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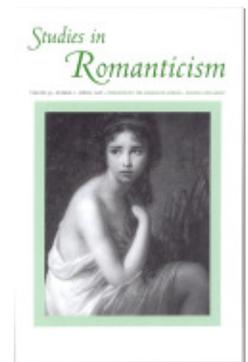
*Five Long Winters: The Trials of British Romanticism* by John Bugg (review)

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(Review)

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# Book Reviews

John Bugg. *Five Long Winters: The Trials of British Romanticism*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014. Pp. xii+246. \$60.

Historicist criticism on the Romantic age from the 1980s to our present moment often appears to split into two different camps. There is the historicism that understands Romantic writing primarily in terms of what it sees, and the historicism that understands Romantic writing in terms of what it doesn't see (or refuses to see). Nicholas Roe's *Keats and the Culture of Dissent* provides a compelling instance of the first kind, for it shows how even images of classical culture in Keats's writing indicate his radical sympathies; Marjorie Levinson's work on Wordsworth provides a compelling instance of the second kind, for it shows how the poet's transcendent powers of imagination are achieved only by eliding or erasing features of a landscape that were present and visible in the poet's moment. The first kind of historicism, particularly when it claims that literary conventions are really political positions, occasionally looks like a resolute repudiation of literary form, or at least the formal work of literature is understood as a coding (even if covert and artful) of political affiliations or beliefs. The second kind of historicism might seem like a more open acknowledgment of literary form as an imaginative construction, although form is considered as a failed attempt to transcend the material circumstances of the author's moment. Thus what might seem like an acknowledgment of the work of imagination works out to be a more complete undermining of formalism than the first, since literary texts are not even considered as echoes of material contexts; they are re-established more firmly in that context (thanks to the critic's endeavor) than an author would willingly acknowledge.

I mention this distinction in strategies to point out that in some ways John Bugg's exciting new book appears to be arguing against the second kind of historicism in order to embrace the first kind: a historicism that accounts for the way that literary works react to, and in a sense encode, specific historical conditions of the moment (Roe's work on Wordsworth and Coleridge is approvingly acknowledged throughout). Like other recent historicist critics like Daniel O'Quinn and E. J. Clery, who participate in something like a second wave of historicism, his work so carefully researches and synthesizes archival evidence that it changes our sense of what the historical conditions for writing actually were in the Romantic age. His

book argues that the infamous laws known as the “Gagging Acts” (The Seditious Meetings Act and the Treason Act, both of 1795) exerted a powerful effect on Romantic poetry. The acts need to be taken into account not because they simply stifled speech, writing, and publication, but because they provoked a range of creative reactions that have yet to be reckoned with completely in our critical commentary. The “Ode to Liberty” by the political prisoner John Augustus Bonney provides an opening example of Bugg’s point in the introduction: the poem is spoken in the voice of a bird whose broken heart and silenced song reflect the atmosphere of the “repressive 1790s” examined throughout the book (3–4). Neither entirely inhibited nor uninhibited in its utterance, the poem (like the bird) performs its constraint. The example of Bonney also shows how Bugg is actually producing an account that flexibly locates itself between the two dominant historicist methodologies: political engagement like Bonney’s is not always explicit and requires a careful attention to literary figures and generic manipulations. When disguised, muffled, or even reduced to “silence,” that silence is spoken through the poem: it is “expressive” of the existence and persistence of repressive legislation.

In his introduction and opening chapter, Bugg does for the Gagging Acts what John Barrell did for the treason trials of the 1790s in *Imagining the King’s Death*. Other critics (including Roe) have discussed the Gagging Acts; Bugg’s book stands out, though, for its sustained focus and revisionary spirit. He gives a beautifully detailed and utterly terrifying account of the context in which the acts emerged, what the acts aimed to do, how they were enforced with surveillance and imprisonment, and how they affected Romantic writers. He helpfully documents early chilling effects in pieces of legislation following the outbreak of the French Revolution, such as the 1792 Royal Proclamation against Seditious Writings, the 1793 Traitorous Correspondence Act, and the 1794 suspension of *habeas corpus*. But it was the Gagging Acts, he argues, that represented the most significant turn in legislative maneuvering, opening the door to increasingly repressive measures, further draconian acts of parliament, and an unprecedented inhibiting and censorship of discourse. These opening parts of the book unfold a nuanced account of how poets and novelists did not respond with one voice but rather took different political and literary stances on the series of repressive acts. Two “extremes of engagement” (14) are demonstrated in Gilbert Wakefield’s overt criticism of the government, which landed him (and his booksellers) in prison, and William Cowper’s significantly more guarded reaction. Unlike Wakefield, who criticized the government’s “long and unbridled . . . career of wickedness” (15), Cowper—while hardly a conservative—censored his own correspondence and even withdrew a highly critical sonnet from publication, fearing reprim-

sal from a “jealous and rigorous” government (17). Between these two poles, Bugg finds a range of expressions that he begins to examine in his first chapter’s analysis of the most immediate reactions to the Gagging Acts. Surveying numerous figures from John Thelwall to James Gillray who found inventive ways to address the Pitt ministry’s efforts to silence radical expression, the chapter focuses particular attention on contrasting modes of reaction to be found in Coleridge and Godwin. Coleridge’s responses to the legislation in *The Plot Discovered* are deeply informed by his account of “the divine potential of human speech,” which consequently affirms human speech as the origin of political authority (39). Whereas Coleridge more overtly (in a manner closer to Wakefield) criticizes the ministry’s attempts to “thwart the growth of language” that ensured spiritual and political well-being, Godwin adopts a different—and much harder-to-read—strategy (41). The author’s *Considerations* has often been interpreted (from Thelwall to the present) as a betrayal of radical principles, but Bugg suggests that the tract’s many appeals to the virtues of social order as a curb to overzealous passions and “mob politics” (44) were subtle strategies designed to coax loyalists into a more skeptical or oppositional posture toward oppressive legislation.

After mapping out the cultural phenomenon of the Gagging Acts, Bugg follows with a series of chapters that explore different genres with different figurative responses to the acts. Chapter 2 focuses on prison poetry of the 1790s by poets from Bonney to Coleridge, all of whom used the imagery of the prison as a potent mode of communication between the lyric speaker and an audience beyond the prison walls. Bonney, James Montgomery, and Thelwall saw time in prison for their overt protest and employ physical confinement in their work in order to register a range of responses from shock and despondency to exhilaration and reverie, as the speakers imaginatively appeal to a sympathetic public. Bugg convincingly shows how these prison poets shaped the development of the Romantic nature lyric (in which the “landscape” is the prison itself): to make the point, the chapter ends with a discussion of Coleridge’s “This Lime Tree Bower My Prison,” which not only covertly sympathizes with the plight of the poet’s friend Thelwall, but also conveys the author’s own sense of the more generally imprisoning political practices of the moment. Chapter 3 shows how even political journalism—which is often assumed to be more straightforward in its alliances—needs to be considered in light of the Gagging Acts, which forced Benjamin Flower, publisher of *The Cambridge Intelligencer*, to engage in elaborate techniques of evasion. Bugg documents how many radical journalists and publishers had been silenced during the 1790s (either through legal action or self-censorship). Flower, however, successfully escaped a similar fate through mutations of voice, techniques of

bricolage, and tactful evasions of controversy until he was arrested and imprisoned for libel and breach of privilege in 1799. Once released, he continued to publish his paper until the return of war in 1803; he ended publication, at least according to his own account, because “lethargy” and “fear” among his countrymen had stifled the very “public voice” which his oppositional journalism had sought to inform and inspire (105).

One of the many strengths of this book is that it patiently develops a complete picture of the political and cultural atmosphere in the 1790s, so that—by the time we reach the two closing chapters, chapter 4 on the “Gagging Acts Novel” and chapter 5 on Wordsworth’s poetry—we can examine these more familiar works within the context that has now been richly described. Rather than emphasizing the political engagement of Jacobin fiction, Bugg reveals how novels like Godwin’s *Caleb Williams*, Charlotte Smith’s *Marchmont*, and Wollstonecraft’s *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman* take an interest in representing “discursive constraint and communicative breakdown” (110). Godwin’s proliferating logic of secrecy among all his characters, Smith’s careful muffling of social criticism by putting it in the mouths of minor characters, and Wollstonecraft’s formal interest in “mutilated information” (126) are closely connected to each other in their efforts to dramatize the forceful silencing of political dissent. The final chapter on Wordsworth is in many ways the strongest in the book, partly because it is the most polemical: it vigorously takes aim at historicist critics who have tended to assume that Wordsworth’s moments of silence in poems from “Simon Lee” to “Tintern Abbey” amount to an intentional suppression or evasion of available modes of social critique. We can now see, thanks to Bugg’s analysis, how a dominant trend in historicism underestimates the degree to which Wordsworth was conscious of, and deeply feared, the repressive politics of Pitt’s regime. Levinson was right, it seems, to remark upon the “constrained manner” of the poet’s utterance in “Tintern Abbey,” but Bugg claims that this reticence is less a sign of neglect than a “performance of the repressive moment” (161).

Some readers who approach Bugg’s book may occasionally feel as though relevant contexts and complete readings for some of the works he discusses have been left out in the exclusive focus on the Gagging Acts. For instance, the location of prison poetry within a very long debate about prisons and capital punishment that precedes the acts under consideration is perhaps more significant than Bugg lets on. When he briefly discusses Coleridge’s “The Dungeon,” for example (originally written for *Osorio*), he does indeed acknowledge that the poem isn’t necessarily commenting on the Gagging Acts or political prisoners, since the precise nature of the supposed offense of the prisoner is unnamed. Still more, though, the reformist register of the poem is far from silenced: the poem openly asks for

an alternative to the prison system, in which the “soft influences” of nature could produce a version of restorative justice (22). Questions about what might get left out of the picture, of course, are probably an inevitable response to an argument that is so highly focused, so moments like this one didn’t significantly alter my appreciation for the work. I have a feeling that this fascinating and revealing book will be discussed by scholars in Romantic studies for years to come: I know it will certainly show its mark on my own work as I continue to digest its conclusions.

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Siobhan Carroll. *An Empire of Air and Water: Uncolonizable Space in the British Imagination, 1750–1850*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. Pp. 290. \$59.95.

Siobhan Carroll’s *An Empire of Air and Water: Uncolonizable Space in the British Imagination, 1750–1850* complicates Edward Said’s apposition of imperialism with habitation and his statement that “uninhabited spaces virtually do not exist” (13). In the service of this endeavor, the book draws on canonical, lesser-known, and archival sources to construct intricate conceptual histories of four interrelated “atopias,” “cultural constructs” (7) defined as “‘real’ natural regions falling within the theoretical scope of contemporary human mobility, which, because of their intangibility, inhospitality, or inaccessibility, cannot be converted into the locations of affective habitation known as ‘place’” (6). These four sites of inquiry—the poles, the sea, the atmosphere, and the subterranean—symbolize both the limits and the ambitions of empire. In so doing, they highlight the vulnerabilities of the colonial project as well as the cultural work that can only be accomplished by literature’s placeless travel. How writers understand, take up, and/or reject literature’s potential ability to expand the empire via imagination forms the core of Carroll’s contribution to the field of Romanticism and to literary studies broadly conceived. Additionally, by charting a capacious map of references to and treatments of these atopias, Carroll has created a resource for scholars from any discipline interested in the cultural histories of uninhabited space. For example, Carroll’s finely wrought discursive histories of the poles and of the atmosphere will be invaluable to scholars interested in historicizing current debates about the environment both within and outside the academy.

Carroll’s first chapter focuses on the poles as objects of British “speculation,” a “slippery term” that, Carroll argues, “usefully captures the vexed