Re-reading Reading in Eighteenth-Century Literary Criticism

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It has become a commonplace that English literary criticism emerges during the eighteenth century; indeed, its development is often taken as one of the most important aspects of the eighteenth century.² For at least the past two decades, eighteenth-century literary criticism has been seen as participating in the emergence of what Jürgen Habermas calls the “public sphere,” and, through that, in nothing less than the creation of modern, liberal democracy. Variations on this “implicitly Whiggish story of art’s democratization,” as Jonathan Brody Kramnick describes it (1999, 29), can be seen in Peter Uwe Hohendahl’s *The Institution of Criticism* (1982),³ Terry Eagleton’s *The Function of Criticism: From The Spectator to Post-Structuralism* (1984),⁴ and James Engell’s *Forming the Critical Mind: Dryden to Coleridge* (1989).⁵ In recent years, however, the “public sphere” eighteenth century has been subject to critiques that point toward a new way of understanding the early history of English literary criticism.⁶ But

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there has not yet been a history of early literary criticism that takes into account these critiques and transformations of Habermas’s model. In this essay, I propose a new approach to the history of early English literary criticism: an approach that traces a debate over the definition of reading in the work of influential English literary critics in order to reconsider the political theories of early English literary criticism.

Recent titles such as Sharon Achinstein’s *Milton and the Revolutionary Reader* (1994), Kevin Sharpe’s *The Politics of Reading in Early Modern England* (2000), or Robert DeMaria’s *Samuel Johnson and the Life of Reading* (1997) indicate the growing interest in a new approach toward the long eighteenth century, one that examines the question of reading during the period historically. But their focus on reading has not yet been incorporated into the story usually told about the eighteenth-century rise of modern English literary criticism. When considered from the perspective of debates over the definition of reading, it is clear that a series of related factors—the emergence of a popular press, the ultimate political violence of the English Civil War, and, most importantly, the radical theories of reading that at least coincide with and maybe even precipitate it—may help explain why the “protocols of reading” that are subsequently debated for literary criticism emerge in the eighteenth century rather than some other period. At the same time, arguments over what it means to read reveal related arguments—often from the same figures (e.g., Milton or Hume)—over what democracy means. Thus, this focus on the redefinition of reading makes possible a reexamination of what might be called the political history of early literary criticism. Reviewing the redefinition of reading reveals that there is in the eighteenth century, and in eighteenth-century literary criticism, a wider range of democratic theories than is predicted by Habermas’s public sphere model for early English literary criticism.

The approach proposed here combines the contemporary critique of the public sphere model with recent work in what is called the history of the book. Associated with the pioneering work of Roger Chartier, Robert Darnton, Elizabeth Eisenstein and others, the history of the book has become a major field in literary studies in recent years, as series like “Studies in Print Culture and the History of the Book” at the University of Massachusetts Press and “Material Texts” at the University of Pennsylvania Press indicate. Generally, recent scholarship in the history of the book focuses on the materials of reading—e.g., printing or marginalia—to reimagine what Cavallo and Chartier call “the history of reading” (1999). Perhaps as a consequence of this materialist emphasis in book history, there is a tendency to see early modernity as responding to the sheer quantity of printed materials considered as physical objects. Chartier, for example, refers to a process
of “inventorying titles, categorizing works, and attributing texts” through which “people in Western Europe between the end of the Middle Ages and the eighteenth century attempt to master the enormously increased number of texts” (1994, vii). By contrast, I am interested in focusing on the qualitative difference entailed by having so many more readers reading so many more books. Where Chartier refers to an “order of books” emerging between the end of the Middle ages and the eighteenth century, I would instead describe something like an “order of literature” within the order of the book, focused on the question of what it means to read, and developed during the Restoration and eighteenth century (1994). With fifty-two times more titles published in the 1710s than in the first decade of the seventeenth century and ten times as many books produced at the end of the seventeenth century as at the beginning (Wheale 1999, 6), the Restoration and eighteenth century do undoubtedly experience a dramatic increase in the volume of books produced and titles published. By trying to organize responses to books rather than the books themselves, this seventeenth- and eighteenth-century debate over reading among early literary critics does for reading what Chartier argues cataloguing does for bound volumes—organize new developments.

In a well-known book-history distinction, Rolf Engelsing distinguishes between an “intensive” reading practiced until about 1750, and an “extensive” reading done since then. 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 (1985, 249). In a materialist history of the book, Engelsing’s point could be taken as focusing only on quantity, as if people found a new way to read solely to deal with the extraordinary volume of new publications. Tracing the debates over the definition of reading, however, reveals other motivations behind the development of what Engelsing calls reading extensively. We shall see that the central figures in early English literary criticism, from Dryden to Johnson, associate what Engelsing calls reading intensively with the political violence of the English Civil Wars of the 1640s. Thus, what is usually characterized 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 a response to what was seen as the regrettable condition of print culture associated with the English 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.
Thus, instead of Habermas, I propose adapting for the history of eighteenth-century literary criticism Slavoj Žižek’s theory of “politics and its disavowals,” which sees democratic political philosophy as a response to the moment of democratic politics proper. Žižek argues that “the entire history of European political thought is ultimately nothing but a series of disavowals of the political moment, of the proper logic of political antagonism.” So, where Habermas’s *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* sees a gradual, progressive rise of democracy from the Middle Ages through its diminution in the twentieth century, Žižek, by contrast, sees a cyclical pattern: democracy is the problem that political philosophy sets out to solve, repeatedly. According to Žižek, “the political struggle proper is ... never simply a rational debate between multiple interests but, simultaneously the struggle for one’s voice to be heard and recognized as that of a legitimate partner” (1998, 989). Habermas and Žižek agree that democracy is the model for all political action, the goal being each person’s participation. The difference is that Žižek believes that a democratic politics is also a struggle for admission into the debate, including the debate about the structure of the debate. Consequently, Žižek’s democracy, unlike Habermas’s, is not necessarily rational, in part because, in contrast to the liberal model, it cannot be assumed that the participants’ options have already been articulated for them to choose from among a series of options. The moment in which everyone gets the chance to say how they want to be understood will strike many as irrational. Generally, such a moment of maximum political participation coincides with the moment of the least social and psychological stability. For with so many different actors making so many different claims, there will be conflict. For Žižek, such conflict is part of disagreement and difference, and is therefore part of true democracy. As he puts it, “the political proper” is “the reassertion of the dimension of antagonism” (2002). But for the political philosopher as described by Žižek, conflict is instability, which prompts people to long for a return to things as normal, which is to say, a time in which fewer were participating. For Žižek, democratic political philosophy attempts to manage this inherently unstable quality of democracy, or, as he puts it, “to gentrify the properly traumatic dimension of the political” (992).

The 1640s, with the extraordinary volume of publication following the end of the Star Chamber restrictions on publication, and the attendant violence of the Civil Wars, represent something like the democratic moment of Žižek’s model. The Restoration and eighteenth century, on the other hand, by working to avoid a repeat of such direct participation in the political life by so many people, represent what Žižek calls the “disavowal of the political moment” (1998, 991). In literary criticism, there is an analogous “disavowal of reading.” For a fuller picture of the history of English literary criticism, we
need a Restoration history of literary criticism to counteract the heroic, Romantic, public sphere history of criticism which has consigned the earlier theories of reading to relative unfamiliarity. To that end, I offer here an overview of the radical hermeneutics of the 1640s, for Restoration and eighteenth-century England literary critics repeatedly refer to them as they articulate their own theories of reading. After a review of Hobbes’ influential analysis of the role of words and reading in the violence of the Civil Wars, I briefly re-read theories of reading in the major—and canonical—literary critics of the period, e.g., Dryden, Addison and Steele, Hume, and Johnson. Given the parameters of an essay it is possible here to provide only a sketch, and my interest is simply to point out the contours of a new approach, and to offer a few reflections on what the new approach might provide us.

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In 1642, Roger Cocks contends that “Pamphlets, like wild geese, fly up and down in flocks about the country. Never was more writing” (1642, 1). Thanks to George Thomason, who collected more than 22,000 items published between 1641 and 1660, we now know that Cocks is right. More is published during 1642 than was published in any year until 1695: 2,000 titles in 1642 alone (Corns 1992, 2). In 1642, William Price complains that “the Press is oppress; almost prest to death in this scribbling Age” (1642, A4t), referring to the oft-noted increase during the 1640s in the number of titles published in England. Increasingly, the English experience with a newly accessible press in the 1640s is understood with reference to Jürgen Habermas’s public sphere. Sharon Achinstein is a pioneer in this regard, arguing that “the press helped to create a public space in which political arguments over such topics could be carried on” (1994, 3). If by “modern public sphere” we mean something like what Habermas calls “critical public debate” (1989, 52), then the 1640s do indeed see England’s first modern public sphere; the political proposals put forward in the pamphlets of the 1640s were, as N.H. Keeble puts it, “hardly to be voiced again until the nineteenth century, and not to be fully enacted until the twentieth,” if at all yet (2001, 3). But if by modern public sphere we mean the legal right to make public such critiques of political arrangements, then Price’s comment also suggests the limits of this early modern public sphere; for Price, it is the press, not the populace, that is oppressed, and it is the press that needs relief, not authors.

It was not only the quantity of the publications in the 1640s that occasioned the concern about them, but also all the attendant questions about who should have access to the press. With the emergence of this newly accessible press, there are also related questions about who is qualified to read these books—and about what constitutes reading itself. In the 1640s, authors
such as Abiezzer Coppe, John Milton, Gerard Winstanley and others place a remarkably individuated reader at the center of reading. Noting that readers need to know how to read words generally before they can read any particular text, some of these authors imply that readers arrive at a text predestined to find them meaningful. In their Calvinist hermeneutics, predestination is both a theological and a hermeneutical point. In its extreme form, this means that the meaning is in the reader, not the text. Abiezzer Coppe, for example, claims, “better schollers they, that have their lessons without book, and can reade God (not by roate) but plainly and perfectly, on the backside, and outside of the book, as well as in the inside” (1983, 61). The best readers know what the book is about without actually reading it; it is a consequence of their being better than others.

Milton’s hermeneutics negotiate a complicated middle position among the various sects of the 1640s. If Ranters such as Coppe are what we might call “textual Levellers,” treating books as if they are all the same and that it is the readers who are different, Milton is more of a textual Digger. The text is a potentiality, something that waits for a kind of revival by the reader, who digs out some manifestation of the text’s potential. For Milton there is something in the text itself, even if that same text winds up meaning different things to different people. Thus the importance of the analogy to the Cadmus myth in Areopagitica: books, according to the image, “are as lively and as vigorously productive as those fabulous dragon’s teeth; and being sown up and down, may chance to spring up armed men” (1991, 240). In addition to the idea of meaning being buried, ready to be dug up, it is not unimportant, in the context of the 1640s, that the meaning also arms men. Seeing Milton as a textual Digger addresses one of this century’s most famous complaints about Milton, F.R. Leavis’s claim that Milton “exhibits a feeling for words rather than a capacity for feeling through words” (Fish 2001, 478). In historical context, this feeling for words is part of what distinguishes Milton’s approach from those of his radical contemporaries. In a way that is not true for Coppe, the words matter for Milton, although at the same time so too do the differences in interpretation that the combination of words and reader can produce.

Milton’s Eikonoklastes (1649) demonstrates his continued conviction at the end of the decade that there is something about books themselves that must be countered and encountered. For here Milton responds to Charles the First’s Eikon Basiliké, recently described by J.C.D. Clark as “the most spectacular propaganda coup of the age” (2000, 44). There were twenty editions “within a month and a half of the execution (there would be thirty-five by the end of 1649), and it had been translated into Latin and several European languages” (Knott 1990, 159). By taking the reputation and memory of
Charles to the public through print, *Eikon Basilikē* testifies to the new importance of the press in political matters, at the end of a decade which had seen the popular press play more of a role than it had ever done before. In keeping with his “Digger” approach to texts, Milton responds to the King’s book with another book. In *Eikonoklastes*, Milton is concerned with reading, but as an interpretation of what was assumed to be the final document of a recently executed King, *Eikonoklastes* is also concerned throughout with politics. Milton claims that “in those words which admit of various sense, the libertie is ours to choose” (1962, 342). This liberty to choose from among various meanings represents Milton’s version of the 1640s idea of radical democratic reading. It is democratic in that it leaves the determination of the meaning of the text to each individual reader; it dovetails, in this way, with the focus on toleration associated with Leveller William Walwyn and Digger Gerard Winstanley. Readers would be given latitude to decide for themselves what they think the words mean. It is also, though, an argument consistent with Milton’s sense that there is something in the words themselves. That is, the words do have meanings; readers choose from among those meanings.

Seemingly unable or unwilling to let the now-deceased Charles rest with what were thought to be his last words, *Eikonoklastes* argues with the King’s book within weeks of its publication, and of the King’s death. With this response, the 1640s combination of antagonistic democratic politics and hermeneutics reaches its most violent combination, from which, I would argue, what is called literary criticism later recoils. It suggests that the issue in the democratized publishing in the 1640s is not uncontrolled writing, but uncontrolled *reading*. Beginning with the comparative democratizing of English political life made possible by the (topical) press, the 1640s end with the violence of Charles’ execution; that violence later becomes associated with the popular press and the kinds of empowered reading advocated in the 1640s. In *The Poetics of Knowledge*, Jacques Rancière argues that “the modern revolution, whose birth Hobbes is witnessing, could be defined as follows: the revolution of the children of the book” (1994, 20). More than merely witnessing it, however, Hobbes provides terms through which the civil wars are subsequently debated. Indeed, it could be argued that Hobbes makes the most thorough exposition of the 1640s as a revolution of the book (as opposed to monarchy, or religious difference).

Published in 1651, two years after the execution of Charles I, Hobbes’s *Leviathan* provides the earliest comprehensive analysis of how print culture of the 1640s contributed to the Civil War. In a sense, it is Hobbes who begins to make the distinction between the reading of the 1640s and the reading that would be preferred after it. In the process, *Leviathan* provides an analysis of the civil war that lays the groundwork for what is later known as criticism.
As far as Hobbes is concerned, the problem is precisely what Milton, Coppe, and others, considered to be the ideal possibility of the 1640s: radically democratizing the reading of books, or what Hobbes calls in *Behemoth* (published after *Leviathan*) “the enemies which arose against his Majesty from the private interpretation of the Scripture, exposed to every man’s scanning in his mother tongue” (1969, 3). On the one hand, Hobbes is concerned with particular types of books; he mentions “books of Policy, and histories of the antient Greeks, and Romans” (1991, 226). Hobbes is concerned with the literature of democratic political philosophy, books which defend what Hobbes calls “the vertue of their popular forme of government” (226). Reading these books is dangerous because they emphasize the equality that government is designed to address, as far as Hobbes is concerned. But on the other hand, Hobbes is also concerned about the politics of reading generally, whether the books are concerned with democratic political philosophy or not: “Wisedome is acquired, not by reading of Books” (10). If in the previous case, Hobbes’s objection focuses on the particular political leanings of certain books, here the issue is one of epistemology, having to do with the uncertainty built into the activity of reading.

Believing that “the Actions of Men proceed from their Opinions,” Hobbes argues that “in the well governing of Opinions, consisteth the well governing of mens Actions, in order to their Peace, and Concord” (1991, 124). Words, being liable to what Hobbes calls “abuse,” require a strong, centralized mechanism to enforce their meaning. Arguing that “Covenants without the Sword, are but Words, without the strength to secure a man at all” (117), Hobbes proposes that the sovereign settle interpretative differences. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes argues that it should be “annexed to the Soveraignty, to be Judge of what Opinions and Doctrines are averse, and what conducing to Peace; and consequently, on what occasions, how farre, and what, men are to be trusted withall, in speaking to Multitudes of people; and who shall examine the Doctrines of all books before they be published” (124). In a sense, the equality between humans and the inequality between humans and words require instituting a similar inequality between humans, putting an individual in the same relation to other people that people have to words. That way, not only can interpretative differences be settled, but a deciding interpretation enforced. Sharon Achinstein calls Hobbes’s invention that supposedly “resolves the epistemological and political difficulties of the multiplicity of languages” a “lexarch” (1994, 74). But it is not difficult to see the critics as playing the same role, with the important differences that they review the books after publication and not necessarily with Court approval.

After the Restoration, a Hobbesian consensus emerges that the press and even words themselves should be held accountable for what happened dur-
ing the Civil Wars (Sharpe 2000, 336). The well-known explanation for the English Civil Wars offered by Samuel Butler’s *Hudibras* (1662)—“hard words, *Jealousies* and *Fears,* / Set Folks together by the ears”—reflects the influence of Hobbes’s earlier analysis of the role of words in contributing to the upheavals of the 1640s (Butler 1967, l. 3-4). And, as others have noted, modern English literary criticism emerges after the Restoration—not immediately, of course; the process unfolds over the next century. Nor does it emerge in the Restoration in the generic form of the prose essay which readers today associate with criticism. Nonetheless, there is, starting in the 1660s, a new development in the treatment of texts—a debate over other, contemporary textual productions. Less often considered, however, is why it is only after the Restoration that we should have literary criticism. At issue in the question is whether literary criticism is part of the Restoration’s concern over words and reading. If so, then implicit in the accepted chronology of criticism’s post-Restoration emergence is the possibility that its origins as part of the Restoration settlement affect its trajectory and its methods. Noting that the Act of Indemnity Oblivion banned “any words of reproach tending to revive the memory of the late differences” (Norbrook 1999, 1), others have established that it officially committed England to a “willed forgetfulness” and “political discourse that was palliative and normalizing,” despite the political crises that recur at least through the end of the century. The question is whether something is lost or gained to modern literary criticism for its having originated during this palliative period of “political quiescence” (Zwicker 1984, 9-10).

In the 1660s, The Royal Society proposes a model of science which it describes as different than and maybe opposed to the trouble associated with words. Particularly important in the Restoration development of a science of textuality is Robert Hooke’s *Micrographia* (1665), which celebrates the king’s “happy Restauration” with various observations the author performs with a microscope. In the first, Hooke chooses a tiny-hand written book, which “in the breadth of a two-pence comprised the Lord’s prayer, the Apostles’ Creed, the Ten Commandments, and about half a dozen verses besides of the Bible” (1661, A1-A2). In the process, Hooke discovers “of what pitiful bungling scribbles and scrawls it was composed.” Seen under the microscope, nothing less than the Bible itself appeared “like a great splatch of London dirt” (A1-A2). Thus Hooke treats as empirical and technological what readers in the 1640s saw as metaphysical and linguistic: the ability to see the invisible in the visible sign. Under the microscope, what is invisible in the letters of the Bible is not an abstract, spiritual, metaphysical meaning; rather, what we could not before see is how “smutty” and dirty these texts really are. For Hooke, texts represent the man-made in general; in their dirty irregularities they show
"the dangers in the process of human reason, the remedies of them all can only proceed from the real, the mechanical, the experimental philosophy" (3-4). Hooke advocates turning to science because it is simpler, cleaner, and more beautiful than studying texts.

Thomas Sprat's well-known History of the Royal Society, published two years after Hooke's Micrographia, takes up Hooke's Hobbesian point, complaining "Who can behold, without indignation, how many mists and uncertainties, these specious tropes and figures have brought on our Knowledge?" According to Sprat, it is the Royal Society's "constant Resolution, to reject all the amplifications, digressions, and swellings of style." Although it is not clear how the phrase "swellings of style" is not itself a swelling of style, Sprat nonetheless argues that Society aims "to return back to the primitive purity, and shortness, when men deliver'd so many things, almost in an equal numbers of words." Crystallizing correspondence theory, Sprat argues that there would or should be one word for every thing, a one-to-one correspondence between word and object. In the context of his many references to (the) Civil War, this wished-for clarity is more than linguistic; it is related to his wish for the clarity that did not exist during the verbose days before the "happy restoration of the Kingdom's peace." Sprat calls his correspondence theory "Mathematical plainness" (1958, 112, 113, 54). Insofar as Sprat is proposing a one-to-one relationship between words and things, his mathematical principle is relatively simple, if not plain, itself. With every thing having one word, the symmetry between words and things concerns addition of whole numbers; there is no room for fractions, and as there are an infinite number of things, there will be an infinite number of words. But it will be clear. In order to "so many things" "deliver'd ... almost in an equal number of words" (113) there cannot, for instance, be either variables or functions.

In 1668, John Wilkins's An Essay Towards a Real Character, and a Philosophical Language goes further than Sprat. In his table of knowledge, Wilkins distinguishes between "spiritual actions" and "corporeal actions." Under spiritual actions, Wilkins places "Understanding," "Thinking," and "Deliberating," under corporeal, "drowsiness," "sleeping," "itching," "scratching," etc. On the side of corporeal actions, though, Wilkins also includes "reading," "spelling," "writing," and "printing" (1668, 225, 233, 227, 228, 234, 235). As far as Wilkins is concerned, reading and thinking are now different things. Wilkins makes reading and writing corporeal actions, so soon after they had been quintessentially spiritual actions. While it may be that Wilkins does not understand spiritual in the religious sense of the word, it is nonetheless the case that his table moves reading away from an alignment with understanding, thinking, and deliberating. Whether these activities should be different or have demonstrated themselves to be so recently is not addressed
by the table. With reading unrelated to understanding, it is instead on the
same side of such activities as sleeping, itching, and scratching. Although
there are also other actions included in the corporeal side of the table, it is
nonetheless that on adjoining pages reading should be so closely paired with
these particularly inattentive forms of corporeal activity.

In “Religio Laici” (1682), John Dryden articulates what he calls “a
kinder and more mollified” (1972, 101) model of interpretation, one that has
absorbed lessons about language put forward by the Royal Society earlier in
the Restoration. The result is, as David Haley describes it, “Dryden’s fullest
comment on hermeneutics” (1997, 81). Like Hooke, Dryden seems to think
that looking too closely at the text will only diminish its beauty. Like Sprat,
he is concerned not only that tropes and figures can interfere with knowl-
dge, but more importantly that exploring the implications of those tropes
will only add to the confusion. And like Wilkins, Dryden proposes a form of
reading involving markedly less intellectual activity. For Dryden, the Civil
Wars result from the modes of reading proposed not only by some in the
1640s, but also by the Reformation itself: “the Seeds were sown in the time
of Queen Elizabeth, the bloody Harvest ripened in the Reign of King Charles
the Martyr: and, because all the Sheaves could not be carried off without shed-
ding some of the loose Grains, another Crop is too like to follow” (1972, 107).

The problem, as Dryden describes it in “Religio Laici,” is that on the one
hand people should be provided access but that on the other they should not
thereby produce unusual readings of the text to which they now have access.
Dryden solves this dilemma in the most straightforward way possible: he says
that when confronted with an obscure passage, readers should not trouble
themselves with what they think its meaning might be. It is an elegantly sim-
ple solution, but the surprise is that Dryden’s response shuts down the inter-
pretive possibilities implicit in so many people reading the book themselves.
If people were to read as Dryden suggests, there would be no need for such
a range of interpretation. As he puts it, “The Scriptures, though not every
where / Free from Corruption, or, intire, or clear, / Are uncorrupt, sufficient,
clear, intire, / In all things which our needfull Faith require” (1972, 297-300).
This clarity would be fine, except that even Dryden says it only applies to
those things which he believes Faith requires. In other words, Dryden con-
cedes that there are passages in The Bible which might not be clear, sufficient
and entire. For those places, Dryden argues “whatever is obscure is conclud-
ed not necessary to be known” (96). That is, Dryden’s solution to the prob-
lem of wanting people to have access to the Bible and also wanting them not
to make outrageous claims as a consequence is to assume that the obscure
sections essentially should not be read: “I have left myself no right to inter-
pret obscure places” (102). Rather than proposing some new model of liter-
al reading as an alternative to the models of reading associated with the upheaval of the 1640s, Dryden instead forecloses reading itself.

In *Forming the Critical Mind*, James Engell points out that “whenever we read an eighteenth-century critic, we are reading Dryden as well” (1989, 43). However, that means that whenever we read an eighteenth-century critic we are reading Dryden’s influential decision to make interpretation a problem. We are reading, of course, a rejection of the kind of reading associated with the 1640s. More importantly for literary criticism, though, applying Dryden’s principle from “Religio Laici” to avoid whatever is obscure on the grounds that it need not be known to texts other than *The Bible* would mean avoiding the very elements of texts most closely associated with the literary. Literary texts do not have a monopoly on such elements; they can, as we have seen, be found even in Sprat’s flamboyant description of how he circumvents them. But literature, perhaps especially after science’s attempt to separate itself from rhetoric, is thought to pay more attention to these elements, just as some texts are thought to highlight or invite such attention. As part of a Restoration settlement, Dryden and others have important reasons for proposing these models of reading, but it would be unfortunate not to examine whether those reasons are relatively local and historical, or to assume that an avoidance of the obscure such as that proposed provides a foundation for the study of literature.

Whenever we read an eighteenth-century critic, though, we are also reading Locke, whose work combines Sprat’s complaint regarding the use of figurative language with Dryden’s concern about interpreting it. By describing words as “having naturally no signification,” Locke articulates the predicament in which language finds itself after the execution of the King, and after Hobbes’s analysis of what the execution does to meaning: “nobody [has] an authority to establish the precise signification of words.” However, for Locke, unlike Hobbes, Sprat or Dryden, language is simply functional: “when a man speaks to another, it is that he may be understood.” More precisely, Locke turns language into an instrument of exchange: “words must be learned and retained by those who would exchange thoughts” (1965, ii.77, 79, 111). Conventional, without an authority to establish precise signification, and facilitating exchange, words as Locke describes them are like coins. Thus, Locke’s work has the advantage of making it possible to convert meaning into value, an implication Steele explores in *The Spectator*: “Words are like money; and when the current value of them is generally understood, no Man is cheated by them” (1965, i.431). For Addison and Steele, then, criticism’s job is clear. If, according to Gresham’s Law, worse coins circulate more, while coins with a high percentage of metal will be hoarded, the tension in criticism after Locke will be in distinguishing cause and effect: does wide circu-
lation indicate that a work is of a baser metal? Conversely, if a work is hoarded, does that mean that it is made of better metal? As the quantities of money and texts coincidentally increase in the seventeenth century, the value of books could easily have dropped, along with their price. If writing with mere exchange value is worth less than that with what Locke calls "overplus" (1988, 302), then Locke's argument leads to Literature's powerful—albeit precarious—position on the outside, as supplement, as superficial, and as surplus.

Once words are like money in having exchange rather than intrinsic or use value, then they are already operating on something like a market model. Using James Thompson's description of the early eighteenth-century "reconceptualization of money from treasure to capital" (1996, 2), it could be said that prior to Locke's reconceptualization of words as money, meaning had been a kind of treasure, something implicit that could be extracted from a word; after it, however, meaning is like capital, always changing, and meaningful only insofar as it is in circulation. But a special, privileged, central market for words—something like the Royal Exchange—is needed so that people representative of the literary market can determine value or meaning for the market system as a whole. In Steele's terms, noted above, "when the current Value of [words] is generally understood, no Man is cheated by them" (1965, i.431). This possibility of being "cheated" by words follows from the analogy between words and money. Describing meaning as value not only puts it squarely in the market, but casts it instead as a form of accountancy, exactly the image Steele uses for it. When the words from the "hollow kind of conversation" are "being brought into the accompt," it can be seen, Steele claims, that "they are meer Cyphers." In other words, when meaning is treated as value, then words can be brought into an "accompt" that will reveal which words are valuable and which are simply excess verbiage. And Steele significantly describes such excess verbiage as "driving a Trade of dissimulation" (i.431). Understood thus in terms of trade—in terms of value rather than in terms of meaning—some excessive words create an inflated sense of value, and increase the risk or volatility for the market as a whole. Thus, when thought of in terms of market exchange, words, like money, require a speculative spectator, who can determine what words mean, or perhaps more importantly, what they are worth.

Although the market seems to provide a model of regulating exchange, it cannot in itself address the journals' persistent concern with excess, or what Spectator 135 calls "superfluous Syllables" (Steele 1965, ii.134). In 1721, Nathaniel Bailey's Universal Etymological English Dictionary, defines "to read" as "to guess, to divine, or foretel" (1721). In other words, even at this late date in a debate over theories of reading that includes many other contributions besides those I have reviewed here, reading is still associated with the mysti-
cal; it is seen as both religious and irrational. The concern, consequently, is and has been to find a way of reading that could lessen the guesswork. There is then a turn toward rules and method to stabilize what had sometimes been thought of as mere prophecy. Perhaps the participant most important in this shift is Alexander Pope, who asks in his Essay on Criticism how one should read in the light of such guidelines, or how “a perfect Judge will read each Work of Wit” (1963, 233). Pope offers two suggestions. In the first case, the reader is told to read “With the same Spirit that its Author writ” (233–34). In essence, a reader should imagine what the writer might have been thinking. Rather than exploring implications, evaluating a text’s arguments, or finding meaning, readers should instead give up their resistance and try their best to “channel” the spirit of the author. In a way, Pope here is reworking Dryden’s earlier claim from Religio Laici that readers should simply not read passages they find obscure. In Pope’s case, it would seem that readers are to assume that they understand the author; confusing passages would need to be discounted. Pope’s second suggestion is meant to take care of this problem. Making an analogy between the text and a “well-proportion’d Dome” (247), Pope claims that “No single Parts unequally surprize; / All comes united to th’ admiring Eyes; / No monstrous Height, or Breadth, or Length appear; / The Whole at once is Bold, and Regular” (249–52). A rule-based text will alleviate the possibility of a reader misunderstanding an author, because the regularity of the text, like the regularity of the dome, will facilitate direct communication.

With the analogy between the text and the dome Pope contributes a new possibility to the debate over theories of reading. In order to reflect the natural order, the dome and the text must be “united,” “at once Bold and Regular,” and with “no single Parts” (1963, 250, 252, 249). In its regularity, the dome is a model for Pope’s ideal relationship to nature. And in the refusal of the “single parts,” Pope participates in the anti-tropological discussion that we have traced, at least from Sprat’s Royal Society to The Spectator. Sprat’s “metaphors” (and Addison’s puns and anagrams) are “single parts” that, to their mind, stand out unnecessarily. Insofar as Pope is considering the reader or reading in the analogy, though, the argument is that readers should not focus on the single parts; texts might have metaphors, anagrams, or puns, but the good reader will overlook them, and in the process intuit what the author intended, despite the metaphors, anagrams, or puns: “Survey the whole, nor seek slight faults to find” (235).

This idea of reading as surveying is a new development in early English literary criticism’s debate over theories of reading. It will prove to be an influential contribution. The idea of surveying insists on the visual connection implicit in our response to a dome or a text. Moreover, surveying the
whole is a particular way of seeing. On the one hand, because it means taking in the entire object in one view, surveying requires a certain distance from the thing viewed. Surveying gives the reader some distance. By proposing surveying as a metaphor for reading, Pope actually provides a way of reconsidering the persistent concern over democratized reading; after Pope’s surveying, it appears that the fear has been that readers cannot get enough distance from their reading. But as an engineering term, surveying also adds an aspect of measuring a landscape at a single, perspectival view. Like nature as Pope described it, surveying “fix’d the Limits fit” (1963, 52); surveying helps to set standards. In other words, treating reading as surveying offers the possibility of reading methodized.

Hume’s “Of the Standard of Taste” reflects the influence of Pope’s contribution. Concerned that people have come to see reading as a mere “amusement, and to reject every thing that requires any considerable degree of attention to be comprehended,” as he complains at the beginning of the Third Book of the Treatise (1984, 508), Hume proposes a reading process composed of two principle parts, perusing and surveying. “It will even be requisite,” according to Hume, “that that very individual performance be more than once perused by us, and be surveyed in different lights with attention and deliberation” (1987, 238). The first activity involves the acquisition of information from the page, the second a subsequent process of evaluation and comparison. In part the distinction between what Hume considers the two basic types of reading—perusing and surveying—is a temporal one; the first reading (the perusing), takes less time than the second (the surveying): “There is a flutter or hurry of thought which attends the first perusal of any piece” (1987, 238). However, as the hurry or flutter of that first perusal “confounds the genuine sentiment of beauty” (238), apprehending the beauty of the text requires surveying. In perusing, “the relation of parts is not discerned: The true characters of style are little distinguished: the Several perfections and defects seem wrapped up in a species of confusion” (238). In short, surveying entails reflection, looking back on the text, moving beyond the experience of having read it. At the same time, although the difference between the perusal and the survey is temporal—the quicker perusal preceding the lengthier survey—surveying is understood spatially, as the word implies. To survey involves stepping back and getting a sense of scale. By taking the longer view, surveying establishes relationships: “every work of art, in order to produce its effect on the mind, must be surveyed in a certain point of view” (239). As the more evaluative reading, surveying is for Hume the more important of the two types.

In recounting the life of Joseph Addison, Samuel Johnson argues that
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 declamations, 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. (Johnson 1950, i.335)

As recipients of a "Romantic" 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 we still associate with its early history in England: Addison, Steele, and Johnson himself, of course. For in the current history of criticism, these figures are seen as struggling heroically to create a public sphere that protects democratic free expression. Johnson, though, sees these canonical figures of literary criticism 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 by contrast commits literature to a politics of depoliticizing. He places Addison and Steele in a lineage that is said to direct attention away from political concerns repeatedly. By not seeing literary criticism, as Johnson does, replaying the Restoration, 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. Samuel Johnson's point about criticism's cooling effect may not fit with Habermas's public sphere model of criticism, but it is consistent with Žižek's story of political philosophy disavowing democracy.

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It is often noted that criticism emerges at the same time as one of Europe's first modern democracies, and as a new consumer culture spreads literacy and books to an unprecedented number of people in England. As a consequence, a series of important associations have 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. It is a heroic story: criticism wrests power from a governing aristocracy, using only the "critical reasoning of private persons on political issues" (Habermas 1989, 29). When looked at through the definitions of reading proffered in the emergence of criticism, a different story emerges, one that reveals the degree to which criticism is concerned about an increasingly accessible print culture. Where Habermas sees literature as the model for
openness needed for democracy to imagine itself, this approach instead sees literary critics debating the possibilities for and the consequences of such openness. Where Habermas sees the eighteenth century as contributing to the rise of the modern, rational public sphere, this approach instead traces a contest over democracies, plural.

What this approach reveals, then, is the connections between the debate in early English literary criticism over models of reading and the period’s debate in political philosophy over “models of democracy” (Held 1987). As literacy moves from a “participatory” model of the 1640s pamphleteering, to a “republican” idea proposed by Milton, to a “representative” democracy articulated by Addison and Steele, to a “procedural” approach hinted at by Hume, we can trace a constitution of literature, in several senses. The modern study of literature is “constituted” in the eighteenth century, in the sense of being created, constructed, or instituted. Moreover, this new institution of literature, especially in its critical capacity, contributes to the “constitution” of democracy, again, in the sense of creating or constructing. For the “public sphere” model, literature, as a commitment to open, public participation, helps to draft the modern democratic constitution itself, in the sense of a founding document, specifically legitimating freedom of expression. However, what is overlooked in the public sphere model is that modern democracies are constituted through a debate over different models of democracy, debates which occur in literary criticism, even as critics offer their theories of reading. For literature is also being constituted as a modern institution at the same time. Just as modern democracy is gaining new, written constitutions (e.g., in the United States), English literature is also acquiring its constitution, in the sense of its procedures, principles, and precedents. After all, the eighteenth-century’s most important literary critic, Samuel Johnson, relies on precisely this constitutional analogy in the Preface to his Dictionary: “we have long preserved our constitution, let us make some struggles for our language” (1984, 327).

A new approach that focuses on theories of reading in early literary criticism can highlight how criticism develops in response to historical, political, social, and technological conditions, having to do with the related questions of how the press was used politically, and how individuals read printed materials. By 1764, Edward Gibbon could describe Horace as “a legislator in criticism” (1764, 64), a phrase which could be read as meaning both that Horace set the rules for criticism and that by the second half of the eighteenth century critics saw themselves as the acknowledged legislators of the world. In any case, it is not clear that we have here the vaunted openness of an emerging public sphere. For example, in 1744, when one Philip Skelton makes the connection between politics and books—“as in a well-regulated
Commonwealth . . . so in one of Books”—he also feels the needs to assert “as we freely live, let us freely read” (1744, 2). His claim suggests a sense that reading is not freely allowed in either commonwealth. Rather than either the accessibility of the press or any particular type of text, it is Skelton’s idea of simply letting everyone read unimpeded that is rejected by criticism in this debate over democratized reading.

Notes

1 I have written a fuller, book-length exposition of these ideas, The Constitution of Literature: Literacy, Democracy, and Early English Literary Criticism (unpublished), from which this essay is adapted. Research for this project was conducted at the Newberry Library, which awarded me a Short-Term Fellowship, for which I thank them.

2 In Forming the Critical Mind, James Engell argues that “criticism, exercised on such a massive scale, ranks with the novel as the most significant ‘new’ mode of writing to enrich English literature between the Restoration of Charles II and the death of George III” (1989, 2).

3 Peter Uwe Hohendahl argues that “In the Age of the Enlightenment the concept of criticism cannot be separated from the institution of the public sphere” (1982, 53).

4 For Terry Eagleton, “Modern European criticism was born of a struggle against the absolutist state” (1984, 9).

5 James Engell follows Habermas in arguing that “The coffeehouses or ‘penny universities’ serve as critical dens and switchboards” (1989, 3).

6 Nigel Smith and others have reconsidered Civil-War-era pamphlets, moving the emergence of a contestatory public sphere back to the mid-seventeenth century. Rather than the openness predicted by the public sphere model, however, the new, relatively democratic access to the press in the 1640s results instead in nearly inescrutable texts and sophisticated hermeneutic theories to accompany them. See Smith (1989, 1994), Halasz (1997), and Zaret (2000). J.C.D. Clark recounts the persistence of an ancien regime, a confessional state in which religious affiliation and genealogical rank were more important than open participation in policy debates (2000). And political philosophers point out that Habermas prioritizes one particular model of democracy over others; his insistence on rationality and a preference for proceduralism structure a public sphere that—if democratic—would be amorphous, it is argued.

7 According to James Raven, Helen Small, and Naomi Tadnor’s “Introduction” to the Practice and Representation of Reading in England, “by comparison with the 400 or so surviving books known to have been published in England in the first decade of the sixteenth century, about 6,000 were published during the 1630s, almost 21,000 during the 1710s, and more than 56,000 titles in the 1790s” (1996, 5).

8 In The Nature of the Book, Adrian Johns addresses the familiar correlation between print and textual stability, arguing that it is not the printing of books per se that creates a new sense of their stability. Johns contends that “the roots of textual stability may be sought as much in these practices as in the press itself” (1998, 5–6).
In this essay, I treat the debates over theories of reading in early literary criticism as one of those practices.

9 See also a revised version of this argument published as “The Political and Its Disavowals,” in Žižek (1999, 187-244).


11 According to John R. Knott, Jr., “The matter of [Eikôn Basilike’s] authorship was not resolved in Milton’s day. It appears now that John Gauden, then Dean of Bocking in Essex and subsequently a bishop, worked from writings of Charles in fashioning the book and smuggled a draft to Charles in Carisbrooke Castle for revision and approval” (1990, 160).

12 On the “Romantic” history of literary criticism, see Siskin (1988), and Patey (1997, 8).

13 See John Brewer, The Pleasures of the Imagination, especially chapters 3 and 4, on “Authors, Publishers and the Making of Literary Culture,” and “Readers and the Reading Public.” There, Brewer notes “Not everyone was a reader, but even those who could not read lived to an unprecedented degree in a culture of print” (1997, 187). On print in consumer culture, see Brewer and Porter, especially Parts IV and V, on “Literacy and numeracy” and “The Consumption of culture: books and newspapers” (1993, 305-436); on eighteenth-century consumer culture generally, also see Campbell (1987), and McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb (1982).

14 In James Engell’s terms, “the critical mind” was formed during the long eighteenth century (1989).

15 For Habermas, “in the institution of art criticism, including literary, theater, and music criticism, the lay judgment of a public that had come of age, or at least thought it had, became organized” (1989, 41).


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