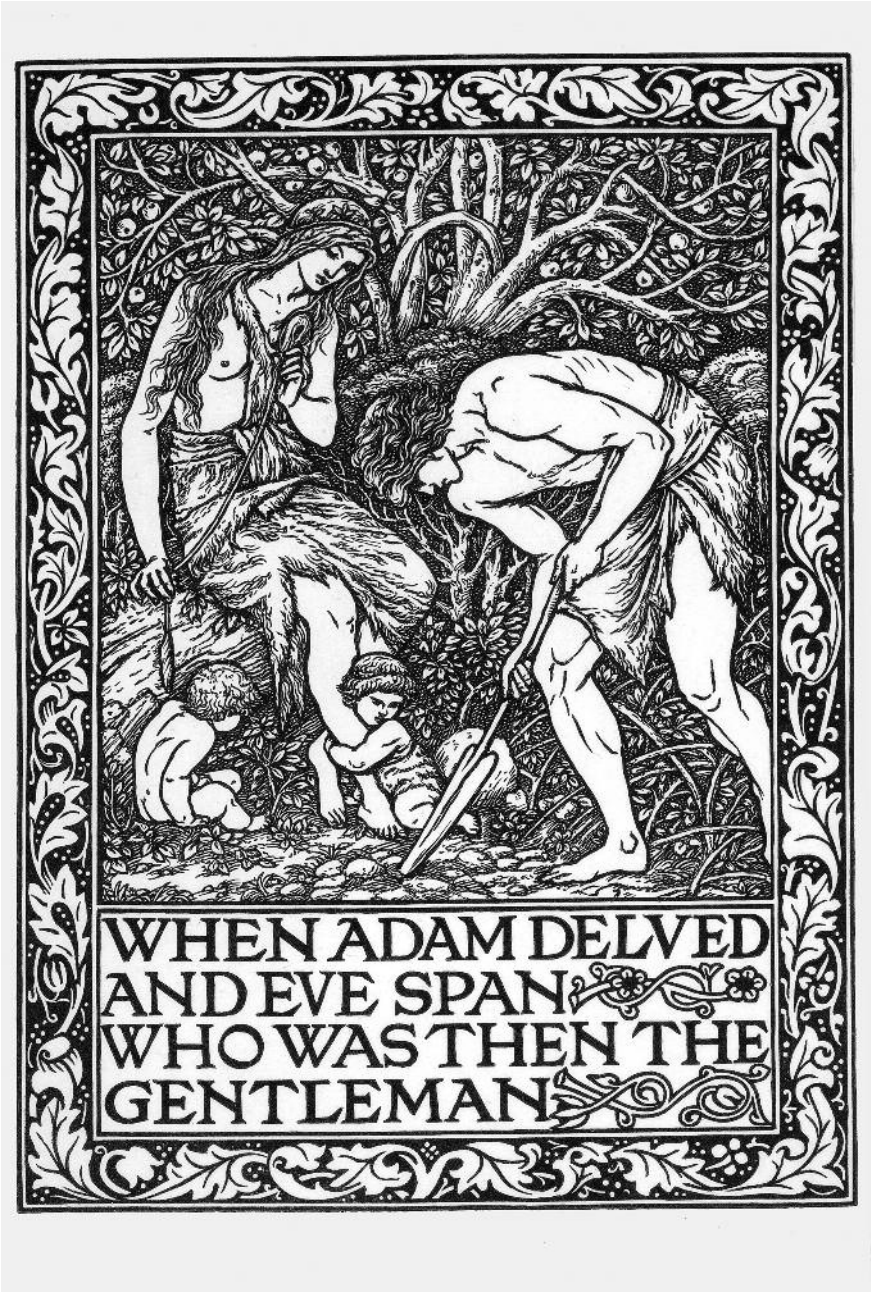

Figure 3: Edward Burne-Jones, design, frontispiece to *A Dream of John Ball and A King's Lesson*, by William Morris (Hammersmith: Kelmscott Press, 1892) (Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection).

of creative labour, made Blake and Morris prophets of alienation during a period when, as Thompson maintained in *The Making of the English Working Class*: '[i]t is neither poverty nor disease but work itself which casts the blackest shadow over the years of the Industrial Revolution'.[51] He quoted a passage from Blake's *Jerusalem* in which 'all the arts of life' had been 'changed into the arts of death in Albion' by the sons of Urizen, the 'Great Work master':

> The hour glass contemnd, because its simple workmanship
> Was as the workmanship of the plowman & the water wheel
> That raises water into Cisterns broken & burnd in fire
> Because its workmanship was like the workmanship of the Shepherd
> And in their stead intricate wheels invented Wheel without wheel
> To perplex youth in their outgoings & to bind to labours
> Of day & night the myriads of Eternity that they might file
> And polish brass & iron hour after hour laborious workmanship
> Kept ignorant of the use that they might spend the days of wisdom
> In sorrowful drudgery to obtain a scanty pittance of bread[52]

The passage conjures early industrial England's steam-powered factories, with their regimes of disciplined labour driven by owners and overseers and dominated by clock time.[53] The 'sorrowful drudgery' of the mill and its machinery of 'intricate wheels invented' would serve for Blake as enduring symbols of slavery, monotony and captivity.[54] His art and poetry enact a struggle – 'Striving with Systems to deliver Individuals from those Systems' – to unchain human energy from the 'mind-forg'd manacles' of mechanistic thought and alienated labour.[55] Los, one of Blake's mythical protagonists, appears as the exemplary craftsman, a symbol of humanity's creative imagination and capacity for self-invention. In the final plate of *Jerusalem* (Figure 4) Los forges a 'City of Art', Golgonooza, a contrast to Babylon, industrial society 'builded in the Waste, founded in Human desolation'.[56]

Leaders of the Arts and Crafts movement later in the nineteenth century framed their ambitions in Blakean terms; C.R. Ashbee, for example, wrote that the goal of his Guild and School of Handicrafts, organised in London in 1888 as a craft cooperative, was to 'establish even a portion of that sacred City of Art, which Los, the God of Time, in Blake's *Jerusalem*, sought to build' (Figure 5).[57] In enlisting Blake as a presiding spirit of the Guild experiment, Ashbee underscored the theme of collective, creative labour – building Gologonooza – that formed the wellspring of Arts and Crafts socialism.[58] Morris, who reprinted several of Blake's poems in the *Commonweal*, the journal of the Socialist League, continually stressed 'joy in labour'

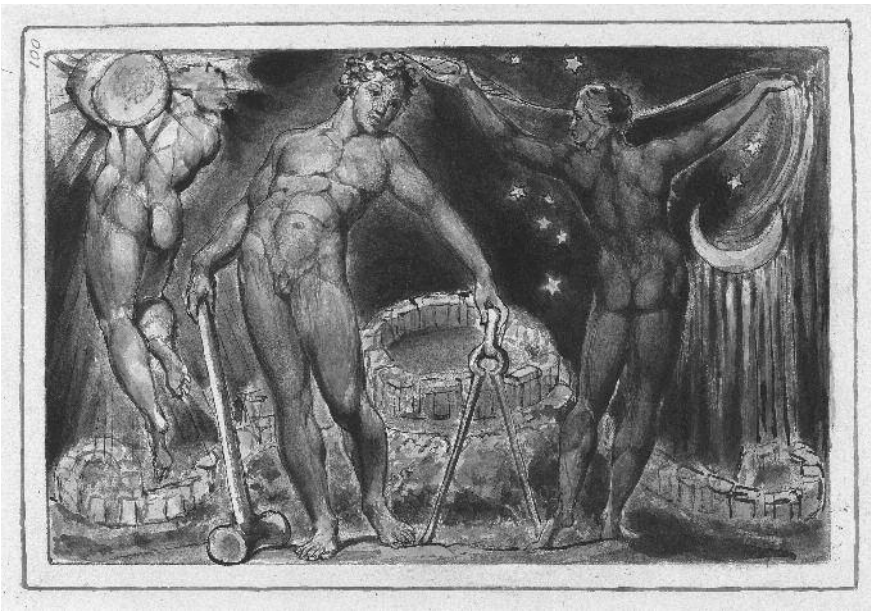

Figure 4: William Blake, *Jerusalem* (1804-1820), Plate 100. Relief etching printed in orange with pen and black ink, watercolour, and gold on moderately thick, smooth, cream wove paper (Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1992.8.1 (100)).

as the goal of a communist society.[59] The source of Morris's antagonism to Edward Bellamy's popular utopian romance *Looking Backward* (1888) was its vision of a socialist society organised to limit the amount of work required of its members. In his review of the book Morris expressed his conviction that 'the ideal of future', as he put it, 'does not point to the lessening of men's energy by the reduction of labour to a minimum, but rather to the reduction of *pain in labour* to a minimum, so small that it will cease to be a pain […] the true incentive to useful and happy labour is and must be pleasure in the work itself'.[60]

Morris's critique of capitalist divisions of labour, articulated in lectures such as 'Useful Work versus Useless Toil', 'A Factory as it might be' and 'The Revival of Handicraft', inspired E.P. Thompson to describe Morris as 'our greatest diagnostician of alienation'.[61] Morris, of course, could not have read Marx's unpublished 1844 manuscripts, and never used the word alienation in his lectures or writings, but Thompson argued that he had arrived independently at similar conclusions to those of the early Marx based on the combined influences of romanticism, Ruskin and Carlyle, Marx's *Capital*, and his own experience as a poet, craftsperson, designer and publisher. Morris defined art as 'the expression of man's joy in labour', and in his utopian romance *News from Nowhere*, first serialised in *Commonweal* in 1890 and

published by the Kelmscott Press in 1892 (Figure 6), art is simply 'work-pleasure'.[62] In Nowhere there is no private property or commodity production; distinctions between mental and manual labour have dissolved; individuals work at varying tasks in a spirit of social fellowship. The transformation of society depended on the transformation of labour; work could only be 'artistic' – in the sense of creative and fulfilling – under conditions liberated from the compulsion to produce commodities for a wage.

The Utopian Leap

In 1960 the *New Reasoner* merged with *Universities and Left Review* to form the *New Left Review*, which charted a new course under the editorship of Perry Anderson. The influence of Morris persisted: '[w]e had all read and been inspired by the "Making Socialists" chapter of Thompson's *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*', Stuart Hall recalled, noting that quotes from Morris bookended *NLR*'s first editorial.[63] Yet Anderson was less sanguine towards Morris and romanticism than Thompson, and further conflicts between the two – over issues such as the history of British capitalism, Marxist theory and socialist strategy going forward – culminated with Thompson's resignation in 1962 from the *NLR*'s editorial board, setting in motion a 'second' New Left more concerned with structural analysis than humanist politics.[64] The structural turn betrayed the influence of French theorist Louis Althusser, whose *For Marx* (1965) dismissed the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* as romantic, Hegelian holdovers abandoned by the more rigorous mature Marx. Structural Marxists styled themselves in opposition to socialist humanism, purporting to show that Marx jettisoned the ontological overtones of his earlier humanism in favour of *Das Kapital*'s hard-headed historical materialism.

Veterans of the 'first' New Left, however, continued to interpret Blake and Morris through the lens of Marx's early writings. In Jack Lindsay's critical biography of Morris, published in 1975, he argued that *News from Nowhere* imaginatively realised Morris's dream of 'how people would feel and behave […] if the all-round approach of the whole man was substituted for the maimed and limited attitudes of alienated or self-divided man'.[65] Lindsay's critical biography of Blake appeared in 1979, in which he claimed that Blake's 'ultimate kinship' was with Marx of the 1844 manuscripts, evident in his belief 'that men must and could and would transcend all the existing contradictions of their divided society and selves'.[66] In both biographies Lindsay treated the creative works of Blake and Morris as efforts to imaginatively reconstitute humanity alienated and fragmented by capitalism. Lindsay called the 'creative image' the only 'unalienated object in our society'; the creative images of Blake and Morris offered a kind of prelude or overture to the possibilities of

Figure 5: 'Los, the God of Time, and the building of the Sacred City', illustration in *Transactions of the Guild & School of Handicraft*, ed. by C.R. Ashbee (London: Essex House, 1890), p. 31 (source: archive.org).

productive labour beyond alienation.[67]

Thompson collected his essays in opposition to Althusser and the 'second' New Left in *The Poverty of Theory* (1978), which reasserted the centrality of Blake and Morris to a Marxist tradition animated by moral urgency and human agency (areas in which, Thompson claimed, Morris 'was immensely more perceptive than Engels or Marx') in contrast to the 'economism' and 'philistinism' of structural Marxism.[68] In his 1976 *New Left Review* article, 'Romanticism, Utopianism and Moralism: The Case of William Morris', which was reprinted as the postscript to the 1977 revised edition of the Morris biography, Thompson reiterated his claim that Morris 'may be seen as our greatest diagnostician of alienation', the basis for his status as a 'major intellectual figure' as well as for his contemporary relevance.[69] Thompson pressed his case for the necessity of Morris's romanticism to the communist tradition in its ability to check Marxism's determinist and positivist tendencies by opening a space for utopian desire. Assimilating Morris to Marxism, Thompson concluded, required 'a process of self-criticism and re-ordering within Marxism itself', a process that had begun with the New Left's pivot in 1956 from so-called actually-existing socialism in the Soviet Union towards a renewed socialist humanism.[70]

That process of self-criticism and re-ordering within Marxism continues today. Growing awareness that the global capitalist system, motivated by the destructive dyad of growth and profit, is accelerating species extinction, ocean acidification and

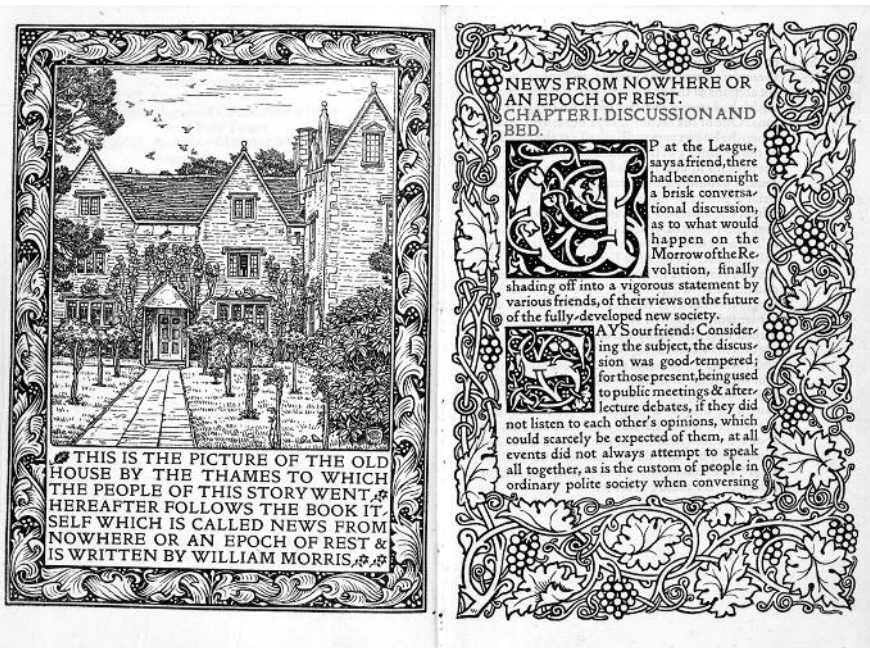

Figure 6: Charles March Gere, design, frontispiece to William Morris, *News from Nowhere* (Hammersmith: Kelmscott Press, 1892) (source: University of Maryland, Creative Commons license CC BY-NC-ND 2.0).

global warming has compelled theorists to revisit the concept of 'alienation from nature' in the work of Marx, and to reinterpret Blake and Morris as proto-environmentalists. This work builds on the foundation of New Leftists such as Jack Lindsay, who identified the struggle against pollution and environmental destruction as being 'at the core' of Morris's socialism.[71] Peter Linebaugh, a student of E.P. Thompson, has tapped a rich ecological vein in the thought of Blake and Morris, marking Blake's response to the enclosure of the agrarian commons in England: '[f]or Blake enclosure leads to death and to ecocide'.[72] In his foreword to the 2011 edition of Thompson's Morris biography, Linebaugh highlighted the strain of 'green communism' in Morris's designs and writings.[73] John Bellamy Foster has positioned Morris alongside Marx and Engels at the fountainhead of a historical materialist tradition investigating the 'alienated metabolism of nature and society under capitalism'.[74] Foster has also argued that *News from Nowhere*, in imagining how communist society might transform 'alienated mechanical labour into unalienated artistic labour', depended on a new orientation of humans towards nature and the earth.[75] In this growing literature Blake and Morris form crucial touchstones in an ecosocialist critique of capitalism.[76]

The chasm between current reality and the utopian visions of Blake and Morris

points to one final form of alienation: the alienation of the utopian from the object of their desire, society transformed. In his dreams Blake envisaged vast, jewel-coloured frescos on temple walls, a public art worthy of the New Jerusalem. In *News from Nowhere* Morris imagined a society where every aspect of life – architecture, clothing, furniture, gardens – would be a work of art and an expression of joy in labour. Yet Blake admitted: '[w]here any view of Money exists, Art cannot be carried on', a conclusion echoed by Morris: '[a]rt cannot have real life and growth under the present system of commercialism and profit-mongering'.[77]

The gap between utopian futures and the grim capitalist present could only be traversed by what Thompson called 'the utopian leap' out of the realm of necessity into the realm of imaginative freedom. He concluded his posthumously published Blake study, *Witness Against the Beast*, as follows: '[t]he essential utopian leap for Blake was to brotherhood, the return to universal man'.[78] This leap involved a dynamic and dialectical view of utopia; it could only be achieved through the transformation via struggle of what already exists. It required human agency and creativity, cornerstones of the New Left's socialist humanism. 'Blake's "Jerusalem"', Thompson wrote, 'was to be built by strenuous intellectual, imaginative and artistic labours: "to Labour in Knowledge is to Build up Jerusalem"'.[79] The artistic labours of Blake and Morris augured what a romantic poetics married to radical politics might conjure – not just a culture of critique, but the 'fullness of life' itself – a visionary 'city of art' to which all citizens would contribute as co-creators and collaborators.

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NOTES

1. Kenneth Muir, 'Marx's Conversion to Communism', *New Reasoner*, 3 (Winter 1957-58), p. 64. (Afterwards Muir).
2. Michael Merrill, 'An Interview with E.P. Thompson', *Radical History Review*, 12 (Fall 1976), p. 20. (Afterwards Merrill).
3. The *New Reasoner* was preceded by the *Reasoner*, founded in 1956 by the Thompsons and John Saville with the goal of reforming the CPGB. See Paul Flewers and John McIlroy, eds, *1956: John Saville, E.P. Thompson and the Reasoner* (London: Merlin Press, 2016); John Saville, 'Edward Thompson, The Communist Party and 1956', *Socialist Register*, 30 (1994), 20-32.
4. On the founding of the *New Reasoner*, see John Saville, *Memoirs from the Left* (London: Merlin, 2003). For an overview of the journal's ambitions and thematic concerns, see Bryan D. Palmer, 'Reasoning Rebellion: E.P. Thompson, British Marxist Historians, and the Making of Dissident Political Mobilization', *Labour/Le Travail*, 50 (Fall 2002), 187-216. Issues of the *New Reasoner* have been scanned, archived, and made available online by the non-profit Barry Amiel & Norman Melburn Trust. The archive is available online: <http://banmarchive.org.uk/collections/nr/index_frame.htm> [last

accessed 26 June 2020].

5. For more on the New Left, see Lin Chun, *The British New Left* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993); Michael Kenny, *The First New Left: British Intellectuals After Stalin* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1995); Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the New Left and the Origin of Cultural Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997); Wade Matthews, *The New Left, National Identity, and the Break-up of Britain* (London and Boston: Brill, 2013). (Afterwards Dworkin). Dorothy Thompson offered critical assessments of Chun and Kenny's studies, as well as personal recollections, in 'On the Trail of the New Left', *New Left Review*, 215 (January-February 1996), 93-100.
6. E.P. Thompson, 'The New Left', *New Reasoner*, 9 (Summer 1959), 1-17 (1). (Afterwards Thompson, 'The New Left').
7. *Ibid*., p. 1.
8. E.P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), p. 810. See also Bryan D. Palmer, *The Making of E.P. Thompson: Marxism, Humanism, and History* (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1981), pp. 36-40. (Afterwards Thompson, *William Morris*).
9. Quoted in Thompson, *William Morris*, p. 804.
10. E.P. Thompson, *The Communism of William Morris: A Lecture by Edward Thompson* (London: William Morris Society, 1965), p. 18. This is the published version of Thompson's address to the Society in May of 1959. (Afterwards Thompson, *The Communism of William Morris*).
11. Thompson, 'The New Left', p. 10.
12. Randall Swingler, 'William Blake, Engraver: Born 28 November 1757', *New Reasoner*, 3 (Winter 1957-58), i-xii (i-ii).
13. 'Editorial', *New Reasoner*, 3 (Winter 1957-58), 2-4 (3).
14. *Ibid*., pp. 3-4.
15. For more on the development of 'socialist humanism' in Thompson's thought, see Kate Soper, 'Thompson and socialist humanism', in *E.P. Thompson and English Radicalism*, ed. by Roger Fieldhouse and Richard Taylor (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), pp. 121-42.
16. E.P. Thompson, 'Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines', *New Reasoner*, 1 (Summer 1957), 105-43 (124).
17. *Ibid*., p. 125.
18. Bryan D. Palmer noted the appeal of Blake and Morris to Thompson as part of Romanticism's 'moral critique of capitalism'; see Palmer, *E.P. Thompson: Objections and Oppositions* (London: Verso, 1994), p. 60.
19. E.P. Thompson, 'William Morris and the Moral Issues of Today', *Arena*, 2: 8 (June-July 1951), available online: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/thompson-ep/1951/william-morris.htm> [last accessed 20 June 2020].
20. *Ibid*.
21. For a survey of British communist literature during the 1930s, see John Connor, 'Communism and the Working Class', in *The Cambridge Companion to British Literature of the 1930s*, ed. by James Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 113-27.
22. R. Swingler, 'The Interpretation of Madness: A Study of William Blake and Literary Tradition', *Left Review*, 3 (February 1937), 21-28.
23. Northrop Frye, 'Poetry and Design in William Blake', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 10: 1 (September 1951), 35-42 (35).
24. *Ibid*.
25. Muir, p. 64.
26. H.P. Adams, *Karl Marx in His Earlier Writings* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1940). See also E.J. Hobsbawm, 'The Fortunes of Marx's and Engels' Writings', in *The History of Marxism, Vol. 1, Marxism in Marx's Day*, ed. by E.J. Hobsbawm (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1982).

27. Muir, p. 64.
28. Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961), p. 75.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
31. Stuart Hall, 'Life and Times of the First New Left', *New Left Review*, 61 (January-February 2010), 177-96 (188). (Afterwards Hall).
32. Charles Taylor, 'Alienation and Community', *Universities and Left Review*, 5 (Autumn 1958), 10-18.
33. Stuart Hall, Ralph Samuel, Peter Sedgwick, Charles Taylor et al., 'The Insiders: A Study of the Men Who Rule British Industry – The Democratisation of Power', *Universities and Left Review*, 3 (Winter 1958), 60-65 (61).
34. Jack Lindsay, 'The Fullness of Life: Autobiography of an Idea', typescript, pp. 178-79. (Afterwards Lindsay, 'The Fullness of Life'). 'The Fullness of Life' is an unpublished autobiography, likely written during the 1970s, discovered in 2010 and edited by Anne Cranny-Francis. For an account of the discovery of the manuscript and an overview of its contents, see Anne Cranny-Francis, 'The Fullness of Life: The Poetics and Politics of Jack Lindsay', *Australian Literary Studies*, 30: 4 (2015), 12-28. In a letter to Lindsay, Thompson described his comrade as a 'premature socialist humanist' already familiar with Marx's concept of alienation by the time it became 'all the rage'. See John T. Connor, 'Jack Lindsay, Socialist Humanism and the Communist Historical Novel', *The Review of English Studies*, 66:274 (2014), 342-63. For Connor's discussion of Lindsay's encounter with Marx's early writings, see pp. 346-47.
35. Jack Lindsay, 'Socialism and Humanism', *New Reasoner*, 3 (Winter 1957-58), 94-102 (98).
36. *Ibid.*, p. 102.
37. *Ibid.*
38. The 1844 manuscripts became broadly available through an English translation published in 1959 by the Foreign Languages Publishing House, a state-run operation based in Moscow. Economist Ronald Meek reviewed the translation in the summer 1959 issue of the *New Reasoner*, attending to how Marx furnished Hegel's concept of estrangement with a 'new socio-economic content' by connecting it to private property and divisions of labour, and noted that Marx's early thoughts on estranged labour survived in the 'commodity fetishism' sections of *Capital*. See Ronald L. Meek, 'Marx and Hegel's Nose', *New Reasoner*, 9 (Summer 1959), 137-39 (138).
39. Merrill, p. 24.
40. Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre have defined romanticism as an essentially anti-capitalist *weltanschauung* opposed to modern bourgeois civilisation in the name of pre-capitalist values. See Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre, *Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity*, trans. Catherine Porter (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).
41. E.P. Thompson [as W.P. Jessup], 'The Making of "London"', *New Reasoner*, 3 (Winter 1957-58), 65-68 (66, 68).
42. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
43. V.G. Kiernan, 'Wordsworth Revisited', *New Reasoner*, 7 (Winter 1958-59), 62-74 (74).
44. E.P. Thompson, 'Disenchantment or Default? A Lay Sermon', in *The Romantics: England in a Revolutionary Age*, ed. by Dorothy Thompson (New York: The New Press, 1997), p. 37.
45. Women and nonwhite artists and writers were largely excluded from the roll-call of socialist humanist predecessors. For more on these blind spots, see Hall, p. 196.
46. For more on the privileged place of Romanticism in postwar English Marxism, see Dworkin, pp. 41-44.
47. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964), p. 915. Anne Janowitz has challenged Thompson's belief that romantic poetry failed to join up with working-class movements in her study, *Lyric and Labour in the Romantic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge

University Press, 1998). (Afterwards Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*).

48. Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, p. 915.
49. *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. by David V. Erdman (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 2008), p. 555. (Afterwards Blake).
50. Stephen F. Eisenman, 'Communism in Furs: A Dream of Prehistory in William Morris's "John Ball"', *The Art Bulletin*, 87: 1 (March 2005), 92-110 (93).
51. Thompson, p. 446.
52. Blake, p. 364.
53. See E.P. Thompson, 'Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism', *Past & Present*, 38: 1 (December 1967), 56-97.
54. Saree Makdisi has outlined the ways in which Blake's thought anticipated critiques of alienated labour developed by Marx in 'Blake and the Communist Tradition', in *Palgrave Advances in William Blake Studies*, ed. by Nicholas Williams (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), pp. 235-53.
55. Blake, p. 154.
56. *Ibid.*, p. 169.
57. C.R. Ashbee, 'A Short History of the Guild and School of Handicraft', *Transactions of the Guild and School of Handicrafts* (London: Essex House, 1890), p. 31.
58. Colin Trodd has identified a 'William Blake Brotherhood' in the Victorian period and traced Blake's influence on the Arts and Crafts movement in *Visions of Blake: William Blake in the Art World, 1830-1930* (Liverpool University Press, 2012); see also Colin Trodd, 'Ford Madox Brown and the William Blake Brotherhood', *Visual Culture in Britain*, 15: 3 (2014), 277-98.
59. See Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, *Slow Print: Literary Radicalism and Late Victorian Print Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), p. 201.
60. William Morris, '"Looking Backward"', *Commonweal*, 5: 180 (June 1889), p. 195.
61. Thompson, *The Communism of William Morris*, p. 14.
62. William Casement, 'William Morris on Labor and Pleasure', *Social Theory and Practice*, 12: 3 (Fall 1986), 351-82.
63. Hall, p. 193.
64. Perry Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism* (London: New Left Books, 1980), pp. 131-40. See also Wade Matthews, 'The Poverty of Strategy: E.P. Thompson, Perry Anderson, and the Transition to Socialism', *Labour/Le Travail*, 50 (Fall 2002), 217-41.
65. Jack Lindsay, *William Morris: His Life and Work* (London: Constable, 1975), p. 348. (Afterwards Lindsay, *William Morris*).
66. Jack Lindsay, *William Blake: His Life and Work* (London: Constable, 1978), p. xvi.
67. Lindsay, 'The Fullness of Life', p. 242.
68. E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London: Merlin Press, 1978), p. 172.
69. Edward Thompson, 'Romanticism, Utopianism and Moralism: The Case of William Morris', *New Left Review*, 1: 99 (September/October 1976), 83-111 (104).
70. *Ibid.*, p. 104.
71. Lindsay, *William Morris*, p. 382.
72. Peter Linebaugh, *Stop, Thief! The Commons, Enclosures, and Resistance* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2014), p. 30.
73. Peter Linebaugh, 'Foreword' to E.P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2011), p. viii.
74. John Bellamy Foster, *The Return of Nature: Socialism and Ecology* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2020), p. 12.
75. John Bellamy Foster, 'William Morris's Romantic Revolutionary Ideal: Nature, Labour and Gender in *News from Nowhere*', *JWMS*, 22: 2 (2017), 17-35.

76. The literature on Morris and ecosocialism is vast, but Patrick O'Sullivan offers an overview in '"Morris the red, Morris the green" – a partial review', *JWMS*, 19: 3 (Winter 2011), 22-38. See also Bradley J. Macdonald, 'William Morris and the Vision of Ecosocialism', *Contemporary Justice Review*, 7: 3 (2004), 287-304.
77. Blake, p. 275; *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, ed. by Norman Kelvin, 4 vols in 5 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984-96), II, p. 230.
78. E.P. Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (New York: The New Press, 1993), p. 227.
79. *Ibid*.