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## Nothing to Do but to Obey Them: The French Revolution and British Individualism

Tyler Pepple

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Dr. Horsley, Bishop of Rochester, voiced the sentiments of many conservatives in the British government when he gave a speech on November 11, 1795 that proclaimed “the mass of the People in every Country had nothing to do with the Laws but to obey them.”<sup>1</sup> Such beliefs were common in Britain during the 1790’s and early 19<sup>th</sup> century among the Alarmist elite – a growing number of aristocratic intellectuals within the government who believed the rising popularity of radical movements speaking on behalf of the people jeopardized the power of the nobles and, thus, all that was good in Britain. The masses had become far more overtly political in the years before the French Revolution, furthering the conservative retreat. For example, Prime Minister William Pitt, a one-time reformer now became a rigid traditionalist, and Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* quickly appeared after the fall of the Bastille, defending what he saw as the inherent wholesomeness of the oligarchies in France and England. The French Revolution weighed heavily on the minds of the elite in Pitt’s government, headlining an age devoid of rules and restrictions and gave the primal habits of the masses free reign.

While the French Revolution instilled in the British bourgeoisie and proletariat a new sense of power that influenced the English government is clear, but how the manifestation of the power itself is ambiguous. Studies of the masses in Britain after the French Revolution are fairly young because historians tradi-

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<sup>1</sup>Albert Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty: The English Democratic Movement in the Age of the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 393.

tionally chose to focus on the aristocracy because of the amount of information available and the opportunity for close examination of individuals. However, because the French Revolution was in essence a revolt of the masses, studies on how it affected the *people* of England have often shed more light on a turbulent and complex period than have inherently limited studies of the aristocracy.<sup>2</sup>

This essay attempts to follow in the interdisciplinary tradition established in recent years by examining both the history and the literature of the decades after the French Revolution in order to discover how they both contributed to form the ‘spirit of the age.’ During the Romantic period, literature played a crucial role in both shaping and mirroring the sentiments of the people by promoting the ideology of the period. It gave the political tensions of the day a voice, and because of its potential for widespread dissemination, was far more effective than the radical societies at providing agency for the masses.

In Britain, I believe the empowerment of the masses arose because the French Revolution gave them agency and contributed to their growing sense of individuality – something that can best be termed as “collective individuality,” which carries with it the double meaning of a collection of individually minded people, and a class expressing its own distinction from other classes and carrying with it its own desires and demands. Two factors acted as catalysts for increasing this sense of collective individuality: radical interest groups like the London Corresponding Society and the Society for Constitutional Information, and the literature of the period, especially political tracts and polemic and didactic literature. These forms were especially important in this period because of the growing literacy rate among the masses. Of the two factors, the radical societies were certainly more threatening in

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<sup>2</sup>For example, see Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty*; Andrew McCann, *Cultural Politics in the 1790's: Literature, Radicalism and the Public Sphere* (London: Macmillan Press, 1999).

their demand for lower-class rights as far as Pitt and the Alarmists were concerned, but this would come at a cost for the societies were easy targets for the government. Political tracts and didactic novels, however, were more difficult to suppress given their widespread distribution.

Certainly the greatest instigator of the surge in polemical essays in the 1790's was Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Inspired by his disgust with the Unitarian minister Richard Price's sermon, *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country*, Burke's essay argued vehemently for the status quo. Burke reacted against Price's exhortations that he had "lived to see THIRTY MILLIONS of people, indignant and resolute, spurning at slavery, and demanding liberty with an irresistible voice; their king led in triumph, and an arbitrary monarch surrendering himself to his subjects."<sup>3</sup> For Burke, the lowly mob leading their king "in triumph" was the pinnacle of evil that could be perpetrated on an established government. The king and the nobility were necessary to the governing of a country because they were the vessels of the political brain, a fact proven historically, Burke thought: "How very soon France, when she had a moment to respire, recovered and emerged from the longest and most dreadful civil war that ever was known in any nation. Why? Because, among all their massacres, they had not slain the *mind* in their country."<sup>4</sup> The people in the "swinish multitude" were not fit to govern because they had common minds, a quality that would greatly circumscribe a king's authority.

Burke's answer for the problems in France (which he admitted there were) was reform based on the old ways in England – to devise a system of government like the one in place in Britain.

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<sup>3</sup>M.H. Abrams and others, eds., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000), vol. 2, *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country*, by Richard Price, 121.

<sup>4</sup>Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 137.

The French government, in other words, was “very nearly as good as could be wished” until all this democracy nonsense stepped onto the world stage again.<sup>5</sup> According to Burke the Revolution was and would continue to be a failure because France destroyed a system that was designed for its benefit.

Not everyone agreed with Burke’s sentiments, especially Thomas Paine. Paine’s *Rights of Man* is less important for what it says than for how it says it. Much of its content focuses on attacking Burke’s flowery language, or “learned jargon,” and making him out to be a kind of contemporary sophist whose sentences end “with music in the ear, and nothing in the heart.”<sup>6</sup> Paine capitalizes on Burke’s pretensions by dissecting his complex phrases in order to make them look ridiculous. This tactic was influential captivating a growing reading public lacking the critical capacity to understand much of the *Reflections*. Indeed, the 1790’s, according to McCann, saw an explosion of writers interested in the public sphere “and its related term the ‘market’ as general and abstract entities.”<sup>7</sup> This explosion is partially attributed to a growing cultural insistence on the belief that literature possessed a socially redemptive value. Novelists and political essayists like Paine exploited this by simplifying their language to make it accessible to more readers, resulting in a democratization of both literature and ideas that crossed class borders and, in a sense, unified the political and literary spheres. The elite were not the sole participants in politics any longer, for writers now made the pressing issues of the day accessible to everyone’s understanding.

There were two consequences to such a change. First, individuals in the lower-classes of society were flattered by these writers who insisted they were as fit to govern the country as those

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 122.

<sup>6</sup>Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man, Common Sense*, ed. Michael Foot (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 16.

<sup>7</sup>McCann, 1.

already in power, which increased the collective ego of the mob, in turn increasing its disposition to insurrectionary violence. Second, Burke and the Alarmists were far too clever not to spot this trend, and exaggerated it for their own benefit, arguing that tracts like Paine's were inherently revolutionary due to their effect on the public.

The debate symbolized by Burke and Paine led to a far greater political awareness among the masses. Paine's insistence that government was formed for the people was a strong counterargument against Burke's conservative appeals to maintain the status quo, and did much to instill a sense of individualism among the people. "The fact therefore must be," Paine wrote,

that the *individuals themselves*, each in his own personal and sovereign right, *entered into a compact with each other* to produce a government: and this is the only mode in which governments have a right to arise, and the only principle on which they have a right to exist.<sup>8</sup>

It was the masses that were in control of the government, not as a swinish multitude but a collection of individuals who were capable of voicing their own demands. Each person was not merely capable of voicing his or her demands, but was also potentially as effective as the elites in government: "Every history of the creation...all agree in establishing one point, the *unity of man*; by which I mean, that men are all of *one degree*, and consequently that all men are born equal and with equal natural right."<sup>9</sup> Paine's critique of the government, then, was twofold. He argued that in its present state it reduced people to an existence below a true human life, although these men and women were theoretically capable of accomplishing anything those in power could achieve.

The challenge the *Rights of Man* posed to Pitt's government

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<sup>8</sup>Paine, 41.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 36.

demanded a reaction. Much of the Alarmist case against Paine was his intentionally simplistic language. Arguing that it was intended as an insurrectionary appeal to a growing reading public who were not sophisticated enough to understand essays like the *Reflections*, the conservatives in the government labeled it as intentionally subversive. Through such reasoning, were able to push for more repressive measures to keep the public from voicing its discontent. It also helped the Alarmist claim that the French Revolution was not a secluded movement. In 1793, when the Reign of Terror began and France declared war on Britain, Pitt was able to use these events to label the English radical societies as “Jacobin” and “revolutionary”, which now isolated them and singled them out, albeit unfairly, as potentially traitorous organizations which would have to toe the line carefully if they wished to remain a public presence.

In reality, the radical societies were hardly revolutionary. Rather, they saw Parliamentary reform as their main objective, concentrating specifically on universal suffrage and annual elections to Parliament. Their effectiveness at petitioning Parliament was never great, but they gained strength after the Revolution and the publication of the *Rights of Man*, which acted as a common bond for all the radical societies.

Ironically, the rise of the radical societies in the 1790s was largely due to Burke’s publication of the *Reflections on the Revolution in France* because it prompted Paine’s reply. Burke even singled out the London Revolution Society and the Society for Constitutional Information, the two most famous radical societies at the time. He disparages the group by illustrating that they were virtually nonexistent until the Revolution occurred, discrediting them in a society that placed so much importance on being heard and recognized:<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Keith Hanley and Raman Selden, eds., *Revolution and English Romanticism: Politics and Rhetoric*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), Michael Ferber, “The Liberty of Appearing: Two Versions of the Romantic

The National Assembly has given importance to these gentlemen by adopting them; and they return the favour, by acting as a committee in England for extending the principles of the National Assembly. Henceforward we must consider them as a kind of privileged persons; as no inconsiderable members of the diplomatic body. This is one among the revolutions which have given splendor to obscurity, and distinction to undiscerned merit. Until very lately I do not recollect to have heard of this club [London Revolution Society]. I am quite sure that it never occupied a moment of my thoughts; nor, I believe, those of any person out of their own set.<sup>11</sup>

For Burke, the French Revolution brought the radical societies to the attention of those in government. This was problematic, for while the passage ironically treats the societies by speaking of them as significant in their own eyes but in no one else's, it also admits to the importance of being recognized at all.

Burke and the Alarmists had other reasons to fear the radical societies besides their newfound fame. They believed that the ultimate goal of the radical groups was the abolition of the aristocracy. Even if reform were the objective as the radical societies claimed, this was seen as a stepping stone to all out revolution. Pitt voiced this concern when noting the connection of certain MPs to the societies. He argued that they "were concerned with others, who preferred not reform only, but direct hostility to the very form of our government. This afforded suspicion, that the motion for a reform was nothing more than the preliminary to the overthrow of the whole system of our present government."<sup>12</sup>

The watch was tight, and the radical societies were forced to cautiously play by the rules of the British constitution. For

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Enlightenment," 91-92.

<sup>11</sup>Burke, 87.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 206.



instance, most members of the societies supported petitioning Parliament for governmental reforms rather than calling a National Convention, a revolutionary buzzword given its connection to French republicanism and the September Massacres. Although petitioning the government to reform itself was their most overt action in the eyes of the Alarmists, the dissemination of Paineite propaganda proved far more beneficial to their cause.

The Society for Constitutional Information, which was in decline after the outbreak of the French Revolution due to repeated failures in pushing the government toward universal suffrage, was saved by Paine. After he published the *Rights of Man*, the Society for Constitutional Information lost no time in advertising its connection to the author and the result was mutually beneficial, swelling membership for the society and increasing sales for Paine. This, of course, is not meant to suggest that Paine's popularity was entirely based on the radical societies' propaganda machine, for, as already stated, the *Rights of Man* held plenty of appeal for the masses by itself.

Paine, however, was not the only author giving agency to the lower classes. Novelists and poets were also speaking out, and among them was William Wordsworth, who based his poetry more on common life than previous writers had. Wordsworth was a radical in the early years of the French Revolution but quickly turned conservative. His reaction to events in both Britain and France is interesting because of its ambivalence. The tremendous potential power of the masses occupied his thoughts often because of the possibility of its acting for good or evil. His overall philosophy was similar to that of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who argued in 1802 that the "grand ideal of Freedom" cannot be realized "under any form of human government." Rather, it belongs to "the individual man, so far as he is pure, and inflamed

with the love and adoration of God in Nature.”<sup>13</sup> Both Coleridge and Wordsworth also feared the mob because of its potential for recklessness. They had respect due to the number of individuals it contained, and the French Revolution was therefore first seen as a triumph. In the *Prelude*, Wordsworth recalls his initial feelings toward the Revolution:

To aspirations then of our own minds  
 Did we appeal; and, finally, beheld  
 A living confirmation of the whole  
 Before us in a People risen up  
 Fresh as the morning star. Elate we looked  
 Upon their virtues, saw in rudest men  
 Self-sacrifice the firmest, generous love  
 And continence of mind, and sense of right  
 Uppermost in the midst of fiercest strife.<sup>14</sup>

Written in 1805, these words reflected the way Wordsworth felt in 1789, but the sentiments were not endemic to the initial stages of the French Revolution. During his early radical years, the French Revolution presented a new and promising age for Wordsworth, where “human nature seeming born again” could flourish in a democratic utopia.<sup>15</sup> The mob was hardly an ignoble mass and was every bit as good as the hegemonic oligarchy of either Britain or France because it represented a group of individuals capable of ruling themselves.

Wordsworth’s poetry is famous for individualizing members of the masses, both by examining individuals and by bringing the

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<sup>13</sup>Peter Kitson, “Coleridge, the French Revolution, and ‘The Ancient Mariner’: Collective Guilt and Individual Salvation,” in *The Yearbook of English Studies*, vol. 19, (Leeds: The Modern Humanities Research Association, 1989), 203

<sup>14</sup>*The Major Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill, *The Prelude* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 518.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 459.

lifestyle of the lower classes into the lofty realm of poetry. “The majority of the following poems are to be considered as experiments,” Wordsworth wrote in his Advertisement to the *Lyrical Ballads*. “They were written chiefly with a view to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure.”<sup>16</sup> It must be stressed here that the *Lyrical Ballads* was not published until 1798, nine years after the fall of the Bastille and also well after the Reign of Terror, which helped shift Wordsworth’s political beliefs to the right. The result was, as already stated, an ambivalent attitude over the mob’s right to independence. As Michael Ferber puts it, Wordsworth “wanted everyone in the world, from the hunger-bitten French girl with the heifer to the distraught mother who drowned her baby, to come into view, to be seen by the public, but he could not quite face the possibility that they might comprise the public themselves.”<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, Wordsworth’s respect for the power of the masses and the potential of each individual would remain with him through his entire life, and the *Lyrical Ballads* are the perfect place to look for the pervasive influence lower class life would have on his art. As he states in that famous passage from the Preface, “Low and rustic life was generally chosen, because in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language.”<sup>18</sup> The importance here is that we get a look into individual lives in the lower class. To Wordsworth and his readers, these were real people with real problems and concerns, not just a herd that had “nothing to do with the laws but to obey them.”

These were also the beliefs of the radical societies, though their politics differed greatly from Wordsworth’s. It seems clear that the idea of a collective individualism was hardly endemic to

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<sup>16</sup>Idem, *Advertisement to Lyrical Ballads*, 591.

<sup>17</sup>Ferber, 100.

<sup>18</sup>Wordsworth, *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, 597.

one specific political ideology, instead occupied a pervasive realm of British life that concerned every class, whether the people perceived it or not. The British radical societies understood the problem, however, and dedicated their time to bringing it to the attention of others and to press for Parliamentary reform. The consequences of such actions were costly, for it brought them to the attention of Pitt and the Alarmists. The London Corresponding Society's address to the National Assembly was not to be taken lightly by those in the government:

We can with confidence assure you Freemen and Friends, that knowledge makes a rapid progress among us; that curiosity has taken possession of the minds of the public; that the reign of Ignorance, inseparable from that of Despotism, is vanishing; and that at present, all men ask each other, What is Liberty? What are our Rights? Frenchmen you are already free, but Britons are preparing to be so.<sup>19</sup>

The London Revolution Society's address was not less controversial: "Royal prerogatives, injurious to the public interest, a servile Peerage, a rapacious and intolerant clergy, and corrupt Representation are grievances under which we suffer. But as *you*, perhaps, have profited from the example of our Ancestors, so shall we from *your* late glorious and splendid actions."<sup>20</sup> The last sentence in this passage is particularly ominous. If the French gained their freedom through revolution, how would the British expect to gain the same liberties?

The fears of the British government were compounded when the London Corresponding Society and the Society for Constitutional Information came together in 1793 to form the British Convention after failing to petition for parliamentary reform

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<sup>19</sup>Goodwin, 255.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 129.

through the Whig opposition on May 7, 1793. Its reference to the governing body in France and its use of French Revolutionary language was overt. Delegates at the Convention, for example, addressed each other as “Citizens,” November 29, 1793, was labeled “the First Year of the British Convention,” reports were often headed with the phrase, “*Vive la Convention*,” and it was suggested that the Convention’s “Address to the British People” be preceded by a Declaration of Rights.”<sup>21</sup>

What the radical societies were thinking by utilizing so much rhetoric from the French Revolution, especially considering their insistence on their reformist nature, is unclear. What is clear, moreover, is the manner of the government response. Pitt announced a bill to suspend *habeus corpus*, which passed on May 18, 1794. While the bill was only applicable to those thought to be engaged in treasonable practices, such a definition was broad enough to hold any leaders of the radical societies without trial.

In early June, the three members of the radical societies with the highest profiles, Thomas Hardy, Horne Took, and John Thelwall, were imprisoned. This time, however, the result was not what the government had anticipated. All three were acquitted by December, and the other members of the radical societies were subsequently released. The trials were not without their successes for the government, though. The greatest casualty for the radical societies was the Society for Constitutional Information, which ceased to meet after its secretary, Daniel Adams, turned King’s evidence and supplied the government with all of the group’s records. Additionally, financial problems gripped the London Corresponding Society, which used much of its funds in defending Hardy and Thelwall. While it continued to operate, membership dwindled significantly.<sup>22</sup>

Circumstances changed temporarily in October of 1795 when the opening of the new Parliamentary session was disrupted by an

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 302.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 362.

attack on the King's carriage. Pitt used the incident to introduce the Two Acts – the Treasonable Practices Bill and the Seditious Meetings Bill. The former altered the current law in order to widen the scope of treason and include “any who ‘compassed or devised’ the death, bodily harm, imprisonment or deposition of the King, who exerted pressure on him to change his measures or counsels, who plotted to assist foreign invaders, or to intimidate or overawe both houses or either house of Parliament, whether such intention was expressed...by overt act, or by speech or writing.”<sup>23</sup> The latter bill was designed to regulate the content and number of public meetings by forcing those organizing the meeting to submit a written document specifying the time, place, and purpose of each meeting to a local newspaper and the local magistrate, who could approve or deny the meeting. Both of these bills were repressive measures designed to silence the voices for Parliamentary reform and for lower-class rights. Once again, however, the results of the Two Acts were ambivalent. Fierce resistance from all sides rose up against the bills. Charles Fox labeled the time as “Pitt's Reign of Terror,” and there were ninety-four petitions with a total of 130,000 signatures in opposition presented to Parliament.<sup>24</sup> During this time, the membership of the London Corresponding Society swelled again. But the revival was short-lived as December 7, 1795, was the last protest meeting the London Corresponding Society held and repeated exhortations by Thelwall to remain defiant were useless. In the end, the most obstinate radicals were forced to seek refuge abroad. The Whig opposition, led by Fox, had no other alternative, but to secede from the House of Commons in 1797.

Of these radicals living abroad, none was more famous than Percy Shelley. Of all the Romantic authors, he and Wordsworth best encapsulate the growing sentiments of individualism that had taken root among the masses. Shelley was far more of a political

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 387.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 391.

poet than Wordsworth, making him a kind of culminating artist of the period – a result of both the political and artistic tensions that had been festering for over three decades. In *A Defense of Poetry*, he elucidates why he views poetry as supremely (and sublimely) important. Part of the reason is its connection with politics, exclaiming that, “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World.”<sup>25</sup> And he means this in a distinctly political sense. “We live among such philosophers and poets as surpass beyond comparison any who have appeared since the last national struggle for civil and religious liberty. The most unfailing herald, companion, and follower of the awakening of a great people to work a beneficial change in opinion or institution, is Poetry.”<sup>26</sup> Poets, in other words, have the ability to influence men’s actions through their art; to become “as generals to the bewildered armies of [men’s] thoughts.”<sup>27</sup> This influence comes primarily from the heightened self-esteem men feel when reading poetry, which, like Paine’s more universal language, ennobles the masses and offers them a new perspective on life.<sup>28</sup>

Perhaps Shelley’s most ambitious attempt at putting such a philosophy into action is *Prometheus Unbound*. This four-act play personifies the masses in the character of Prometheus, thus giving them both a face and a hero. Chained to the Caucasus Mountains in India by the tyrant god Jupiter, Prometheus eventually frees humanity with the help of Demogorgon, the ruler of the underworld. *Prometheus Unbound* is filled with assertions of the potential power of the people. “I gave all / He has,” Prometheus says of Jupiter, “and in return he chains me here / Years, ages, night and day.”<sup>29</sup> Just as the people were first responsible for

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<sup>25</sup>Idem, *A Defense of Poetry*, 535.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 535.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 523.

<sup>28</sup>Gerald McNiece, *Shelley and the Revolutionary Idea*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 3.

<sup>29</sup>Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, 221.

giving the king his power, so Prometheus is the fountainhead of Jupiter's power, and the result is a despotic government where all that is good is turned to evil purposes:

The good want power, but to weep barren tears.  
 The powerful goodness want: worse need for them.  
 The wise want love, and those who love want wisdom;  
 And all the best things are thus confused to ill.  
 Many are strong and rich, -- and would be just, --  
 But live among their suffering fellow men  
 As if none felt – they know not what they do.<sup>30</sup>

Yet, among this chaos is the pervading sense that all will one day be right because all people, while controlled by society, are still in control of their own passions and beliefs. “Yet I am king over myself, and rule / The torturing and conflicting throngs within / As Jove rules you when Hell grows mutinous,” Prometheus exclaims to the Furies.<sup>31</sup> Hope is always present in *Prometheus Unbound* because oppressed individuals are capable of something more than they are allowed to be under the tyranny of Jupiter's rule.

What emerges in this study of the literature and politics of the decades after the French Revolution is the discrepancy between what occurred in the two realms. Both the radical societies and the writers of the time were influenced by the collective individuality emerging in the masses ( including conservative writers like Burke, who were influenced negatively). The radical societies, however, were far less successful than the writers in achieving their goals. As distinct organizations that could be equated to revolutionary France (which was also an enemy of Britain for the most of the period studied here), they offered easy targets for the repressive measures of Pitt's government. Authors such as Paine were more difficult to silence because of the rate of dissemination

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 229.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 225.



of their texts, while others, like Wordsworth, could bring the lives of “low and rustic” people to the foreground without being overtly political.

The literary and the political realms were thus tied together in complex ways, as each supported a similar ideology, and when it was challenged by Pitt’s oligarchy, the two areas necessarily grew closer together. It is partially because of the relationship between politics and literature that the Romantic period was such a dynamic one. Long after the demise of the radical societies, the government could still boast that at least the mass of people in *England* “had nothing to do with the laws but to obey them,” but authors such as Wordsworth and Shelley, who were active well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, proved that the influence of the French Revolution on the collective individuality of the masses was far from ephemeral.