

**John Bugg, *Five Long Winters: The Trials of British Romanticism*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014. Pp. 264. \$60. ISBN 9780804785105.**

**Kenneth R. Johnston, *Unusual Suspects: Pitt's Reign of Alarm and the Lost Generation of the 1790s*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. 400. £31.99. ISBN 9780199657803.**

**Murray Pittock, *Material Culture and Sedition, 1688–1760: Treacherous Objects, Secret Places*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Pp. 256. £55. ISBN 9781137278081.**

Writing to his younger brother in late May, 1794, Richard Wordsworth broke off from the usual subject of money to issue a specific warning: ‘I hope you will be cautious in writing or expressing your political opinions. By the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Acts the Ministers have great powers’. Richard Wordsworth’s concerns were well-founded. Habeas Corpus had been suspended earlier in the month and the Government had already swooped: Thomas Hardy, John Horne Tooke, and John Thelwall were in the Tower, charged with high treason – still a quartering offence – for advocating reform and the extension of the franchise. In Britain, political dissent had never been more dangerous.

William Wordsworth, as is so often the case, did not respond personally to his brother’s urging caution, but rather left that task to his sister, Dorothy:

I think I can answer for William’s caution about expressing his political opinions. He is very cautious and seems well aware of the dangers of a contrary conduct. He intends staying at Keswick till he gets some employment which may make it necessary for him to go elsewhere.

In fact, Wordsworth was anything but cautious, and the ‘employment’ he was seeking was work as a radical journalist. On the same day Richard was writing to urge caution, Wordsworth, in a letter to a friend, was avowing his commitment to the cause, and explicitly condemning the Government’s repressive response:

I solemnly affirm that in no writings of mine will I ever admit of any sentiment which can have the least tendency to induce my readers to suppose that the doctrines which are now enforced by banishment, imprisonment, &c, &c, are other than pregnant with every species of misery [...] I am of that odious class of men called democrats, and of that class I shall for ever continue.

But from this unabashed assertion of democratic politics, Wordsworth would, over the course of the decade, steadily retreat, along with a number of writers, actors, philosophers, and artists; their political energies either dissipated or redirected into their art – raised voices falling into uneasy silence.

Wordsworth’s trajectory here is common to the period as a whole. Many of the writers we call Romantic trace a similar course, what E. P. Thompson called ‘Jacobin affirmation and recoil’, and, pejoratively, ‘the Bishop of Llandaff’s slide’ – falling from spirited resistance to quietist despair, or, in some cases, outright apostasy. And this apparent reactionary turn in those writers and writings called Romantic provoked a number of new historicist critics (namely Jerome McGann, Marjorie Levinson, and Alan Liu) to claim

‘Llandaff’s slide’ as constitutive of Romanticism as a whole, a silence masking a fundamental complicity. But did Wordsworth and others fall, or were they pushed? And, if they were pushed, how then should we read the literature of this peculiarly febrile period? How are we to read their silence?

The first two books considered here, Jonathan Bugg’s *Five Long Winters*, and Kenneth Johnston’s *Unusual Suspects*, address these questions directly. ‘At stake’, Bugg explains,

is a reinvestigation of a model of the period’s literary history that might be called the excitement-to-apostasy arc [...] In this narrative, those hardy souls who continued to support the cause went underground, while many familiar writers turned to aesthetic escapism or reactionary conservatism (1).

Bugg’s problem with this model is that it ‘presupposes a climate in which writers felt able to write (and find publishers for) anything they pleased’, and that ‘within this Habermasian dream [...] previously progressive writers suddenly chose to abandon their political ideals’ (1). Such a model simply does not take into account the vigorous efforts of the government to stifle domestic dissent, ‘an interlocking system’, says Johnston, ‘of spies, informers, packed juries, compliant magistrates, “hegemonic” vigilante forces which reform activists then and some historians today refer to as Pitt’s “Reign of Terror”’ (xvi). As Johnston reminds us, in furious italics, ‘*there were more trials for sedition and treason in the 1790s in Great Britain than ever before or after in its history*’ (xiv). To correct this oversight, Bugg and Johnston present a markedly different reading of Romantic silence, and, therefore, Romanticism itself. And they do so in distinct but oddly complimentary ways.

Johnston’s approach is to produce a series of short biographical chapters on a number of ‘unusual suspects’ caught up in William Pitt’s ‘Reign of Alarm’. That is, ‘the large number of persons who were *not* tried for treason or sedition’ but were nonetheless ‘penalised anyway for their liberal, reformist views’ (xv). These penalties ranged from being expelled from one’s position, like William Frend, stripped of his fellowship at Jesus College, Cambridge, or having one’s house and laboratory burnt down by a semi-sanctioned mob, like dissenting scientist Joseph Priestley, who promptly left for America. Stories like these, argues Johnston, ‘form the outline of a group biography of crisis, like a flock of birds, each one of which is beating along strenuously on its own flight path, but creating a larger pattern which seems to have a life of its own’ (xvii).

The chapter on Romantic women is a case in point. Mary Wollstonecraft, Helen Maria Williams, Charlotte Smith, and almost every other woman in print with even the slightest democratic sympathy were drawn together, in 1798, for special ridicule and censure in the Revd. Richard Polwhele’s ‘pornographic Spenserian pastiche’ (113), *The Unsex’d Females*. Polwhele was one of a number of state-sanctioned critics and authors who saw attacking writing women as the chance to hit two birds with one stone, mobilising anxiety about radical politics and gender simultaneously. As Johnston notes, ‘women got it worse just for being women’ (113). This had, and still has, serious consequences for women writers of the period. That the later years of the 1790s showed a ‘marked contraction of what had been expanding opportunities for (liberal) writing women is another cost of the reign of Alarm’ (113). And this is a cost still being counted. Johnston’s chapter on Helen Maria Williams is particularly insightful in the way it reveals the continuing marginal status of Romantic women. We are still much more likely to reach for Wordsworth on the French Revolution than we are for Williams, even though Williams was on the ground in France for its entirety. The dead hand of reactionary criticism is here shown to be reaching into the present.

The great strength of Johnston's approach is its breadth and accessibility. To provide such a rich tableau of the 1790s and its writers and thinkers, both known and unknown, in only four hundred or so pages is a remarkable achievement. *Unusual Suspects* is a profoundly useful book for every student of the period, at whatever level of accomplishment; if it does not fundamentally change the way we view and teach the period, it should. And yet, finishing the book, my first thought was that I wanted to know more; to see Johnston's conclusions of the chilling effect of Pitt's ministry reflected in the works of the period, rather than just their circumstances of composition. Considering the breadth of *Unusual Suspects*, the depth of the book is remarkable, and yet, by necessity, Johnston cannot always delve as deeply into his authors' works as he might want to.

Fortunately, a formal and theoretical engagement with the poetics of silence is precisely the purpose of Jonathan Bugg's book. Following the work of critics like Susan Wolfson, Bugg works to beat back a New Historicist criticism that has tended to view form, and, indeed, poetry itself, as a kind of escape – a wriggling out of one's historical moment through the apparently false consciousness and consolations of nature and lyric. On the contrary, Bugg argues, 'the most important political change that British writing went through in the 1790s was in its form' (2). And this, according to Bugg, goes some way to explaining 'the presence in early Romantic writing of as much silence as there is speech, as much fragmentation as there is transcendence' (3). Pursuing such silence, fragmentation, and stuttering through the work of figures as known, unknown, famous, and infamous as Benjamin Flowers, John Augustus Bonney, John Thelwall, William Godwin, and, of course, Wordsworth, Bugg asserts that

the five long winters at the century's end are marked by an aesthetic of suppressed communication, one registered in both metaphoric and iterative modes, as writers invented various ways to depict politically enforced 'silence' (5).

With only silence to fall back on, authors like Wordsworth turned their attention to the formal and stylistic challenges of deploying silence effectively, an effort that was 'dramatically contingent, socially implicated, and deeply purposeful' (6).

What follows is a series of close and perceptive readings of works by Romantic authors, with a new attention to what is left out, closed down, or linguistically smudged. In this sense, Bugg's method is almost identical to the methods on show in, say, Alan Liu's *Wordsworth: The Sense of History*, but moments of apparent historical suppression, what Liu calls 'over-determined and precise absence[s]' are read not as culpable 'agonic denial', but rather presented as the poetic equivalent of the chalk outlines used by police to record the position of murder victims. They are windows rather than absences.

One of Bugg's most ambitious findings on this score identifies 'shades of the prison house' dappling the otherwise solar-powered Romantic lyric:

Following this movement from the Tower and Newgate to the poetic retreats of the West Country, I track the migration of the prison poem from the solitary cell to practices of what M. H. Abrams called the 'greater Romantic lyric' to show how the shape of the prison poem endures in the Romantic lyric, registering political history in poetic form (18).

Bugg is here on the trail of John Thelwall, 'acquitted felon' and public enemy number one of the 1790s, who never found the rural felicity advertised so seductively by his friend Coleridge. Bugg's reading of Coleridge's 'This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison' places Thelwall and other 'prison poets' centre stage, asking us: 'how might Coleridge's trope of the

prison appear if we were to read it against the contemporary incarcerations of his friends and fellow writers?’ (75). Bugg answers this fascinating and far-reaching question uncertainly, in one the rare weak moments of the book, providing, it seems to me, an overly sympathetic and slightly tentative reading: ‘Coleridge suggests [...] that the solitary poet, crafting a greater Romantic lyric in post-Gagging Acts Britain, must never abandon his song’ (78). Admitting, in this instance, that Coleridge’s poem might be wincingly insensitive in no way blunts the force of the original question, or weakens Bugg’s overall thesis.

I register this moment of sympathy not as a complaint, but rather as an example of a dilemma that affects all readers of silence, Romantic or otherwise. Namely, that as silence often offers only the vaguest of clues for its rereading and reconstruction into speech, critical sympathy must always play a part in its construal. There are times in both Bugg’s and Johnston’s books where the authors seem anxious for their subjects to ‘win’; that is, to be cleared of charges of apostasy or quietism. This does not necessarily undermine their work – such sympathies are often a source of critical insight – but it does, from time to time, lead to pulled punches. William Godwin’s *Considerations on Lord Grenville’s and Mr Pitt’s Bills* (1795) is, Bugg admits, ‘normally taken to signal both Godwin’s break with reform politics and an epochal shift in British political discourse’ for its open criticism of Thelwall (42). Bugg stresses instead Godwin’s masterful switching of linguistic tactics:

If there is a change in Godwin’s writing at this point, I would suggest that it is less in political commitment than rhetorical strategy [...] in the close grain of *Considerations* we see Godwin forging a complex persona amidst the pressures of suppression and surveillance (42).

For Thelwall, desperate for unequivocal support, knowing he had been stabbed in the back with a ‘rhetorical strategy’ wielded by a ‘complex persona’ would have been cold comfort indeed. Even if Godwin’s intentions were benevolent (they usually were), the Government chalked *Considerations* up as a win. My point here is not to berate Bugg for an overly rosy account of a classic Godwinian own goal, but to show how too close an engagement with the intentions, or perceived intentions, of an author can blind us to the outcome, and its real historical consequences. Silence, if taken seriously as a rhetorical strategy, must also be allowed to misfire.

The real dilemma here is evidence. While Bugg and Johnston both provide convincing and informed readings of all their unusual suspects, they often use the same sources of information as their New Historicist adversaries – indeed, this is the very ground contested. Bugg is the first to acknowledge that the severity of Pitt’s crackdown is still only partially understood, and may be less or more severe than either side imagines: ‘Unless a box of wildly uncircumspect letters is pulled from the floorboards of 10 Downing Street, we cannot know for certain’ (12). Likewise, though Johnston can retell the ‘Spy-Nozy’ affair, when a Government spy was dispatched to shadow Wordsworth and Coleridge while they composed the *Lyrical Ballads*, he and we are still in the dark as to why Wordsworth’s name was ‘known’ to the Home Secretary. But the real achievement of both writers, Bugg and Johnston, is to reopen the question so thoroughly and so compellingly. With the field now open, new research must surely follow.

The shape of this novel research and evidence is presaged interestingly in Murray Pittock’s dauntingly erudite book on Jacobite counter-culture, *Material Culture and Sedition, 1688–1760*. This is a multidisciplinary work that pursues an even deeper silence: the material objects and secret places of Jacobite ritual and cultural commemoration. Like Bugg and Johnston, Pittock takes issue with what he sees as a falsely utopian view of the public sphere

in the eighteenth century, and asks why scepticism about Habermassian formulations seems to restrict itself to the early years of Romanticism:

Why has what is termed the public sphere been so often seen as open during a time of repressive legislation in the first half of the eighteenth century and the early Enlightenment but not in the 1790s? (xi).

Pittock attempts, over the course of the book, to banish this apparent complacency in the face of what was, essentially, an ongoing civil war, fought both openly and covertly, between Jacobites and Hanoverians.

While Johnston's book considers unusual suspects, Pittock's task seems even more difficult: he must consider unusual evidence. Jacobitism, driven further and further underground, developed increasingly complex and opaque rituals that were often unwritten and even non-verbal. The challenge this represents to the modern scholar of Jacobitism is immense, and requires new and often difficult theoretical methods, as well as a keen eye for possible evidence. As Pittock puts it, '[c]an we model cultural memory and celebration in the same way in circumstances where it was illegal to communicate shared frameworks of memory?' The answer, according to this book, is no, and the alternative is a new attention and approach to physical sources. Pittock argues persuasively that an overvaluing of written sources often means that the physical object or artefact is interpreted by the words on it or about it, and this requires every reader of the past to ask how far "we overestimate language and documents as historical sources when utterance or publication were so dangerous?" (xi).

This question is particularly urgent when dealing with Jacobite artefacts. As Pittock explains, '[i]f Jacobite material culture is an object which sometimes wears a carapace of language, that language is a protective code or quotation, not a manifestation of transparency' (16). What follows is a fascinating collection of material evidence, from trick goblets to plantations of certain kinds of trees; from the architectural layout of manor houses to reconstructed accounts of rituals, codes, and cant words. Pittock has a brilliant eye for detail, as is necessary when dealing with a subject that can reveal itself even in the way one drinks a glass of wine. The challenge is to reveal that which,

in its own speechlessness makes its most profound articulations, and which in its oblique reference to more public political sympathies occults itself in privacy and silence, as did the Manchester Jacobite Beppy Byrom's tartan garters with their explicitly Jacobite legend, hidden to all but intimacy or assault (16).

As far as evidence goes, this is about as intimate and obscure as it gets.

The only real drawback of this approach, and the book itself, is the need for images to make one's point, and carry the reader along with one's argument. Despite being fairly image rich, the book relies heavily on the reader's visual imagination, particularly in those sections dealing with Jacobite architecture. Pittock apologises for not including more images, and helpfully provides a number of sources to consult, as well as an excellent index of terms, but this is still a book to be read with an internet browser open nearby. But considering the feats of research on show in *Material Culture and Sedition, 1688–1760*, this seems a small price to pay for admission to such a rich and varied trove of evidence.

*Elias Greig*  
*University of Sydney*