The Constitution *of* Literature

Lee Morrissey
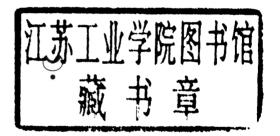
The Constitution of Literature

Literacy, Democracy, and Early English Literary Criticism

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Preface

Rethinking the History of Criticism

On one level this book is a gloss on Jacques Derrida's claim, "No democracy without literature; no literature without democracy,"[1] using early English literary criticism as the example. Inspired though this book is by Derrida's slogan, his formulation requires qualification, modification, and, most important, historical consideration. Literary criticism, literature, and democracy may be related, but texts that are considered "literary" exist long before democracies. Thus, Derrida's point has more to do with the institution of literature in modern democracies; as he points out, "what defines literature as such is profoundly connected with a revolution in law and politics."[2] That "revolution" might happen at different times in different places, but in England it begins in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. On another level, then, this book takes up the question of why modern English literary criticism emerges during and after the Restoration rather than at some earlier time. Provisionally it can be said that the emergence of literary criticism as a related modern institution is seen here as a response to the upheaval associated with the English Civil Wars of the 1640s. The argument is that what we now know as literary criticism attempts to organize what was then seen as one particularly troubling aspect of print culture: democratized reading. Therefore, this book reviews how reading is redefined and debated from the 1640s to the late eighteenth century, mostly with reference to canonical early literary critics such as Dryden, Addison and Steele, Pope, Hume, and Johnson and often with reference to other sources where reading is also being defined, such as dictionaries and grammars.

Focusing on the early critics' debates over what they think reading is and over how it operates on and through us as readers, I consider early English literary criticism as an extended debate over theories of

reading, including theories of resistance to reading. Such a historical consideration of the theories of reading that constitute the central debate (and activity) of literary criticism represents, I believe, the unfinished project of deconstruction. Leaving it unfinished puts literary studies in a particularly complicated position: literary studies claims a pioneering relationship to democracy (albeit by invoking it more than exploring it), while new forms of literacy (electronic literacies) claim to be more democratic, and literary criticism might unknowingly replicate some of the same preferences for interpretive stability (rather than the instability of democratic plurality) seen among its earliest modern practitioners. For as the early critics cast these debates over theories of reading as also being debates over political philosophy, literacy turns out to have been a politically ambivalent image of democracy for early English literary critics. In these debates each of the major seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English literary critics mentions different anxieties over the Civil Wars of the 1640s and the role of reading in fomenting them, indicating that the eighteenth-century development of literary criticism has an antithetical relationship with what could be seen as the democratic political upheaval of the seventeenth century.

The political history of eighteenth-century literary criticism is often understood through Jürgen Habermas's idea of the public sphere. But focusing on theories of reading reveals an extended debate over a range of different models of democracy, some apparently rejecting the public sphere through which early criticism is usually seen. Rather than the steady, albeit slow, rise of an autonomous public sphere devoted to free expression, with which literary criticism and democracy have been associated, in the debate over the definition of reading between the 1640s and the eighteenth century various models of political philosophy and literacy are proposed and recombined. If, as Robert DeMaria points out, "reading, like literature itself, is socially constructed,"[3] then literary criticism is the social construction of reading (and literature itself) writ large. More than socially constructed, however, literary criticism is also *constituted* in the eighteenth century through a cumulative and evolutionary process of acquiring practices, precedents, and terms, as well as a canon and a way of reading that canon. I attempt to suggest how we might reimagine the political history of modern English literary criticism by focusing on theories of reading during its formative decades.

When considered in relation to its theorists' anxiety about the Civil Wars, the extensive reading sometimes attributed to the eighteenth century seems born out of a resistance to an earlier kind of reading—the intensive reading of the mid-seventeenth century. As I discuss in more detail in my introduction, my formulation combines more recent devel-

opments in the history of the book with Paul de Man's claim that "the resistance to theory is in fact a resistance to reading."[4] For de Man this resistance to reading is "a resistance to the rhetorical or tropological dimension of language."[5] As we will see, Hobbes, Sprat, Dryden, and others are explicit on this count, convinced that the tropological dimension of language is dangerous because misleading. Of course, they are not the first to be concerned with the effect of images. But they associate attention to the tropological with arguments published in the 1640s. Thus, implicitly under consideration in this book is whether what de Man considers criticism's resistance to reading results from the arguments over the definition of reading in the work of these early literary critics. At the same time, although the terms may be de Man's, the approach is not, for it is my assumption that the resistance to reading has a history.

In a way the tropological, rhetorical readings described by de Man and associated with poststructuralism and deconstruction are well attuned to the modes of reading that predate literary criticism's modern constitution. For some that is the problem with poststructuralism; it lacks the necessarily rational attributes that are said to have come to criticism in its eighteenth-century, Enlightenment formation. Indeed, it may be that the controversy that followed poststructuralist literary theory stems from its reconnecting reading to modes that are older than the eighteenth-century constitution of literature. Conversely, though, it may also be that the kinds of reading described by the early English literary critics are not well equipped to address texts written in an earlier time, when reading may have needed to be tropological because there was not necessarily a protection accorded speech or writing. It seems to me that deconstruction still makes at least two major contributions to literary studies and to our sense of its democratization: the first highlights the degree to which literature is a type of reading (more than a form of writing or of publication), and the second articulates and defends the plurality of meanings, the multivalence and the ambiguity, of verbal representations. Both points remain relevant to how we see literature's relationship to pedagogy, to book history, and to digital literacy because the empowered reader posited by deconstruction can be placed at the center of the classroom, is at issue in the history of reading, and is implied throughout the literature on hypermedia. Perhaps most important, though, the poststructural celebration of unresolved plurality expands meaningful possibilities: the multiplicity that makes possible what deconstruction calls "play" constitutes the deep, generative connection between reading and democracy.[6] The plurality of meanings is not merely an analogy for pluralism in general, however. In print culture it is its defining image.

Depending on how we understand the reading process, different readings can represent different choices or even difference itself.

At a time when arguments about modes of literacy implied by the development and spread of the World Wide Web are casting the printed book as linear, hierarchical, fixed, and stable—and digital hypertext as preferably fluid, open, and changeable—it is all the more important to reassert the intrinsically flexible capacity of texts, and not just "literary" ones. What begins in these arguments about interactive media as a difference in the production of the text or in the reading experience associated with it often becomes a putative difference in the political possibilities of the two media, with hypertext cast as democratic, the book as aristocratic. The importance and potential of the World Wide Web for democratizing access to publication should not be overlooked, even if this supposed democratization requires extraordinary and unevenly distributed levels of investment in knowledge and technology. But it is striking that defenses of digital literacy share a vision of the book as unchanging, both in its physical form and over its various readings. The reality is that the book has never achieved the stability or exclusiveness attributed to it. Despite the efforts of the early literary critics and many, many others, printed text remains as dynamic and destabilizing as the World Wide Web is said to be. Still, the historical association between the book and stability must be conceded, while at the same time we must insist that it is "merely" an association—one to which the eighteenth-century development of criticism contributes. The early literary critics, like today's users of digital media, have their reasons for wanting to make reading safer, as we will see. I worry, though, that their solution, if unexamined, would leave us with a diminished sense of literacy and of democracy. At a time when some claim that the World Wide Web has displaced print with a more democratic literacy and pedagogy, it is particularly important to turn to a history of reading so as to rearticulate literary criticism's defining relationship with democracy or, more accurately, to its relationship with a fuller range of democracies.

Acknowledgments

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Habermas and the Resistance to Reading in Early English Literary Criticism

> Literacy in its varied versions can be taken up as both the politics of representation and the representation of politics.
> —Henry A. Giroux, "Literacy, Pedagogy, and the Politics of Difference"

☾

Modern English literary criticism emerges during the Restoration and eighteenth century. Along with the novel it has been called "the most significant 'new' mode of writing to enrich English literature between the Restoration of Charles II and the death of George III."[1] Although there were literary-critical defenses of poetry before the Restoration and although there would be more extensive networks of academic and published criticism after the eighteenth century, figures such as John Dryden, Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, and Samuel Johnson represent important changes in the status of criticism. Between the second half of the seventeenth century and the latter third of the eighteenth, literary criticism becomes professional, periodical criticism begins to come into its own, and across the period an English literary canon is developed, refined, and debated. It is not surprising that Peter Gay should refer to the Enlightenment as "The Age of Criticism."[2] Although there is agreement that modern English literary criticism begins to come together during the Restoration and eighteenth century, however, there is less consensus on why it happened at that time. What was it about this period that prompted the emergence of modern literary criticism? Generally, there have been two, sometimes related, approaches to explaining the eighteenth-century emergence of literary criticism: the explosion of print

and the public sphere. In July 1641 the Star Chamber was abolished and with it the licensing system that had kept print in check.[3] The following year would see more titles—two thousand—than would be published in one year again until 1695.[4] More titles were published between 1640 and 1660 than had been in the preceding century and a half.[5] Those numbers, high as they might have seemed in 1660, would be similarly dwarfed by the last decade of the eighteenth century, when it is estimated that fifty-six thousand titles were published.[6] According to this explanation, democratization is related to what we might call massification: the sheer quantity of new titles called for—produced, one could say—critics, professional readers who could help others find their way through the thicket of these new books.

   In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* Jürgen Habermas offered a second answer to the question of criticism's emergence, an answer still related to the explosion of print. Arguing that critics help create the modern "public sphere" central to modern democracy, and citing Addison, Steele, *The Guardian*, and *The Spectator* by name, Habermas placed eighteenth-century English critics at center stage, giving literary criticism an emancipatory role in public culture.[7] Through a mechanism that Habermas calls "representative publicness,"[8] critics become figures of opposition to a governing aristocracy, "to engage them in debate over the general rules governing relations."[9] It is a heroic story: criticism wrests power from an aristocracy, using only the "critical reasoning of private persons on political issues."[10] Related to this shift, and perhaps more important, though, criticism also negotiates a transition from a premodern decision-making process based on the will of a sovereign to what Habermas sees as the modern, rational choice of the people debating the issues openly, from "sovereignty based on *voluntas*" to "legislation based on *ratio*."[11] Habermas's public sphere now operates as something like the "standard model" for the early history of English literary criticism. In the four decades since the publication of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, a presumption of a mutually reinforcing relationship between literary criticism and democracy, perhaps especially during the eighteenth century, has become practically axiomatic in literary studies. Variations on the "public sphere" model can be seen in Peter Uwe Hohendahl's *The Institution of Criticism*,[12] Terry Eagleton's *The Function of Criticism: From "The Spectator" to Post-Structuralism*,[13] and James Engell's *Forming the Critical Mind: Dryden to Coleridge*.[14] A series of important associations have thus developed around eighteenth-century literary criticism, including the origins of English literary study, the dispersion of a critical vocabulary to a mass audience, the development of the modern public sphere, the articulation

of the right of unimpeded public expression, and the centrality of print media in modern democracy.[15]

The public-sphere vision of the eighteenth century that Habermas describes has been subject to important critiques over the past few decades, although without yet a corresponding change in the history of literary criticism. Some, for example, argue that a modern public sphere as Habermas understands it might have emerged much earlier than Habermas indicates. Historians such as Nigel Smith have reconsidered Civil War–era pamphlets, moving the emergence of a contestatory public sphere back to the mid-seventeenth century, to the period immediately following the end of the Star Chamber.[16] Similarly, in *Origins of Democratic Culture* David Zaret builds on the work of Smith and argues (perhaps more directly than Smith might) that "a political public sphere first appeared in the English Revolution."[17] Prominent work on eighteenth-century history indicates that England does not see the openness that Habermas associates with the public sphere.[18] J. C. D. Clark, for example, describes a persistent *ancien regime*, a confessional state in which religious affiliation and genealogical rank were more important than open participation in policy debates.[19] In *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy argues that the "history of the African diaspora . . . may require a more complete revision of the terms in which the modernity debates have been constructed" by Habermas and others.[20] From political philosophy there is a range of objections to Habermas's model of democracy. Historians of philosophy argue that what Habermas associates with the modern democracy of the eighteenth century might have preceded it, at least by the seventeenth century. Quentin Skinner, for example, reveals a "liberty before liberalism," which he contends proposes an "unconstrained enjoyment of a number of specific rights" in the seventeenth century.[21] Among political philosophers, advocates of "radical democracy" would contend that Habermas's insistence on rationality and a preference for proceduralism structure a public sphere that, if democratic, would be amorphous. Finally, the recent "aesthetic turn" reminds us that the literary experience engages more than reason.

Although it is quite widely accepted currently, Habermas's model for democracy and for literary criticism entails at least two significant limitations for the history of English literary criticism. Its story of increasing openness and participation does not quite fit the English experience with criticism in the eighteenth century (even as Habermas cites English critics in his history), and its emphasis on an eighteenth-century rise of reason is at odds with what literary critics believed, by the middle of the eighteenth century, makes literature literary. The discussion of print during this period reveals profound tensions over democratization, across nearly

a century after the Civil Wars. Perhaps especially after the revisions of the chronology for Habermas's public sphere, the story of early English literary criticism ought to start earlier in the seventeenth century, with the public sphere of the 1640s, rather than with the eighteenth-century and Romantic authors on which it is generally focused today. In English at least, though, criticism develops in a Restoration attempt to give print the stability that early literary critics believed the mid-seventeenth-century experience with democratized print had lacked. There is a profound resistance to reading—or, more accurately, resistances to different ideas of reading—built into the intellectual and cultural history of this period. What is needed is a history of criticism that would indicate the important and often destabilizing democratic potential that cannot be separated from print and the influential debate over attempts to achieve such a separation so as to increase stability during the Restoration and eighteenth century. Given political historians' recent contributions to our knowledge of the complexity of early modern political philosophy, the history of literary criticism needs to be more attuned to the variety of models that characterize Restoration and eighteenth-century English political theory, at least in addition to and maybe rather than the rise of rationality that Habermas sketches. The fact that this history does unfold as a debate is part of Habermas's public sphere, but the fact that the status of rationality itself is at issue within this debate is at odds with how Habermas describes the public sphere in the eighteenth century. Finally, and following from this, what is needed is a history of criticism as a debate that recognizes and attempts to account for the difference between the aesthetic experience as described by literary critics—especially in the eighteenth century—and the rationality that Habermas prefers (and sees in eighteenth-century criticism).

Contrary to both the "explosion of print" and the public-sphere explanations for the emergence of criticism, the democratized access to print at issue in both explanations is cause for deep concern about the place of print in the public sphere among those we now see as formative seventeenth- and eighteenth-century critics. Reading, it turns out, is an ambiguous figure for democratization in the period. It was not lost on contemporaries that the initial increase in titles published during the mid-seventeenth-century public sphere happened to coincide with the English Civil Wars and Interregnum. Especially after Hobbes's *Leviathan*, the violence of the English Civil Wars becomes associated with the newly popular press and, more important, with the kinds of reading advocated through it during the 1640s. Therefore, with *The Constitution of Literature*, I argue that English literary criticism initially emerges as part of a reaction against the role print was thought to have played in the

English Civil Wars of the 1640s. That is, literary criticism is understood here as part of a Restoration response to the English Civil Wars and also as part of a larger project of "restoration" after the English Civil Wars, a project that persists long after the end of the Restoration as a historical period. After all, the Restoration was not fully restorative, with an Exclusion Crisis in the mid-1680s, the Glorious Revolution in 1688, and Jacobite rebellions until as late as 1745. Early English critics' dual attention to the increase in print and democratic access come together in debates over theories of reading—processes for acquiring meaning from the page, psychological and social effects, and diffusion across the population, for example. A focus on the critics' debate over theories of reading offers a historiography of English literary criticism that is more complicated than either the explosion of print or the models informed by Habermas would predict. By tracing a debate over the definition of reading between the 1640s and the 1770s, or what I call "the constitution of literature," I propose a reconsideration of what we might call the political history of early English literary criticism.

Today historians are somewhat less likely than they once were to consider the Civil Wars as "a catastrophe which had imposed on the subjects the appalling obligation to reconstitute authority," to use J. G. A. Pocock's and Gordon Schochet's helpful phrase.[22] Revisionist historians such as J. C. D. Clark have been making the case that the Civil Wars of the 1640s can no longer be considered a defining episode. As we will see, however, the Civil Wars are mentioned by each of the major seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English literary critics—Dryden, Addison and Steele, Pope, Hume, and Johnson. In the wake of the Civil Wars of the 1640s many proposed a wide range of ways to reconstitute authority; their *hope* may have been for precisely the continuities that Clark sees in the eighteenth century, but it is not clear these hopes were achieved to the degree revisionist historians have argued. For the literary critics the focus was on the seemingly and potentially unstable relationships between literacy and politics. In other words the critics focused their political attention on reading. Rather than Clark's sense of eighteenth-century "continuities which established society's basic public formulations,"[23] *The Constitution of Literature* traces different Restoration and eighteenth-century *assertions* of continuity as a response to a central—one might even say continuous—discontinuity: the execution of Charles I.[24] By the middle of the nineteenth century, Dickens was able to treat his country's obsessive, protracted process of remembering the king's death as a kind of bad joke. In *David Copperfield* Mr. Dick wonders how it could have already been two centuries since the execution of Charles: "if it was so long ago, how could the people about him have

made that mistake of putting some of the trouble out of *his* head, after it was taken off, into *mine*?"[25] Instead of the forgetting to which "The Act of Oblivion" officially committed the Restoration, a paradoxical process of keeping alive the memory of the king's death is an important part of the Restoration project, and it extends through the eighteenth century.

Habermas is right to remind us that the development of literary criticism participates in a formative debate in political philosophy over the shape of modern democracy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. And it may also be, as Habermas claims, that criticism played a formative role in the development of modern democracy. What is not so clear is whether that development also results in the modern democratic public sphere. The terms of the Restoration and eighteenth-century debate over the definition of reading also entail a debate over political philosophy. The very fact of the debate over reading indicates a wider range of political philosophy than is indicated in Habermas's narrative. We do not see a single, particular type of political arrangement coalescing over the period. Rather, we see a contest over what form political arrangements should take. Across the debate it is not clear that Habermas's democratic openness is what the critics were aiming for. If anything is open, it is a deep concern over openness and accessibility. That this debate over openness itself took place in public is not, though, the same as what Habermas means by an eighteenth-century development of a public sphere. In his story such openness is developed so that other areas could be discussed.

In seeing literary criticism as a form of reading with an institutional history, the approach here is informed by the history of the book, offering part of a seventeenth- and eighteenth-century version of what Cavallo and Chartier call "the history of reading."[26] Scholarship in the history of the book has two main strands, sometimes described "as material objects and as systems."[27] The latter, systemic or more immediately sociological approach tends to recount the situation for printing, either at a particular time or over time, looking at various aspects of the production and circulation of texts, usually in quantitative terms, to the extent that such data can be known. The former approach begins at a somewhat more micro level, usually starting with a book as a physical object and reading it for evidence of its participation in—or its running counter to—the larger sociological or systemic patterns. Perhaps the most important recent development in the history of the book as a field combines these two approaches to show that books are not in themselves stable objects. In an earlier model of systemic book history it was believed that "the press gives the book a permanent and unchanging text," that texts

became more standardized in the transition from handwritten copies to the printing press.[28] Comparisons of individual books as material objects, however, revealed important variations between different copies of the same "text," even within the same edition. For centuries print was composed of movable type, and type was often moved during print runs, resulting in different texts even within the same printing. The idea that print stabilizes text seems to assume retroactively a permanence of print made possible by nineteenth-century developments in print technology, when printing advanced beyond movable type. Against this presumption of print's stability, and in an argument typical of the recent approach to book history, Adrian Johns argues in *The Nature of the Book* that it is not the printing of books per se that creates a new sense of their stability. Instead, Johns contends that "the roots of textual stability may be sought as much in . . . practices as in the press itself."[29]

Usually, and understandably, explanations of the extramechanical practices associated with the development of textual stability focus on the development of copyright laws and legal definitions of authorship.[30] In *The Constitution of Literature*, by contrast, I consider the debates over theories of reading in early literary criticism as one of those practices designed for textual stability. In *The Order of Books* Chartier asks, "How did people in Western Europe between the end of the Middle Ages and the eighteenth century attempt to master the enormously increased number of texts?"[31] Chartier's own answer has to do with organizing institutional structures—"inventorying titles, categorizing works, and attributing texts."[32] In this book I consider Chartier's question from a more qualitative angle. By attempting to organize responses to books rather than the books themselves, early literary critics try to do for reading what cataloguing does for bound volumes. Where Chartier refers to an "order of books" emerging between the end of the Middle Ages and the eighteenth century, *The Constitution of Literature* describes something like an "order of literature" within the order of the book, focused on the question of what it means to read, developing during the Restoration and eighteenth century.

In a well-known book-history distinction, Rolf Engelsing distinguishes between an "intensive" reading, practiced until about 1750, and an "extensive" reading since then.[33] According to this model reading is said to shift from repeated readings of, say, the Bible before 1750 to a faster pace and greater number of titles after, when readers "ran through a great deal of printed matter," in Robert Darnton's memorable phrase.[34] Perhaps as a consequence of the "explosion of print" reading of the Restoration and eighteenth century, there is a tendency to explain the possible shift from intensive to extensive reading as a response to

the sheer quantity of printed materials, as if people found a new way
to read solely to deal with the extraordinary volume of new publica-
tions.[35] By tracing seventeenth- and eighteenth-century debates over the
definition of reading, though, we can see that the central figures in early
English literary criticism associate what Engelsing calls reading inten-
sively with the political violence of the English Civil Wars of the 1640s.
Thus, what is usually characterized in book history as an inevitable shift
from intensive to extensive reading made necessary by the sheer volume
of new publications (and the pace at which they appear) emerges instead
as something much more strategic. What Engelsing calls reading exten-
sively turns out to be cast as a response to what was seen as the regret-
table condition of print culture associated with the 1640s. It could be
that extensive reading is encouraged in the public sphere, although that
hypothesis then raises questions about democracy in the period, given
the flowering of democratic political philosophy that coincides with and
is sometimes represented by mid-seventeenth-century intensive reading
and the Civil Wars.

When considered in relation to its theorists' concern over the Civil
Wars, it seems that extensive reading is born out of a resistance to an
earlier kind of reading—the intensive reading of the mid-seventeenth
century. Consider, for example, a passage from Samuel Johnson's "Life
of Addison," in which Johnson sketches a history of literary criticism
from Sprat to Addison and Steele:

> The Royal Society was instituted soon after the Restoration to divert the attention
> of the people from public discontent. *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* had the same
> tendency; they were published at a time when two parties, loud, restless, and vio-
> lent, each with plausible declarations, and each without any distinct termination
> of its view, were agitating the nation; to minds heated with political contest they
> supplied cooler and more inoffensive reflections.[36]

As recipients of a public-sphere history of literary criticism, we might not
recognize the origins of literary criticism in the history Johnson sketches,
despite the fact that it features the major figures still associated with the
history of early English literary criticism: Addison, Steele, and Johnson
himself, of course. In the Habermasian history of criticism, and of the
eighteenth century, these figures are seen as struggling heroically to cre-
ate a public sphere that protects democratic free expression. Johnson,
by contrast, sees them as quelling dissent. At the very moment that the
development of a democratic public sphere is supposed to be making pos-
sible the public discussion of policy and political events, Johnson con-
nects literature to a politics of depoliticizing, placing Addison and Steele
in a lineage that is said to direct attention away from political concerns.