

# Introduction

## *The Repressive 1790s*

*Five Long Winters* argues that the repressions of the government of William Pitt had a constitutive role in the formation of early Romantic-era writing. At stake in my argument is a reinvestigation of a model of the period's literary history that might be called the excitement-to-apostasy arc: the notion that the outbreak of the French Revolution inspired a burst of democratic energy in British culture in the early 1790s, but that this excitement speedily dissipated as the Parisian scene grew violent, turning most supporters of the revolution into its opponents with the guillotining of King Louis XVI in January 1793. In this narrative, those hardy souls who continued to support the revolutionary cause went underground, while many familiar writers turned to aesthetic escapism or reactionary conservatism. But this account presupposes a climate in which writers felt able to write (and find publishers for) anything they pleased, and that within this Habermasian dream a wide swath of previously progressive writers suddenly chose to abandon their political ideals. I reassess this version of literary history both for what it misses and for what it loses. What it misses is the counterevidence: few Romantic-era writers changed their thoughts about reform politics with the execution of Louis XVI. Many were wary of

the new Jacobin leaders in France, but they did not alter their progressive principles, nor did they abandon their desire for reform at home. What did shift was the manner of their public discourse: the most important political change that British writing underwent in the 1790s was in its form, and it is this change that I chronicle. This brings me to what has been lost. Both well- and lesser-known writers of the period, while publishing work that cautiously engaged the historical moment, were more forthcoming about their sustained political commitments in their diaries, letters, and other unpublished writing. This archive steadily beats with the democratic pulse of the early 1790s, and casts a powerful illumination on the work that these authors did choose to publish during the latter half of the decade. The exclamations of fear, the confessions of self-censorship, the urgings to caution in these manuscripts help us to recognize the political charge of the poetics of gagging that marks so much early Romantic-era writing, from provincial journalism to the high lyric mode.

For a long while the notion that Romantic poetry elides its political moment focused new historicist criticism, but new attention to the repressions of the British government, and to the broader rise of counterrevolutionary pressure as the 1790s unfolded, has asked us to think about the lives and works of early Romantic writers in a new way. Kenneth R. Johnston, for instance, has been tracking a “lost generation” of authors, scientists, educators, political activists, and others whose lives were forever changed (and in some cases ended) by government repression and its attendant cultural pressures.<sup>1</sup> There have been individual studies of most of these “lost” figures, Johnston notes, but to comprehend the full reach of Pittite repression we must measure the “aggregate of individual consequences” by collecting their stories into a generational portrait.<sup>2</sup> This attention to the cultural consequences of Pitt’s “Reign of Terror” has not come out of nowhere. Although in *The Making of the English Working Class* E. P. Thompson’s quarry was radical will rather than its petrification—and so from this perspective he downplayed the effectiveness of the repressions of the Pitt ministry—in later reflections he came to focus on the force and impact of state repression.<sup>3</sup> Thompson’s “Disenchantment or Default?” revised his earlier skepticism, for instance, about Coleridge’s reason for refusing to help John Thelwall find a cottage at Nether Stowey. Pointing to Coleridge’s explanation that “even riots & dangerous riots might be the consequence” if Thelwall were to move to the West Country, Thompson wryly comments that “the author of a recent book, *The Making of the English Working Class*, tends to sneer at the

sincerity of Coleridge's professions at this point. If he had speculated less, and carried his research a little further, he would have been of a different opinion. Coleridge was sincere. The riots could have happened."<sup>4</sup> Taking seriously the testimonies of Coleridge and many others that they were living amidst intense political pressure, Kenneth Johnston, John Barrell, Nicholas Roe, Judith Thompson, Michael Scrivener, and others have brought fresh attention to the cultural significance of the coercions and persecutions of the Pitt ministry.<sup>5</sup>

*Five Long Winters* joins this critical effort, arguing that in order to account for the presence in early Romantic writing of as much silence as there is speech, as much fragmentation and stuttering as there is transcendence, we need to shift our attention to the second half of the decade, from the era of Paine's *Rights of Man* to the era of the Gagging Acts. We find a reading lesson for this mode of attention in political prisoner John Augustus Bonney's poem "Ode to Liberty," which he composed while in solitary confinement in the Tower in 1794.<sup>6</sup> Bonney writes in the voice of a bird singing of revelation and concealment:

I mourn'd all night, and chirp'd the live long day.  
 Nor, cruel mortals, think the strains I sung,  
 Were such as fall from pleasure's blissful tongue:  
 E'en when my notes in sweetest accent spoke,  
 They veil'd a heart oppress'd and almost broke. (66–70)

Bonney's rhyme of "broke" and "spoke" shows how a break in speech can carry a poetics of its own. Even if the song were to cease, the very silence carries meaning:

Sometimes the relic of a former note,  
 May faintly issue from his joyless throat,  
 But soon "expressive silence" will declare,  
 He wants his native freedom of the air. (89–92)

With the quotation marks Bonney may be recruiting to his plight James Thomson's paradox of "expressive silence" from his 1730 "Hymn" (itself an echo of Milton's "darkness visible") to claim for silence the status of language. But the immediate reference is William Godwin's novel *Caleb Williams*, published just as Bonney and his fellow activists were being hauled off to jail—or as Godwin put it, "Caleb Williams' made his first appearance in the world in the same month in which the sanguinary plot broke

out against the liberties of Englishmen.”<sup>7</sup> The phrase “expressive silence” appears in Godwin’s novel as Caleb comes to a recognition about his fate amidst the unrelenting surveillance of Ferdinand Falkland. “I was his prisoner,” Caleb realizes, “and what a prisoner! All my actions observed; all my gestures marked. I could move neither to the right nor the left, but the eye of my keeper was upon me.”<sup>8</sup> Scrambling for self-direction amidst the terror of this eye, Caleb comes across Falkland’s brother-in-law Forester, who, Caleb reports, “observed a strange distance in my behaviour, and in his good-natured, rough way reproached me for it.” But if Forester’s eye is benign, Caleb has already learned to deflect any manner of observation: “I could only answer with a gloomy look of mysterious import, and a mournful and expressive silence.”<sup>9</sup> This is not foundational “silence,” but a communicated reticence full of import, and an implied backstory for the mournful gloom. Setting the phrase “expressive silence” in one scene (the plight of a songbird, yearning for freedom), and releasing it through quotations into Godwin’s surveillance nightmare, Bonney sketches the plight of political prisoners in their need for communicatory caution. Reverberating with his own attempts to find a form of self-expression from his prison cell, Bonney’s charge that we recognize and listen to “expressive silence” guides my investigation in *Five Long Winters* of the forms of literary expression that developed across the repressive 1790s.

My book’s title comes from Wordsworth’s subjective chronometry in the opening lines of “Tintern Abbey,” as he writes that although it has been only “five summers” since he last visited the Wye valley, this time has passed with the feeling of “five long winters.” These lines are familiar for their collocation of Enlightenment rationalism and Romantic subjectivism, but they also register a shared epochal sense of the painful passage of time in an era of political repression. In my focus on this repressive milieu, and on the importance of discourses of sedition and treason in particular, the way to my study has been paved in part by John Barrell’s *Imagining the King’s Death*. With detailed attention to the 1794 treason trials, Barrell situates the Romantic keyword “imagination” within debates about what could be named treasonous activity according to the ambiguities of the 1351 treason statute (still active during the 1794 trials). Barrell exposes a culture of literary interpretation in the courtroom, with the defense ingeniously arguing that by reading “treason” where none was explicit, it was the prosecution that was guilty of “imagining” the king’s death. Thomas Erskine managed by such arguments to win acquittals for the activists charged with high treason in 1794. Barrell

closes his study with the appearance of the 1795 Gagging Acts, legislation intended to shut the loopholes of the 1351 treason law. When Barrell brings down the curtain in late 1795, the play of opposition would seem to be over, but there is an important sequel that is the focus of my study: if Thompson, Barrell, and others have taught us about the raucous radicalism of the first half of the decade, other forms of politically engaged writing emerged in the following years, including ironic celebrations of the Pitt ministry, the circulation of political keywords across an array of ostensibly nonpolitical genres, and the recurrence of tropes of gagging and silencing, broken communication, and fractured speech. 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."

Critical history has hardly overlooked the concept of silence in Romantic-era writing. The period's expressions of silence have most often been read as gestures of the ineffable (whether theological, ontological, or linguistic), which in Mario Praz's famous 1933 account becomes a virtual synonym for Romanticism itself:

The essence of Romanticism consequently comes to consist in that which cannot be described . . . the poet ecstatic in front of a forever blank page, the musician who listens to the prodigious concerts of his soul without attempting to translate them into notes. . . . How many times has the magic of the ineffable been celebrated, from Keats, with his "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter" to Maeterlinck, with his theory that silence is more musical than any sound.<sup>10</sup>

In the magic of the ineffable we can make out something of T. E. Hulme's notion of Romanticism as "spilt religion," in this case with the discourse of ineffable divinity transposed onto a secular metaphysics of otherworldliness.<sup>11</sup> The silences of Wordsworth, writes Paul de Man of "The Boy of Winander," "have a strangely superhuman quality as if they, too, could only occur on the far side of death."<sup>12</sup> Deconstruction's pursuit of the relationship between ontological and linguistic thresholds developed a continuum of silence as the sign of the ontologically or linguistically unsayable.

This version of Romantic silence, brilliantly studied by David Ferry, Geoffrey Hartman, Paul de Man, Frances Ferguson, and others, is less my concern in *Five Long Winters* than socially embedded silence, formations and portrayals of interruptions in social communication. Attention to a

historically situated version of Romantic silence was initiated by readings of what several critics found to be denials or displacements of politics in a cluster of canonical Romantic works. Jerome McGann's *The Romantic Ideology*, Marjorie Levinson's *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems*, David Simpson's *Wordsworth's Historical Imagination*, and Alan Liu's *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* sought to expose a "Romantic ideology" that operates through a rhetoric of evasion and a poetics of transcendence.<sup>13</sup> While I share historical terrain with much of this work, my study is guided by a conviction that the aesthetic practices of the 1790s, especially the politics of form, are not a garrison from social woes but an arena of engagement. Reports of the "apostasy" of writers such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Godwin—their turn from radical politics to the consolations of nature and the lyric, and to increasingly reactionary positions—are familiar to us, but what has been missed is the shaping influence of the Pitt ministry's program of surveillance, intimidation, and prosecution. It is against the severity of repression, and not the myths of transcendence, that we need to measure the poetics of silence in Pitt-era literary culture.

Rather than enactments of ontological or linguistic thresholds, or betrayals of political apostasy, the silences I trace are dramatically contingent, socially implicated, and deeply purposeful. This mode of silence in Romantic-era writing forms a grammar of its own, and in the chapters that follow I examine a variety of figurations of performed or registered breakdowns in communication. Perhaps most directly related to the conditions of repression are representations of characters who are afraid to speak, who have stories to tell but are wary of telling them. Second, and closely allied to these studies of fear, are works in which characters or narrators make silence itself the focus of their discourse. Third, incorporating these two modes of silence but extending into other scenarios we find dramatic depictions of people who cannot seem to understand one another—the curious adult-child dialogue in Wordsworth's "Anecdote for Fathers," for instance. Finally, we have moments in which alternative modes of communication become necessary, when gestures or non-verbal utterances take the place of linguistic exchange. These four overlapping strategies for inscribing social silence form a poetics of gagging that sketches the national climate as the repressive atmosphere intensified across the 1790s.

This process of intensification did not follow a clean line of acceleration, though there was a gradual accretion of repressive initiatives across the decade. The inaugural action was the May 1792 Royal Proclamation Against

Seditious Writings, issued to prevent the distribution of “wicked and seditious” material, otherwise known as Paine’s *Rights of Man*. Not a new piece of legislation, the Proclamation was rather an official broadcast in parliament (and widely published) that “divers wicked and seditious writings have been printed, published, and industriously dispersed, tending to invite tumult and disorder.” Local magistrates were ordered to discover “the authors and printers of such wicked and seditious writings.”<sup>14</sup> The Proclamation did have juridical consequences, including the arrest and imprisonment of several booksellers, but its primary function, as a nonlegislative initiative, was to effect social division by generating anti-democratic sentiment and forcing local authorities to take action against their own neighbors. It was time to choose sides. This dynamic is shown as neighborly intervention in Hannah More’s *Village Politics* (1792), in which a tradesman who has been reading Paine is convinced by his loyalist friend to abandon the cause of democracy. The more spectacular, real-life version of this effort came in the orchestrated burning of Paine effigies in late 1792 and early 1793. Staged as community purification rituals, these bonfires served to warn the gathered crowds about the consequences of democratic thought, as though Paine’s effigy were a criminal swinging on the gallows. The message was not subtle. “At Felton,” Frank O’Gorman reports, “the effigy was hung with an obliging sign: ‘Tom Paine, a sower of sedition and libeller of our happy and enjoyed Constitution—Britons beware of his democratic principles and avoid his merited fate.’”<sup>15</sup>

The Proclamation, More’s *Village Politics*, the effigy burnings: all were part of an effort to alienate democratic sentiment, an effort that defined the ministry’s legislative strikes as the decade unfolded. To examine the bundle of repressive legislation passed across the 1790s is to find an early instance of what Jürgen Habermas has described as the technologies of manufactured consent characteristic not of the eighteenth century but of modernity. For Habermas, it was eighteenth-century Britain that famously modeled an ideal public sphere, in which the rational-critical debate that flourished in extraparliamentary venues helped to steer government decisions.<sup>16</sup> But as I discuss in Chapter 3 (on newspaper culture), Habermas’s historical arc elides the four decades between the French Revolution and the Reform Act—the repressions of the Pitt era are especially troublesome, even for Habermas’s stylized account, for here we see a determined and unrelenting effort to manufacture consent at the heart of the era Habermas means to enshrine against a fallen modernity.

In *Keywords*, Raymond Williams reminds us that “consensus,” from the Latin *con* + *sentire*, implies the sense of a shared feeling, a common sentiment.<sup>17</sup> This notion of national consensus guides Linda Colley’s argument in *Britons* that against the hostilities of the French and under the paternal eye of aristocracy the British public came to feel together as a nation.<sup>18</sup> Colley’s version of national self-conception transposes Benedict Anderson’s paradigm from the realm of mediated contemporaneity to that of shared threat, with Britain as a fortress-nation forged by the Napoleonic wars.<sup>19</sup> The force and frequency of state engineering behind this “shared feeling,” however, should not be underestimated. Colley might show us John Bull waving a flag, but we must not occlude the bayonet at his back. The government’s legislative guarantors of consensus took several forms across the decade. The 1793 Aliens Act, aimed at tracking foreigners who entered the country, brought the program of social bifurcation to the level of citizenship.<sup>20</sup> Shades of anti-Gallicism also fell across the 1793 Traitorous Correspondence Act, which was meant to restrict and monitor commerce between Britain and France, though as Mary Favret points out, the term “correspondence” in its title was exploited by the loyalist press to generate alarm over Britain’s internal enemies.<sup>21</sup> The *Public Advertiser* proclaimed that the bill’s introduction warranted its urgency: “This measure is a proof that Ministers are vigilant at their posts; and we doubt not that they have good reasons for what they are about, as there are wretches in this country who would seize all opportunities in order to furnish our foes with intelligence.”<sup>22</sup> Favret suggests that this strategic misreading of “correspondence” may have been part of the ministry’s larger intent: “Fox and others fumed that the name was chosen for its effect on the people, ‘with no other view than to disseminate through the country false and injurious ideas of the existence of a correspondence between some persons and France.’”<sup>23</sup> These initial strikes in 1792–3 sought to polarize political opinion by inculcating the belief that “wretches,” disenfranchised and revolutionized, were ready to betray their own nation.

All was now in place for the momentous suspension of habeas corpus in the spring of 1794. This was the boldest repressive measure thus far, and it was received in its full historic and symbolic import. Though versions of the protection offered by the writ of habeas corpus were popularly traced back to the Magna Carta, its precise bearing on juridical process was first registered in the 1679 Habeas Corpus Act, which ensured that to keep a suspect in custody a warrant must be made available that gave the cause of and evidence for the arrest.<sup>24</sup> By the eighteenth century, habeas corpus was known

variously as the Great Writ of Liberty and the Palladium of Liberty and was viewed (as it is today) as the foundational and always tender meeting place of personal liberty and state security. One nineteenth-century account testifies to the public fear occasioned by the 1794 suspension:

[A]ny subject could now be arrested on suspicion of treasonable practices, without specific charge or proof of guilt: his accusers were unknown; and in vain might he demand public accusation and trial. Spies and treacherous accomplices, however circumstantial in their narratives to secretaries of state and law officers, shrank from the witness-box; and their victims rotted in jail.<sup>25</sup>

This summary captures the widespread concern that informers could always be found to fling charges but not necessarily to testify in court—hence the ease of imprisonment, and with habeas corpus suspended, the difficulty of exoneration. The sense of peril created by this dynamic heightened attention to what Whig parliamentarian and playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan in the Commons called “the most destructive of all weapons, the perjured tongues of spies and informers.”<sup>26</sup> For John Thelwall, lecturing after his acquittal and release from prison, the danger was clear: “[E]very key hole is an informer, and every cupboard ought to be searched, before you unbosom the painful story of your wrongs, lest you should be brought unhappily within the iron fangs of—LAW (I think *they* call it) not for what you have uttered only, but for what the perjured hirelings by whom we are so frequently surrounded, may think fit to lay, upon the slightest suggestion, to your charge.”<sup>27</sup> If the immediate effect of the suspension of habeas corpus was to allow the ministry to hold Thelwall, Hardy, Bonney, and other reform leaders in prison indefinitely, in broader terms it eroded Britons’ sense of both personal liberty and social trust. Concern quickly spread, and people became nervous about the language they used. William Wordsworth’s older brother, London lawyer Richard Wordsworth, wrote to warn the poet to “be cautious in writing or expressing your political opinions. By the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Acts the Ministers have great powers.”<sup>28</sup> Exchanging ideas a few weeks later with William Matthews about the prospect of launching a new opposition periodical, William Wordsworth revealed that the suspension was still on his mind: “[A]mongst the partizans of this war, and of the suspensions of the *habeas corpus* act, amongst the mighty class of selfish alarmists, we cannot obtain a single friend.”<sup>29</sup> Habeas corpus itself, meanwhile, had no dearth of friends: a cluster of publications addressed the suspension, offering historical overviews, present pleas, and terrifying

prophesies.<sup>30</sup> From his cell in the Tower, and already vexed from his fruitless requests to have the charges against him presented in writing, Bonney composed "Suspension," a poem that roams across the word's multiple referents: suspended law, prisoners "suspended" in their elevated cells to warn the public, lives suspended at the whim of ministers.

This initial burst of attention to habeas corpus emerged with the 1794 suspension, and further outrage greeted the ministry's proposal to extend it in 1795.<sup>31</sup> The acquittals in the 1794 treason trials showed that no dark plot to overawe the government was afoot. By what jurisprudence, then, could an extension be argued? This was the keynote of a forceful essay in *The Cabinet*, a reform journal published out of Norwich. Though the 1794 acquittals were widely cheered and brought new energy to the reform movement, *The Cabinet* meditated in more sober terms on the damage wrought in the lives of the accused, who were now, as Secretary at War William Windham had sneered, little more than "acquitted felons." "What rational hope of success can the 'acquitted felon' entertain," *The Cabinet* asked, "ruined in his business by a long imprisonment, beggared by the expenses of a long trial? and where are his means to carry on a legal conflict with administration, which has the secret committee of both houses of parliament to draw its plea of justification, and the treasury to pay the costs and damages?"<sup>32</sup> At stake was the suspension of the entire judicial process—"when the tribunals of justice are closed, when the voice of the law is forbidden to speak, and government becomes the fabricator of the crime"—and in this sense every Briton had become if not an acquitted then an imminent felon: "If ministers will listen to the perjured tale of spies and informers, or if they think proper to charge me with treason, what security have I against their designs?"<sup>33</sup>

*The Cabinet* was startled by what it perceived to be the public's apparent timorousness and complaisance: "To be terrified at the slightest movement of liberty, and to view with indifference the widest stretch of power, seems to be the characteristic of modern Englishmen." This portrait of a government claiming the "widest stretch of power" uncannily forecast the legal and cultural storm just then on the horizon. In response to the 1794 acquittals and the subsequent resurgence of the democratic movement, in the fall of 1795 the ministry introduced the Treasonable and Seditious Practices Bills (popularly known as the "Gagging Acts"). This legislation was greeted as a new level of draconianism by radicals, moderates, and even a few members of Pitt's own party. The 1795 Gagging Acts mark a historical caesura, as the

loud Paineite radicalism of the first half of the decade gave way to a period of nervous and muffled discourse, one that lasted until the brief respite provided by the stirrings of Amiens and the resignation of Pitt at the dawn of the nineteenth century.<sup>34</sup>

Even as the Gagging Acts escalated the climate of fear, the ministry continued to pass further legislation, both to contain local eruptions of unrest and to prevent larger accumulations of oppositional sentiment. Of particular force were laws relating to the military, meant to ensure that what Shelley would later prophesy in *The Mask of Anarchy*—that day when the military “turns to those who would be free” and joins the people against governmental force—would never arrive. Paramount was the Incitement to Mutiny Act, a response to the 1797 naval mutinies at Spithead and Nore. Its full title, “An Act for the better Prevention and Punishment of Attempts to seduce Persons serving in His Majesty’s Forces by Sea or Land from their Duty and Allegiance to His Majesty, or to incite them to Mutiny or Disobedience,” indicates the law’s intention to inoculate the military against the spread of radical discourse from organizations such as the London Corresponding Society (LCS) and the United Englishmen.<sup>35</sup> This act was part of a broad effort to cordon off soldiers from civilians, an intent dramatically materialized in the ministry’s barracks-building program from 1792 onward (military quarters were set up near industrial centers to prevent or manage popular unrest while keeping the soldiers isolated from the people). Of the cluster of other laws meant to forestall Shelley’s prophesy, most effective in manufacturing consent was the 1798 Defence of the Realm Act, which authorized the government publicly to drum up a list, community by community, of all those willing to serve in the military in the event of an invasion.<sup>36</sup> E. P. Thompson has said of this moment that when Wordsworth and Coleridge left Britain for Germany in September 1798 “they were hopping the draft.”<sup>37</sup> Thompson’s canny quip misses an important aspect of the legislation, however: this was specifically not a draft. Rather than mandating military participation, the government asked for “volunteers” willing to fight should an invasion occur. The Defence of the Realm Act, in other words, was a public inquiry into loyalty, and an attempt to further the social marginalization of internal dissent, rather than a straightforward preparation of a ready defense. The capstone of the government’s program of consensus management came in a cluster of acts targeted at political sociation passed at the decade’s end. In 1799, the Act for the More Effective Suppression of Societies Established for Seditious and Treasonable Purposes (some-

times referred to as the Corresponding Societies Act or Unlawful Societies Act) aimed to stamp out what was left of the LCS. It applied not only to members of political societies, but of equal importance, to any person who “shall directly or indirectly maintain correspondence or intercourse with any such society or club, or with any committee or delegate, representative or missionary, or with any officer or member thereof.”<sup>38</sup> Members of political societies had become internal exiles. Meanwhile, to monitor working-class collectivities specifically, the ministry brought in the “Combination Acts” of 1799 and 1800, which outlawed labor organization.

How necessary was this battery of legislation? Historians have debated the question of just how “radical” Britons were in the years following the French Revolution, and correspondingly, how commensurate the government’s counterrevolutionary efforts were.<sup>39</sup> Assessments of the validity and sincerity of the Pitt ministry’s fears and motivations will continue, for as Barrell has observed, there seem to have been both “panic stricken” and “coldly malevolent” versions of counterrevolutionary alarm across the 1790s, and a plausible case can be made for either interpretation.<sup>40</sup> Unless a box of wildly uncircumspect letters is pulled from the floorboards of 10 Downing Street, we cannot know for certain the precise calculations behind the government’s repressive program. But this is not my concern. My remit is the cultural reverberations of the actions that the government did take, actions that altered the course of British literary history. What matters for literature is that a generation of authors felt the force of “Pitt’s Terror,” and across the decade they watched in horror as writers, printers, and booksellers were arrested, imprisoned, transported, and bankrupted, and they shaped their writing, thematically and formally, under these circumstances. The government’s actions were both less organized and more destructive than has often been assumed, and it was this mix of incompetence and wrath that rendered the threat so unnerving. High-profile writers and activists were arrested for casual words tossed off in pubs or coffee shops. At other times, fiery speeches or pamphlets passed by without prosecution. There seemed no coherent pattern in the ministry’s actions, and so no clear sense of how daring one’s language could be: any politically engaged or even politically inflected discourse could lead one to prison.

My examination of the formations of literary culture in this chilling atmosphere shares with studies of censorship history an interest in how authors variously shape their works during eras of severe repression. Literary criticism has tended to regard censorship in one of two ways, guided either

by Whiggish notions of a long-historical struggle between repression and liberty, or more recently, by a sense of the instability of the distinction between censor and critic. The classic statement of the traditional approach is F. S. Siebert's *Freedom of the Press in England, 1476–1776: The Rise and Decline of Government Controls*. As his subtitle indicates, Siebert's argument follows a generally progressivist narrative of gradual liberal amelioration. The focus on an agon between force and freedom in works such as Siebert's has brought with it a catalogue of the statutes, office holders, and victims of censorship: the Star Chamber's grotesque punishments of William Prynne, Václav Havel's prison letters, the fatwa against Salman Rushdie. A second approach to censorship emerged in the mid-1980s to question the traditional mode's circumscription to cases of direct prohibition. The "new censorship studies" drew on Michel Foucault's model of power (especially its mid-1970s version in *Discipline and Punish*) to comprehend censorship in terms of a broad dispersal of force that restricts discourse in myriad ways. Along the same lines, Pierre Bourdieu shifted the focus from legislation to field, arguing that censorship preconditions any discursive event, and so we need not myopically concentrate on "explicit prohibitions, imposed and sanctioned by institutional authority" because censorship is itself "constituted by the very structure of the field in which the discourse is produced and circulates."<sup>41</sup> For British literary studies, Annabel Patterson's *Censorship and Interpretation* has been most influential in the emergence of this new approach. Attending less to the "law and the formal institutions and mechanisms whereby the press, or the pulpit, or the theatrical companies were supposed to be made subject to state control," Patterson turned instead to study "censorship in the broadest sense, as a cultural experience of limitation and threat, on the writerly psyche and its products."<sup>42</sup> Patterson's work has been followed by a flowering of critical attention to censorship, some of which goes further to distance itself from "old" censorship studies by critiquing the naïveté of any attempt to identify specific censoring agents.<sup>43</sup> As Michael Holquist has put it, to be "for or against censorship as such is to assume a freedom no one has. Censorship *is*."<sup>44</sup>

Yet for all its power of sociological analysis, this notion of censorship as a fully dispersed power determinative of all discourse risks ignoring differences of degree and kind in the work of regulation. Patterson herself cautioned against the costs of such dissolution when she later addressed Hans-Georg Gadamer's claim in *Truth and Method* that severe political repression differs only in degree from the constraints faced by writers always

and everywhere, the “intentional or unintentional pressure that society and public opinion exercise on human thought.”<sup>45</sup> Wary of such flattening, Patterson warned that “however much we have learned about the modern tyranny of opinion, about hegemony, or the workings of the unconscious, this does not permit us to forget that there have been and continue to be times and places” in which “political censorship is so pervasive that it rises to the forefront, at least among intellectuals and to an extent all literate people, as the central problem of consciousness and communication.”<sup>46</sup> Patterson’s caution is worth keeping in mind. As the chapters that follow make clear, I share with the new censorship studies a sense that there is more to the pressure on discourse than an *index librorum prohibitorum*, and that restrictions on British writing did not disappear in 1695 with the lapsing of the Licensing Act. While I primarily focus on authors who were documented targets of state surveillance and prosecution, my larger claim for repression’s constitutive role in early Romantic writing depends on a conception of censorship as profoundly reticulated. But I also agree with Patterson’s insistence that reticulation need not imply dissolution. If the older approach to censorship has become unfashionable, its concerns are not dispensable. It is important to recognize that constraint on discourse is not always and only an affair of ontology. There are times and places in which people go to jail for what they write. The birth of British Romanticism was one. Working with the insights of both traditional and new censorship studies, I attend to important pieces of legislation as well as to the dispersed practices and techniques that extend the province of what we understand as regulated discourse. The broad expanse of this regulation in the 1790s is illustrated by the cases of Gilbert Wakefield and William Cowper, a public instance of the brutal punishment of an oppositional writer on the one hand, and an episode of self-silencing known only to a handful of people until its recovery in the twentieth century on the other.

Wakefield’s fiery opposition and Cowper’s studied recusal mark two extremes of engagement with repression in the 1790s. Wakefield, a Cambridge graduate, classics scholar, and impassioned reformer, penned a radical address to the Bishop of Llandaff (Richard Watson) that landed him in prison.<sup>47</sup> Wakefield’s 1798 pamphlet was written, as was Wordsworth’s heated but ultimately unpublished *Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff* five years earlier, in response to one of Watson’s reactionary publications, his *Address to the People of Great Britain*.<sup>48</sup> Decrying the allied corruption of church and state, pacifist Wakefield was convinced that peace would never come

as long as Pitt held power. The distractions and alarms of military conflict, he argued, were all that kept the prime minister and his supporters in office: "How then can they be supposed desirous to accelerate that period, when they shall be despoiled of their power, and left naked to popular indignation, after so long and unbridled a career of wickedness, and such a multitude of enormous crimes?"<sup>49</sup> Wakefield's unguarded language led not only to his own imprisonment but also to that of booksellers Joseph Johnson, Jeremiah Jordan, and John Cuthell, whose shops stocked Wakefield's tract.<sup>50</sup> John Aikin, writing a few years later, supposed that Wakefield was targeted because the ministry wanted a high-profile example: "From that systematic progress in restraining the free communication of political opinions which may be traced in the acts of the late ministry, it is not unreasonable to conclude, that a victim to the liberty of the press, of name and character sufficient to inspire a wide alarm, was really desired."<sup>51</sup> For Charles James Fox, the imprisonment of Wakefield signaled the end of reform discourse. "The liberty of the press I consider as virtually destroyed by the proceedings against Johnson and Jordan," he wrote to Wakefield on 1 March 1799, "and what has happened to you I cannot but lament therefore the more, as the sufferings of a man whom I esteem, in a cause that is no more."<sup>52</sup> Wakefield was dead by 1801, victim to the typhoid he contracted at Dorchester Gaol.

If writers such as Wakefield were brave (or reckless) enough to speak out as late as 1798, others had begun to feel cowed earlier in the decade.<sup>53</sup> Not immune to the pressures of the era, even those already in retirement resorted to further self-censorship, as the fate of one of William Cowper's poems illustrates. On 12 June 1793, Cowper received a letter from journalist and printer Richard Phillips, sent from Leicester Gaol, where Phillips was imprisoned for selling Paine's *Rights of Man*.<sup>54</sup> Urging Cowper to read the reports of his case, Phillips solicited a "song or sonnet" of support, one he hoped might be popularly distributed.<sup>55</sup> Cowper was sympathetic but cautious, and replied that he did not understand how he could write anything "that would not expose me to the evils by which you are so great a sufferer," for a "tame composition, in short, would not serve you, and a spirited and vehement one might ruin me."<sup>56</sup> Skeptical of both the unfolding of the French Revolution and the measures of the British government, Cowper had the temper of a moderate Whig, and was careful in his correspondence.<sup>57</sup> On 10 June 1792 he wrote to William Hayley about a letter he had received from the radical bookseller Thomas Clio Rickman: "He is a violent overturner of thrones and

Kingdoms, and foolishly thinks to recommend himself to me by telling me that he is so. He adds likewise that Mr. Paine often dines with him.—Will it not be best to leave his letter unanswered?”<sup>58</sup> Phillips’s own letter to Cowper remained unanswered, but he would not give up; his next attempt enclosed copies of the *Leicester Herald* that held accounts of his arrest and prison ordeal. Phillips’s complaint was that he was convicted for selling Paine’s *Rights of Man* before the work was declared libelous.<sup>59</sup> He protested this proactive restraint in a pamphlet he wrote from prison: “[N]o Man can suppose, with the smallest Shadow of Equity, that a Retailer is culpable, till the Principal is found Guilty.”<sup>60</sup> And he was no less mystified by the caprice of the prosecution: “[L]et it be clearly understood, that every Publication of Paine’s was to be had upon Application at the Shop of every Bookseller in this Country, at the Time they were sold by the Printer of this Paper. Why then is he to be Subject of a Prosecution, while the equal Offence of all his Brethren is overlooked?”<sup>61</sup>

Cowper changed his mind, at least for a moment. After reviewing the case, he composed “A Sonnet Addressed to Mr. Phillips now in confinement at Leicester”:

Phillips—the Suff’rer less by Law than Pow’r,  
 Though prison’d in an adamantine hold,  
 Might bear a heart as free and uncontroll’d  
 In his dark cell, as in a Summer’s bow’r.  
 The sly accuser, who at such an hour  
 When all suspicion sleeps, like Him of old,  
 Eve’s tempter, wreath’d in many an artful fold  
 Conceals his drift with purpose to devour—  
 He is the pris’ner; and those bars within  
 That hoop his sorry vitals round about  
 Dwells one, who never shall compassion win  
 From Just and Good, ’till Judgment calls him out.  
 Thou, then, less deeply at thy wrongs repine;  
 Scorn is thy meed, Commiseration thine.<sup>62</sup>

Cowper’s distinction that not British law but “Pow’r” had imprisoned Phillips was a familiar refrain in the early 1790s (versions of this discourse extend up through the 1794 acquittals, before the 1795 Gagging Acts convinced many reformers that the law itself had been turned tyrannous). Having written this sonnet for Phillips, Cowper was uncertain of what to do. On 18 June he sent a copy to his friend Samuel Rose, reporting that Phil-

lips's "case is singularly hard" and enclosing issues of the *Leicester Herald*. "Touched by the hardship he seems to have suffer'd," Cowper explained,

I have composed a Sonnet in his favour, but Government is so jealous and rigorous at present that I fear'd to send it till some wiser man than myself should assure me that I might do it safely. I therefore subjoin it for your opinion, and beg that if you have any doubts yourself you will consult some Legal friend who may ascertain the matter.<sup>63</sup>

Rose confirmed his wariness. Five days later Cowper wrote to tell Phillips that "an able lawyer" had advised him against publication, warning of the dangers of such an effort.<sup>64</sup> Withheld from publication during his lifetime, Cowper's sonnet on the imprisoned journalist did not appear in print until 1921.

Wakefield's and Cowper's responses to repression—a fiery political pamphlet, a poem nervously written and withheld from print—instance two poles of engagement in the repressive 1790s. But between these poles, a literary practice of strategic, oblique opposition would take shape. It is this space, between recklessness and recusal, that is the terrain of *Five Long Winters*. I begin with the national debate generated by the appearance of the new treason and sedition bills in November 1795. My first chapter examines these laws not merely as pieces of legislation but as cultural phenomena. Introducing the bills, the ministry offered every Briton the chance to be a critical investigator, a hermeneutic agent charged with uncovering dangerous secrets. In this way Pitt responded to calls to extend the franchise with a different offer to take part in governmental affairs: using the allure of the secret, he attempted to generate an imagined community of patriotic detectives. But refusing this effort to substitute surveillance for suffrage, public intellectuals and ordinary Britons united in protest against the Gagging Acts. I examine the representational practices that shape the responses to Pitt's legislative strike during six weeks in late 1795 (after the appearance of the bills but before they passed into law) by Coleridge, Godwin, Thelwall, Peter Pindar (John Wolcot), James Gillray, Thomas Beddoes, and others. Despite this loud public outcry, the Gagging Acts received royal assent on 18 December 1795, and the "deathlike silence" that Coleridge shuddered to predict in his assessment of Pittite repression did indeed descend on the nation.<sup>65</sup> This is why Thompsonian readings of Romantic cultural history have often taken 1795 as a terminus, as we see the raucous energy of the radical 1790s effectively quashed at last. Yet if we shift our audit from loud radicalism to other, more oblique modes, we find a variety of politically engaged writing endur-

ing in the aftermath of the Gagging Acts. My next two chapters examine two sites for this endurance: prison verse and newspaper journalism.

Paying special attention to three prison poets of the 1790s, John Thelwall, James Montgomery, and John Augustus Bonney, my second chapter investigates the significance of incarceration for Romantic-era culture. Although John Howard called attention to the British jail system in the 1770s, prison conditions commanded broad notice two decades later, when writers, editors, journalists, and booksellers experienced the horrors of incarceration. This targeted imprisonment was the dire muse of a variety of writing—poems, essays, broadsheets, and newspaper reports—that exposed readers to life inside a jail cell. A visible presence in Romantic-era print culture, the prison is a key site and resonant metaphor in the work of Coleridge, More, Wordsworth, Hays, Godwin, Wollstonecraft, and many others. The repressions of the Pitt ministry were felt not just in urban centers but even in the far reaches of rural life. 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 the 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. Tracing a different narrative of formal and discursive endurance through the darkest moments of the decade, Chapter 3 examines the fate of progressive journalism across the 1790s, with a focus on Benjamin Flower, a steadfast critic of the Pitt ministry who edited the *Cambridge Intelligencer* from 1793 to 1803. Flower’s paper, styled a radical “hell broth” by the *Anti-Jacobin Review*, published early writings by Coleridge, Thelwall, Anna Letitia Barbauld, and Henry Crabb Robinson, among others. But after a half decade of oppositional journalism, Flower at last found himself in Newgate in 1799. While the work of Lucyle Werkmeister and others has taught us much about newspaper culture in the early years of the decade, I attend to the status of the press in the post-Gagging Acts era. Tracking the plight of Flower and his influential newspaper as the ministry’s surveillance and intimidation tactics became more aggressive and more focused, I examine the narrowing scope of activity available to oppositional journalists in the later 1790s.

The strategies of Flower and other newspaper editors can be lost in analyses that regard the era’s news in terms of either bold radicalism or propagandistic loyalism. We might be tempted to bring a similar bifurcation to the novels of the 1790s, which have often been parceled into one of two modes,

“Jacobin” and “anti-Jacobin.” But in Chapter 4, I propose a different way to think about this literary landscape by examining novels that are concerned less with sounding political expatiations than with portraying discursive constraint. Godwin’s *Caleb Williams*, written after the conviction of Daniel Crichton and published during the sweeping arrests of many of Godwin’s activist friends, shapes a narrative as focused on secrecy and obfuscation as it is on reform discourse.<sup>66</sup> Charlotte Smith’s *Marchmont*, published five years after her revolutionary novel *Desmond*, and in the wake of the Gagging Acts, extends Godwin’s work not only to portray a social landscape haunted by surveillance and persecution, but to embed this sense of terror in the structure of the novel. This formal registration of repression is also at the heart of Wollstonecraft’s *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria* (composed in 1796–7 and published posthumously in 1798), which markedly departs from her writing of the early 1790s. “I utter my sentiments with freedom,” Wollstonecraft had declared at the opening of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, with a voluble optimism that defines the tract. But five years later, what changed as she felt the dark clouds of absolutism descend was not only her sense of the politically possible, but also her interest in the forms that politically engaged discourse might take. *The Wrongs of Woman* is a virtuosic exploration of the rhetoric of apophasis, arriving to us in an array of stutters, elisions, truncated utterances, and paranoid whispers.

While it might be expected that the writing of some of the era’s most visible political thinkers would bear the imprints of Pitt’s repressive regime, this hush also extended to the dells of Alfoxden. In my final chapter I trace the career of silence in *Lyrical Ballads*. Historicism has taught us much about the contemporary political issues with which Wordsworth’s poems are concerned (vagrancy, prostitution, poverty), yet less attention has been paid to the political register of these poems’ formal effects. I tell a new story about the politics of *Lyrical Ballads* in Chapter 5, one in which some of what is said, and much of what is given in “expressive silence,” registers the climate of the Gagging Acts era. Published amidst the darkening atmosphere of 1798, the year that saw the decade’s highest number of arrests for sedition—an *annus mirabilis* for government spies—the political texturing of *Lyrical Ballads* strategically engages this world of prosecution and paranoia. The rhetoric of locked jaws and silenced communities that marks the protests against the Gagging Acts by Coleridge and others is deeply impressed on Wordsworth’s Alfoxden poems in fractured dialogues and coerced discourse. Examining this poetics of troubled utterance, I call

attention to Wordsworth's use of rhetorical devices that characterize much late-1790s discourse: *praeteritio* and *occupatio*, expressions of the disruption of expression.

My argument in each of these chapters assumes an understanding of literary form as a site not just of historical registration but of political engagement. This mode of reading is informed by Susan Wolfson's charge that we take seriously the idea of a "contextualized formalist criticism" that recognizes that the information communicated by form necessarily includes the "social and political critiques" of writers very much aware of their works' formal events.<sup>67</sup> Historically and politically engaged criticism of the Romantic era has sometimes taken it as almost axiomatic that literary works function, in Fredric Jameson's phrase, as "formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions."<sup>68</sup> But to attend to the performances of stifled expression in early Romantic writing is to demand a reassessment of this critique. What we encounter are not "formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions" but formal engagements with unrelenting political repression. These engagements come into sharp focus when we shift our attention from the bold political discourse of the radical 1790s to the poetics of silence of the repressive 1790s. This is the story I tell in *Five Long Winters*.