

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 régime*, 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 publications.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 intensively 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 extensively turns out to be cast as a response to what was seen as the regrettable 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 violent, 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 create 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 possible the public discussion of policy and political events, Johnson connects literature to a politics of depoliticizing, placing Addison and Steele in a lineage that is said to direct attention away from political concerns.

By not seeing literary criticism replaying the Restoration, as Johnson does, the current public-sphere model of literary criticism overlooks how what is called literary criticism emerges as a reconceptualization—rather than the creation—of the public sphere. According to a familiar criticism of the Enlightenment and of the scholarship of the eighteenth century, we are too willing to see the period in the same glowing terms its most famous figures used to describe it.³⁷ It is not clear, however, that the most enthusiastic current defenses of an Enlightenment public sphere are actually seeing the eighteenth century the way major authors of the day did. It turns out that those whom we now consider to have been formative early English literary critics were deeply concerned about the possible consequences of a free press. The emergence of a deregulated press, the ultimate political violence of the English Civil Wars, and, most important, the radical theories of reading that at least coincide with and maybe even help to precipitate these wars may explain why the protocols of reading that are subsequently debated for literary criticism emerge in the eighteenth century rather than some other period.³⁸

In other words, *The Constitution of Literature* reveals a resistance to reading, or, more specifically, a history of resistances to democratized reading, in the early development of English literary criticism. My phrasing refers, of course, to Paul de Man's well-known analysis of the "resistance to theory," although I am interested here in combining this resistance with the history of the book for reconsidering the history of literary criticism. For de Man, language combines a logical side, which it is possible to decode, and a "tropological" or metaphorical side, which stays as a "residue of indetermination" after a decoding of the grammar has occurred.³⁹ When de Man describes "a resistance to the rhetorical or tropological dimension of language,"⁴⁰ it is this figurative, metaphorical, or "tropological" dimension that readers resist. Because for de Man language is always made of these two parts, each avoidance of this tropological dimension is also an avoidance of reading the text in itself. Thus there is a paradox at the heart of the experience of reading: the avoidance of one side of the meaning is unavoidable. "Resistance to the rhetorical or tropological dimension of language" is built into reading, de Man believes. Combining Engelsing's terms with de Man's, we could say that what de Man is describing is a resistance to intensive reading (or, conversely, a tendency toward extensive reading).⁴¹ Unfortunately, de Man contends that "if the conflict," between what he calls the tropological and the grammatical, or what Engelsing might call the intensive and the extensive, "is merely historical, in the literal sense, it is of limited theoretical interest."⁴² By thus summarily dismissing the possibility that the resistance to theory might have a

history, de Man's vision of literary theory turns away from one of the most important issues it could address: what reading means across the institutional history of literary criticism. Of course, de Man's possible motives for offering an "ahistorical turn" now haunt the institutional history of poststructural literary theory and of literary studies. It is precisely on account of the justified concern about de Man's own history, though, that we ought to reject his sense that the history of this resistance to reading is not important.

The Constitution of Literature reads theories of reading,⁴³ after theory,⁴⁴ for historicist objectives. This might seem an old-fashioned thing to do. After all, since the revelation in December 1987 of de Man's wartime writings for a Belgian German-controlled newspaper, it has been noted that we are working in the wake of theory and of deconstruction.⁴⁵ A consensus has emerged that we are now "post theory" or "after theory."⁴⁶ There is a way in which the recent interest in the history of the book and the history of reading might be attempting to repair the separation between history and hermeneutics implied by de Man's model.⁴⁷ But it is also possible to see book historians' insistence on the *materials* of reading as a way of avoiding association with theory understood in a deconstructive way. The difference, however, between poststructuralism and, say, cultural materialism matters little when compared to the current sense that print itself no longer matters in an age of electronic communication. Considering how persuasive such claims can be, considering as well how predisposed many are to believe them, literary studies would be in a better position if it could agree that deconstruction can be a form of historicism and that cultural materialism sometimes reveals what is most important about reading: the immaterial. Understood in this way, it seems to me that rereading theories of reading historically is the unfinished project of deconstruction.

Of course, such a focus on critics defining the word *reading* and related cognates does not indicate how people actually do read. There may very well be, and probably is, quite a wide gulf between how the critics understand reading, or the kind of reading they propose, and the kind of reading that is actually taking place. Literary critics are not necessarily the best guides for the reading practices of their day. Indeed, this gap can be seen even in the authors' own claims about how to read; it is not clear that they are all reading as they prescribe. Also, to consider how reading is defined does not necessarily entail a consideration of *what* people are reading. Critics' concerns about some genres, or preferences for others, can distort our sense of the popularity of certain texts. Nor can we assume that the critics' prescriptions change the behavior of actual readers. *The Spectator*, for example, had a print run of only three thousand

to four thousand copies per issue, Defoe's *Review* only four hundred.⁴⁸ Even if each issue had many readers, we are still looking at a very small percentage of the population. Indeed, it is believed that only 30 percent of the adult males in England were literate in the 1680s.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, focusing on how a particular small group of readers such as the early literary critics defines reading does indicate how they at least wish people would read, even if those concerned are "merely" voicing concern about how they think people *do* read. Moreover, the select group under consideration in this book remains particularly influential, as they are often credited with articulating the earliest claims of a modern, professional literary criticism.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there was a widespread discussion of the positive relationship between an accessible press and democratic possibilities, that is, precisely the kind of public-sphere discussion Habermas would lead us to expect. There were authors who posited a causal connection between the diffusion of print and the form of government in England. In *The Candid Reader* (1744), for example, John Skelton begins with the premise that "as in a well-regulated Commonwealth . . . so in one of Books."⁵⁰ Writing in 1746, John Upton articulates as more than an analogy the assumption behind such arguments, "trac[ing] . . . the reciprocal dependence and mutual connexion between civil liberty and polite literature."⁵¹ For Upton it is a relationship in which civil liberty causes English polite literature. Some might wonder, of course, about how the "polite" might limit the literature. However, when Skelton goes on to exclaim, "as we freely live, let us freely read,"⁵² this same text indicates a profound tension between political liberty and literacy: why the declaration? Who is limiting free reading? Some, perhaps especially in contemporary Continental philosophy, are said to have uncovered an alternative, archaeological—almost subconscious—counter-Enlightenment way of understanding the eighteenth century not directly available to us through the claims of the period's major authors. To this way of thinking, these previously unacknowledged sources might reveal counter-Enlightenment pressures on free reading. I focus here on discussions of literacy and democracy specifically in the major, canonical critics of the Restoration and eighteenth century; through their work it can be seen that both sides in today's debate over the Enlightenment underestimate the degree to which tensions concerning the public sphere characterized the Enlightenment—and maybe especially characterize criticism's role during the period. That is, I propose seeing the present-day debate over the Enlightenment as already having been part of the Enlightenment.