



PROJECT MUSE®

---

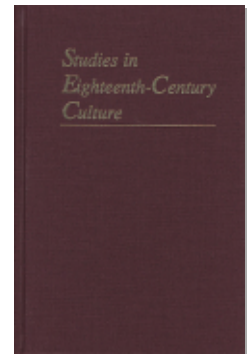
## Liberal Theory and Eighteenth-Century Criticism

David Rosen, Aaron Santesso

Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture, Volume 51, 2022, pp. 1-21 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sec.2022.0004>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/851049>

# Liberal Theory and Eighteenth-Century Criticism

DAVID ROSEN AND AARON SANTESSO

By almost universal consent, professional literary criticism is an invention of the long eighteenth century, while literary *theory*, the systematic, metacritical practice that undergirds a great deal of academic work on literature, has its roots in nineteenth-century hermeneutics. Perhaps this is part of the reason that “high” theory, as it has been called, has often found a cold reception in the bastions of eighteenth-century studies. Although this situation has changed considerably in the last decade or so, even a cursory glance at conference proceedings or the indices of period journals confirms the strong and continuing presence of historicist and archive-focused scholarship. To the extent that theory *has* made inroads, moreover, it has often taken the shape of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, following Silvan Tomkins, has termed “weak theory” (cognitive criticism, “thing theory,” affective criticism, “distant reading,” and the like)—modes, that is, that favor the descriptive and quantitative, in contrast to the aggressively interpretive energies of “strong theory.”<sup>1</sup> In the present-day debate over the merits of “critique” versus “postcritique” (terms that overlap considerably with “strong” and “weak” theory, respectively) eighteenth-century studies has largely, if not exclusively, turned its head towards the latter.<sup>2</sup> Although, as Immanuel Kant put it, “our age is the genuine age of criticism, to which everything must submit,” “critique,” the methodology that Rita Felski and

others have identified as central to most high-theoretical analysis, has long sat uncomfortably with eighteenth-century literary texts.<sup>3</sup> In particular, the subversive, destructive mode of critique that Paul Ricoeur termed the “hermeneutics of suspicion,” a tradition that began with the likes of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Friedrich Schlegel and greatly accelerated with Ricoeur’s three great masters of suspicion—Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud—has always understood and presented itself as an undoing of Enlightenment rationalism and its (supposed) ideological simplicity.

To put it a slightly different way: it might be said that the eighteenth century provided the conditions that made the “hermeneutics of suspicion” necessary. In this view, many of the century’s most notable achievements—the vast spread of empire and of market capitalism, the elaboration of the modern liberal subject, Enlightenment rationalism itself—were only so many masks of power waiting to be peeled off and identified as the epiphenomena of something sinister and brutish, or at the very least unreflectingly naive. It would come as no surprise, then, that the great elaborators of nineteenth-century hermeneutics would be particularly out of sympathy with eighteenth-century texts, both literary and otherwise. Under the best of circumstances, as Sedgwick and Felski (among others) have pointed out, the methodologies of critique have been destructive in their intention and often paranoid (Sedgwick’s term) in their affect, placing

an extraordinary stress on the efficacy of ... knowledge in the form of exposure, [acting] as though its work would be accomplished if only it could finally, this time, somehow get its story fully known. That a fully initiated listener could still remain indifferent or inimical, or might have no help to offer, is hardly treated as a possibility. [This] trust in exposure seemingly depends, in addition, on an infinite reservoir of naivete in those who make up the audience for these unveilings.<sup>4</sup>

To acknowledge, however, that many eighteenth-century authors were complicit, or worse, with the spread of systemic oppressions does not quiet a nagging sense that there may be more interesting, or in any case different, ways to approach period texts—ways that move beyond both suspicious reading and historicist contextualization to treat those texts’ readers (both then and now) as something other than “infinitely” credulous and that bring some nuance to the complex intentionality of those authors.

We might, for example, acknowledge a certain pragmatic side to a great deal of eighteenth-century literature and to a main strand of period reading habits. We might recognize this tradition, too, as being intensely engaged

with liberal thought—to the extent, anyway, that it recognizes all authors, and all readers, as autonomous agents with vastly different ideas about taste, morality, politics, etc., and as therefore requiring certain accommodations and conventions in order to communicate properly. In the discussion that follows, we will attempt to move past what seems to us a false choice for readers of eighteenth-century texts—indeed, though it far exceeds the scope of this essay, we would suggest that this false dichotomy plagues the entire field of literary studies. It is a choice between shooting fish in a barrel (which is what engaging in paranoid reading or “critique,” or embracing those “strong” theories that make use of critique, can often feel like) and submitting to some species of weak theory or postcritique, which can feel like a failure of ambition or form of professional suicide.<sup>5</sup> In doing so, we will suggest that there exists a species of “theory” native to the eighteenth century, or at least implicit in its critical writings, that attains the complexity and consequence of “high” theory, without falling into the usual dichotomies of “strong” and “weak.” In tracing the genealogy of this species of theory, we will further suggest that it indeed originates in early thinking about liberalism—that is, in the work of both John Locke’s followers and his bitter opponents. A conviction that people are not naturally subject to hierarchical authority, but rather are free and equal; a high valuation of individual dignity and autonomy; a contractarian vision of society that revolves around toleration and mutual agreements: if one is to discover a “literary theory” endemic to the eighteenth century, one might expect it to be in conversation with the most intense modal energies of the day.

### The Problem of a Liberal Criticism

Though earlier thinkers (e.g., Sir Philip Sidney) exercised an influence, liberalism during the eighteenth century was largely associated with and derived from Locke—and so the obvious place to look for the origins of a literary theory colored by liberalism would seem to be in the work of critics who actively espoused Lockean principles. In practice, however, this is less straightforward than it sounds—and it turns out that very few politically liberal critics produced anything of the kind. As numerous observers have noted, the line from Locke’s political views, as articulated in the *Second Treatise on Government*, and his aesthetic views (such as they were), as they might be derived from the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, was never direct or obvious—and Locke’s aesthetically inclined followers often struggled to square his Whiggishness with his indifference, or even hostility, towards creative literature.<sup>6</sup> Joseph Addison and Sir Richard Steele, for example, accepted the major aspects of both Locke’s epistemology and his

political philosophy and used their writings to promote these positions, from the celebration of republican resistance to tyranny in Addison's *Cato* and the late statement in *The Free-Holder* on "Civil Liberties, as the natural Rights of Mankind," to the various expositions on empiricism and Lockean language theory in *The Spectator*.<sup>7</sup> It is clear, moreover, that Addison endeavored to understand criticism itself in Lockean terms:

Mr. Lock[e]'s *Essay on Human Understanding* would be thought a very odd book for a man to make himself master of, who would get a reputation by critical writings; though at the same time it is very certain, that an author who has not learned the art of distinguishing between words and things, and of ranging his thoughts, and setting them in proper lights, whatever notions he may have, will lose himself in confusion and obscurity.<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately, the very terms with which Addison conveys his Lockeanism vividly indicate the limited utility of Locke for a serious literary criticism. Invoking the "art of distinguishing between words and things" and stressing the importance of avoiding "confusion and obscurity," Addison recalls Locke's own dim view of literature as such: figurative speech, metaphor, fictive associations, and so on, all belong to the realm of fancy, not the world of real experience, which it is the *philosopher's* task to perceive clearly. In contrast to philosophical language (the topic of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book III), which aims at precision and at drawing fine distinctions, the discourse of poetry and fiction commits rampant "abuses" of language—fine, perhaps, for the purposes of entertainment, but hardly fit to "inform and instruct."<sup>9</sup> To the meager extent that he is interested in them at all, literary taste and aesthetic judgment occupy for Locke a sphere separate from either political theory or epistemology.

This leaves Addison, far more interested in aesthetic questions, in something of a bind. Deriving his political principles from a figure actively hostile towards art (or at best dismissive of it), he is left with, essentially, two recourses. First, Addison helps to establish what becomes a longstanding tradition of politically minded critics (liberal or otherwise) valuing or devaluing literary works in light of the ways in which they pass or fail various ideological litmus tests: political virtue (having the right opinions) matches up remarkably well with literary value. Thus Addison defends John Milton against John Dryden's charge that the kingly, tyrannical "Devil was in reality Milton's Hero"; instead, he argues, "Milton never intended" any hero at all, and this move away from a central focus on a superior, controlling character is part of the poem's "Greatness of Plan."<sup>10</sup> What Addison pointedly does not offer is a vital link between politics and aesthetics: a considered account

of the ways in which an author's political ideology might be relevant to aesthetic judgment and assessments of literary quality. Rather, in helping to pioneer the persona of the critic-grandee, rendering verdicts against those who deviate from acceptable doctrine, Addison stands as a kind of forefather to a whole host of liberal critics—from Leslie Stephen to Lionel Trilling and beyond—who scorn the illiberal without ever, themselves, reading or writing in a liberal manner.

Quite the opposite. The civic values that are Addison's meat and drink in his more political essays—the toleration of different beliefs, the promotion of the rights of the general public, the celebration of individual liberty and equality—fade away in his literary criticism, in which the canons of taste are ultimately aristocratic. When Addison defines taste as a “faculty of the Soul” that is “in some degree born with us,” or when he expresses hostility and contempt toward “Mob Readers,” he is explicitly contradicting both Locke's politics and his empiricism.<sup>11</sup> In contrast to Locke's scorn for those who rely on “the alms-basket” and “live lazily on scraps of begged opinions,” *The Spectator* offers the neoclassical view that criticism must be founded upon received universal standards (“I shall always make Reason, Truth, and Nature the Measures of Praise and Dispraise”), rather than upon the “generality of Opinion.”<sup>12</sup> “A little Wit,” Addison comments, “is equally capable of exposing a Beauty, and of aggravating a Fault, and though such a Treatment of an Author naturally produces Indignation in the Mind of an understanding Reader, it has however its effect among the generality of those whose Hands it falls into, the Rabble of Mankind being very apt to think that every thing which is laughed at with any mixture of Wit, is ridiculous in itself.”<sup>13</sup> Wearing the hat of a Whig apologist, Addison perceives all people to share a common “nature”; speaking as a critic, he perceives the opposite: some are born with the critical faculty, or acquire it through rigorous training, while the great majority never attain it.

For the early professional critics of the Enlightenment, the utility of liberalism was impeded, it seems likely, by the very novelty of their position. Undoubtedly aware of the need to establish and legitimize their authority as critics in a newly open and competitive marketplace, these critics tended, perhaps inevitably, to defend their insights as supported by timeless and inarguable standards; when it comes to questions of taste and value, there's little, ultimately, to distinguish Addison and Steele—or Nicholas Rowe, or William Congreve, for that matter—from many of their Tory counterparts.<sup>14</sup> The idea, therefore, that a liberal politics might actually become the basis for a literary criticism, or cause one to read in certain ways, is never seriously entertained by these writers. For that, ironically, one has to turn to authors of a more conservative stripe.

### Authorial Contracts

When Dryden couched Achitophel's justifications for regicide in the language of contractarianism ("All Empire is no more than Pow'r in Trust"), he was at once attempting to discredit a political philosophy that he found dangerous and quietly acknowledging the extent to which such language had entered the public sphere by the early 1680s.<sup>15</sup> Although it is improbable that Dryden was conversant with Locke's *Second Treatise* when he wrote *Absalom and Achitophel*, he proved surprisingly fluent at articulating the foundations of (what would ultimately become) a liberal politics:

What shall we think! can people give away  
Both for themselves and Sons, their Native sway?  
Then they are left Defensless, to the Sword  
Of each unbounded Arbitrary Lord:  
And Laws are vain, by which we Right enjoy,  
If Kings unquestiond can those laws destroy.  
Yet, if the Crowd be Judge of fit and Just,  
And Kings are only Officers in trust,  
Then this resuming Cov'nant was declar'd  
When Kings were made, or is for ever bar'd:  
If those who gave the Scepter, could not tye  
By their own deed their own Posterity,  
How then could *Adam* bind his future Race? ...  
Then Kings are slaves to those whom they Command,  
And Tenants to their Peoples pleasure stand.  
Add, that the Pow'r for Property allowd,  
Is mischeivously seated in the Crowd:  
For who can be secure of private Right,  
If Sovereign sway may be dissolv'd by might?<sup>16</sup>

For Dryden, the Hobbesian notion that the sovereign might only be an "Officer in trust," holding power at the "People[']s Pleasure," is self-evidently absurd, both an affront to religion (i.e., the absolute power of the Stuarts derived from God) and, paradoxically, itself the violation of a "Cov'nant." Following the logic of Sir Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha*, Dryden conceives of the Adamic "contract" as binding kings to their subjects for all of "Posterity."

One would look in vain, then, to Dryden's poetry and criticism for the political liberalism that Addison derived from Locke. Nevertheless, it is equally clear that the language of covenants and contracts had become common coin by the final decades of the seventeenth century. In Locke's earliest, and least sentimental, framing of his contractarianism, the 1667 *Essay on Toleration*, Locke himself showed little interest in the liberties and

rights that he would later outline in the *Second Treatise*, and which were subsequently associated by Addison and others with political liberalism.<sup>17</sup> Compulsion and prejudice, Locke observed in the *Essay*, would only create more determined enemies, and therefore the “magistrate ought ... to meddle with nothing but barely in order to securing the civil peace and [property] of his subjects.”<sup>18</sup> Contracts, in this early articulation, were little more than a form of deferred aggression: we tolerate and thus form covenants with people of whom we do not necessarily approve, but cannot justify attacking or ignoring—people with whom we need to find a *modus vivendi*. At the risk of compressing a great deal of intellectual history into a few sentences, we would contend that the instrumental agreement between real or potential rivals was the characteristic mode—political and economic, but also in some cases aesthetic—of the period that emerged in the wake of divine-right monarchy, and that even the Stuarts’ staunchest defenders were on some level aware of this development. In the emerging market for literary goods, Dryden seems to recognize, the author would need to strike bargains, tender promises, and reach informal or tacit deals with his or her audience; thus in his *Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire*, Dryden praises Juvenal for the way “he fully satisfies my Expectation” and carefully presents his own satirical work as endeavoring to “give the Publick all the Satisfaction [I am] able in this kind.”<sup>19</sup>

The relation between politics and literary theory, at the turn of the eighteenth century, might be described as chiasmic. If Addison, both a producer and admirer of literary works expressing liberal sentiments, could not articulate (or was not interested in articulating) a vital link between his partisan beliefs and his critical practices, but instead held true to traditional and neoclassical aesthetic values, so writers of a more conservative, often monarchist, political bent, moved in the opposite direction, and spent the period slowly feeling their way into an aesthetic theory grounded in contractualism.<sup>20</sup> This seeming contradiction requires disentangling stances that in later ages would have been more closely bound up with each other—for instance, the notion that writing literature for a broad public, or writing literature of a populist bent, necessarily indicated a favorable view of democracy as such. Or, again, the notion—subsequently the cause of much mischief—that political liberalism and a commitment to the free market, both guided by the logic of the contract, necessarily went hand in hand.<sup>21</sup> Given their political leanings, it is unsurprising that these more conservative writers tended to couch these contracts not in civil but in economic terms—with their prefaces and introductions, in particular, often serving as bills-of-fare.<sup>22</sup> The best known example of such a gesture is arguably the work of a Whig—Fielding’s Introduction to *Tom Jones*, in which he explicitly compares the novelist to an innkeeper:



An Author ought to consider himself, not as a Gentleman who gives a private or eleemosynary Treat, but rather as one who keeps a public Ordinary, at which all Persons are welcome for their Money. In the former Case, it is well known, that the Entertainer provides what Fare he pleases; and tho' this should be very indifferent, and utterly disagreeable to the Taste of his Company, they must not find any Fault; nay, on the contrary, Good-Breeding forces them outwardly to approve and to commend whatever is set before them. Now the contrary of this happens to the Master of an Ordinary. Men who pay for what they eat, will insist on gratifying their Palates, however nice and whimsical these may prove; and if every Thing is not agreeable to their Taste, will challenge a Right to censure, to abuse, and to d—n their Dinner without Controul.<sup>23</sup>

With his first sentence, Fielding casts a somewhat jaundiced eye back towards a patronage system in which authors had no need to make a case for the “Entertainments” they provided, even if those efforts proved “indifferent, and utterly disagreeable to the Taste” of their readers. By contrast, authors now needed to “welcome” all paying customers—and had compelling economic reasons to attract as many of those as possible. However ironic the tone Fielding frequently adopts, his underlying point is serious—and a nervousness about the viability of his writerly enterprise ultimately outweighs any possible satirical intent. The bill-of-fare, “which all Persons may peruse at their first Entrance,” so as to acquaint themselves “with the Entertainment which they may expect,” occurs as a natural metaphor for the quasi-contractual relationship Fielding sees himself entering into with his readers—readers who may “either stay and regale with what is provided for them,” or “depart” and take their business elsewhere (31).

Something like the contrapositive of this deal is also implicitly in effect: namely, that if the reader, having been provided a full account of what to expect, still purchases the book, or attends the play, and nevertheless does not find the results pleasing, then that consumer only has him- or herself to blame, and the author is in the clear. Perhaps because she is writing from a much more precarious position than Fielding—as a woman, but also at an earlier moment, when the modern literary profession was still coming into being—Aphra Behn is particularly clear about this quality of mutual obligation. In stark contrast to Fielding’s geniality, Behn begins *The Dutch Lover* by almost taunting the “Good, Sweet, Honey, Sugar-candied READER.”<sup>24</sup> Her opening epistle, whose logic (if not tone) Fielding largely adopts, is far less interested in welcoming the prospective reader than in defending the author from that reader’s displeasure. Refusing to “*beg your pardon for diverting*

you from your affairs, by such an idle Pamphlet as this," Behn carefully tries to imagine her addressee as, at once, a member of the leisured class ("*I presume you have not much to do, and therefore are to be obliged to me for keeping you from worse employment*") and as a paying customer, rather than an aristocratic patron (5:160). In such a situation, she can only request that the reader peruse her Terms of Use carefully ... and keep quiet if his expectations are not met: "*if you will misspend your time, pray lay the fault upon your self; for I have dealt pretty fairly in the matter, and told you in the Title Page what you are to expect within. ... Having inscrib'd Comedy on the beginning of my Book, you may guess pretty near what peny-worths you are like to have, and ware your money and your time accordingly*" (5:160). To reiterate: neither Behn nor Dryden could be called a liberal. Nevertheless, these writers' willingness, economically motivated though it may have been, to reflect on their work using the language of contracts, indicates a certain thinking along with the political contractarianism of Hobbes, Locke, and their followers.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, though this was hardly their intention, these writers were helping to lay the groundwork—as Addison could not—for a liberal way of reading and evaluating texts. Almost as an afterthought, Behn takes a hatchet to the aesthetic categories so dear to Addison (or indeed Dryden). In terms that a present-day populist might embrace, she openly mocks "*most of that which bears the name of Learning*" and commends her own "*want of letters*" (5:160), thus undoing the Horatian injunction that literature both instruct and delight.<sup>26</sup> "*None of all our English poets,*" she comments, "*can justly be charg'd with too great reformation of mens minds or manners.*" (5:160). Moreover, she is "*sure ... no Play was ever writ with that design*" (5:161). If a paying audience wishes to be delighted and could not care less about being instructed, then a successful play or work of fiction will be judged solely by its capacity to delight. Indeed, the introduction of moral instruction by the author might be seen as tantamount to a betrayal of trust. If plays "*were certainly intended for the exercising of mens passions, not their understandings,*" then "*he is infinitely far from wise, that will bestow one moments meditation on such things*" (5:161). However careful Behn might have been to restrict herself, at moments like this, to the idiom of buying and selling, it is clear that her logic had far-reaching ideological and aesthetic implications.

We should clarify that we are by no means the first to notice the ways that the author-reader relationship might be understood along contractual lines—such thinking appearing prominently in the work of late twentieth-century French theorists especially, including Jean-Louis Curtis, Philippe Lejeune, and Gérard Genette. Lejeune, for example, begins his extensive study of autobiography, *Le Pacte autobiographique*, by observing that "the

autobiographical genre is a *contractual* genre” (Lejeune’s italics); Curtis contends that “to read a novel is in effect to have made a tacit pact with the novelist. A pact assumes agreement with two parties, mutual consent.”<sup>27</sup> It is Genette, however, whose study of the “paratext”—his term for those elements (prefaces, epilogues, titles, interviews, etc.) that “surround ... and extend [a text], precisely in order to *present* it, ... to ensure the text’s ‘reception’ and consumption” (Genette’s italics)—remains the single most influential and extensive account of author-reader bargaining, who comes closest to our own concerns.<sup>28</sup> For Genette, who devotes three chapters of *Paratexts* just to the study of prefaces, such authorial statements often carry a “binding contractual force,” locking both writer and reader into a certain understanding of how the text is to be received.

While we don’t disagree with any of these observations, we would nevertheless suggest that Genette and his contemporaries take a far more restrictive view of authorial contracts than what we see in the work of many eighteenth-century writers. For Genette, the “original assumptive authorial preface ... has as its chief function *to ensure that the text is read properly*” (Genette’s italics), and, in much the same spirit, Lejeune comments that the paratext is “a fringe of the printed text which in reality *controls* one’s whole reading of the text” (our italics).<sup>29</sup> For both critics, the authorial contract is ultimately rule-establishing: it governs the procedures by which a text is to be “properly” apprehended by the reader. In short, this particular view of the contract aligns neatly with some theories of *genre*, “mold[ing] the reader,” as Wayne Booth puts it in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, “into the kind of person suited to appreciate ... the book [the author] is writing.”<sup>30</sup> Indeed, in some moods, eighteenth-century writers extend their “contracts” in precisely this spirit; once again, Henry Fielding:

as I am, in reality, the Founder of a new Province of Writing, so I am at liberty to make what Laws I please therein. And these Laws, my Readers, whom I consider as my Subjects, are bound to believe in and to obey; with which that they may readily and cheerfully comply, I do hereby assure them that I shall principally regard their Ease and Advantage in all such Institutions: For I do not, like a *jure divino* Tyrant, imagine that they are my Slaves, or my Commodity. I am, indeed, set over them for their own Good only, and was created for their Use, and not they for mine. (77–78)

In Fielding’s elegant parody of Locke, the work of the author entails establishing the parameters of proper reading (“readily and cheerfully” complied with by his happy subjects). By the same token, the proper task of the literary critic is to examine carefully the extent to which any new novel or

poem meets or somehow violates those generic strictures—a task that came naturally to masters of “propriety,” such as John Dennis and Samuel Johnson.

And yet it bears pointing out how distant the rule-setting gestures of the opening chapter of Book II of *Tom Jones*, just quoted, feel from Fielding’s “Bill of Fare” for the novel as a whole, or, for that matter, from Behn’s epistle, which openly mocks the fetishization of rules for their own sake: “*I think a Play the best divertisement that wise men have; but I do also think them nothing so, who do discourse as formallie about the rules of it, as if ’twere the grand affair of humane life*” (5:162). Contracts may certainly be understood as rule-establishing (as salvos in the rhetoric of genre), but they may equally be understood as *promises*, as gestures with complex implications. What promises, we might ask, does an author make to his or her readers? “Buy my book, and read it in a certain way, and in return, I will provide you with X” (where “X” could mean “entertainment,” or “emotional stimulation,” or “the sensation of unfettered access to another’s mind,” or countless other things). What happens, in turn, when an author finds it impossible or inconvenient to abide by the promises that she or he has made? Perusing Dryden, Behn, and Fielding, we might well wonder to what extent a contract may be attenuated while still remaining “in effect” and what tactics an author might employ to break an agreement. Overtly or covertly? With the full knowledge of the reader, or in the hopes that the reader might not notice, and so on? Far from establishing the rules of a genre, eighteenth-century paratexts often point towards the subtle, complex, often unspoken, instrumental agreements that underlie the production and reception of literature—agreements that ultimately push far beyond economic bargaining and into the sphere of ethics—and suggest, in turn, avenues for both criticism and theory to pursue.

### **Towards an Ethics of Reading**

We began this essay by suggesting that eighteenth-century literature frequently indicates, or invites, ways of reading that feel significantly different from both the hermeneutics of suspicion and its near-synonyms (paranoid reading, critique, etc.) and the various forms of weak theory that seem to find a natural home in the age. What we did not suggest, however, is that any of the major period authors, let alone any of the countless less prominent ones, Whig or Tory, ever came close to articulating a systematic metalanguage, rooted in liberal-contractarian ideas, about how to understand or analyze literature as a whole. In short, whatever the implications of Fielding’s or Behn’s prefaces and introductions, the concerns of those writers are always local and specific, concerned with the reception of this

particular novel or that particular play. Though we may well notice theoretical implications in these paratexts, the authors themselves are ultimately focused on the pragmatics of writing and reading. To the extent that these writers were in conversation with “literary theory,” it was, as we have already seen, with the dominant theories of the day: neoclassicism, the discourses of sentiment and affect, the sublime and the beautiful, and so on.

It is only at the very end of the eighteenth century that we begin to see the glimmers of a theoretical self-awareness begin to arise out of the rich discourse of authorial bargaining. When Mary Wollstonecraft, for example, prefaces her final novel, *Maria; or The Wrongs of Woman*, by commenting that “in many instances I *could* have made the incidents more dramatic, would I have sacrificed my main object” (our italics), she is admitting that a contract of sorts has been thrown into abeyance.<sup>31</sup> Her central moral concern, “exhibiting the misery and oppression, peculiar to women, that arise out of the partial laws and customs of society,” has led her not to write the “dramatic” novel of manners that her readers might reasonably have expected on opening her volume: “in the invention of the story, this view restrained my fancy.” Undoubtedly the closest we come, however, to a fully contract-centered theoretical statement is in a relatively little-studied section of William Wordsworth’s 1800 preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (little-studied because it does not treat his poetics directly), which we must quote in full:

It is supposed, that by the act of writing in verse an Author makes a formal engagement that he will gratify certain known habits of association, that he not only thus apprizes the Reader that certain classes of ideas and expressions will be found in his book, but that others will be carefully excluded. This exponent or symbol held forth by metrical language must in different æras of literature have excited very different expectations: for example, in the age of Catullus Terence and Lucretius, and that of Statius or Claudian, and in our own country, in the age of Shakespeare and Beaumont and Fletcher, and that of Donne and Cowley, or Dryden, or Pope. I will not take upon me to determine the exact import of the promise which by the act of writing in verse an Author in the present day makes to his Reader; but I am certain it will appear to many persons that I have not fulfilled the terms of an engagement thus voluntarily contracted. They who have been accustomed to the gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers, if they persist in reading this book to its conclusion, will, no doubt, frequently have to struggle with feelings of strangeness and awkwardness: they will look round for poetry, and will be induced to enquire by what species of courtesy these attempts can be permitted to assume that title. I

hope therefore the Reader will not censure me, if I attempt to state what I have proposed to myself to perform, and also, (as far as the limits of a preface will permit) to explain some of the chief reasons which have determined me in the choice of my purpose: that at least he may be spared any unpleasant feeling of disappointment, and that I myself may be protected from the most dishonorable accusation which can be brought against an Author, namely, that of an indolence which prevents him from endeavouring to ascertain what is his duty, or, when his duty is ascertained, prevents him from performing it.<sup>32</sup>

In the course of Wordsworth's self-defense, a whole way of reading, or method of analysis, begins to round into view. Even more than Wollstonecraft, Wordsworth has absorbed the language of "promise[s] ... an Author ... makes to his Reader" and that of covenants more generally; like Wollstonecraft, he is acutely aware that *Lyrical Ballads*, through his very gesture of calling it a book of "verse," may appear not to have "fulfilled the terms of an engagement ... voluntarily contracted." What ensues, for the remainder of the preface, is very much a negotiation regarding genre (what gets to count as poetry and what doesn't)—a negotiation, importantly, that is carried out in explicitly moral terms: Wordsworth is less concerned by the accusation of having violated a trust, a "formal engagement" with the reader, than with explaining why he has done so. If his "duty" has been to conform to certain "expectations" (e.g., for elevated poetic diction), then the remainder of the preface will detail, at length, why a higher consideration has "prevent[ed] him from performing" that duty. Sometimes, it would appear, the breaking of a trust is preferable to the keeping of it—and by thinking through the implications of this seeming paradox, Wordsworth begins to unite two strands of post-Lockean thought that we have so far observed operating in isolation: on the one hand, an economically motivated contractarianism, and on the other, a set of values that Addison, and Addison's successors, saw as consonant with liberal ideology. It is important, moreover, that Wordsworth is making no effort to conceal his apparent betrayal of trust from the reader—quite pointedly the opposite: it is part-and-parcel of his liberalism that he conceives of the reader as a full partner in establishing the consequences of his choices as an author. Most significantly, perhaps, Wordsworth emphasizes that his breaking of the pact is occurring at a particular moment, for reasons peculiar to that moment. Readerly expectations would have been different in the age of Pope, let alone the age of Shakespeare or of Catullus.<sup>33</sup> It is unreasonable, and perhaps immoral, Wordsworth implies, to think that poets will adhere to bargains struck a century or millennium—or even a decade—previously. Rather, the author-reader relationship must entail a process of

continuous re-negotiation—an insight with profound consequences for how one conceives of “literary history,” writ large—of which the preface itself is, of course, a signal example.

Wordsworth’s purpose in the preface was to articulate a poetics, not a systematic theory of literature; however effectively he summarized, reconciled, or made explicit lines of thinking that had been ramifying over the course of the long eighteenth century, he finally exercised little influence on the professional study of literature as it subsequently developed. That work fell ultimately to the hermeneuticists—first in Germany, but soon enough in England and the United States—to the point where “hermeneutics” and “literary criticism” have at times seemed nearly synonymous.<sup>34</sup> In contrast to the hermeneutic emphasis on decoding, uncovering, or revealing, the strand of eighteenth-century criticism we have been discussing invites us to see literature as a kind of force field, in which contractual gestures—promises—interact, morph, grow, or wane in strength over time. A full explication of such a view of literature—both its theoretical/ideological implications and its consequences for practical criticism and analysis—would far exceed the scope of this essay and take us well beyond the eighteenth century. Instead, we will end with a brief reading, or at least an examination, of such a force field in action. To this point we have looked mainly at “paratexts,” in which the author’s critical activity has been inseparable from the need to defend or explain a specific literary work. In closing, we will turn to a work of pure criticism—a work unhampered, as it were, by the requirements of self-justification—in which the labor of contractual bargaining nonetheless comes across with particular vividness: Samuel Johnson’s *Rambler* number 4. As Johnson discusses the nature of fiction (especially what we would now term “the novel”), his typical confidence as a critic wavers ever so slightly. Trying to account for a genre at once new and overwhelmingly popular, and of which he largely disapproves, Johnson engages in some energetic negotiations in order to square the virtues of the form with his broader aesthetic and civic priorities.

The great strength of the novel, self-evidently for Johnson, is its realism. In more or less the same terms as Ian Watt would lay out two centuries later, Johnson contrasts the previously dominant form of prose fiction, romance, with a new genre dedicated to exhibiting “life in its true state, diversified only by accidents that daily happen in the world.”<sup>35</sup> In drawing this distinction, Johnson plants his feet squarely in two camps. He has absorbed enough of the economic-contractual spirit of the age to ascribe the decline of romance to a waning market: why romance “found reception so long, in polite and learned ages, it is not easy to conceive; but we cannot wonder that, while readers could be procured, the authors were willing to continue it” (10). At the



same time, Johnson the policer of generic rules is also fully present. Having determined that the novel “is to be conducted nearly by the rules of comic poetry” (9), he spends the first pages of the essay briskly establishing what the novel may or may not do, when it comes to plot and characterization.<sup>36</sup> Since its “province is to bring about natural events by easy means” (9) and “must arise from general converse, and accurate observation of the living world” (10), it is “therefore precluded from the machines and expedients of the heroic romance”—for example, “employ[ing] giants to snatch away a lady from the nuptial rites” (9).

The chief distinction, however, that concerns Johnson—and that, it transpires, is the motivating worry of the essay—centers on the differing powers of romance and the novel to command readerly belief. Because the plots of romance were so preposterous, “the reader was in very little danger of making any applications to himself” (11). Not so the novel, especially when it comes to the “young, the ignorant, and the idle,” who comprise (according to Johnson) the genre’s primary consumers and to whom novels “serve as lectures of conduct, and introductions into life” (11). Here, the very verisimilitude that gives the novel its extraordinary power (and accounts for its popularity) comes into direct conflict with Johnson’s conservatism and, still more, his Horatian insistence that literature be an instructive tool. If “the power” of realism “is so great, as to take possession of the memory by a kind of violence, and produce effects *almost without the intervention of the will*, care ought to be taken” by authors that the novel do no harm (12; our italics). The remainder of *Rambler* 4 is at once an acute examination of the psychology of reading and—more important for our purposes—a furious effort to establish, in an increasingly hostile literary environment, the very nature and boundaries of realism. Thus authors, though constrained by emerging canons of representation “to imitate nature” (12), should still exercise some restraint over what they represent:

The chief advantage which these fictions have over real life is, that their authors are at liberty, tho’ not to invent, yet to *select* objects, and to cull from the mass of mankind, those individuals *upon which the attention ought most to be employ’d*. . . . It may not be . . . safe to . . . show . . . all that presents itself without *discrimination* . . . that observation which is called knowledge of the world, will be found much more frequently to make men cunning than good. The purpose of these writings is surely not only to show mankind, but to provide that they may be seen hereafter with less hazard; to teach the means of avoiding the snares which are laid by Treachery for Innocence (12–13; our italics).



By the end of his account, Johnson has talked himself into allegory—a long way, we might observe, from the “realism” with which he began. Indeed, if “vice, for vice is necessary to be shewn, should always disgust” (15), and if virtue should invariably be rewarded and evil punished, it is hard to say what remains of realism once Johnson’s process of “selection” has concluded.

Before drawing our own conclusions, we will pause to note how ripe *Rambler* 4 is for a “suspicious” or “paranoid” reading; indeed, we would be the last to suggest that such a reading of Johnson’s essay is unjustified. With no subtlety at all, Johnson attempts to steer the anarchic energies of an emerging genre into ideologically acceptable territory—providing an almost textbook demonstration of the ways in which the discourses of power extend their reach over unclaimed spaces of the human mind. Whatever threat early novels might have posed to the “Innocen[t],” texts composed within the discursive boundaries specified by Johnson might reliably be expected to produce well-disciplined subjects. Novels that “confound the colours of right and wrong, and instead of helping to settle their boundaries, mix them with so much art, that *no common mind* is able to disunite them” (14; our italics), are thus banished from Johnson’s Republic. Such a reading is more than plausible and also gives us (critics of the present day) the pleasant sensation of having caught the good doctor at his game and, most likely, of knowing quite a bit more about that game than he did—Johnson himself, after all, being a well-disciplined subject. And yet, without any of these conclusions being falsifiable, how far from the spirit of *Rambler* 4 those conclusions actually seem. With only the slightest shift of frame, it becomes possible to view Johnson as energetically (and quite consciously) engaging in the contractual bargaining typical of the age. If we take “realism” to consist of a kind of contract—in which the author promises to provide a view of the world as it “really” is, of “life in its true state” (9)—then *Rambler* 4 vividly shows us Johnson trying to imagine how far that contract might be extended, or tampered with, or modified, without explicitly violating those initial terms. Verisimilitude, yes—but need one represent *everything*? Surely, one might select some things to represent, and ignore all else—in order to preserve a role for literature that Johnson is unwilling to surrender? Would that not still be “realism”? That subsequent novelists in the “realistic” tradition would call Johnson out on his bad faith, and reject his particular bargain, is entirely the point; it would be unreasonable for a Dickens, or a Poe, or a Conrad—or, indeed, one of Johnson’s own less timorous contemporaries, like Fielding—to accept his terms.<sup>37</sup>

That Johnson was no liberal in no way negates the essentially liberal dynamics at play in *Rambler* 4; inevitably, Johnson’s need to grapple with a new and “unsafe” genre draws him out of his usual and relatively

comfortable task of assessment into something far less stable: an intense contest with rivals over what constitutes an acceptable literature—a contest that, in the fullness of time, he eventually loses. It is to our point, finally, that Johnson’s bargaining occurs entirely within the bounds of the practical criticism native to the age; the vital link we have perceived between liberal-contractarianism and the bargaining evident in paratexts, in critical essays, and perhaps most of all (though we lack the space to pursue this idea) in literary texts themselves never achieved anything approaching theoretical self-awareness during the eighteenth century—not until a glimmering awareness in Wordsworth, anyway. It was only at the very end of the century that something like a liberal theory of reading and analyzing texts became plausible—at precisely the moment when criticism began its turn towards hermeneutics, and “literary theory” began to take the form with which we are all familiar. In the twenty-first century, we have begun to grapple with the costs of this turn, alongside its innumerable benefits, to the profession. As we begin to explore new ways of reading and thinking about literature, the loss to hermeneutics may finally be a gain for ethics.

## Notes

1. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 133 et passim. For Sedgwick, a hallmark of “strong theory” is its tendency to assert a primacy over the text under examination, usually by hermeneutic means. For this reason, “strong theory” ranges from the highly politicized (e.g., theories derived from Marx or Foucault) to the purportedly apolitical (post-Freudian theories or poststructuralism).

2. We might take the foci of recent “special issues” of the leading eighteenth-century journals as indicative of the continuing predominance of historicist and archival scholarship, as well as of the various species of “weak theory,” in the discipline. Thus we note special issues on “Thing Theory,” “East and West,” and “The Maritime Eighteenth Century” (all in *Eighteenth-Century Studies*); “Form and Formalism,” “The Senses of Humor,” “Material Fictions,” and “Ecological Footprints” (all in *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*); and “Historical Criticism and Eighteenth-Century Studies,” “New Findings from the Digital Miscellanies Index,” and “Literary Ephemerata” (all in *Eighteenth-Century Life*).

3. In his early work on the “post-critical,” Michael Polanyi defined it against the “critical mode” he imagined as born in the Enlightenment. Kant, Preface to *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 100–1. See Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski, Introduction to *Critique and Postcritique* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 1–25.

4. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 138, 141. Felski's work on "critique" borrows heavily from Sedgwick's work on paranoid reading and "strong theory." Felski discusses the destructiveness of critique in several places; see especially her claim that "Critique is Negative" in "Critique and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion," *M/C Journal* 15, no. 1 (March 2012).

5. Lest the language of "professional suicide" seem overly dramatic, we would note that recent debates over the merits of "postcritique" have often taken that exact tone. See, for example, Bruce Robbins's response to Rita Felski's attack on "suspicious reading" and "fault-finding" in *The Limits of Critique*, in which he argues that critique is the only thing that "distinguishes us as academics from fans as well as from most reviewers, belletrists, and other adjuncts to the publishing industry." Robbins goes on to imagine what would happen to the field if it adopted Felski's vision of postcritique:

[We would be left with] a criticism that is closer to fandom, a profession that is closer to the industry's dollars-and-cents metric and its rhetoric of helpful and largely positive advice to the would-be consumer ... Felski might have paid more heed to this question, considering possible disadvantages of putting the discipline through what looks to me like a corporate restructuring. ("Not So Well Attached," *PMLA* 132, no. 2 [2017], 372).

6. Cf. Karen Collis, "Shaftesbury and Literary Criticism: Philosophers and Critics in Early Eighteenth-Century England," *The Review of English Studies*, n.s., 67, no. 279 (April 2016): 294–315. Collis argues that Anthony Ashley Cooper, the Third Earl of Shaftesbury, was able to reconcile his aesthetics and his Whig politics by essentially ignoring Locke's epistemology, while Joseph Addison's acceptance of the *Essay* led necessarily to his perceiving a diminished role for literature.

7. *The Free-Holder* 2 (26 December 1715).

8. *The Spectator* 291 (2 February 1712).

9. For the discussion of "figurative language" as an "abuse," see Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book III, chapter X (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1995). Needless to say, subsequent philosophers of language have problematized Locke's seemingly straightforward distinction between philosophical and imaginative discourse. For a reading of the *Essay* that examines the inexorably figurative nature of *all* language, see Paul de Man, "The Epistemology of Metaphor," *Critical Inquiry* 5, no.1 (Autumn 1978): 13–30.

10. *The Spectator* 297 (9 February 1712).

11. On those few occasions that Locke discusses questions of taste, he, too, can show a surprisingly high-handed side, claiming that only some people are born with minds well suited to "judgment" and that artistic discrimination is only "natural to some tempers." Politically, Locke believes that every individual has rights that must be respected; in terms of critical judgment, he thinks that "brutes" and "idiots" can distinguish between and compare ideas and sentiments "to no great degree" and that those who perceive or retain ideas "dully" cannot "judge or reason to any

tolerable degree; but only a little and imperfectly" (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book II, chapter XI, 105). For Addison on "Mob Readers" see *The Spectator* 62 (11 May 1711).

12. Locke, "The Epistle to the Reader," *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, xiii; *The Spectator* 111 (7 July 1711).

13. *The Spectator* 291 (2 February 1712).

14. Abigail Williams, in *Poetry and the Creation of a Whig Literary Culture, 1681–1714* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), argues for a "Whiggish vision of literary aesthetics" (18), with Whig poets drawing on a particular store of tropes and rhetoric. Yet, as Williams recognizes, the majority of those tropes were themselves drawn from classical models, as they were in Tory poems. Whig and Tory poems may have had different philosophical and ideological foundations, but, as far as questions of structure and decorum were concerned, there was no vast difference between the neoclassicist judgments put forward by Whigs, like Thomas Rymer or Charles Gildon, and those of a Tory critic, like George Granville—or for that matter, those of a less avowedly political publisher, like John Newbery, who, a century after Rymer, was still publishing criticism urging adherence to the classical unities (*The Art of Poetry on a New Plan* [London, 1762]).

15. Dryden, "Absalom and Achitophel," in *The Works of John Dryden*, ed. Edward Niles Hooker and H. T. Swedenberg, Jr., et al., 20 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1956–2002), 2:17.

16. Dryden, "Absalom and Achitophel," 2:28. The *Second Treatise* is sometimes dated to 1689, the year of its publication—well after the appearance of "Absalom and Achitophel." Richard Ashcraft has persuasively argued, however, that it was written during the Exclusion Crisis of 1678–81, making it contemporary with Dryden's poem. It's still highly unlikely, however, that Dryden would have been aware of Locke's text. See Richard Ashcraft, "Revolutionary Politics and Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*: Radicalism and Lockean Political Theory," *Political Theory* 8 (1980): 429–86.

17. For an expansion of these ideas, see our *The Watchman in Pieces: Surveillance, Literature, and Liberal Personhood* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 70ff.

18. Locke, "An Essay on Toleration," in *Political Essays*, ed. Mark Goldie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 136.

19. Dryden, *Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire*, in *The Works of John Dryden*, 4:63, 4:87.

20. Addison was not the only Whig who was, when it came to aesthetics, completely invested in aristocratic and traditional canons of value. Samuel Garth scorned the taste of the "vulgar throng" and the conclusion of Thomas Tickell's "Prologue to the University of Oxford" is virtually a compendium of elitist sentiments:

None should presume to dictate for the Stage,  
But such as boast a great Extensive Mind,  
Enrich'd by Nature, and by Art refined;

Whom from the *Antient* Stores their Knowledge bring,  
 And tasted Early of the Muse's Spring.  
 May none pretend upon her Throne to sit  
 But such, as sprung from you, are Born to Wit:  
 Chos'n by the *Mob*, their lawless *Claim* we slight:  
 Yours is the *Old Hereditary Right*.

—Garth, *The Dispensary; A Poem* (London, 1699), 45; Tickell, "Prologue to the University of Oxford," in *Poetical Miscellanies, Consisting of Original Poems and Translations. By the Best Hands* (London, 1714), 71.

21. The relatively new and utterly inaccurate habit of conflating "liberalism" with "neoliberalism" has been adopted enthusiastically by the socialist and progressive left press. See, for example, the dismissal of Paul Krugman as a "neoliberal" in Paul Heideman, "Bulletproof Neoliberalism," *Jacobin*, 1 June 2014. See also Bruce Robbins, "Everything is not Neoliberalism," *American Literary History* 31, no. 4 (2019): 840–49.

22. This sort of language can be found in the prefatory materials offered up by Tory authors for the remainder of the century (e.g., Maria Edgeworth's "Preface" to *Castle Rackrent*: "the author of the following memoirs has upon these grounds fair claims to the public favor and attention"). Henry Brooke, another Tory, went so far as to parody the fashion in his dedication to *The Fool of Quality* ("To the Right Respectable My Ancient and Well-Beloved Patron, The Public").

23. Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling*, ed. Fredson Bowers (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1975), 31. Subsequent citations of *Tom Jones* will be made parenthetically.

24. Behn, epistle to the "Good, Sweet, Honey, Sugar-candied READER," *The Dutch Lover*, in *The Works of Aphra Behn*, ed. Janet Todd, 7 vols. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1996), 5:160. Subsequent citations of this epistle will be made parenthetically.

25. The fact that this thinking along often happened in works of satire is particularly notable: as in *Absalom and Achitophel*, a genuine engagement with contractarian politics could and often did occur more or less independently of the main satiric thrust of a work.

26. Behn also anticipates Locke's dismissal of "*scraps*" of received wisdom by more than a decade, expressing scorn for "*Creatures [who believe] such scraps as they pick up from other folks*" (*Works*, 5:162).

27. Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, ed. Paul John Eaken, trans. Katherine M. Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 29; Curtis, *Haute Ecole: Essai* (Paris: Rene Julliard, 1950), 171. Our thanks to Steven Monte for the translation of Curtis.

28. Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1.

29. Genette, *Paratexts*, 197; Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, 29.

30. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 89.

31. Wollstonecraft, *Maria or The Wrongs of Woman* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975), 5.

32. Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads: The Text of the 1798 Edition with the Additional 1800 Poems and the Prefaces*, 2nd ed., ed. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (London: Routledge, 1991), 235.

33. Wordsworth's very word, "expectations," seems to anticipate the language of Hans Robert Jauss, whose work on reception history approaches the same insight. Cf. Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahn (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

34. Felski quotes several times Stanley Fish's line: "like it or not, interpretation is the only game in town" (*Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980], 355).

35. Johnson, *The Rambler* 4 (31 March 1750), in *Selected Essays from the Rambler, Adventurer, and Idler*, ed. W. J. Bate (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 9. Subsequent citations of this essay will be made parenthetically.

36. Johnson is here likely alluding to Fielding's declaration in the "Preface" to *Joseph Andrews* that the novel, or "comic Romance," is a "comic Epic-Poem in Prose" (Fielding, *Joseph Andrews*, ed. Martin C. Battestin [Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1967], 4).

37. Indeed, Johnson, in the more conversational mode captured in Boswell's *Life*, takes Fielding repeatedly to task in exactly these terms: "Fielding, being mentioned, Johnson exclaimed, ... 'he was a barren rascal.' BOSWELL. 'Will you not allow, Sir, that he draws very natural pictures of human life?' JOHNSON. 'Why, Sir, it is of very low life. Richardson used to say, that had he not known who Fielding was, he should have believed he was an ostler.'" (Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, ed. R. W. Chapman [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989], 480).