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Thumbing Our Nose at the Public Sphere: Satire, the Market, and the Invention of Literature

CHRISTIAN THORNE

[1]

BEGIN IN FABULAR FASHION, BY RECOUNTING TWO STORIES we tell about ourselves and our modernity and the books we read. My first story is so familiar that it nearly tells itself: Europe was once full of imbeciles; then came the printing press, and there were imbeciles no more; for with print came mass literacy, and with literacy came learning, and with learning—it is here that the story gets hazy—came democratic self-fulfillment in some guise or another. This is a story, then, of lettered nations and lettered subjects. It is a story, as well, of what Jürgen Habermas has lastingly termed the public sphere—the sphere, characteristic of modernity, “in which critical public discussion of matters of general interest was institutionally guaranteed” (xi). The guarantor institutions in the public sphere have, of course, traditionally been print institutions. So it is in this sphere that we discover the full significance of print. It is in the public sphere that literate subjects come together to reflect on the business of nations. Print is public debate; it is the promise of critical reason.

This story, I need hardly point out, is out of favor, although even those readers who have long since parted with any belief in the essential value of great literature are likely to harbor some residual attachment to the value of the printed word. Michael Warner has dubbed this narrative the “Whig-McLuhante” model of print history, and his phrase neatly encapsulates the charges against it, which are that it indulges in a crudely progressive technological determinism (*Letters* 5). Yet the critique as it has evolved is, in fact, more shrewd than this: few scholars have suggested that it is simply wrong to claim that print has been liberating in roughly the manner outlined here. Many have insisted, rather, that print is not necessarily or inherently liberating. Print, these scholars contend, is not inherently

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anything. Print culture may have played something like a democratizing role in Europe and America, but it has done so only insofar as it was enmeshed in other phenomena, such as the expansion of capitalism or the rise of the bureaucratic state, and the limits of its democratizing project have been the limits of those other institutions. Capital and the state may have been significantly changed by print, but they themselves helped transform print and cannot, therefore, in any simple way be explained by it. As much as print has set the terms for our modernity, so too has print been shaped by our modern social and political institutions. The technology does not exist apart from the politics that assigns it its meanings or functions; print is not prior to culture. Recent projects in what is usually called the history of the book have thus had a story of their own to tell: they have spun a political history of print. They have insisted that we cannot understand the effects of print without understanding print's place in the social-symbolic order.

Warner's *Letters of the Republic* is a model effort of this kind. "The West," Warner begins, "treasures few moments in its history the way it treasures the story of the democratization of print. In the century preceding the American and French revolutions, men of letters commonly linked the spread of letters to the growth of knowledge" (ix). Warner's purpose is to call this story into question; indeed, his topic is early American republicanism, and he goes on to make the strong case that our tendency to naturalize a certain logic of print has worked to obscure the limitations of the republican politics that print is said to underwrite. I have few quarrels with this argument as far as it goes; I would, however, append to Warner's project the following simple observation: the narrative that Warner identifies here—the story of the democratization of print—has become self-evident in Europe and America only because it has won out over other, competing narratives of print. Warner tells the story of his Poor Richard republicans, and he tells it well. But there is another, equally political

story here, the story of those writers who, in the early eighteenth century, already denied the benefits of print and repudiated the knowledge and the democracy that were said to attend to it. It is this second story that I would like to tell. This essay, then, concerns the contending meanings of print in the early modern period, although unlike Warner I take England as my site of investigation. This study is about the self-proclaimed opponents of print and the public sphere.

[II]

[From *Bedlam*] *Miscellanies* spring, the weekly
boast

Of Curl's chaste press, and Lintot's rubric post:

Hence hymning Tyburn's elegaic lines,

Hence Journals, Medleys, Mercuries, MAGAZINES:

Sepulchral Lies, our holy walls to grace,

And New Years Odes, and all the Grubstreet race.

—Alexander Pope, *The Dunciad*

In his seminal *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas points out that one of the key moments in the development of the English public sphere in the eighteenth century is the formation of something like a print opposition or fourth estate. The public sphere, he notes, can only really take hold once the interrogation of state power becomes one of the expected features of print discourse, as it does for the first time in the Tory journalism of the 1720s. In Bolingbroke's *Craftsman*, Habermas argues, "the press was for the first time established as a genuinely critical organ of a public engaged in critical political debate" (60). The year 1726 is of particular importance in this regard, because its summer saw the publication, in rapid succession, of three great Tory satires: Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, John Gay's *Fables*, and Alexander Pope's *Dunciad*. For Habermas this is a watershed moment. He sees in these polemics the opening volleys of the opposition's literary flank, in which the critical exercise of public reason is given the polished respectability of belles lettres. Collectively, he

argues, Swift, Pope, and Gay worked to establish the idea that a ruling body could be criticized publicly, in print, as part of a sustained debate about the legitimacy of authority.

There is a sense, no doubt, in which Habermas is dead-on. Few would contest that, taken together, the Tory satires of the early eighteenth century make for an unprecedented display of public truculence. Swift, Pope, and Gay are only the most enduring members of a vociferous gang of Tory controversialists engaged in an unremitting campaign against the venality of Robert Walpole's Whig oligarchy. If we follow Habermas's account—and, again, there is good reason to—it would seem the Tory satirists must play a prominent role in any narrative of print and the rise of democracy. Habermas himself is atypically blunt on this score: the Tory satirists, he declares, are forerunners of the West's finest journalistic traditions. They are "exemplary of the critical press" (61). On this point Habermas is in accord with a scholar as otherwise far removed from him as J. G. A. Pocock, for whom the same writers are "the first intellectuals of the Left" (477).¹

Keen as this point is, however, it may be keen in ways that Habermas does not seem to understand, for if there is one feature of modernity that Tory skepticism consistently targets, it is the very idea of a public sphere and a critical press. The cast of characters in Tory satire is a catalog of Habermas's public-sphere participants—politicians, scholars, stockjobbers—and for the Tories this cast is unmistakably a typology of fools. What is more, if there is one feature that unites Swift, Pope, and Gay, at least in their Scriblerian mode, it is their common loathing of discourse—not a particular discourse but discourse as such, the very procedure of public argument. This observation alone should do much to complicate Habermas's suggestive but perhaps somewhat too blithe notions of a Tory fourth estate. For the consistent effect of Tory satire is, in fact, to expose England's early modern political culture as a dictatorship of the public, as a catastrophic attempt to predicate power on public opinion

rather than on virtue. Modernity, in this vision, is a fall from grace, a deplorable break from a past marked by manly earnestness and into a feminized present of hypocrisy and superficial luxury. My point here is simple: if we are looking for the opponents of print and the public sphere, these are the writers—the same writers who are in some sense most representative of that sphere. If we wish to understand the canonical Tory satires, therefore, we must read them against the rise of the public sphere and with an eye toward this compelling contradiction. My aim here is to provide a general account of Tory satire, one that might reestablish the interest of these texts for a wide range of readers and in which detailed readings could at some later point be undertaken, readings that would attend more closely to the many varied ways in which the Tories deploy the strategies outlined here.

My questions are first of all historical. What were the contradictions inherent in print at the advent of Britain's commercial revolution? What concessions did the bourgeois public sphere exact from its participants? But these questions speak, perhaps more pressingly, to lingering cultural-political concerns: What is the place of oppositional discourse in the print market and in the conventions of public reason? How do the critics of a commodity culture position themselves in that culture's institutions? And how, finally, do we account for the continued appeal of the literary? We might think of this last as the essay's secret query, for careful attention to the Tory satirists should allow us to account with precision for the emergence of literature in the eighteenth century as modernity's central cultural category.

The issues are threefold:

1. The Tory satirists, as a rule, proceed with more force than finesse. Even in its most literary manifestations, their polemic is easily available in the texts, so that no great exegetical effort is required to round up its tropes and trace its strategies. The Tories are forever drawing battle lines. It is commonly noted, for instance, that the public sphere came into being on the wings of three

(closely related) historical developments: the rise of Parliament and party, the expansion of capital during the Financial Revolution, and the creation of the free press with the end of censorship in 1695 (Habermas 58; Dickson; Carswell). These three, it just so happens, are a fairly accurate shortlist of Tory bugaboos; they are a quickly sketched profile of a pathological modernity. Party, for the satirists (however proud their own party label), is never anything more than “Faction,” the lamentable symptom of an ailing and divided nation. Capital is a sham, replacing a yeoman’s economy of landed value with modern institutions of phantom credit. As for the rise of the free press—the Tory disdain for the modern print trade is complete. Swift and his fellow satirists greet the glut of print with something akin to hysteria; almost wholly anticipating recent hand-wringing over the Internet, the Tory satirists imagine that the proliferation of textuality in the wake of a new information technology can only have dire consequences for the polity (Rogers). The rise of print culture heralds an age in which signification will run amok, flooding the polity with an undifferentiated mass of contradictory opinions and arguments and thus corroding traditional forms of citizenship or civic virtue.

It is important, of course, not to separate out the strands of the Tory polemic artificially. The avenues of critique enumerated here are ultimately part of a single vision, that of a disunited society governed by Grub Street and infected by a market morality. This vision, moreover, is underwritten in each of its manifestations by a severe repudiation of the critical reason that is supposed to be the hallmark of modernity or the public sphere. Tory satire reserves special scorn for the “Critick”—a figure characterized chiefly by his punishing pettiness of mind and made ugly by a pretense to knowledge that is an ill-concealed bid for power. Critics of this caliber bode ill for civic discourse. In Habermas’s compellingly idealized account, the early modern public sphere “developed to the extent to which the public concern regarding the private sphere

of civil society was no longer confined to the authorities but was considered by the subjects as one that was properly theirs” (23). But for the Tory satirists, enveloped in the gloom of their pessimistic anthropology, the public arrogation of authority can only be ominous. For the proponents of the public sphere, rational-critical debate offers a blessed alternative to domination; for the satirists, the public sphere is merely a new kind of domination, the tyranny of corrupt commercial interests.

Stated in these terms, the Tory critique has a familiar ring to it—it is much the same critique Habermas makes. Indeed, the Tory position may seem, on closer inspection, more familiar still. According to Habermas, the public sphere’s key function is to “compel public authority to legitimate itself before public opinion” (25). The public, in other words, is said to possess, or perhaps to produce, some knowledge (about its interests or the constitution of good government), and the exercise of authority is supposed to be predicated on that knowledge. It is this attempted link between knowledge and authority that commands our attention here, for the Tory satirists’ complaint against the public sphere is finally an epistemological one. Swift and Company never tire of railing against the modern “commonwealth of learning”—or, as Pope has it in the *Essay on Criticism*, “The bookful blockhead, ignorantly read, / With loads of learned lumber in his head” (lines 612–13). We might think here of the mock footnotes that threaten to engulf the *Dunciad*, of the brutal and muddleheaded philosopher-kings of Swift’s Laputa, of the woman butchered by science in his *Tale of a Tub* (82–83). The effect of this mockery is to call into question what is often termed the standard of knowledge: underlying the Tory reproach of modernity is a skeptical insistence—a stalwart insistence in Swift, an oft-qualified one in Pope—that we can possess no knowledge worthy of the name, because we have no secure, philosophically unimpeachable criterion by which to decide what knowledge is. The epistemophilia characteristic of modernity,

therefore, is fundamentally misguided; it leads not to a definitive corpus of common knowledge but to an insane proliferation of argumentative standpoints. And the idea that authority should be called on to validate itself in ambitiously epistemological terms is just a disaster. For if there is no transparent epistemological standard by which authority can justify itself, then to demand public legitimation for authority is to subject power to an inadjudicable infinity of competing standards and thus to throw the status of authority permanently, chaotically into question.

Without this emphasis on maintaining authority, the Tory satirists would seem like Marxists or postmodernists *avant la lettre*. In fact, they were republicans of a special kind. There is a peculiarly English brand of Machiavellianism that has a kind of afterlife in the figures that oppose the various postrepublican compromises of the Restoration and beyond (Pocock). One might think here not only of Swift and Bolingbroke but also of sundry other partisans of what is usually termed the Country ideology, which in its broadest contours is an unlikely fusing of a (more or less egalitarian) political understanding of virtue with traditionalist, hierarchical forms of deference. The Tory polemics of the early eighteenth century are a virtual combinatory of seventeenth-century discourses, drawing on Thomas Hobbes and James Harrington in equal proportion, weaving together humanist notions of virtue with an absolutist insistence that social authority be unitary and incontestable. More precisely, the Country ideology is a combination of Florentine republicanism and the mythic agrarianism of the Physiocrat—a crossbreed for which the iconic figure of the yeoman may be taken as emblematic: the robust farmer-patriot whose landholding, however small, allows him to participate independently in the nation's affairs, without depending for his livelihood on the corrosive largesse of some governing class.

The important thing to understand about this eighteenth-century Machiavellianism is that it has reconciled itself, albeit with reluctance

and rage, to its own reduction to the status of a critical ethics. By its own account, it is a republicanism without a republic. In this sense, its "virtue" names no longer a lived practice but only a vantage point from which existing social practices may be denounced.² The fury characteristic of writers like Swift is fueled by a sense of futility in the face of civic entropy. The millenarian viciousness of Country ideology derives from a sense that while the governing classes of early modern England—the Whigocracy or the Robinocrats or the monied interest—can be railed against, they cannot be coherently opposed, because the only true opposition to the mercenary powers of the Whig regime would be a complete reawakening of virtue throughout the English polity, if indeed in its dismal and degraded state it still merits that name.

The most familiar face of eighteenth-century Machiavellianism is thus that of God's Englishmen—Tory citizen-prophets playing a vanguard role in a drama at once national and chiliastic, united in fierce opposition to the dominant institutions of the early century: the public sphere, public credit, the newly professional military, the parliamentary state and its bureaucracy. Swift and his fellows have a fairly clear historical narrative to tell—the story of backwoods Anglo-Saxon virtue put to the test by urban corruption—but they recount this story mournfully after the fact, the way a certain type of American might even today bemoan the passing of the cowboy. Tory history, reduced to its essentials, goes something like this: the old agricultural economy once supported the stout yeoman, whose virtue was crucial to the health of the nation, not so much because that virtue gave the English polity a broad political base as because it formed the bedrock of a special, uniquely English class. This class, a not quite gentry, was distinctive in that it combined the hardiness of the Nordic peasantry with the authority of the Continental aristocracy, while dodging the barnyard oafishness of the former and the lacy effeminacy of the latter. And in this story we find the decidedly un-Habermasian

bottom line: The Tories transform the republican vision of a more or less egalitarian and open-ended politics into a disaffected myth of English patriotism and class prerogative, in which republicanism takes the guise of a strident, splenetic antimodernity. To the extent, then, that they retain any notion of the public, theirs is a public of heroic men casting aside particular interest to forge a common will and foster the common good, not a public of essentially private persons piecing together some craven consensus to novel commercial ends (Baker 187).

2. In addition to the surface polemic of these satirical texts, there is usually a historical narrative implicit in their contempt, where the contending readings of the public sphere become particularly clear. The bourgeois public sphere is born of the turmoil of the seventeenth century. Insurrection and regicide are its enabling acts, and yet to sustain its claims to reason, that sphere must efface its history. To the embarrassment of the mavens of modernity, the Tory skeptics are forever hell-bent on rearticulating that originary conflict. Their political polemics and satirical stories work to construct continuities between a mad present—marked by financial corruption, seemingly endless military endeavors, and the spiraling demands of the administrative state—and the past hundred years of, in Swift's words, "Conspiracies, Rebellions, Murders, Massacres, Revolutions, Banishments; the very worst Effects that Avarice, Faction, Hypocrisy, Perfidiousness, Cruelty, Rage, Madness, Hatred, Envy, Lust, Malice, and Ambition could produce" (*Gulliver's Travels* 120). Where the proponents of the public sphere see its operations as informed discourse, Swift and Company see only the permanence of dissent, an ominous pretense to evenhandedness on which is inscribed the violence of revolution.

3. There is furthermore the question of form. Most current historicist accounts of early modern satire hardly take on the question of form at all. They content themselves instead with simply reading the thematics of the text,

distilling its argument into a series of discrete propositions that can then be brought into dialogue with other political "standpoints." Most formal accounts of satire, by contrast, have little more to offer than the ritually incanted insight that the satirical text "perpetually undermines itself," dissolving without end into a wash of delicious indeterminacies. But to fetishize the "destabilized text" in this fashion, to play this game of infinitely receding ironies, is to ignore the fact that the formal unreliability of satire already has a kind of ideological valence. In the context of a public sphere that assigns new and grandiose roles to print, to act out textual instability in satirical form is already to engage in a polemic. It is to tutor the reader in the insincerity of print.

Let us consider Swift, whose satire—more so even than the work of his confederates—is marked by his ability to mimic the voices he mocks. The belabored neoclassicism of Pope's style itself signals a cultural project: it is a bid for vanished dignity. But Swift shows no such confidence in the ability of antique models to regenerate the virtue that modern social practices lack, and so he delivers his prose hostage to the degraded rhetorical forms of the metropolitan market. Swift in effect adopts the premises or habits of thought characteristic of his opponents in an effort to drive their arguments toward an illogical, inhuman extremity. His "Modest Proposal" is exemplary in this regard. Since we think the market should regulate human affairs, since we consider the Irish less than human, and since the Irish are suffering from famine, why don't we just butcher their babies and put the meat up for sale? Beyond any specific intervention into the debates of the day, satire such as this—especially when writ large, as in *A Tale of a Tub*—constitutes a generalized attack on the conventions of public discourse and debate. The public sphere is founded on its ability to test truth claims, but Swift's aggressive skepticism seeks to rob these claims of the standards by which their soundness might be tried. By demonstrating how easily the rhetoric of ratiocination is manipulated, his

satires work to empty public knowledge of its suasive power and thus to deny the tools of persuasion to those whose business it is to persuade. Satire, in this special sense, never sets out to persuade anybody of anything. Its aim, rather, is to shout discourse down, to stifle debate, or generally to gum up the works. To make satire just another aspect of the public sphere, therefore—to treat it, as many scholars do today, as though it were merely part of the debate—is to miss the point. Tory satire, in all its archaic severity and quicksilver crudeness, is unwilling to argue according to the standards of public rationality.

[III]

*Why did I write? what sin to me unknown
Dipped me in ink, my parents', or my own?
As yet a child, nor yet a fool to fame,
I lisped in numbers, for the numbers came.
[.]
But why then publish?*

—Pope, *Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot*

Such, then, are the textual contours of the Tory opposition to print and print culture. Let us turn our attention now to a formal matter of a more intricate kind, which we might best summarize in a well-worn theoretical phrase: the Tory satirists are caught throughout in a performative contradiction. The final fury of their polemics is always reserved for the institutions of the public sphere—coffeehouses, periodicals, the Critick—and yet the Tories are, of course, wholly implicated in these institutions. They are a mainstay of the coffeehouse crowd. Their periodicals are the flagship publications of the day. Their uncompromising assault on the Whig government, we might recall, is “exemplary of the critical press.” The Tories, in short, must enter the public sphere to articulate their opposition to it. Their anti-modernity, in this light, is merely a special kind of modernity, and I am curious, first and foremost, how the Tory satirists endure this paradox.

This issue is, to begin with, a rhetorical one. Catherine Gallagher has argued that women

writers in the eighteenth century devised a variety of complex rhetorical strategies to give legitimacy to their status as authors in the face of the marketplace and their masculinized profession. Following Gallagher’s lead, we might ask in regard to the Tory satirists, How do satirical texts figure their own textuality? How do the satirists figure their own status as authors? How do they position themselves in relation to the marketplace? How, to be precise, do they envision a textuality that is both modern and outside the print marketplace? How, analogously, do they envision a textuality that is engaged—though that word would not be theirs—yet outside the public sphere? Nuanced answers to these questions may be available, but on the face of it, a crude answer will do; for in its broad strokes, the Tory impulse is clear enough—and much less cunning than the authorizing strategies that Gallagher discovers in Aphra Behn and Delarivier Manley. The Tory strategy is to deny everything. Deny your textuality, deny your place in the market, deny your participation in the public sphere. “If I ridicule the Follies and Corruption of a *Court*, a *Ministry*, or a *Senate*,” Swift writes, “are they not amply paid by *Pensions*, *Titles*, and *Power*, while I expect, and desire no other Reward, than that of laughing with a few Friends in a Corner?” (qtd. in Lock 266).³ The satirical text is portrayed here as essentially private; its ridicule may be, in some ineffectual way, public—it may have, at least, public targets—but its important effects are wholly intimate. Satire gains significance only at a remove from the mechanisms of publicity and politics. Indeed, the satirical text is not even a proper text here. It is virtually a spoken act, a conversation or chuckle between pals, and is thus exempt from Swift’s generalized critique of print or public argument.

The issue, at this level, is a rhetorical one, because it should be obvious that Swift’s avowal of privacy is a wishful misrepresentation of his publishing practice.⁴ But what of that practice? The Tory satirists, in effect, pose a tantalizing question for anyone interested in the history of

textual forms: Can publishing be anything other than public? The answer would at first seem a clear no. The Tory satirists may desire this incongruity, but it is hard to see how the desire alone could liberate them from the print marketplace: they are public, like it or not. Two determining features of the publishing landscape of the early eighteenth century are instructive in this regard. We find, first of all, what I have already referred to as the rise of the free press. The expiration of the Licensing Act in 1695 amounted to what we would now call the deregulation of the publishing industry. The first decades of the eighteenth century saw the rapid proliferation of printers and presses across England, all engaged in a sudden competition for an expanding and eager, though still limited, readership. The free press was thus a newly commodified press, and perhaps the most important task facing any early-eighteenth-century writer was learning to navigate this uncharted market (Belanger).

The period witnessed not only the commodification of print but also print's wholesale politicization, giving rise to what Gallagher calls "the new public textuality of political controversy" (95). To be a writer of any stature in Swift's day was by definition to be a political writer. Similarly, to read nearly any printed document was to read it through a partisan lens, in much the way that European periodicals today are still read as center-left, say, or right-wing. These two developments, the rapid expansion of the literary marketplace and the politicization of print, are entangled in complicated ways. One notes among the writers of the early eighteenth century, Whig and Tory alike, a general distrust of the marketplace; and so there developed among this first generation of market writers a series of publishing strategies designed to mediate their position in the new literary economy, to hedge against the market or resist commodification. This design sounds rather grand, but it amounted to the search for new forms of patronage. The increasingly common practice of literary sub-

scription, for instance, enabled authors to receive, in Leslie Stephen's words, "a kind of commission from the upper class." Subscription constituted a "kind of joint-stock body of collective patronage," a hybrid form of market patronage that promised to spare the writer the indignity of the bookstall (qtd. in Nicholson 10; see Foxon; Collins). But such subscription was reserved for the most prominent poets, most famously for Pope; so by and large it was political patronage that replaced aristocratic patronage as an author's primary means of support.

The problem for the Tory satirists was this: to the extent that they shunned the market, they had little choice but to become political figures in a manner that called their critique of politics into question. If they severed their ties to the political institutions they saw as corrupt, they were cast back on the market they abhorred. This dilemma is the ground of the performative contradiction in which they labored, which means that we should not conceive of this contradiction as a moral failing. The Tory satirists were not in some simple way hypocrites. They were fueled, rather, by a special kind of irony: the irony of immanent critique—the ideological bind that comes from having to launch a critique of prevailing institutions and discourses from within those institutions and discourses. It is a question of what Richard Brodhead calls "literary access," a question of the terms under which authorship is even possible, at specific moments in our history, under concrete political, economic, and cultural conditions (107–15).

I do not want to overstate this case, however. Recognizing the publishing frameworks in which the Tory satirists operated can help us formulate the performative contradiction they faced, but it cannot account for the full complexity of that contradiction. While the notion of immanent critique may illuminate the Tory quandary, in the end Tory satire cannot be conflated with that later notion, for the simple reason that the Tory satirists are out to undermine the very notion of critique. Theirs is a critique of critique, and the

dilemma here is simple but stark: if what you are criticizing is the glut of print or the institution of criticism, your very critical utterance, your every written word, compromises the authority of your stance.⁵ An early example of this anticritical genre is published in 1700, by Richard Blackmore; it is entitled *Satyr against Wit*, and the futility of his effort is palpable in the title alone. The moderns, Swift writes in a similar vein, are like spiders, self-generating spitters of venom and spleen. The ancients by contrast are bees, pollinating men's minds, offering "Sweetness and Light" (*Battle* 113). These images are clear enough, but in his pointed arthropod metaphors, Swift signals his allegiance to one while defining himself as the other; he is an arachnid turncoat, the spider fighting for the bee. What is more, Swift draws out the ramifications of this schizoid self-loathing unflinchingly:

[I]t would be very expedient for the Publick Good of Learning, that Every *True Critick*, as soon as he had finished his Task assigned, should immediately deliver himself up to Ratsbane, or Hemp, or from some convenient *Altitude*, and that no Man's Pretensions to so illustrious a Character, should by any means be received, before That Operation were performed. (*Tale* 45)

Criticism, it turns out, is justifiable only when bent on its own destruction. So perhaps Swift is a bee after all—not the honeybee of his description but the bumblebee, sacrificing its life to deliver its defensive sting.

Just to bring all the strands together: If Tory satire verges on the suicidal, it does so because the public sphere and the market establish mechanisms of opinion and discourse so firmly that to argue against them is already to accept their terms and procedures. To rage to one's peers against the validity of the public sphere is already to enter the sphere's discourses. The Tory writers' express purpose is to stick up for what Swift calls the "common forms" of premodern England (e.g., *Tale* 82). The problem is that these common forms begin to articulate them-

selves as such only when contested by the differentiated institutions of modernity, but once the forms have been reduced to a self-conscious intellectual stance, one position among many in an institutionalized debate, they are no longer common, and to argue their authority is to abandon oneself to paradox. This is the Tory contradiction at its least forgiving.

There is a sense, however, in which satire *as a form* can be read as an attempt to reckon with the contradiction—a contradiction that, I hope I have made clear, operates at several levels. Beyond any specific intellectual intervention, the calculated obnoxiousness of Tory satire signals a simple refusal to enter the public sphere, to subject itself to a cloyingly convivial, clubhouse reason. Satire, this is to say, is an attempt to avoid the discursive demands of sustained argument while still engaging in the debates from which such argument emerges. The Tory skeptic must stand on the fringes of the public sphere—at the coffeehouse door, so to speak—proclaiming in full voice his refusal to enter. Unwilling to participate in the game of persuasion, satire, whether in the form of Swiftian mimicry or Popish mock-heroics, becomes an attempt to evoke, through a series of negative gestures, an ideal that can no longer be positively articulated. Under the weight of modernity, satire broadcasts the transposed afterimage of traditional, authoritarian ideals that no longer seem rationally defensible and whose hegemony is waning. In these several senses satire is a kind of publishing that is not public. Satire is the Tories' defiant gambit to make good on that oxymoron.

An old argument claims that Tory satire is an exercise in negativity, though that negativity gets called by different names. Whereas the New Critics once spoke of Swift's savage irony (Leavis; Dyson), the Derrideans are now likely to discover self-deconstruction and aporia (Gill). My own argument, in this light, has been twofold: To the extent that Tory satire is a matter of negativity, we must give a historical account of that feature, which is as ideologically specific as the positive

positions it seeks to annul. In any such account, moreover, negativity will be only half the story. If we place too strenuous an emphasis on the Tories' refusals and repudiations, we will likely neglect their ingenious (though ill-fated) attempts to produce new textual forms, to solve at the level of genre ideological problems that can no longer be addressed at the level of argument. We may extend this observation's ambition, however, by following its line beyond satire into the rise of the novel, the Romantic lyric, and the philosophical discourse of the aesthetic: because while satire may fill this role for a time, what ultimately is a publishing that is not public if not the literary? When, in other words, is a public artifact not public? When it is aesthetic. Tory satire works to define the ideological dilemmas to which the categories of the aesthetic and the literary are a response. We have heard repeatedly in recent years that the constitution of literature in the eighteenth century is really just an attempt to keep the mob at bay, but it has been difficult to know what this claim refers to beyond a vague, unrevealing elitism. The public-sphere questions sketched in this essay might help fill such a gap, because they help us see, as the Tories would have seen, the value of literature as a form of textuality that is not merely political. To spell out the Tories' opposition to the public sphere is to make clear their desire for a form of textuality that operates at a safe remove from this degraded public space.⁶

There is a further paradox. The early eighteenth century is generally considered one of the great moments of political literature in anglophone cultural history. Among Habermas's most intriguing insights is the idea that, in the formation of the public sphere, the realm of culture or taste serves as a model for political discourse. His argument runs something like this: once art has lost its ceremonial or ritual functions, it achieves a kind of autonomy. This newly commodified art may be subject to contradictions of its own, but at least it is no longer subservient to aristocratic patronage. For the first time it can take on functions other than

those of representing the authority of court or church or aristocracy. Habermas's point here is that the autonomy that art claimed for itself when it entered the marketplace provided the early public sphere with a sense of what an autonomous critical reason might look like. When—to caricature the case a little—the seventeenth-century men of taste sat over their claret debating the merits of a poem, they were, had they but known it, rehearsing the exchange of ideas and opinions that would later define the public sphere. They were tutoring themselves in the possibilities of critical scrutiny or self-assertion. “The process,” Habermas concludes, “in which the state-governed public sphere was appropriated by the public of private people making use of their reason was one of functionally converting the public sphere in the world of letters already equipped with institutions of the public and with forums for discussion” (51; see also Hohendahl 52).

Once again, let me complicate Habermas's argument by identifying a contradictory tendency. The autonomy of art may in some sense presage the autonomy of public reason, but the category of the literary as a self-governing sphere of cultural production comes into being precisely when a certain kind of writing begins to assert its independence *against* the public sphere. The marriage of art and politics in the public sphere is a distinctly unhappy one, and it is in their seeming divorce that literature is born. The Tory satire that Habermas sees as typical of the public sphere may be political, but its politics, after all, is one of disaffection. Consider, in this light, Philip Stanhope's diatribe in the antigovernment periodical *Common Sense*:

I challenge the Ministerial Advocates to produce one Line of *Sense*, or *English*, written on their Side of the Question for these last Seven Years. [. . .] Has there been an Essay, in Verse or Prose, has there been even a Distich, or an Advertisement, fit to be read, on the Side of the Administration?—But on the other Side, what numbers of Dissertations, Essays, Treatises,

Compositions of all Kinds, in Verse and Prose, have been written, with all that Strength of Reasoning, Quickness of Wit, and Elegance of Expression, which no former Period of Time can equal? Has not every body got by heart, Satires, Lampoons, Ballads, and Sarcasms against the Administration? [. . .] By what uncommon Fatality then, is this Administration destitute of all Literary Support? (qtd. in Goldgar 9)

Stanhope's bluster is curious. A screed such as his does much to support Habermas's notion of the literary opposition. But one might say that it supports the notion rather too well, exceeding it to the point where the literary has become identical with the oppositional. Stanhope comes perilously close to suggesting that the realm of aesthetic production has become wholly inimical to the realm of government. It is but a short step from here to arguing the complete disassociation of literature from politics. It is, in other words, a short step from saying that humanist literature is opposed to Whig politics to saying that literature as such is opposed to—or the opposite of—any politics. If Tory satire is, in effect, a hyperpoliticized literature against politics, it should come as no surprise that this contradiction is, in the long run, untenable. What an eighteenth-century writer of a certain cast of mind requires, therefore, is a cultural category that can partake of the politicized mechanisms of print while distancing itself from the political, securing for the author a critical perch on modernity while staking a more direct claim on our ethical and sentimental faculties. And this, of course, is the category of literature.

But a crucial change has to take place before literature can emerge, and the Tory satirists (just barely) initiate this change. In their attempt to resist commodification, the first generation of writers for the market indulge in a widespread nostalgia for the patronage and manuscript culture of the courtly poets. Literature, however, will make no sense as a concept until writers can forgo this longing for an idealized form of textual circulation and wager instead on a new

form of textual production. They must convince themselves that they can produce a new kind of writerly object, one that can survive commodification intact, one that can make it through the marketplace without being mugged of its excellence. Swift and Pope, by effectively corralling the humanist elite out of the public sphere, help establish the preconditions for literature. So it is with the satirists that culture begins its long and stuttery history of secessionism, trying again and again to claim autonomy from the degraded spheres of politics and economics. Careful attention to the impasse of Tory publicity should help us understand how critics of modernity got going on this perpetual bid for an ever-receding independence. This bid is the story of Raymond Williams's cultured Victorians, bucking against the constricted instrumentality of industrial society. It is the story, too, of Pierre Bourdieu's rather woollier Second Empire bohemians, wearing their contempt as a badge of independence. In the name of Romanticism, aestheticism, or modernism, literature will discover, as though always afresh, that its political projects succeed best when they abjure all reference to the political. It is here, I think, that we must stop short—on discovering that this bold and bitter Adornian point is Tory through and through.

{ IV }

I have tried to shed some light on a few of our perpetual and common concerns: concerns such as the place of print in the political realm, the place of the author in the marketplace, the place of oppositional thought in dominant institutions, and the place of the literary in the hierarchy of textual forms. First and foremost, however, I am eager to stoke the dwindling debate over the promise and limitations of the public sphere. Most of the important work on the public sphere after Habermas has focused on access, and it is easy to see why. That a contradiction has plagued the public sphere since its inception has been the source of much recent suspicion toward its institutions, to the extent that they can even be

said to have survived under late capital. As Habermas notes, the public sphere defines itself as infinitely open and accommodating, as an arena of suasion and not force, free from the coercion and hierarchy that mark social relations in the private sphere and in the administered public space of the state. In practice, however, the public sphere is of course bounded in some familiar and troubling ways. It defines its participants as universal subjects, but this definition merely ensures that only the subjects who can, so to speak, make themselves universal can participate in its exercise of critical reason. It entails “the identification of ‘property owner’ with ‘human being as such’” (88), and I am sure few will be surprised to find that “property owner” and “human being as such” in the eighteenth century come with phalluses firmly attached (Benhabib; Fraser; Landes). Habermas is interested in the public sphere as a promise that is never fulfilled. Subsequent scholars have not had his dialectical patience. Terry Eagleton, for instance, pointedly dismisses the public sphere as the idealized self-image of the eighteenth-century merchant class, as a pretense of reason that merely masks the chummy accommodation of aristocratic and capitalist interests characteristic of the age (*Function*). This antagonism is even more pronounced in Michael Warner’s work, where the classical public sphere is rarely anything other than a cruel abstraction, the vacuous power play of disembodied subjects (“Mass Public”).

These uncompromising hostilities help train our minds on the problem of the public sphere, but I have yet to see in any account an acknowledgment that there was massive and articulate opposition to the institutions of the public sphere from its onset, opposition not just from plebeian or womanly counterpublics but also from the dominant sphere’s own elite and disaffected participants. The terms of this opposition—its allegiances, the alternatives it poses (or the lack of them)—have yet to be investigated in any sustained way. Such a project is doubly necessary, because, given the dissenting tenor of recent ac-

counts, an inquiry into the quandaries faced by the public sphere’s first opponents should provide us with some small insight into our own muddles and misgivings. That said, it is hard to know in what way the Tory satirists force us to revise our estimate of Habermas. His method is bracingly dialectical, using several interpretive strategies in quick succession. He begins by rigorously delineating the concept that the public sphere generates of itself, the dream of a perfect and collaborative rationality. He then measures the print institutions of the eighteenth century against their own norms and finds them perpetually wanting. Habermas is under no illusions here: the public sphere never matches its own concept but was always exclusive, particularist, and prejudicial. Then, having measured the institutions against their concept, he reverses tack: he measures the theories of publicity, notably Kant’s, against the institutions and shows that the theories too are inadequate, because they cannot, as theory, solve the real contradictions of the material structures they seek to describe. Finally—here is where it gets tricky—Habermas launches into a historical narrative, a story that he calls the “degeneration” (*Verfall*) of the public sphere under monopoly capital. The word *degeneration* does not quite capture the tenor of Habermas’s account, however, which attempts to show not so much that the public sphere fell apart during the nineteenth century but that the conditions of making good on the public sphere became increasingly less available, until they were eclipsed entirely by the administered publicity, the pretended and passive consensus, of public relations and mass culture. One often has the feeling—and this is the strange quality of his book—that Habermas is giving the history of an institution that never existed in the first place and then came, over time, to exist even less. It is uncertain where we should locate the Tories in such a troubled scheme. They demonstrate that a critical-oppositional discourse has felt compelled from the start to establish itself against the public sphere; that if one is inclined to be hostile

toward a commodified public space, there is no reason to wait until monopoly capital arrives to get hot and bothered; that the public sphere takes on its blandly ideological character as soon as it becomes the guardian of commercial society (in a mercantile London and not a monopolized one) and the bureaucratic state (under Walpole and not some welfare regime). Does this sink Habermas's account? That depends on whether one thinks that his normative claims require a pristine public sphere, operating in actual fact, to serve as historical anchor or original source.

What seems clear to me, however, is that the Tory satirists, in all their histrionic brilliance and political impotence, are a standing rebuke to any of us who would like to pursue a politics beyond the public sphere. They are a mocking reminder of our continued and quixotic attempt to write our way out of institutions we cannot at present change. Beyond the questions of print and the public sphere, I see this argument as an exercise in what Louis Althusser calls "the history of the theoretical" (49). To turn our sights on Tory satire is to furnish ourselves with the simple but necessary reminder that our criticisms of modern institutions have a kind of history, a history that is internal to these institutions. The Tory critique of the public sphere takes place in a more general discourse of skepticism—a blanket suspicion of modern epistemology, modern science, modern philosophy, the modern institutions of learning; and it is clear that, in our own scattershot way, we have come to share much of that skepticism. Can we interrogate our skeptical theoretical lineage with the same tough-mindedness, the same sharp eye for contradiction and the shifting historical ground, that we have brought to bear on the institutions of public reason? This essay is a rudimentary attempt to take up that challenge.

the left—any left. To cite just two further examples: Pope and Swift are the surprise heroes of E. P. Thompson's epic of precapitalist use rights, *Whigs and Hunters* (see esp. 216–18; see also Thompson, *Poverty* 42). Thompson finds in Tory disaffection an approximation of his own populist Marxism. Its traditionalist and radical humanism functions as a kind of placeholder: it is at least the possibility of something outside capital, a position that has not yet resigned itself to the seeming inevitability of commerce and corruption. For Edward Said, Swift is the model of the organic intellectual, and his satire is the model of "activist" writing, at once politically intransigent and theoretically reflective. It is our business, then, to rescue Swift from his accidental Toryism and to make of him instead "the exemplary author for vanguard contemporary criticism" (72–73). The poststructuralist Swift, in turn, remains a familiar figure, a deliciously excremental theorist of textuality and the body, anticolonialist, mischievous, materialist (Eagleton, *Benjamin*).

² Bolingbroke writes, "The utmost that private men can do, who remain untainted by the general contagion, is to keep the spirit of liberty alive in a few breasts; to protest against what they cannot hinder, and to claim on every occasion what they cannot by their own strength recover" (249).

³ Pope, for his part, issues a series of widely read poems later in his career announcing that he has relinquished his public vocation as a poet and will retreat henceforth into the carefully staged privacy of Twickenham. See the *Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot* and *The Second Epistle of the Second Book of Horace Imitated*, which contains the lines "Go, lofty poet! and in such a crowd, / Sing thy sonorous verse—but not aloud" (lines 108–09).

⁴ Swift and his fellows break with a traditional practice that one might imagine was still available to them—namely, scribal publication or manuscript circulation. Many of the Restoration's more scurrilous satires, like courtly poetry before them, circulated primarily among the writers' intimates. Tory satire remains in some sense personal—personal in its invective and in its rarely bestowed praise—but it becomes more conspicuous for cultivating this personal tone in the impersonal marketplace of print.

⁵ Tory writing invites us to see this contradiction as fairly dire, but it is not necessary to experience self-critique in these terms. It is possible to say that critique is naturally reflexive, in which case the contradiction outlined here loses its sting: if those in the public sphere insist on the value of critique, they will surely turn critique on themselves. This is no contradiction, or if it is, it is a contradiction easily weathered, for it is just the logic of critique unfolding. If we can grasp the difference between these two ways of experiencing critique's reflexivity, then we can grasp the difference between the Tory satirists and Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, with whom they otherwise seem to share much. Addison and Steele's *Spectator* is a critique of critique in this other, less harried sense, in which the public sphere comes, with genial good humor, to subject itself to self-review. See *Spectator*, no. 124.

NOTES

¹ Eighteenth-century studies is, in fact, crowded with attempts to conscript Swift and (to a lesser extent) Pope for

⁶This desire is fairly clear in Pope's (nonsatirical) attempt to redeem modernity by building a great tradition, in hopes of initiating at long last the Renaissance that inexplicably passed England by (see *Essay on Criticism*, lines 693–744).

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