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Review of Lee Morrissey, *The Constitution of Literature: Literacy, Democracy, and Early English Literary Criticism*.

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Lee Morrissey, *The Constitution of Literature: Literacy, Democracy, and Early English Literary Criticism*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008. 242 pp (+ xiii) ISBN 9780804757860.

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The Resistance to Criticism

One of the biggest obstacles faced by the historian of literary criticism is the persistent suspicion of its marginal status, the unquestioned assumption that the real action of literary history is always taking place somewhere else. In this view, a history of literary criticism has exactly as much appeal as a history of baseball's most celebrated umpires. And this dismissive view of criticism is shared not just by the general public and so-called "creative writers," but often by literary critics themselves, who will publish accounts of literary works as if other critics, their institutions, and all the other histories and contexts of reading and interpretation hardly mattered at all. This "resistance to criticism"--meaning the continual denunciation or disavowal of literary criticism--occurs whenever we focus exclusively on the origins of literary production, without any concomitant attention to the subsequent historical trajectory of a literary work's reception: how it was received, read, remembered, or reproduced alongside other works in their respective social, cultural, and institutional settings. This narrowing of focus to the biographical or productive side has the effect of making the entire field of criticism disappear from view, or, better yet, making readers *wish* it would disappear. Criticism as an institution, once it is concealed from view, allows readers, including other critics, to sustain the illusion of an unbroken, *unmediated* contact with an author and work that they would otherwise have to locate and evaluate for themselves. For this reason, the narrator of *A Tale of a Tub* generously suggests that "every true critic, as soon as he had finished his task assigned, should immediately deliver himself up to ratsbane, or hemp, or leap from some convenient altitude," to demonstrate the truly heroic character of his calling. So the history of literary criticism is to some extent also a history of mediation, a mediation that perennially seems to be on the verge of vanishing. [1]

Though Swift's solution to the problem seems a bit literal-minded, recent developments have left many in the academy wondering whether literary criticism really has gone over the cliff in recent years. In a variety of professional and lay forums, the liberal arts' ongoing role in the corporatized, science-driven, entrepreneurial university of the future continues to be anxiously debated among humanities scholars. At the same time, in the aftermath of the Canon Wars of the '80s and '90s, the cultural function of the professional literary critic seems more and more like a byproduct of a print culture whose mediating functions are now giving way to newer, more decentralized and dispersed forms of communication and authority. [2] In this respect, the dwindling prospects of humanities scholarship seem to confirm literary scholars' worst fears about their increasing marginalization and diminishing cultural authority. I would argue, however, that in the wake of all these predictions of the death of criticism, a history of its emergence becomes that much more timely, and indeed, necessary.

At such a moment of perceived crisis, Lee Morrissey's *Constitution of Literature* takes a decidedly different tone and approach. Morrissey responds to English-language criticism's present sense of lost purpose by revealing its contingent origins in an earlier moment of political

crisis, the period of the English Civil Wars and Interregnum (1642-1660). This helps him reveal literary criticism's constitutive entanglements in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English debates over democratic participation in political life. Though this pairing of literature and democracy may initially seem arbitrary, Morrissey soon shows that bracketing them in this way allows us to understand their affinities better, so that we may analyze their mutual *constitution* (meaning their establishment, organization, and demarcation) during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Morrissey's pairing of democracy and literature derives from two distinct views of the historical Enlightenment and its political and aesthetic legacies in the present: those of Jacques Derrida and Jurgen Habermas. The starting-point of Morrissey's entire inquiry is Derrida's suggestive observation, "no democracy without literature, no literature without democracy" (ix). As Morrissey notes, the rest of his book will serve as a historical "gloss" on this remark, and will use the example of English literary criticism to instantiate the "revolution in law and politics" that left these two fields "profoundly connected." Morrissey narrates the early history of Anglo-British literary criticism as a series of stabilizing responses to the originary trauma of the English Civil War, the "revolution in law and politics" that introduced an unprecedented degree of popular participation in political discussion. According to Morrissey, the response to this fundamental rupture in the sources of political and cultural legitimation was a retrospective redefinition of the reading and writing practices that helped to produce the rupture in the first place. This rupture helped to introduce "reason" itself into religious and other discourses as a potent new source of legitimation.

At the same time, these newly "critical" and "reasonable" reading and writing practices, once reconfigured, became the basis for the now-differentiated and stabilized sphere known as "literature" (x). Thus, Morrissey argues that the stresses and demands created by these new and potentially more open forms of participation in public discussion helped to generate new forms of both reading and writing, which were designed in turn to organize, shape, and direct a more predictable and domesticated public opinion away from open political conflict and toward more "productive" (i.e., depoliticized) forms of discussion. A revolutionary moment of open participation gave way to a long process of retrospective stabilization of interpretive disagreement designed to prevent the recurrence of revolution. Through this hydraulic scenario of discussion redirected away from open political conflict, and into new, more temperate channels, Morrissey discovers some seventeenth- and eighteenth-century versions of the "public sphere."

Obviously, the other major theorist presiding over this book is Jurgen Habermas, whose *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* provides a key metaphor for this and other accounts of the important role of literary criticism for the political, cultural, and associational life of this period. In his classic account, Habermas leans very heavily on the notion that "in the constitution 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," and therefore capable of providing a model for new forms of participation in a political public (quoted by Morrissey, 87). In this respect, Habermas and Derrida do indeed share some common ground in their view of the mutual co-implication of literature and democracy. At the same time, Habermas's *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* famously denounced Derrida and other poststructuralists

for acting as a group of "new conservatives" eager to abandon Enlightenment reason for the aesthetic pleasures of Nietzschean irrationalism or religious "mysticism." Habermas wishes to defend a far more robustly normative and trans-historical notion of philosophical reason than Derrida (or Morrissey). Morrissey notes, however, how the polemical dimension of Habermas's *Philosophical Discourse* leads to an anachronistically secularized, over-idealized view of the historical Enlightenment it would celebrate, and offers an unconvincing view of Nietzsche, Derrida, and other post-structuralists as mere "irrationalists" (12-13). Morrissey is understandably keen to preempt these kinds of dismissive readings of the poststructuralists, and therefore targets the most vulnerable aspects of Habermas's public sphere model to disarm them. Whether or not these vulnerabilities belong to Habermas's own account, or to its numerous Anglophone readers and adapters, however, is a question that Morrissey does not really address.

Morrissey observes at the outset the suspiciously self-congratulatory nature of many of the literary histories derived from Habermas's notion of the public sphere, which often posit a heroically oppositional role for critics and criticism in the politics of early- to mid-eighteenth century England (2). By focusing chiefly on the role of literature and literary critics in his influential work, Habermas's literary followers are not misrepresenting his argument, but they are simplifying it to the extent that other economic, cultural, and political factors began to disappear from view in their retellings. Habermas himself unwittingly reinforced this self-serving narrative of disciplinary origins when he celebrated the critics of Addison's era for "engag[ing the governing aristocracy] in debate over the general rules governing relations," thereby crediting them indirectly for the emergence of an autonomous "public sphere" in the early part of the eighteenth century. To counter this narrative of criticism's origins in the anti-absolutism of England's literary and political Opposition, Morrissey emphasizes instead the reactive and regulatory dimensions of literary criticism, its investments in irrationality and depoliticization, and its role in the partitioning off of popular opinion from real, consequential decision-making in the realm of politics. Thus, rather than a steady, continuous "rise of the public sphere" leading, in Terry Eagleton's words, to "a distinct discursive space, one of rational judgment and enlightened critique" (182), Morrissey describes a rather more discontinuous succession of gestures toward "stabilization," "reconceptualization," or, significantly, "Restoration," designed to undo the traumatic openness and contingency of radical democracy and open political conflict (180). (Morrissey's revisionist reading, however, belongs more properly to Eagleton's whiggish historical narrative than to Habermas's own, rather discontinuous account that slights the Civil Wars and the Restoration.)

In Morrissey's account, however, the open-endedness of post-Interregnum political narratives is signified not merely by the traumatically reenacted memory of the King's execution, but by the final major term in Morrissey's account of criticism: the figure of *reading*. For Morrissey, *reading* in its active, unregulated, democratically accessible, openly politicized forms made the traumatic events of the Civil War possible, and consequently helped to provoke in its turn the constitution of literature. The literary realm (along with its preference for intensive over extensive reading) helped first English and ultimately British society to bridge the discontinuities of open civil conflict, and helped constitute forms of reading and writing capable of anticipating and defusing similar conflicts in advance.

By focusing on its founding moment of crisis, Morrissey can describe how literary criticism's broader purposes go well beyond its subordination to the writing it conveys to the public. In fact, this founding crisis helps shape its more enduring selective function as an institutional mediator that makes the ever-increasing volume of published writing both accessible and intelligible to an expansive reading public. This crucial role of selecting, mediating, and organizing material on behalf of the public it serves is a function that literary criticism shares with two other features of modern public life: the political party and ideology. [3]

The Constitution of Literature is a remarkably thoughtful and lucid book, which packs a great deal of argument into a series of chapters that move us from the "radical democracy" of the 1640s through Dryden, Addison and Steele, Pope, Hume, and Johnson. Though the selection of critics and topics can sometimes seem a bit self-limiting, the individual readings of these figures are persuasive and they do seem to add up in a way that we rarely see nowadays in contemporary literary criticism. In my opinion, the most valuable insight provided by Morrissey's treatment is his focus on the pivotal role of Hume in this history of unregulated and regulated reading, and the retrospective, synthetic, mutually accommodating forms of rationality explored by Hume in his discussion of taste and governmental institutions, both of which require a "very violent effort" "to change our judgment" (qtd. by Morrissey, 153). This backwards-looking form of rationality seems linked both to Hume's own writing on prejudice and Burke's later call for a form of "sagacity" that would "discover in [prejudices] the latent wisdom which prevails in them." Morrissey's focus on the retrospective direction of literary history's rationalizations seems absolutely pertinent to our recognizing how literary history helped to organize and in some sense conceal some of the most terrifying moments of contingency experienced by seventeenth and eighteenth-century readers and writers. I believe that if anyone were trying to identify the forms of thinking most distinctive of experts in literary studies, it would lie precisely in this capacity for retrospective organization and ordering of materials thematized by Hume and refined by Johnson.

The biggest weaknesses of this book center on the thinness of the contextualizations offered here, though of course their omission helped to make the book as compact as it is. To some extent, the Habermas on view here is essentially Eagleton's strong caricature of the public sphere thesis, without Habermas's own qualifications of the argument in the second half of that work, and without the benefit of several decades of controversy and revision of Habermas (Fraser, Warner, Taylor, et al.) that by now have become standard accompaniments to our rehearsals of Habermas. It also seems odd that a work devoted to the intersections of Derrida and "democracy" is more focused on close readings of familiar texts than on the mechanisms of governance and the manipulation of public opinion for this period. Similarly, after a tantalizing initial discussion of historical practices of reading via Rolf Engelsing (7), this historical framework is not really pursued or elaborated in the remainder of the book, despite the thematic importance of reading throughout. Finally, though the putative focus of this book remains the very general notion of an intensive, literary "reading," which is paired uncritically with a book-centered view of literary history, the absence of extended discussion of unbook-like forms such as newspapers, pamphlets, broadsides, and so forth may limit the usefulness of this book for those interested in how this story might relate to what we already know about the "history of the book" and other printed or ephemeral forms in this period.

In his final chapter, Morrissey discusses how the debates over democratization and the purposes of literature remain crucially "unfinished," though both these social and institutional forms may very well take new, unfamiliar, or even unrecognizable shapes in the future. But Morrissey finds that much of the discussion of the present-day crisis in literary studies, like that of its originating crisis in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, amounts to agitation at the prospect of the new--at the birth of what Derrida himself once described as "the formless, mute, infant, and terrifying form of monstrosity." And, according to Morrissey, literature's most important social and political function might very well be invoking, assessing, defending, but also regulating that sense of the open-ended and the new, which is a constitutive aspect of modernity. As Morrissey observes, "literature's position . . . means that it can postulate new possibilities, beyond what is and what ought to be" (194). But we will not experience these possibilities as possibilities, or postulate this kind of open territory, without the assistance of criticism to tell us where we have been thus far.

Notes

[1] Cf. Clifford Siskin and William Warner. *This Is Enlightenment* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010); Fredric Jameson, "The Vanishing Mediator; or, Max Weber as Storyteller" (1973). In *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays, 1971-1986: The Syntax of History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 3-34.

[2] For an account of how the crisis in academic publishing has been accompanied by a crisis in academic reviewing (reflecting diminished support for both academic presses and the journals that review their publications), see, for example, the Report of the *MLA* Task Force on Evaluating Scholarship for Tenure and Promotion (December 2006/*Profession* 2007). The response to this loss of access to conventional print publication has been an increasing amount of scholarly activity appearing online in the forms of blogs, digital humanities projects, and social networking, among other things. But departmental and university committees often remain uncertain about how to evaluate this kind of scholarship for quality, or assess its impact. See, for example, the *MLA's* Guidelines for Evaluating Work with Digital Media in the Modern Languages, at http://www.mla.org/guidelines_evaluation_digital/

[3] Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).