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E. P. THOMPSON'S HISTORIOGRAPHIC AGENCY IN *BEYOND THE FRONTIER*

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Abstract

This article examines how *Beyond the Frontier* (1997), a hybrid work of commemoration, investigation, and political intervention, redefines the practice of historiography. I argue that the book is driven by what I term historiographic agency: the historian's capacity to mediate between past and present, to resist ideological distortions, and to construct meaning through evaluative and interpretive judgment. For Thompson, such agency entails a dual responsibility: to recover the irreducible complexity of past lives and simultaneously to intervene in the political dilemmas of his own time. By confronting state-sponsored myths in both Britain and Bulgaria, and by resisting the abstraction of lived experience into rigid categories, *Beyond the Frontier* foregrounds the tension between agency and structure that had long preoccupied Thompson's political, pedagogical, and historiographic practice. Rather than a pessimistic break with his earlier romanticism, the work reflects a strategic shift: from celebrating the agency of historical actors to emphasizing the historian's own role in negotiating between events, myths, and lived experiences. In this sense, Thompson's mourning becomes historiography, and his historiography itself a form of political engagement.

Keywords: E. P. Thompson, Beyond the Frontier, historiography, agency, structure, political engagement.

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When an engaged historian writes to mourn, what kind of historiography emerges?

In *Beyond the Frontier* (1997a) – one of E. P. Thompson's least studied yet most personal works, originally delivered as the 1981 Harry Camp Memorial Lectures at Stanford University and published posthumously in 1997 – he reconstructs the circumstances of his elder brother Frank's death in 1944

while serving as a British liaison to Bulgarian partisans. What makes the work particularly compelling is its hybrid nature: at once an affectionate commemoration, a historiographic investigation, and a political intervention. At the outset, Thompson states that the book "belongs both to the present and to the past: it is historical, and yet it is not quite 'history'". He grapples with "how the reasons of state are eternally at war with historical knowledge," (p.14) a theoretical concern made all the more pressing by the stigmatized and mystified narratives propagated by both Socialist Bulgaria and the UK regarding the contested causes and significance of Frank's death.

As with nearly all of Thompson's major works – *William Morris* (1955) positioned against J. W. Mackail's *Life of William Morris* (1899), *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963a) against Stalinism and its economic determinism, and *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (1978b) against Althusserian structuralism – *Beyond the Frontier* likewise engages with clear opponents, if not outright antagonists. I argue that it may be read as an intervention directed against two historiographical adversaries.

First, Thompson denounces the subordination of history to ideological agendas and national mythmaking. In Bulgaria, successive regime changes and Cold War dynamics produced a series of official reinterpretations of Frank's legacy: from national hero, to naïve youth manipulated by imperialists, then to a Byronic tragic figure – embarked on a noble foreign mission yet betrayed by his own evil regime. In Britain, from 1945 to 1981, the government maintained a studied silence regarding Frank's mission, never officially acknowledging its support for the Bulgarian partisans. The archives of the Special Operations Executive – which oversaw Frank's work – remain sealed, and relevant files in the Foreign and War Offices have been deliberately purged by what Thompson calls malicious "anti-historians." Meanwhile, unofficial British myths and anecdotes cast Frank as a stubborn communist who defied orders and acted on his own initiative. This portrayal conveniently turns Frank into a scapegoat, allowing British authority to shirk responsibility. Thompson's mission, then, is to debunk these distorted narratives: narratives in which, as he puts it, "the ideology preceded the history, and invented an anecdote to conform to it" (p.41).

The second, less overt adversary is the tendency to abstract lived experience into impersonal categories of scholarly discourse. Thompson underscores "the endless discrepancies between the trajectories of personal experience, of individuals, and those public trajectories of quantities, of trends, tendencies and process with which historians normally concern themselves" (p. 15). He cautions that rigid theoretical frameworks risk foreclosing inquiry, reducing the complexity of the past to predetermined schemas. By drawing on numerous letters Frank wrote to his family and to his close friend Iris Murdoch, whom he had known at Oxford before the war, Thompson discloses the richness of

Frank's experiences and the delicacy of his emotions. Frank's life, he argues, cannot be captured by any single discipline or doctrine. In the face of tense and rapidly shifting wartime conditions, Frank's careful appraisals and situational judgments were firmly anchored "in concrete historical and personal locations rather than in a priori abstractions" (p. 62). Thompson now insists on approaching his brother's legacy in the same spirit.

The confrontation with these two historiographic adversaries both reflects and amplifies a central motif that recurs throughout Thompson's intellectual and political life: the assertion of human *agency* in resistance to *rigid* structures. By agency I mean the situated experiences of individuals and their conscious efforts to transform prevailing conditions. Structure, by contrast, denotes the encompassing social, economic, political, and ideological frameworks that delimit and condition human action. Thompson's privileging of agency over structure found concrete expression in three of his most significant personae: the political polemicist, the adult education tutor, and the social and labor historian.

Since the mid-1950s, Thompson's paramount political objective as a polemicist was to articulate and defend socialist *humanism* against two opponents: on the one hand, British capitalism and the piecemeal reformism of social democracy; on the other, the abstract, dogmatic, and repressive apparatus of Stalinism. Both, in Thompson's view, imposed profound structural constraints upon individuals: the former denies transformative capacity through the inertia of reformism and political expediency, while the latter suppresses it through teleological determinism and bureaucratic control. (E. P. Thompson, 1957a, 1958, 1959a, 1959b) In opposition to both, Thompson demanded "a return to man: from abstractions and scholastic formulations to real men; from deceptions and myths to honest history." (E. P. Thompson, 1957b, p. 109) During his seventeen years as an extramural tutor at Leeds, he consistently encouraged students to challenge abstract academic theories through their own experiences, rejecting standardized norms imposed on adult learners (E. P. Thompson, 1950, 1997b). For Thompson, a class truly succeeded "when the students, from their memories and from their living experience, revise received academic opinions before one's eyes and reduce the lecturer to the part of saying 'I don't know', or 'the historians haven't looked at that yet'" (E. P. Thompson, 1963b, p. 1). This same commitment underpins the central argument of his magnum opus, *The Making of the English Working Class,* that the process of class formation is "an active process, which owes as much to agency as to conditioning" (1963a, p. 9).

Each of these interventions exemplifies Thompson's lifelong commitment to restoring human agency in the face of structural constraints. In light of these engagements, Thompson advances an *anti-reductionist* historiography that

foregrounds the complexity of historical experience. He aims to rescue his brother Frank's life and legacy from the enormous condescension of state-sponsored, ideologically distorted myths, and from the overly abbreviated categories of academic discourse.

But before turning to Thompson's historiographic approach, it is worth noting a significant shift in tone. He moves from triumphant shout-out to individual agency to a rather somber awareness of structural oppression as a tenacious impediment to change. This contrast becomes especially striking when *Beyond the Frontier* is juxtaposed with Thompson's very first book, *There Is a Spirit in Europe* (1947), which likewise commemorates Frank's life and death. Its title came from a 1943 Christmas letter from Frank, where he expressed optimism that European nations would unite to defeat fascism: "There is a spirit abroad in Europe which is finer and braver than anything that tired continent has known for centuries, and which cannot be withstood" (p. 169). In that book, E. P. Thompson glorified Frank's sacrifice as a beacon of internationalist hope: "It was for this vision of the common people of Europe building, upon their old inheritance, a new creative society of comradeship that Frank gave his life. This is the positive answer which he gave to the negative and defeatist philosophies of our time" (p. 19).

Three decades later, however, the title *Beyond the Frontier: The Politics of a Failed Mission: Bulgaria* 1944 signals the liminal moment when Frank chose to leave Yugoslavia, cross into Bulgaria, and join local partisans – a decision that would ultimately cost his life. Here Thompson no longer affirms the unequivocal significance of his brother's sacrifice. Instead, he laments, "is not history always a record of the supersession and cancellation of individual meanings and motives in the sum which makes up historical process?" (p. 100). This shift alludes to an implicit paradox: if human agency is destined to be subsumed within broader socio-economic and political structures, why does Thompson continue to insist that reconstructing Frank's irreducible personal experience might still serve as an antidote to Cold War ideologies and state-sponsored falsifications of the past?

Rather than indicating a pessimistic rupture in Thompson's thought (Hamilton, 2012, pp. 249-261), I argue that the shift reflects a strategic reorientation. Thompson moves from asserting the transformative potential of *historical* (actors') agency to highlighting the *historiographic* (historians') agency involved in negotiating between personal experience and structural constraint. In this sense, his historiographic agency becomes a springboard from which to resist ideological distortions and to recuperate lost complexities – an endeavor that operates across multiple temporal registers: those of events, myths, and lived experience.

In the first part of the book, Thompson adopts a conventional scholarly approach, using meticulous archival analysis to reconstruct Frank's actions as historical *events*. His stated aim is to offer a "factual answer" capable of countering the myths propagated by both the British and Bulgarian states, whose competing national and ideological interests produced "reprocessing of approved views of the past (or amnesia about the past) and the accretion of new dimensions of myth" (p. 37). Yet the bond of brotherhood precludes Thompson from reducing Frank to a mere object of inquiry. The second section then shifts register, turning to letters, diaries, and poetry to recover Frank's inner struggles, convictions, and wartime *experiences*. "His life," Thompson remarks, "uneasily conforms with stereotypes of either discipline or doctrine" (p.58). The final section, drawing on recollections from British officers and Bulgarian partisans, traces Frank's outlook as he entered Bulgaria and reconstructs the circumstances of his capture and death. More significantly, Thompson ventures what he regards as the most plausible – though ultimately unverifiable – scenario: that Frank was a casualty of history, caught in the late-war geopolitical rivalry between Britain and the Soviet Union, and that his execution was ordered from above. It is this recognition, above all, that lends the book its somber tone.

What Thompson constructs is a polyphonic narrative in which multiple historical temporalities intersect without any single thread subsuming the others. By interweaving events, myths, and lived experiences, he foregrounds the complexity and plurality of historical realities while simultaneously exposing the distortions wrought by *raison d'état* upon both individual lives and the writing of history.

But this is not where Thompson concludes. His ultimate claim is that only historians, writing with the vantage of hindsight, can weave together disparate historical temporalities and, in doing so, endow the past with meaning.

It is we, in the present, who must always give meaning to that inert and finished past (p.100).

The essence of Thompson's historiographic agency then lies in his conviction that narrative reconstructions of the past – when conducted in accordance with scholarly norms and subjected to epistemological scrutiny – can nonetheless exert tangible effects within the socio-political contexts from which they emerge. Thompson's intellectual shift, therefore, consists in discarding the youthful romanticism that the mere depiction of historical figures as active agents would suffice to secure hopeful political outcomes. He no longer believes that cultivating an English "liberty tree" rooted in the late eighteenth century could directly bridge that past to the labor movements of the 1960s, as he had implied in *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963a). Instead, he turned inward, foregrounding the historian's own positionality in

confronting the past's otherness and emphasizing the ethical burden of responsibility toward both the dead and the living.

Perry Anderson succinctly captures this reorientation when he observes that Thompson's historiography constituted at once "a militant intervention in the present, as well as a professional recovery of the past" (1980, p. 2). Thompson's subsequent reflections illustrate this shift. He begins to question the legitimacy of applying the concept of "class" to the analysis of pre-class formations in the eighteenth century (1978a). Later, he cautions against retroactively interpreting historical actors through contemporary categories of inequality, insisting that such figures are "proto-nothing" (E. P. Thompson, 1991, p. 320; Levine, 1993, p. 389). Yet historical writing, for Thompson, was never merely an academic exercise conducted among peers. It was also a struggle on behalf of Frank and other "casualties of history" (E. P. Thompson, 1963a, p. 13): an effort to present truthfully a polyphonic past capable of contesting the univocal and ideologically distorted narratives imposed by the state.

A comparable intellectual impulse is discernible in theoretical works produced contemporaneously with *Beyond the Frontier*. Most notably, in the celebrated "intermission" of *The Poverty of Theory* – where Thompson pivots toward what he calls "historical logic," effectively his philosophy of history and theory of historiography – he articulates a similar orientation (1978b, pp. 37-50). Here Thompson shifts from celebrating the agency of historical actors *per se* to probing the ways in which historians themselves might exercise agency. He insists that historical evidence does not "disclose itself involuntarily" (p. 39), nor does it bear an inherent capacity to articulate its own significance: "Only we, who are now living, can give a 'meaning' to the past" (p. 42). Such meaning must be actively constructed through evaluative and interpretive judgments, mediated by historians' hindsight and by their own positionality, whether generational, gendered, or classed. In this sense, historiographic practice itself becomes a form of political intervention: historians cast their vote through the very act of interpretive engagement, just as Thompson aligns his own with Frank's internationalist commitments rather than with the repressive politics of Britain and the Soviet Union. "Our vote will change nothing. And yet, in another sense, it may change everything" (p. 42).

While writing about his brother, Thompson also immersed himself in studying William Blake, the prophetic poet who wrote of envisioning "Jerusalem" in England's dark satanic mills. Blake became the central focus in the last decade of Thompson life (E. P. Thompson, 1993). Blake's famous dictum echoes (Blake, 1794, 1992, p. 262):

> Eternally I labour on.
>
> I labour upwards into futurity.

Might Thompson have seen in Blake a kindred spirit? Might he have felt the need to move beyond analyzing agency in the third person, toward embracing the role of the laborer in the first? Were Thompson able to witness the decline of the global left and the widening gulf between progressive intellectuals and workers in the 2020s – questions he had grappled with since the 1950s through his inquiries into social and labor history – he would, one suspects, have turned once more to the English radical tradition embodied by Blake and Morris, and to a renewed meditation on the role of historians within it. For him, historiography was never merely an academic exercise; it was a mode of engagement with the contradictions of the world, a means of safeguarding truths that power sought to efface, and an insistence on the irreducible value of individual lives against the weight of impersonal structures. In our own unsettled times, Thompson's legacy lingers as both challenge and invitation: to discover agency within our scholarship, to speak in a voice that is at once evidential and performative, and thereby to shape, however provisionally, the meanings of our present in ways that might endure for posterity.

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