Romantic Hackers: Keats, Wordsworth and Total Surveillance
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In 1791, the political reformer Jeremy Bentham theorized the Panopticon, whose design promised to allow a single Inspector to surveil (exercise "inspective force" over) large numbers of criminals or workers. In recent years, the advent of a suitable technical apparatus – CCTV, ISP taps (network traffic interception), data banks, and so on – has extended the proposed 30m circumference of Bentham's structure to, and beyond, the physical boundaries of entire countries. While total surveillance is often perceived as a feature of modernity, its conceptual and epistemological framework is rooted in the Romantic period, moreover at a key juncture in the history of ideas concerning individual subjectivity, rights and freedoms. David Barnard-Wills refers to inspective culture as a "nexus of surveillance, identity and language" (2012). In this talk, we examine this nexus in the historical period that first, and so powerfully, imagined the fully surveilled world.

While panoptic visions of surveillance emerged out of Enlightment rationality and utilitarian projects, becoming conceptually possible for the first time, so, too, did a response to those visions – hacking. Hacking, we argue, using the term in a tighter sense than that of analogy alone, or that of Richard Stallman's definition of hacking as "playful cleverness" – represents a key response of Romantic writers and political activists from the period to emerging totalitarian surveillance culture (and the suspension of habeas corpus in England in 1795 and 1817). As we discuss, the first victims of surveillance culture developed some of the most persuasive, and enduring, forms of resistance to that culture.

Our talk looks at two specific case studies, the (now-)canonical Romantic poets William Wordsworth and John Keats, both of whom were subject to state censure for their close links to radical political movements. Wordsworth was the friend of treason suspects on the Romantic equivalent of a "kill list", and was himself placed under close surveillance by Pitt's government. Keats's career as a poet was blighted by a focused and sustained government campaign of character assassination and ridicule that bears comparison with methods used against political writers of our own age, including Julian Assange.

Both Romantic poets, we show, developed strategies of resistance that may be considered as "analogue hacking", subverting the established language of power at the level of discourse and literary genre. These strategies of resistance bear fruitful comparison to – at the same time as throwing light on – ways in which current resistance is constituted by "movements" such as Anonymous and Lulzsec. These poets' shift of status from rebels, undesirables and revolutionaries to central canonical English authors will be a subject of discussion.

As a concrete example of the phenomena we describe, poems by these Romantic authors, through their use of irony, ambiguity and allegory, provide Tor-like anti-tracking protection for their readers, obscuring political start points and ideological destinations. We finish by considering literary equivalents to web trolling, trojans and viruses. We suggest how these early responses to surveillance offer ways of envisaging possible futures for political resistance.

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(Liverpool University Press, 2012). He is Co-director of the Centre of Romantic Studies at Aberystwyth University.

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Both live 30 miles from Aberporth, the largest drone test site in Europe, on the former site of West Wales airport.