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.

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