

**Christopher Hill's Intellectual Trajectory:  
From Biblical Protestantism to Humanist Marxism <sup>1</sup>**

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Christopher Hill, the Marxist historian who died in February 2003 at the age of ninety-one,<sup>2</sup> was a magisterial figure not only among historical circles but in twentieth-century British intellectual life. In particular, his achievements represented the successful acceptance of a very distinctive tradition of non-sectarian, non-doctrinaire but nonetheless unapologetic Marxism, in its cultural rather than political manifestation.

Personally, Hill was a genial but very reserved and private man, laconic in his speech and witty, even sardonic, in humour. He was the model of a reticent Englishman.<sup>3</sup> He was not a public polemicist or theoretician; nor did he wish to be. Here he was unlike Edward Thompson, his friend and fellow Marxist historian, whose *Poverty of Theory* (1978)<sup>4</sup> attacked the abstract Marxist historical schemas of Louis Althusser and whose *Protest and Survive* (1980)<sup>5</sup> was a furious polemic in favour of nuclear disarmament. Nor did Hill participate in public debates about the state of modern British politics. Not for him the role played by Eric Hobsbawm, another personal friend and fellow Marxist historian, whose political

journalism in the later 1970s and 1980s opened up key discussions among the Left about the Labour Party's problems in opposing the right-wing populism of Margaret Thatcher.<sup>6</sup>

Hill instead conveyed his views by his voluminous and important studies of seventeenth-century English history.<sup>7</sup> He was the Macaulay of Marxism, conveying complex arguments in readable and accessible prose. It indicates how strong the power of history-writing remains in British culture that Hill was able to establish his position in this way. Of course, he was also from 1965 to 1978 the Master of Balliol College, one of the most liberal Colleges within the prestigious but slow-changing Oxford University. But that was not the real source of Hill's prestige or influence. He was 'Master of more than an old Oxford College', as E.P. Thompson wrote, with a calculated note of iconoclasm, when dedicating one of his own books to Hill.<sup>8</sup>

Seventeenth-century history instead was the battle-ground. Virtually all of Christopher Hill's extensive writings centred upon this tumultuous period of British history, which he termed the 'Century of Revolution'.<sup>9</sup> Over time, he developed a nuanced interpretation of these years. He followed Karl Marx in accepting that the civil war years of 1640-60 constituted a classic 'bourgeois revolution'. He explained that in his first brief and simplified study, *The English Revolution, 1640*<sup>10</sup> – a text that he wrote in a hurry as his 'last will and testament' in the early days of the Second World War.<sup>11</sup> The triumphant mid-seventeenth-century bourgeoisie, however, was not the prime focus of Hill's interest. Nor was it their economic history that he studied.

Instead, the real heart of Hill's project was the exploration and celebration of the 'ferment of ideas' that erupted in the years 1640-60. Press censorship was then lifted for the first time. Many startling radical ideas relating to both church and state were freely canvassed; and some radicals

tried to build a new society – a ‘new Jerusalem’. It seemed, briefly, that freedom *and* equality might be established in place of the old social hierarchy of kings and gentlemen: in effect, *The World Turned Upside Down* (1972) – as signalled by the title of Hill’s single most famous work.

Even though things always became complicated when putting such ideas into practice, this radical quest was for him undeniably just and good. It was not only evidence of an exciting period of history but it held out a significant message from the past for the present. He accordingly wrote at the end of the book: ‘We can, perhaps, extend a little gratitude to all those nameless radicals who foresaw and worked for – not our modern world – but something far nobler, something yet to be achieved – the upside down world.’<sup>12</sup>

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A belief in egalitarianism was a fundamental component of Hill’s personal credo. He instinctively agreed with the celebrated declaration by one of the seventeenth-century radicals: ‘None comes into the world with a saddle on his back, neither any bootied and spurred to ride him.’<sup>13</sup>

For Christopher Hill, the roots of his egalitarianism can be traced back to his personal response to his religious upbringing. From earliest youth, he was immersed in a strong tradition of Yorkshire Methodism, with its authentic brand of piety and proud dissenter separatism. The Hill family rode their bicycles for several miles to attend chapel in York twice every Sunday without fail. At home after the sermon, its message was then discussed intensively, especially between Christopher and his mother. The Hill parents were not personally severe but they adhered strictly to their Methodism, with Sundays observed punctiliously as days of worship and abstinence from all worldly activities. Protestant piety provided a clear moral framework and a well-defined code of personal behaviour. There was even a Methodist ‘saint’ in an earlier generation of the Hill family:

Christopher's great-uncle David Hill was an inspirational Methodist missionary in China in the 1870s and 1880s.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, however, the continuing tradition of provincial Nonconformity in the 1920s was personally restrictive, disapproving of drink and worldly temptations. Christopher Hill was not content with that. His vision of freedom was more libertarian, although not licentious. On one occasion, sometime in late 1931, there was a tense confrontation within the Hill family, when Christopher Hill as a new student returned from Oxford and insisted upon taking his sister, who was younger than him by some years, to the theatre in York.<sup>15</sup> This was heresy. Every true Wesleyan Methodist knew that theatres were haunts of the Devil or, at very least, not suitable for young teenage girls. An unprecedented familial crisis ensued. Hill's father – an upright and reticent man – was saddened and angered at the confrontation. The fact that his brilliant and much-cherished son was showing signs of deviation from the true faith was genuinely alarming.<sup>16</sup> For Christopher Hill, this came at a time of intellectual transition and much personal questioning. He read widely and pondered the classics of European socialism. The outcome was that, at some point in 1933 or 1934 – within the context of major turmoil in European politics – Christopher Hill became a convinced Marxist.

However, even when he had left the chapel and become an agnostic, he retained a staunch moral ethic, as well as a close knowledge of *The Bible*, as befitted one who had read it many times. It is interesting to note that his fellow Marxist historian, E.P. Thompson, was also educated in the Methodist tradition. Both these historians shared a belief not in redemptive religion but in the historically redemptive ideology of Marxism – which can be seen in some ways as representing a form of secularised Dissent. Accordingly, it was appropriate that Hill, later in his career, dedicated 'in gratitude' his own major study of *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-*

*Century Revolution* (1993) to E.P. Thompson and his wife, the historian Dorothy Thompson. Their shared fellowship in a common cause was explicitly recognised. The Thompsons ‘know that history is about people not things’, Hill wrote in his dedication, ‘and that all our work is about the present as well as the past’.<sup>17</sup>

The struggle for true equality was a thread that ran through history. In espousing this view, Christopher Hill also acknowledged one important early spiritual-intellectual influence upon his thinking. It came in the form of the sermons of a highly unconventional Methodist preacher. Hill’s *Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution* (published in 1965) was inscribed ‘For T.S. Gregory’. At the end of the preface, Hill explained:<sup>18</sup>

The dedication acknowledges a thirty-five-year-old debt which can never be repaid. How can one ever be sufficiently grateful to the person who first showed one that all accepted truths, just because they are accepted, tend to become lies?

This highly interesting revelation was once explained to me in further detail by Christopher Hill.<sup>19</sup> He recalled T.S. Gregory as a radical preacher on the Yorkshire Methodist circuit in the late 1920s. His unabashed message was the spiritual equality of every individual: ‘We are all one in the eyes of the Lord’. And Christopher Hill gave me a lively imitation of Gregory’s preaching style, leaning forward as from the pulpit and speaking with great emphasis to startle the utterly respectable congregation of York Methodists with the admonition that, in order to see the divine, they should ‘look into the eyes of every fellow sinner, even the poorest beggar or the most abandoned prostitute or the most vicious wretch in the city streets’.<sup>20</sup> A belief in the fundamental equality of all, high and low alike, was a passionate commitment that resonated instinctively with Christopher Hill. He admired Gregory’s sermons for their articulation of this case. Subsequently, the attitudes towards religion of these two men diverged

completely. Hill, however, had enough of his staunch Protestant background in him to laugh wryly when he told me that T.S. Gregory, always unorthodox, had later left Methodism to be received into the Catholic Church.<sup>21</sup>

Equality, however, was the principle that united these two men. It remained the key theme of Hill's intellectual trajectory throughout his life. Belief in equality furthermore was one of the strong threads that attracted him to many of the seventeenth-century Puritans and radicals whom he studied.

Foremost among the ranks of those admired by Hill was the Digger leader, Gerrard Winstanley. He advocated an agrarian communism, hoping to achieve a social as well as theological egalitarianism. In Winstanley's tract entitled *Fire in the Bush* (1650), he addressed his 'Brethren and fellow-members of mankind',<sup>22</sup> calling them to understand the full meaning of God's message. 'And here I shall end with this question: *What are the greatest sins in the world?*' he concluded rhetorically. His answer was unequivocal: '*First*, for a man to lock up the treasuries of the earth in chests and houses, and suffer it to rust or moulder while others starve for want. ... *Second*, ... for any man ... to take the earth by the power of the murdering sword from others ...'.<sup>23</sup> For Winstanley, belief in spiritual equality had to be translated into how people lived their daily lives. Hill absolutely agreed. He therefore became a communist because he was an egalitarian, rather than the other way round.

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Hill's acceptance of Marxism came some time in 1933 or 1934, when he was in his early twenties. The growing power of European fascism undoubtedly pushed him leftwards, as it did many of the left-leaning young of his generation. There was, however, no one single moment of conversion. In later years, he was often asked why he became a Marxist, to which he

gave a number of different, equally cryptic answers. One favourite reply was ‘Through reading the metaphysical poets’. That always bemused his questioners and usually silenced them too. It sprang from Hill’s perennial dislike of a ‘confessional’ type of conversation; and from his impish sense of humour. He must have enjoyed the look of consternation on the faces of his questioners, who were probably expecting a reply about the evils of Hitler and who were instead left pondering the identity of the metaphysical poets.

Yet Hill’s answer was revealing all the same. It indicated that he had come to Marxism to find a solution to intellectual and moral questions that he was already pondering. More than that, the seventeenth-century metaphysical poets – men like John Donne, George Herbert and Henry Vaughan – had been the subject of a notable essay by T.S. Eliot, published in 1921, in which Eliot had argued that the metaphysical poets were the last poets who were able to fuse thought and feeling perfectly together.<sup>24</sup> After them, a prolonged ‘dissociation of sensibility’ had followed, beginning about the time of Milton and lasting through to Tennyson, Browning and beyond. Eliot’s striking verdict, which did much to revive the prestige of the metaphysicals,<sup>25</sup> remains debatable about the course of English poetry. It conveyed, however, a notion that was relevant and pleasing to Christopher Hill, both intellectually and psychologically. For him, Marxism did precisely offer such a holistic schema that fused both ‘thought and feeling’. As a historian, he valued Marx and Engels’s interpretation of the dynamic linkages between past and present; and, as an egalitarian, he welcomed their sympathy for the proletarian underdog and their confidence that the future, after the proletarian revolution, would ultimately be communist. He also liked the international emphasis of Marx and Engels’s analysis, which moved history beyond a nationalistic narrative into a global framework.

Welding together emotion and intellect, as attributed to the metaphysical poets, represented for Hill an ideal vision. Thus he might have echoed the chiding words of Henry Vaughan from his magnificent poem on *Eternity* (1655), addressed to those who would not believe:<sup>26</sup>

Oh fools (said I) thus to prefer dark night  
Before true light, ...

During Hill's time as a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), which lasted more than twenty years until his resignation in 1957, he did not express any serious doubts about the movement. He spent a year in Russia in 1935/6 and learned the language.<sup>27</sup> Writing as K.E. Holme (the name being a transliteration of 'Hill' in Russian), he penned a propaganda booklet, *The Two Commonwealths: The Soviets and Ourselves* (1945), seeking to boost Anglo-Soviet friendship in the aftermath of the Second World War.<sup>28</sup> And, later, for once venturing away from seventeenth-century British history, he offered a friendly appraisal of Lenin, in a succinct biography for the 'Teach Yourself History' series (1947).<sup>29</sup> The nadir of Hill's communist loyalism came in Autumn 1953. He then advised readers of the *Modern Quarterly* (a Marxist journal) of the merits of 'Stalin and the Science of History'.<sup>30</sup> This essay celebrated comments by the Soviet leader on the role of the common people in effecting social change. Stalin was described as a 'great and penetrating thinker' and a friend of humanity - and Hill buttressed the praise by citing Churchill's 1945 encomium for 'Stalin the Great' as a war-time leader.<sup>31</sup> The essay appears to have been one of a commissioned set of obituaries. Nonetheless, Hill's pietistic praise for Stalin's theory of social change seems in retrospect to have been determinedly blind to Stalin's actual policies in practice.<sup>32</sup>

Meanwhile, British communism, which had a strict Party line on international affairs, did not extend its writ to controlling the detailed interpretation of history. Such matters were open for argument.<sup>33</sup> And in the



years from 1946 to 1956, they were mightily debated by the CPGB Historians' Group, its membership a scintillating galaxy including among others Christopher Hill, Eric Hobsbawm, Dorothy Thompson, sometimes E.P. Thompson (who was enrolled in the CPGB Writers' Group), Rodney Hilton, Victor Kiernan, John Saville, A.L. Morton, George Rudé, Dona Torr, George Tate, and many others, including teachers, trade unionists and CP activists.<sup>34</sup> For Hill, this network of Left-wing historians became the ever-stimulating 'peer group' from which he drew sustenance, superseding as referents the Russian economic historians whose research he had explored in the 1930s.<sup>35</sup>

He also played a leading role in the launch in 1952 of a new ecumenical journal, *Past & Present*, which brought together Marxists and liberals to circulate the latest research in social history.<sup>36</sup> It might be added that both personally, and as a tutor, Hill was always tolerant of a wide range of views and lifestyles, encouraged in this social latitudinarianism by the cultured bohemianism of his first wife Inez Waugh.

Many of the Historians' Group were active in the internal Party campaign to democratise the CPGB in 1956, in protest at the leadership's controversial support for the Soviet invasion of 'goulash-communist' Hungary. Hill was one of the foremost leaders of the dissenters. Only when this campaign failed at the 1957 Party Congress, did he, with many others – especially but not exclusively the 'intellectual' comrades – resign from the CP.<sup>37</sup> The change entailed a break from and within the Left's international networks too. British and continental Marxism became increasingly bifurcated. In time, Hill became known as an international figure, his works translated into many languages. Yet his intellectual focus remained very much within the English-speaking world.<sup>38</sup>

Thereafter, Christopher Hill described himself as a Marxist but not a Communist. His decision to leave the Party in May 1957 caused him much

anguish. It meant that, in terms of his own personal beliefs, he had to face T.S. Gregory's message twice over: that 'all accepted truths, just because they are accepted, tend to become lies.' In terms of religion, the once-radical exciting Protestant cause had hardened into a solidly establishment religion. For the young Hill in the 1920s, its message of theological liberation combined with personal repression had become a restrictive lie. Early Protestantism differed from later Nonconformity 'as much as vinegar does wine', he claimed.<sup>39</sup> But the communist movement in which Christopher Hill then placed his own (secular) faith, also failed to become the answer that he and many others had hoped. Embalmed as a repressive state orthodoxy, it too did not allow real freedom. It had become a lie, and was later rejected in Eastern Europe by the very people in whose names the communists ruled.

Freed from Party orthodoxy after 1957, Hill increasingly dropped the formalised Marxist terminology. The events of 1640-60 remained for him 'the English Revolution' – replete with many possibilities – but were no longer named as 'the bourgeois revolution'. The change was in part purely semantic, because Hill did not rescind a socio-economic interpretation of the upheavals.

There was, however, a subtle internal shift in his explanatory logic. Initially, it was an emergent capitalism that generated the English Revolution, bursting asunder the restrictive bonds of the old feudal state,<sup>40</sup> whereas in his later works it was the Revolution created the conditions in which an emergent capitalism could flourish.<sup>41</sup> The causal flow was, in effect, reversed. Political change laid the groundwork for economic change, rather than the other way round. From his perspective, however, the revolutionary nature of the Revolution was 'saved'.

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After the crisis of 1957, Christopher Hill, then aged 45, wrote with fresh vigour and speed. Because he did not move sharply to the political Right (in contrast to some other former communists), he himself described leaving the Party as an institutional transition rather than an intellectual liberation. The change also coincided with his second marriage in 1956, to Bridget Mason (née Sutton). Theirs was a union of deeply kindred spirits. Bridget Hill, the daughter of a Baptist minister, had a similar Nonconformist background from which she too had broken free; and she shared Christopher's unwavering belief in Marxism and in the value of education. (They had first met in the late 1940s, long before their courtship began, when he came to lecture to a Workers' Educational Association class that she had organised). Bridget Hill encouraged Christopher to write, just as he later encouraged her.<sup>42</sup>

Gaining simultaneously both personal and intellectual equipoise unlocked his creativity. From this point, Hill's writing productivity shot up and thereafter became prodigious. All in all, he wrote more than fifteen books (two being textbooks),<sup>43</sup> as well as edited volumes of printed primary sources and historical studies.<sup>44</sup> He also contributed to very many books and journals, writing over 150 scholarly essays, the most important of which were subsequently reprinted in seven volumes.<sup>45</sup> Everything was accessibly written, and replete with formidable learning, based upon library collections of printed primary sources (he was never an archives man).

Among his major books, one significant category comprised biographies of leading seventeenth-century Puritans: Oliver Cromwell;<sup>46</sup> John Milton;<sup>47</sup> John Bunyan.<sup>48</sup> Hill was keenly attentive to the dilemmas faced by radicals in turbulent times, in their struggles to balance freedom and order. It was part of his favoured approach to study history via the role of individuals: no soulless reliance upon the impersonal forces of history for him. Indeed, many of Hill's short essays were about little-known Puritans

who in their individual careers exemplified aspects of the seventeenth-century debates. There are thus wonderful brief biographies of men like ‘The Mad Hatter’ (Roger Crab, a radical egalitarian who also espoused teetotalism and vegetarianism)<sup>49</sup> or of ‘John Mason and the End of the World’ (a millenarian preacher who attracted crowds of believers waiting to see the Last Judgement at the place and time specified by Mason).<sup>50</sup>

Another major category of his publications related to religion, not only in its institutional guise but especially as a set of ideas. His *Economic Problems of the Church: From Archbishop Whitgift to the Long Parliament* (1956) was the most explicitly concerned with the materialist infrastructure, although Hill did not use that Marxist terminology. He examined the financial problems that were grievously weakening the Church of England, mixing as he did so fiscal detail with theological learning: the motto for the study came from *The Bible*, Matthew, vi, 19-21: ‘Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt ...’.<sup>51</sup> It was not difficult to believe that Hill, had he returned to seventeenth-century England, would have joined with gusto in Puritan complaints that the Church dabbled too much in the world of mammon and had lost its primitive purity.

Ideas rather than economics remained his forte. In *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England* (1964),<sup>52</sup> *AntiChrist in Seventeenth-Century England* (1971)<sup>53</sup> and *The Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution* (1993), he examined the social implications of religious beliefs. This was always one of Hill’s preoccupations. He did not stint, moreover, on the theological details. For example, in the middle of his study of Milton, he devoted a chapter to ‘mortalism’ – the materialist heresy that the soul dies with the body.<sup>54</sup> It was very interesting and it was entirely relevant to his analysis of the unorthodox beliefs of Milton. Yet it made Hill a surprising Marxist, at least

for those who expected a crude Marxism to focus upon nothing but the ‘economic factor’. The stress upon the power of ideas was continued in his *Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution* (1965)<sup>55</sup> and the much slighter *Intellectual Consequences of the English Revolution* (1980),<sup>56</sup> based on a set of guest lectures. A late and somewhat disparate study of *Liberty against the Law* (1996)<sup>57</sup> also celebrated a variety of critics of the seventeenth-century ‘system’, ranging from Puritan divines to pirates and highwaymen – no doubt to the posthumous horror of the Puritan divines at being yoked with such raffish and disreputable company.

In general, it could be said that Hill’s position had evolved into a humanist Marxism, which laid stress upon the agency of individuals and the power of their ideas. He did, however, reveal a residual materialism from time to time. Once when writing about the new usage of the term ‘revolution’ in seventeenth-century England, he wrote blithely that ‘Things precede words’.<sup>58</sup> In elaboration, he explained that ‘New words were needed because new things happened, or old concepts forced themselves anew upon popular attention’. Hence he argued that the new seventeenth-century references to ‘revolution’ confirmed that one had occurred in the 1640s and 1650s. Yet these are philosophical deep waters. Do dragons (or mermaids or unicorns) really appear before people can speak of ‘dragons’, ‘mermaids’, ‘unicorns’? Indeed, the lapidary dictum that ‘things precede words’ would imply that God must precede the word for ‘God’ – not an argument that Hill the atheist would readily accept in other circumstances. Here his enthusiasm for the seventeenth-century revolution had led him into a philosophical quagmire.

Undoubtedly, for him, the work that best expressed his own beliefs was *The World Turned Upside Down* (1972).<sup>59</sup> This study joyfully delineated the quest for radical change by assorted Levellers, Diggers, Ranters, Fifth Monarchists and others previously dismissed as the ‘lunatic fringe’. Hill did

them the compliment of taking them seriously. Obliquely, it could be said too that his message implied a measure of support for the radical student movements of 1968, although Hill as the establishment Master of an Oxford College had managed to ensure that Balliol's angry young men did not go too far in their challenges to convention.

His optimism in *The World Turned Upside Down* contrasted notably with a later and sadder work, *The Experience of Defeat* (1984), written in the Thatcher years, when he meditated the outward failure of the English Revolution post 1660. It was not his best book; and the volume ended with a somewhat wistful call for a renewed radical idealism: 'In 1644 Milton saw England as a "nation of prophets". Where are they now?' he wrote, without suggesting an answer.<sup>60</sup> It indicated that Hill was happiest with contemplating hopes for change. At a talk to London University students some time in the later 1980s, he was challenged by one young questioner to explain how the Left should best oppose Margaret Thatcher, to which he replied sadly: 'I wish I knew'. Hill's Marxism, cut off from the Communist Party with its small but loyal industrial base, had by this date entirely lost contact with the world of organised labour.<sup>61</sup> And the student radicalism that had seemed so lively in the later 1960s and 1970s had oozed away in the 1980s. Nonetheless, he still stressed the need to remain aware of the radical alternatives to the existing system. Change was always possible and, alas, always needed.

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Foremost among Hill's achievements was making an intellectual Leftism respectable. He and his fellow Marxist historians were part of the new tide of social history that brought 'history from below' irrevocably onto the teaching curriculum; and they opened the floodgates to the many initiatives that followed in women's history; gay history; ethnic history, and so forth. In the 1970s, for example, Hill warmly welcomed the new History

Workshop movement. He particularly enjoyed the egalitarianism of its discussion groups, where he typically listened rather than pontificated. At the same time, as Master of an Oxford College, Christopher Hill represented the capacity of Marxism to storm an important cultural citadel – although it should be noted that, by the time of his election in 1965, Hill was no longer a doctrinaire exponent of the cause. It remains a moot point whether he would have succeeded had he still been a CP member. In my view, probably not. Hill was never popular with visceral anti-communists – an attitude that long persisted.<sup>62</sup> But he was so elected; and he made a successful and liberal (rather than revolutionary) Master.<sup>63</sup>

Whilst Hill's reputation with the public spread through his accessible publications and through his willingness to tour schools and Colleges to lecture, he was not without strong critics. His books almost always had mixed reviews from his fellow academics. Moreover, a sharply honed attack upon his general methodology came in 1975 from the American historian J.H. Hexter.<sup>64</sup> He accused Hill of 'source-mining', scouring his sources to find evidence for a predetermined case, and then of 'lumping'<sup>65</sup> material together too uncritically. The critique scored some good points, even while underestimating the nuances that Hill increasingly gave to his interpretation. Other polemics followed. In 1986 Hill was accused of inventing, in *The World Turned Upside Down*, a Ranter 'movement' of hippie-style libertarians, allegedly to substantiate a communist mythology of popular resistance to the 'bourgeois' Protestant ethic.<sup>66</sup> And in 1996, he was critiqued again, along with his fellow Marxists, for 'fabricating' a changing history in response to changing political times.<sup>67</sup> Yet Hill, an absolute Puritan in personal morals, did not dishonestly manipulate his material. He believed everything that he wrote. At times, admittedly, his style can be faulted as too impressionistic, without sufficiently weighing alternative explanations and assessing problems within his own argument (some of his

critics fell into the same trap). The fact that he wrote rapidly and updated his arguments over time, however, did not in itself disprove his history.

Most damaging for that was the wider ‘revisionist’ tide of new research in the 1970s and 1980s, which sought to throw doubt on the existence of any revolution at all in seventeenth-century England.<sup>68</sup> Hill was not convinced by this alternative interpretation, needless to say; and he was pleased, in his later years, when the tide began to return towards a ‘post-revisionism’ that restored change into the big picture.<sup>69</sup> As that suggests, however, the Marxist historians by no means carried all before them. Their influence, which was great, became increasingly diffuse over time. There was talk of a ‘terminal decline’ of Marxist history in the Thatcher era, though not from the convinced Marxists themselves.<sup>70</sup>

Other intellectual fashions came and went, multiplying from the 1970s onwards. These sometimes contradicted and sometimes complemented, more or less awkwardly, the premises of classical Marxism. Hill himself did not seek to generate a single ‘school’ of researchers. Thus the heirs of the Marxists in the next academic generation tended to be more generically radical than formally Marxist.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, there was a potential disagreement within the Marxist historical ranks as to when was ‘the great divide’ in British history? For Hill, the indisputably key revolution occurred in the seventeenth century; while for others, such as E.P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm, it was the Industrial Revolution of the later eighteenth century – once described by Hobsbawm as ‘the most fundamental transformation of human life in the history of the world recorded in written documents’.<sup>72</sup> Hill’s later formulation of 1640-60 as the generator of capitalism, complete with England’s landed gentry playing the role of an agrarian bourgeoisie, seemed one possible way to bridge the difference. Nonetheless, the once straightforward message of Marx and Engels was becoming ever more complicated. There was not one agreed ‘line’ for all to



follow. And, by the same token, Marxism itself as an intellectual tradition was also diversifying almost out of existence, whether applied to history or any other subject specialisms.

Throughout all this, Christopher Hill never rejected the hopes of the Left, despite his sadness at the failure of institutionalised communism. Intellectually, he continued to defend Marxism as a way of understanding both past and present history. The general framework remained clear to him. He did not endorse ‘post-Marxism’ – that is, a left-wing stance that could describe itself as coming *after* and learning from Marxism (as distinct from anti-Marxism which simply opposed Marxism). For him, the cause was very far from dead and buried:<sup>73</sup>

I have changed my vocabulary [he wrote at the age of eighty] but I do not think I have shifted very far on my main ‘Marxist’ point about seventeenth-century England. I still think that the events between 1640 and 1660 are aptly described as a revolution, since they led to vast changes in the history of England and of the world.

But Hill did not preach by the book. His interpretation of the English Revolution, peopled with saints and sinners, was propelled by ideas and issues, by theology and prophecy, rather than by inexorable long-term economic trends. No doubt his arguments will be updated, because that is how the study of history develops. When the research dust settles, however, his insistence that change is made by ordinary people will survive. Trends are the sum total of individual micro-actions and occasional macro-upheavals, in which all may participate. His vision will continue to inspire those who seek to understand history’s complex inter-connectedness through time. He liked to cite approvingly E.M. Forster’s celebrated dictum: ‘Only connect!’<sup>74</sup> It was what Hill strove to do in his teaching and writing. And what was the unifying thread?

Above all, Christopher Hill was an egalitarian, nurtured by Biblical Protestantism and later translated into humanist Marxism. He believed in the quest for freedom *and* equality. And, all his life, he stuck with his Good Old Cause.

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## ENDNOTES:

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- <sup>1</sup> With thanks to Irene Corfield, Tony Corfield, Lyndal Roper and Susan Whyman for helpful criticisms of an early draft of this essay; and to Dorothy Thompson for illuminating discussion of the Historians' Group of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) and its intellectual milieu.
- <sup>2</sup> Christopher Hill (1912-2003) was Fellow (1938-65) and then Master (1965-78) of Balliol College, Oxford, and one of the founding editors of the historical journal *Past & Present* (1952- ), in which capacity he appears in the group portrait by Stephen F.G. Farthing, 'Historians of Past and Present' (1999), in London's National Portrait Gallery.
- <sup>3</sup> Hill was born in Yorkshire, a county with a reputation for terse humour. His affection for his natal county remained with him all his life. As a boy he was keen to play cricket for Yorkshire, at a time when membership of the team was restricted to those with the 'birthright' - that is, who had been born within the county. But, despite much practice, Hill was never more than a tolerable amateur at the game, and 'so he took up history instead': personal account by Christopher Hill to P.J.C.
- <sup>4</sup> E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory: and Other Essays*, London, 1978.
- <sup>5</sup> E.P. Thompson, *Protest and Survive*, London, 1980.
- <sup>6</sup> Most famous of Eric Hobsbawm's political essays was the text of his 1978 Marx Memorial Lecture, 'The Forward March of Labour Halted?', repr. in Eric Hobsbawm, *Politics for a Rational Left: Political Writings, 1977-88*, London, 1989, pp. 9-22. See also the essay plus a range of responses in Martin Jacques and F. Mulhern (eds), *The Forward March of Labour Halted?*, London, 1981.
- <sup>7</sup> See M.F. Roberts, 'A Select Bibliography, 1938-77', in *Puritans and Revolutionaries: Essays in Seventeenth-Century History Presented to Christopher Hill*, ed. Donald Pennington and Keith Thomas, Oxford, 1978, pp. 382-402. Hill continued to publish extensively throughout the following twenty years 1977-97, when he was finally halted by ill-health.
- <sup>8</sup> E.P. Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters: the Origin of the Black Act*, London, 1975, p. [5].
- <sup>9</sup> This was the title of his spirited textbook on seventeenth-century England: Christopher Hill, *The Century of Revolution, 1603-1714*, Edinburgh, 1961.
- <sup>10</sup> Christopher Hill, *The English Revolution 1640*, London, 1940; and many later reprints. The uncompromising Marxism of this analysis shocked some of Hill's academic colleagues when it first appeared: see Gwendolyn B. Whale, 'Christopher Hill: Some Reminiscences', in *Puritans and Revolutionaries*, ed. Pennington and Thomas, p. 6.
- <sup>11</sup> Cited by Martin Kettle, 'Obituary: Christopher Hill', *Guardian*, 26 Feb. 2003.
- <sup>12</sup> Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution*, London, 1972, p. 311.
- <sup>13</sup> Speech on the scaffold by the defeated radical Richard Rumbold, after the failure of Monmouth's rebellion in 1685, as quoted in *The Good Old Cause: the English Revolution of 1640-60 - Its Causes, Course and Consequences*, ed. Christopher Hill and Edmund Dell, London, 1949, p. 474.
- <sup>14</sup> Information about David Hill (1840-96) is available in W.T.A. Barber, *David Hill: an Apostle to the Chinese*, London, 1906; H.B. Burgoyne, *David Hill, Friend of China: a Modern Portrait*, London, 1949; and P. Yates, 'Friendly Foreign Devil': *David Hill of China*, London, 1939.

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- 15 Personal information from my mother, Irene Corfield (née Hill), who is  
Christopher Hill's only sibling: P.J.C
- 16 As a student at Oxford, Christopher Hill had ceased to attend the Methodist  
chapel in c. 1931 but he continued to do so on his return to the family home, until  
he was aged 22 or 23 (that is, until c. 1934/5), when he eventually explained to  
his saddened parents that he was no longer a believer: information from Irene  
Corfield.
- 17 Christopher Hill, *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution*,  
London, 1993, p. [iv]. An excellent discussion of the often-noted connection  
between liberal Protestant Dissent and Marxism comes in Raphael Samuel, 'The  
British Marxist Historians, 1880-1980: Part One', *New Left Review*, 120,  
March/April 1980, pp. 41-55.
- 18 Christopher Hill, *Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution*, Oxford, 1965,  
p. [v]: this referred to Theophilus Stephen Gregory (1897-1975).
- 19 Personal recollection of my conversation with Christopher Hill, triggered by my  
curiosity to know more about T.S. Gregory, of whom otherwise no mention had  
ever been made: P.J.C.
- 20 Corroboration of this theological approach is found in T.S. Gregory, *They Shall  
See God*, London, 1926, p. 21, where he avers that 'God is in man - in the vilest  
of men - or else He doesn't matter'.
- 21 T.S. Gregory, a Methodist minister 1921-35, joined the Catholic communion in  
1935 and later became President of the Aquinas Society (1945): see *Who's Who  
Online, 1897-1996*. His account of his conversion is contained in T.S. Gregory,  
*The Unfinished Universe*, London, 1935.
- 22 Gerrard Winstanley, *Fire in the Bush: the Spirit Burning, Not Consuming but  
Purging Mankind* (1650), in *The Law of Freedom and Other Writings*, ed.  
Christopher Hill, Harmondsworth, 1973, p. 213.
- 23 Gerrard Winstanley, *Fire in the Bush*, in his *Law of Freedom*, p. 272.
- 24 T.S. Eliot, 'The Metaphysical Poets', *Times Literary Supplement*, 20 October  
1921; and repr. in *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode, London,  
1975, pp. 59-67, esp. p. 64.
- 25 See *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century: Donne to  
Butler*, ed. H.J.C. Grierson, Oxford, 1921 - the publication which prompted T.S.  
Eliot's review essay.
- 26 Henry Vaughan (1621-95), 'The World (I)', in *Henry Vaughan: the Complete  
Poems*, ed. A. Rudrum, New Haven, 1976, p. 228.
- 27 During this visit, Christopher Hill had surgery for an acute ear infection, which  
left him afterwards with damaged hearing in one ear. On a happier note, he  
reportedly had a love affair with a Russian woman.
- 28 K.E. Holme [Christopher Hill], *Two Commonwealths: the Soviets and  
Ourselves*, London, 1945.
- 29 Christopher Hill, *Lenin and the Russian Revolution*, London, 1947; and many  
reprints.
- 30 Christopher Hill, 'Stalin and the Science of History', *Modern Quarterly* 8:4,  
autumn 1953, pp. 198-212. This followed upon J.D. Bernal's tribute to 'Stalin as  
Scientist', *Modern Quarterly* 8:3, summer 1953, pp. 133-42.
- 31 Hill, 'Stalin and the Science of History', p. 211.
- 32 The supportive attitude of most British communists towards the USSR pre-1956  
is noted in Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: a Twentieth-Century Life*,

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- London, 2002, pp. 191-202, which also includes a brief account of Hill and Hobsbawm's joint visit to the USSR as academic delegates in December 1954.
- <sup>33</sup> This point is made in Rodney Hilton, 'Some Reminiscences', in *Puritans and Revolutionaries*, ed. Pennington and Thomas, p. 9; and also Eric Hobsbawm, 'The Historians' Group of the Communist Party', in *Rebels and their Causes*, ed. Maurice Cornforth, London, 1978, pp. 33-4.
- <sup>34</sup> For a summary, see Harvey J. Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians: an Introductory Analysis*, Basingstoke, 1995, pp. 10-15; and for details, see Hobsbawm, 'Historians' Group', pp. 21-48; Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, p. 191; Richard Johnson, 'Culture and the Historians', in *Working-Class Culture: Studies in History and Theory*, ed. J. Clarke, C. Critcher and R. Johnson, London, 1979, pp. 54-65; D. Parker, 'The Communist Party and its Historians, 1946-89', *Socialist History* 12, 1997, pp. 33-58; and Samuel, 'British Marxist Historians', pp. 91-4.
- <sup>35</sup> See for example Christopher Hill, 'Soviet Interpretations of the English Revolution', *Economic History Review* 8, 1938, pp. 159-67; and Christopher Hill, 'Prof. Lavrovsky's Study of a Seventeenth-Century Manor', in *Econ. Hist. Rev.* 16, 1946, pp. 125-9.
- <sup>36</sup> The journal's title harked back to Thomas Carlyle's radical classic *Past and Present*, London, 1843, but its subtitle *A Journal of Scientific History* added Marxist hopes for a 'scientific socialism'. The sub-title was quietly dropped in 1958, when the editorial board was further widened
- <sup>37</sup> Kaye, *British Marxist Historians*, p. 17. The proposal, made by Christopher Hill and Rodney Hilton, that the Historians' Group disaffiliate from the Party to recommence as a free-standing organisation was rejected on a show of hands; and the Group continued under its old rubric for some years, but with greatly reduced numbers and impact.
- <sup>38</sup> He maintained particularly close contacts with liberal academics in the USA and Australia, and in the 1970s and 1980s often lectured in America and held visiting professorships at New York's New School of Social Research.
- <sup>39</sup> Christopher Hill, *Puritanism and Revolution: Studies in Interpretation of the English Revolution of the Seventeenth Century*, London, 1958, p. xx. Another metaphor referred to the Puritanism that survived after defeat in 1660 as the 'dry husk' of what had gone before: see Christopher Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England*, London, 1964, p. 510.
- <sup>40</sup> Examples of this interpretation can be found in Hill, *English Revolution, 1640* (1985 edn), p. 78; and Christopher Hill, *Economic Problems of the Church: from Archbishop Whitgift to the Long Parliament*, Oxford, 1956, p. 352. For Hill's determined advocacy of this view against criticisms from Victor Kiernan in the CPGB Historians' Group in the later 1940s, see Alastair MacLachlan, *The Rise and Fall of Revolutionary England: an Essay on the Fabrication of Seventeenth-Century History*, Basingstoke, 1996, pp. 116-21.
- <sup>41</sup> For examples, see Hill, *Century of Revolution*, pp. 187-8, 307-8; and his *Reformation to Industrial Revolution: a Social and Economic History of Britain*, London, 1967, pp. 4-10. See also Christopher Hill, 'A Bourgeois Revolution', in J.G.A. Pocock (ed.), *Three British Revolutions: 1641, 1688, 1776*, Princeton, 1980, pp. 109-39, esp. p. 111. For a critique of Hill's changing emphasis from the left, see A.L. Merson, 'Problems of the English Bourgeois Revolution: Some Reflections on the Recent Work of Christopher Hill', *Marxism*

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- Today, Oct. 1963, pp. 310-15; and from the right, see MacLachlan, *Rise and Fall of Revolutionary England*, p. 131.
- 42 Bridget Hill (1922-2002) published her major books after the age of 65: *Women, Work and Sexual Politics in Eighteenth-Century England*, Oxford, 1989; *The Republican Virago: the Life and Times of Catherine Macaulay*, Oxford, 1992; *Servants: English Domestic in the Eighteenth Century*, Oxford, 1996; and *Women Alone: Spinsters in England, 1660-1850*, New Haven, 2001.
- 43 These were his *Century of Revolution* and a rare excursus into economic history in his *Reformation to Industrial Revolution*.
- 44 Hill edited for publication H.N. Brailsford, *The Levellers and the English Revolution*, ed. Christopher Hill, London, 1961; and he co-authored Christopher Hill, Barry Reay and William Lamont, *The World of the Muggletonians*, London, 1983.
- 45 See Hill, *Puritanism and Revolution*, containing one of his longest and singly most influential essays 'The Norman Yoke', pp. 50-122. Others are Christopher Hill, *Change and Continuity in Seventeenth-Century England*, London, 1974 - this was the volume that provoked a strong critique by J.H. Hexter's critique (below n. 64); as well as *The Collected Essays of Christopher Hill, Vol. 1: Writing and Revolution in Seventeenth-Century England*, Brighton, 1985; *The Collected Essays of Christopher Hill, Vol. 2: Religion and Politics in Seventeenth-Century England*, Brighton, 1986; *The Collected Essays of Christopher Hill, Vol. 3: People and Ideas in Seventeenth-Century England*, Brighton, 1986; Christopher Hill, *A Nation of Change and Novelty: Radical Politics, Religion and Literature in Seventeenth-Century England*, London, 1990; and Christopher Hill, *England's Turning Point: Essays on Seventeenth-Century English History*, London, 1998 - including numerous review essays.
- 46 Christopher Hill, *God's Englishman: Oliver Cromwell and the English Revolution*, London, 1970. A short version appeared earlier in his *Oliver Cromwell, 1658-1959*, Historical Association pamphlet, 1958.
- 47 Christopher Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution*, London, 1977.
- 48 Christopher Hill, *A Turbulent, Seditious and Factious People: John Bunyan and his Church, 1628-88*, Oxford, 1988: dedicated 'For Bridget, beloved comrade and fellow pilgrim' - invoking the language both of communism and of radical Protestantism.
- 49 Christopher Hill, 'The Mad Hatter', in his *Puritanism and Revolution*, pp. 314-22. This book was dedicated to Hill's parents [Janet Augusta and Edward Harold Hill] with a graceful, if very subtly ambiguous, acknowledgement: 'To J.A.H. and E.H.H. who taught me most'. For more on Roger Crab's teachings, see also R. Bowers, 'Roger Crab: Opposition Hunger Artist in 1650s England', *Seventeenth Century*, Vol. 18 (2003), pp. 93-112.
- 50 Christopher Hill, 'John Mason and the End of the World', in his *Puritanism and Revolution*, pp. 323-36.
- 51 Quoted in Hill, *Economic Problems of the Church*, p. [iv].
- 52 Hill, *Society and Puritanism*, p. [5]: dedicated 'To Bridget but for whom ...'.
- 53 Christopher Hill, *AntiChrist in Seventeenth-Century England*, London, 1971, based on his 1969 Riddell Memorial lectures at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne
- 54 There were three versions of this heresy: one stating that the soul sleeps after death until the Last Judgement; the second arguing that the soul dies with the

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body but is resurrected at the Last Judgement; and the third taking an annihilationist view that the soul dies with the body which then decomposes into its original elements: see Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution*, p. 317.

55 Hill, *Intellectual Origins*; reissued in revised format as *Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution Revisited*, Oxford, 1997.

56 Christopher Hill, *Some Intellectual Consequences of the English Revolution*, London, 1980.

57 Christopher Hill, *Liberty against the Law: Some Seventeenth-Century Controversies*, London, 1996: this work was also dedicated to Bridget Hill.

58 Christopher Hill, 'The Word "Revolution"', in his *Nation of Change and Novelty*, p. 117: the essay was first published in a *Festschrift* for Veronica Wedgwood in 1986.

59 Hill, *World Turned Upside Down*, p. [8]: dedicated to Bridget Hill and their children, Andrew and Dinah Hill, as well as to Rodney Hilton, Hill's friend and fellow Marxist, for suggesting the book.

60 Christopher Hill, *The Experience of Defeat: Milton and Some Contemporaries*, London, 1984), p. 328.

61 After 1957, Hill joined the Labour Party but it never became his spiritual home, and in the 1990s he was predictably unhappy with Tony Blair's 'Third Way' project for New Labour.

62 Upon Christopher Hill's death in 2003, his conduct during his wartime secondment to the Foreign Office in 1944-5 was denounced by Anthony Glees in *The Times*, with a hostile banner headline implying that Hill had virtually confessed to being a Soviet mole or secret agent, at an interview with Glees in September 1985: see *The Times*, 5 March 2003, p. 3. Glees's 2003 attack, however, contrasted with his much more cautious analysis of Hill's FO service, published while Hill was still alive, in Anthony Glees, *The Secrets of the Service: British Intelligence and Communist Subversion, 1939-51*, London, 1987, pp. 279-88. In fact, at their 1985 meeting Hill denied Glees's charges of underhand dealings and repeated his denial in subsequent correspondence. Hill's political views were never concealed, as he believed in the duty to 'bear witness' publicly. In practice, moreover, Hill was only a junior figure in the Foreign Office and he by no means directed British foreign policy vis-à-vis Russia, a country with which Britain was already in wartime alliance: on this, see John Saville, 'Christopher Hill at the Foreign Office, 1944-5', in John Saville, *The Politics of Continuity: British Foreign Policy and the Labour Government, 1945-6*, London, 1993, pp. 212-17.

63 Liberal reforms initiated in his era included the admission of student representatives on College committees and plans to introduce women as postgraduate students. Traditionalists who had feared that Hill would neglect the College's graduates were reassured when he proved to be punctilious in keeping in touch with Balliol 'old boys' of every political persuasion: see Maurice Keen, 'Some Personal Reminiscences', in *Puritans and Revolutionaries*, ed. Pennington and Thomas, p. 20.

64 J.H. Hexter, 'The Historical Method of Christopher Hill', *Times Literary Supplement*, 25 Oct. 1975, repr. in his *On Historians: Reappraisals of Some of the Makers of Modern History*, London, 1979, pp. 227-51. An immediate reply by Hill, 'The Burden of Proof', followed in *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 Nov. 1975, p. 1333.

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- <sup>65</sup> ‘Lumpers’ sought to group the disparate historical record into one big picture, while ‘splitters’ tended instead to make complicated things more complicated: see Hexter, *On Historians*, pp. 241-2. Using this terminology, Hexter himself was one of life’s splitters, and Hill - like Marx and Engels, before him - was without doubt temperamentally a lumper.
- <sup>66</sup> See J.C. Davis, *Fear, Myth and History: the Ranters and the Historians*, Cambridge, 1986, passim esp. p. 134. For Hill’s measured refutation of the accusation of inventing his history, see Christopher Hill, ‘Abolishing the Ranters’, in his *Nation of Change and Continuity*, pp. 152-94 (expanded from his 1987 review of Davis).
- <sup>67</sup> MacLachlan, *Rise and Fall of Revolutionary England*, assesses the evolution of Hill’s ideas, with the hostile assumption throughout that Hill is either trying to deceive or is self-deceived. For a general discussion on Britain’s evolving Marxist historical tradition as a whole, this time from a sympathetic viewpoint, see also Samuel, ‘British Marxist Historians’, pp. 21-96.
- <sup>68</sup> For a distillation of revisionism, drawing upon the research of historians such as Conrad Russell, John Morrill, Alan Everitt and John Miller, see Barry Coward, *The Stuart Age: a History of England, 1603-1714*, London, 1980 - a text that contrasts notably with Hill’s *Century of Revolution*.
- <sup>69</sup> See his comments on seventeenth-century revisionism in Hill, *English Bible*, pp. 47-9.
- <sup>70</sup> ‘From the end of the 1970s, the Marxist approach to history, which had flourished in Britain and elsewhere for over two decades, entered a period of abrupt and terminal decline’, argued Gareth Stedman Jones, ‘The Determinist Fix: Some Obstacles to the Further Development of the Linguistic Approach to History in the 1990s’, *History Workshop Journal* 42, 1996, p. 19.
- <sup>71</sup> For diverse evaluations, see Stedman Jones, ‘Determinist Fix’, pp. 19-35, esp. p. 33; Kaye, *British Marxist Historians*, pp. 221-49; MacLachlan, *Rise and Fall of Revolutionary England*, pp. 314-35; and Matt Perry, *Marxism and History*, Basingstoke, 2002, pp. 155-9. A global survey of the fragmentation of Marxist thought does not even list the names of Christopher Hill, Eric Hobsbawm or E.P. Thompson in its index: see François Furet, *Le passé d’une illusion*, Paris, 1995, transl. as *The Passing of an Illusion: the Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century*, Chicago, 1999.
- <sup>72</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire: an Economic History of Britain since 1750*, London, 1968, p. 1.
- <sup>73</sup> Christopher Hill ‘Premature Obsequies?’ in *After the End of History*, ed. Alan Ryan, London, 1992, pp. 10-11.
- <sup>74</sup> E.M. Forster, *Howard’s End*, London, 1910, in 1989 edn, p. 188: ‘Only connect! ... Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its highest. Live in fragments no longer. Only connect, and the beast and the monk, robbed of the isolation that is life to either, will die’.