CHAPTER 8

Truth, Fiction and "Undisputed History"

Telling Lies

"[A] Story says Johnson 'should be a Specimen of Life and Manners; but if the surrounding Circumstances are false, as it is no longer any Representation of Reality it is no longer worthy our Attention.'"[1] Events in time guide the true narratives of an historical "Representation of Reality." The art of poetry may seek truth by fictional means, by acts of invention; both forms of artistry recruit imagination to their distinctive purposes; but poetry, narrative or otherwise, makes no pretense to precise historical representation and in conventional wisdom needs no basis in material facts. The relative unconventionality of some of Johnson's judgments means, however, that his critical deployment of key terms, and the latitude he allows to them, require more elaborate teasing out. Recent studies in fakery and literary fraud within the world of eighteenth-century scholarship have drawn attention to the problematic glorification of truth within the Johnsonian *oeuvre* and the critical standards he applies. One recent example is an essay on "The Poet as Fraud" by Nick Groom, who seems to accuse Johnson of being ready to play fast and loose with truth when it suited him to do so: "[E]diting fabricated parliamentary reports, composing dedications for writers he had not met and books he had not read, and spending his nights walking the streets with a convicted murderer." Groom suggests a measure of hypocrisy in Johnson's practice that is continuous, he seems to imply, with his tendency to consort with reprobates such as Savage. He brings to the fore Johnson's early authorship of the antiquarian "Marmor Norfolciense: Or, an Essay on an Ancient Prophetical Inscription, in Monkish Rhyme, Lately Discover'd Near Lynn in Norfolk," published in 1739 by Johnson under the pseudonym

[1] Richard Ingrams (ed.), *Dr Johnson by Mrs Thrale: The "Anecdotes" in Their Original Form* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1984), p. 71.

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of "Probus Britanicus" (Works x, pp. 19–51).[2] In his parliamentary reporting, writes Groom, Johnson "concocted speeches supposedly given in the House of Commons as if he was actively reporting the words of Robert Walpole and William Pitt the Elder."[3] And so Groom has us place Johnson's later denunciation of the Macpherson Ossian fraud against his own readiness to make things up.[4] He is willing to relate the proceedings in Parliament without actually doing so, and is complicit in having others pass off as their own compositions that had no author but himself.

Groom's "fabricated" and "concocted" do more than heavily hint a fault; but perhaps one need not see dishonesty in all or any of this. Given the legal prohibitions of the age, the parliamentary debates were published under the fictional rubric of "Debates in the Senate of Magna Lilliputia," as Groom actually points out.[5] Moreover, the willingness to ghost-write, a practice that has to this day made the Johnsonian canon hard to fix, might equally signal duties of friendship and charity, and for this he is properly praised.[6] The labors Johnson undertook on others' behalf might similarly reflect a spirit of generosity toward those in want that Groom seems to begrudge him. There is, after all, no plagiary on Johnson's part and what is "made up" is, of course, "made."

[2] "Marmor Norfolciense" ("Norfolk Marble") was not publicly attributed to Johnson until 1775.

[3] Nick Groom, "The Poet as Fraud," in *The Oxford Handbook of British Poetry, 1660–1800*, ed. Jack Lynch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 227–46, at 227.

[4] The Ossian controversy, and Johnson's role in it under the aspect of "truth," have generated some vituperative debate. See, in particular, the heated exchanges between Groom and Thomas M. Curley, who defends Johnson's disapproval of Macpherson. Curley's essay, "Samuel Johnson and Truth: The First Systematic Detection of Literary Deception in James Macpherson's *Ossian*," appears in *AJ*, vol. 17 (2006), pp. 119–96. A reply by Groom appears as "Samuel Johnson and Truth: A Response to Curley" in *AJ*, vol. 17 (2006), pp. 197–201. Groom has reviewed Curley's *Samuel Johnson, the Ossian Fraud, and the Celtic Revival in Great Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Published in the *JNL*, vol. 62, no. 1 (March 2011), pp. 46–56, the review is remarkable for its outspoken hostility to Curley, who defends the concept of "truth" as foundational in Johnson's attitude to the controversy. The agitation of this scholarly debate over Ossian – replicating somewhat emotions at large in the eighteenth century – has not served particularly well our sense of what Johnson might mean by "truth" and how we are to take its usage in relation to "fiction."

[5] Groom, "The Poet as Fraud," p. 227; *Debates in Parliament*, Works xi–xiii. Arthur Murphy tells of Johnson's confession that "I never had been in the gallery of the House of Commons but once." "An Essay on the Life and Genius of Samuel Johnson, LL.D." (London, 1792), in *Johnsonian Miscellanies*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, 2 vols. (London: Constable, 1897), vol. i, p. 379. The proceedings were conveyed to Johnson as notes, courtesy the offices of Edmund Cave, editor of *The Gentleman's Magazine*, and his hired helpers.

[6] On the difficulties of determining the authorship of Johnson see O M Brack, Jr., "The Works of Samuel Johnson and the Canon," in *Samuel Johnson after 300 Years*, ed. Greg Clingham and Philip Smallwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 246–61.

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Nevertheless, there is point in Groom's observations. The complications that hover over the term "truth" have generated unease among Johnson's critics, and since Johnson uses the term with some confidence he will be understood, it is timely to reopen questions about its content and force. We have, for example, the outspoken claim in the *Preface to Shakespeare* of 1765 that while "the pleasures of sudden wonder are soon exhausted," "the mind can only repose on the stability of truth." Or when, later in the *Preface*, explaining the improving innovations of Shakespearean drama when there prevailed a taste for "strange events and fabulous transactions," Johnson remembers the regressive context of contemporary reception: "The mind, which has feasted on the luxurious wonders of fiction, has no taste for the insipidity of truth" (Works VII, pp. 61–62, 82). Later again in the "Life of Waller," he writes that while "Poets, indeed, profess fiction," "the legitimate end of fiction is the conveyance of truth" (*Lives*, vol. II, p. 40). In his "Life of Milton" Johnson had famously affirmed that "Poetry is the art of uniting pleasure with truth, by calling imagination to the help of reason" (*Lives*, vol. I, p. 282).

As the axiomatic form of these remarks would suggest, the traditional opposition of truth and fiction (like pleasure or imagination) instances concepts that are interlinked and that together shape core beliefs from which Johnson's judgments flow. In his *Dictionary* Johnson defines the poet as "an inventor; an author of fiction; a writer of poems," and he gives three definitions of "fiction" – (1) "The act of feigning or inventing"; (2) "The thing feigned or invented"; (3) "A falsehood; a lye." "Fictitious" is defined variously as (1) "Counterfeit; false; not genuine"; (2): "Feigned; imaginary"; (3) "Not real; not true." As the antonym of "fiction" defined in any one of these senses, truth, with its strongly emotional resonance, is among the mainstays of Johnson's literary criticism. In his "Life of Savage" (apropos Savage's historical drama *Sir Thomas Overbury*) Johnson had written that the "mind ... naturally *loves* truth" (my emphasis; *Lives*, vol. III, p. 129).[7]

The Truth and Untruth of Fiction

Johnson commonly acknowledges limits to unhindered theoretical speculation and with the exception of religious revelation takes issue with foolish ambitions in the face of universal imponderables. In what follows I will

[7] The version of the "Life" included in the *Lives of the Poets* is a revised version of Johnson's *An Account of the Life of Mr Richard Savage, Son of the Earl Rivers* (London, 1744), p. 22.

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examine Johnson's disconcertingly strong affirmation of a truth of literary fictionality specifically grounded in nonfictional actuality – in real-life events of an historical nature as distinct from sources in what can be imagined, fabricated, made up or merely created – the "feigned" or "not real" or "lyes" of the above dictionary definitions. By reviewing individual judgments, I suggest the complexities that attach to Johnson's routine terminology and I explore the implications of Johnson's attraction to the retrievable verities of the recorded past.

An inherent bias has often been supposed to restrict Johnson's interest in the new fiction of the novel – indeed, has spawned the accusation that Johnson was living in the critical past on this subject. But in *Rambler* 4 (March 31, 1750), Johnson defended "The works of fiction, with which the present generation seems more particularly delighted," and he explained that the works "exhibit life in its true state, diversified only by accidents that daily happen in the world, and influenced by passions and qualities which are really to be found in conversing with mankind." He went on to contrast the modern fictions of which their effect arises from "general converse, and accurate observation of the living world" with the ancient traditions of romance:

> In the romances formerly written, every transaction and sentiment was so remote from all that passes among men, that the reader was in very little danger of any applications to himself; the virtues and crimes were equally beyond his sphere of activity; and he amused himself with heroes and with traitors, deliverers and persecutors, as with beings of another species, whose actions were regulated upon motives of their own, and who had neither faults nor excellencies in common with himself. (Works III, pp. 201–21)

But even if Johnson does not develop the criticism of novelists far in his writings, his criteria of appreciation could only encourage the creative directions taken by such novelists as Jane Austen.[8] On "fiction" or the "fictitious" as recurrent critical terms, Johnson can recall the salutary contact with reality that marks his admiration for the novel in the *Rambler*. When discussing instances of poetical fiction in the *Lives* a correspondingly strong moral aversion to fictional indulgence will almost always arise. "Where there is leisure for fiction," Johnson complains of Milton's *Lycidas*, "there is little grief" (*Lives*, vol. I, p. 278). "No man," he writes of Cowley's amorous fabrications in *The Mistress*, "needs to be so

[8] See Freya Johnston, "Johnson and Austen," in *Samuel Johnson after 300 Years*, ed. Greg Clingham and Philip Smallwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 225–45.

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burthened with life as to squander it in voluntary dreams of fictitious occurrences" (*Lives*, vol. 1, p. 194).

The inspiration of poetry grounded in personal experience is clearly crucial. "We know that they never drove afield, and that they had no flocks to batten," Johnson observes defiantly of *Lycidas* in 1779. The note of impatience with the poem and its poet (and to an equal extent the poem's many contemporary admirers) comes from the observation that we "know," as Milton himself knows, that what is said by the real poet of the real friend is not true; this is not altered by the warmth of our response to Milton's pastoral and lyrical fancy. About the poem's relationship to the known events we don't even ask: "[T]hough it be allowed that the representation may be allegorical," Johnson observes of the lines that prompt his contempt, "the true meaning is so uncertain and remote, that it is never sought because it cannot be known when it is found." Grieving over lost friends is for Johnson far too serious an emotional state for such trivial diversions. The poem is consequently barren of feeling and unable to generate any in the reader: "He who thus grieves will excite no sympathy; he who thus praises will confer no honour" (*Lives*, vol. 1, p. 279).

This famous disavowal of the poetic logic of *Lycidas* did much to turn the twentieth-century British critic F. R. Leavis against the criticism of Johnson; but Johnson is expressing in his judgments criteria of truth that he had begun to work out and to apply critically earlier in his career. Johnson's remarks from *Adventurer* 92 (1753) on the two best pastorals of Virgil relate poetical credibility to the knowledge of "events that really happened." Several of the Virgilian poems confirm that Johnson, at this stage, is not hostile to pastoral invention as such but that he rather reserves disapproval for occasions where fiction as "the act of feigning or inventing" (*Dictionary* definition 1) is too weak. Of the fifth pastoral he writes that "whoever shall read it with impartiality, will find that most of the images are of the mythological kind, and therefore easily invented." In the tenth, however, there is "the genuine language of despair," and in the first, which is Johnson's overall favorite, "The description of Virgil's happiness in his little farm, combines almost all the images of rural pleasure": "he, therefore, that can read it with indifference," Johnson observes, "has no sense of pastoral poetry." The two poems taken together, he concludes, "may be of use to prove, that we can always feel more than we can imagine, and that the most artful fiction must give way to truth" (Works 11, pp. 419–24). The fiction is most artful when it gives way to truth specific to poetry. That it is composed in the pastoral genre is no disqualification.

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History and Fiction in Poems by Dryden and Pope

This principle of taste leads us to two judgments in the mature criticism of the *Lives of the Poets* that reinforce the appeal of poetry based on "events that really happened."[9] The first (1781) is Johnson's account of Pope's *Eloisa to Abelard* from *Poems* (1717). Johnson's commentary upon this celebrated piece recalls the priority he attaches in the *Adventurer* to what we feel over what we can imagine, and similarly accords the success of the poem to historical sources of truth: "The heart naturally loves truth. The adventures and misfortunes of this illustrious pair are known from undisputed history ... So new and affecting is their story that it supersedes invention, and imagination ranges at full liberty without straggling into scenes of fable" ("Life of Pope," in *Lives*, vol. IV, p. 72). Again, this time in the comparison from the "Life of Pope" of Dryden's *Alexander's Feast* with Pope's *Ode for St. Cecilia's Day*, Johnson observes that "Dryden's plan is better chosen; history will always take stronger hold of the attention than fable" ("Life of Pope," in *Lives*, vol. IV, p. 67).

Doubtless the reference to historical truth reinforces the impression of a Johnson hostile to the inventive achievement of such poems as *Lycidas*, and his distaste for "scenes of fable" may remind us of the scant attention he accords to Dryden's last work, his celebrated *Fables, Ancient and Modern* of 1700. Poems in this widely admired collection of translations have their sources in Chaucer, Boccaccio and the mythology of the Greek and Roman classics. In several instances the appeal of the translations depends on the fanciful imaginings of strange and wonderful stories from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Johnson's matter-of-fact verdict markedly downplays the volume's immense contemporary fame, a celebrity lasting well into the nineteenth century:[10]

> His last work was his *Fables*, in which he gave us the first example of a mode of writing which the Italians call *refaccimento* ... The works of Chaucer ... require little criticism. The tale of the Cock seems hardly worth revival; and the story of *Palamon and Arcite*, containing an action unsuitable to the times in which it is placed, can hardly be suffered to pass without censure of the hyperbolical commendation which Dryden has given it in the general Preface [to *Fables*]. (*Lives*, vol. II, p. 147)[11]

[9] I am grateful to my colleague Professor David Hopkins for starting the conversation about these judgments that has led to the present discussion.

[10] For an exemplary book-length study of the collection see Cedric D. Reverand II, *Dryden's Final Poetic Mode* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988).

[11] Despite Johnson's unflattering mention of Chaucer here it is clear, as Hopkins and Mason have pointed out, that "though as a critic he dismissed Dryden's reimaginings of several of Chaucer's

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One suggested explanation for this cool response is that Johnson was preempting and attempting to curtail the developing enthusiasms of his friend Joseph Warton as they were to surface in the second volume of his *Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope* (1782): "It is to his fables," wrote Warton, "that Dryden will owe his immortality ... The warmth and melody of these pieces, has never been excelled in our language."[12] When therefore Johnson writes that "history will always take stronger hold of the attention than fable," he may seem out of step with his times. It appears, however, that there is no invariable rule of judgment asserted in Johnson's assessment of the two poems by Dryden and Pope independent of the critical occasion of these judgments.[13] Were that the case such a rule would be recalled more consistently across the range of Johnson's critical opinions than it actually is. He would, for instance, be making a special claim for Shakespeare's history plays (*King John*, the two Richards and the various Henrys gathered up as a group) in contrast to the tragedies and the comedies. The latter depend less (or not at all) on known historical narratives. But Johnson does not do this. Indeed, in the *Preface* of 1765 he writes with undifferentiated approval of Shakespeare's plots "whether historical or fabulous" as "always crouded with incidents" (Works VII, p. 83). In *Rambler* 4 Johnson had commented without *dis*approval on "narratives where historical veracity has no place" (Works III, p. 24).

Fanciful narratives that have no historical basis but nevertheless retain their emotional force could moreover impress Johnson. Just as he makes no special plea for the "Histories," so Johnson can be assumed to have fully endorsed the first note in his 1765 Shakespeare edition on *The Tempest*, retained from Warburton. He prints without any qualifying comment Warburton's critical praise of the play (1747) for "that sublime and amazing Imagination, peculiar to *Shakespear*, which soars above the Bounds of Nature without forsaking Sense; or, more properly, carries Nature along with him beyond her established Limits."[14] Johnson echoes the remark when in his *Preface* he passes his own judgment on

tales, his *Dictionary* shows him to have known them intimately." David Hopkins and Tom Mason, *Chaucer in the Eighteenth Century: The Father of English Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), p. 409.

[12] Joseph Warton, *Essay on the Genius and Writings* [*Writings and Genius*] *of Pope*, 2 vols. (London, 1756 and 1782), vol. II, p. 12.

[13] For extended discussion of this concept within critical history see Philip Smallwood, *Critical Occasions: Dryden, Pope, Johnson and the History of Criticism* (New York: AMS Press, 2011).

[14] Samuel Johnson (ed.), *The Plays of William Shakespeare*, 8 vols. (London, 1765), vol. I, p. 3.

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nonnaturalistic beings: "Even where the agency is supernatural," he allows, "the dialogue is level with life": "Other writers disguise the most natural passions and most frequent incidents; so that he who contemplates them in the book will not know them in the world: Shakespeare approximates the remote, and familiarizes the wonderful" (Works VII, pp. 64–65). Nor, conversely, as we shall see, does Johnson systematically commend seventeenth- or eighteenth-century political or occasional poetry. Critical reservations remain even when examples of poetry "on affairs of state" evoke historical events one could fairly describe as "undisputed."

On this count Johnson mounts in the *Lives* a defense against Warton's charge that Addison's war poem *The Campaign* (on the Duke of Marlborough's historic victory at Blenheim) is a "gazette in rhyme": "his images are not borrowed merely from books," Johnson writes in his "Life of Addison," and observes of the poem that "The rejection and contempt of fiction is rational and manly" (*Lives*, vol. II, p. 24). But much of this kind of poetry seems to Johnson's eye undistinguished. The satirical form of Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel* may famously depend on the history of the Popish Plot (and the allegory of Old Testament narrative); but Johnson's appraisal offers no unqualified approval for Dryden's poetical classic of political ridicule:

> Absalom and Achitophel is a work so well known, that a particular criticism is superfluous. If it be considered as a poem political and controversial, it will be found to comprise all the excellences of which the subject is susceptible . . .
>
> It is not, however without faults . . . allegories drawn to great length will always break . . .
>
> The subject had likewise another inconvenience: it admitted little imagery or description . . .
>
> As an approach to historical truth was necessary, the action and catastrophe were not in the poet's power. (*Lives*, vol. II, pp. 135–36)

Johnson here sees "historical truth" as an inescapable impediment to the poetical image-making that gives the poetry its life.[15]

The imaginative works that Johnson himself composes are too various in their modes to explain his favoring of historical sources in other poets. Johnson's *Vanity of Human Wishes* recalls real-life figures from history,

[15] The comments can be placed with Johnson's characteristic impatience in response to poems (such as *The Dunciad* of Pope) founded on topical as distinct from very recent historical events (Popish Plot 1678–81; *Absalom and Achitophel* 1681). The events on which the poem is based were topical in 1681 but had become "historical truth" by Johnson's day.

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Cardinal Wolsey, Charles XII of Sweden, Jonathan Swift and so on, who did indisputably exist. But others – the ruined young woman in the portrait of "Pride and Prudence" – can in the same text claim only the fictional reality proper to a Jane Austen novel. Johnson's only tragic drama, *Irene* of 1749, draws on a real history of the Turks.[16] However, Johnson's prose fiction of 1759, *Rasselas*, commences in a utopian "Happy Valley" and takes the form of an Eastern Tale: not exactly a vote of confidence in the superior attractions of "undisputed history." Once again, there are no grounds for the belief that Johnson thought fictional works were written with an intention to deceive or lie. Readers of *Rasselas* notice that characters and events are made up for the purposes of the story and in that sense "fictional." But *pace* Groom, no "fraud" – no *dishonest* pretense that something is true when it is not – is perpetrated.

History, Myth and Poetry

One complicating factor is that the break between history and mythology may not always be as sharp as historians would like. What once counted as historical fact may no longer go unchallenged; yet, even if the ancient narrative of Persepolis affording Dryden's ode its "plan" might now be disputed, Johnson does not appeal for verification to his own generation of historians. Truths about the nature of the world that derive from enduring myths may be encapsulated in poetry; but they are not the same thing as history, and what occurs when history is transformed into art may not have happened. What did happen (unknowable when facts are lost in the mists of time) may nevertheless be needed to generate the poem. A poet may retell a mythological tale believing it to be true when the content is fictional. This accords with what the philosophers Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen call the "description sense" of "fictional" (i.e., "unreal").[17]

Johnson wrote that Dryden's ode "has been always considered as exhibiting the highest flight of fancy, and the exactest nicety of art"

[16] Johnson's source is Richard Knolles's *Generall Historie of the Turkes* (London, 1603).

[17] For an account of the "object" and "description" senses of the term "fiction" see Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. 16–18. Lamarque and Olsen observe that "A fictional character is a fiction in the object sense, a work of fiction is a fiction in the description sense. To say of a thing that it is fictional is to suggest that it does not exist, the implied association being between what is fictional and what is *unreal*. To say of a description that it is fictional is to suggest that it is not true, the implied association being between what is fictional and what is *false*" (p. 16).

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(*Lives*, vol. II, p. 148), but he spends no time dwelling on correspondence between the "real events" of *Alexander's Feast* and Dryden's retelling of them in the ancient poetical form. As the opening lines of the poem would suggest, the retelling highlights the gulf between poetical fictionalization and history's representational debt to the real. The Dionysian temper of the lines signals Dryden's will to unshackle his discourse from historical source material:

> Twas at the Royal Feast, for *Persia* won,
> By *Philip's* Warlike Son:
> Aloft in awful State
> The God-like Heroe sate
> On his Imperial Throne.[18]

In his translation from *Fables* of Chaucer's "Nun's Priest's Tale" ("The Cock and the Fox"), Dryden could entertain a self-mocking allusion to his own poem when he joked that "Princes rais'd by Poets to the Gods" are "*Alexander'd* up in lying Odes." [19] Whether Dryden's "lying" ode is true within the fictions permitted by poetry, whether the poetry arises from events that really occurred and whether or how it is true *to* them if they did happen are different issues. But factual reality still counted with Dryden. In their Longman edition of the poem Paul Hammond and David Hopkins note that the sources Dryden used "bequeathed a profoundly ambivalent picture of Alexander to posterity." At the same time Dryden wanted "to protect himself against the charge of historical inaccuracy": he wrote to Tonson for this reason to ask him to "alter the name of Lais [in the poem] for Thais." [20]

Johnson's supposition that Pope was relying on historical events in *Eloisa* is well grounded: Abelard and Eloisa were "real life" characters to be sure. Pope emphasizes the factuality of his narrative in the "Argument"

[18] "Alexander's Feast; or the Power of Musique. An Ode, In Honour of St. Cecilia's Day" (1697), in *The California Edition of the Works of John Dryden*, 20 vols. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1956–2000), vol. VII: *Poems 1697–1700*, ed. Vinton A. Dearing (2000), p. 3, lines 1–5.

[19] "Fables: The Cock and the Fox," in ibid., p. 325, line 660.

[20] *The Poems of John Dryden*, ed. Paul Hammond and David Hopkins, 5 vols. (London: Longman, 1988–2005), vol. V, pp. 5, 8. In his note to Johnson's commentary on Pope's corresponding music ode Lonsdale observes that in his 1797 *Works of Pope* Joseph Warton, who promoted contemporary tastes favorable to fable, seems actually to be adopting Johnson's preference for Dryden in his own comments on Pope's as against Dryden's ode: "Warton may for once," writes Lonsdale, "echo SJ when later stating that 'The subject of Dryden's ode is superior to . . . Pope's, because the former is historical, and the latter merely mythological (*Works of P* [1797]) i. 485).'" (*Lives*, vol. IV, p. 325).

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prefixed to the poem: "Abelard and Eloisa flourish'd in the twelfth Century; they were two of the most distinguish'd persons of their age in learning and beauty, but for nothing more famous than their unfortunate passion."[21] The reference is to the historical circumstance of Abelard's castration and the couple's tragic separation. Pope includes occasional notes to his poem recording the dates of the protagonists' deaths, and he points up the rootedness of the poetical story in a universe of fact. This is despite the finding that Pope is basing his *Eloisa* on a romanticized French version of their Latin letters by Bussy-Rabutin from 1697, a rendition that was itself translated into English in 1713 by John Hughes.[22] On this evidence, his editor Roger Lonsdale concludes, Johnson's belief in Pope's poem taking its start from "undisputed history" is "hardly justified" (*Lives*, vol. IV, p. 331). Pope's view of the narrative behind *Eloisa to Abelard* is that of a true history that has gone through more than one previous "fictional" transformation and remains true nevertheless.

In the case both of Dryden's poem and of Pope's we ask whether Johnson's making a point that the fiction of the poetry is founded on history is mistakenly to prize an accidental attribute as a central artistic quality. The legitimate end of fiction can be the "conveyance of truth"; but truth and fiction may not always connect through the logic of ends and means. Truth and fiction are sometimes antagonists in seeming competition: Johnson can suggest fiction's tendency to corrupt truth by excess: "Where truth is sufficient to fill the mind, fiction is worse than useless; the counterfeit debases the genuine" ("Life of Gray," in *Lives*, vol. IV, p. 182). How, then, are these terms of judgment resolved within Johnson's outlook? Can they in fact be resolved?

Realities Found and Imagined

My conjecture is that Johnson's praise of the historical basis of the poems by Dryden and Pope is founded on an emotional embrace of reality and signals our universally precarious grasp of the real. Johnson recognized the bedrock importance to literary pleasure of this investment in the material; and when the cultural conditions of the late 1770s were increasingly defined by taste for fictions unhinged from realities – as the popularity of *Lycidas* reminded him – the need was more urgent.

[21] *The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope*, gen. ed. John Butt, 11 vols. (London: Methuen, 1939–69), vol. II, p. 318.
[22] John Hughes (trans.), *Pierre Abélard and Héloise* (London, 1713).

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Other factors inform the remarks on Dryden's ode: Playing their part are Johnson's unshakeable disdain for free-floating fabulation and time-wasting journeys into "the dark and dismal regions of mythology, where neither hope nor fear, neither joy nor sorrow can be found" (*Lives*, vol. IV, p. 68). Johnson can claim that "Works of imagination excel by their allurement and delight; by their power of attracting and detaining the attention" (*Lives*, vol. II, p. 147); but he is always on guard against our seeing the physical world of real objects as a construct of mind (hence the famous Boswellian verification anecdote of the rock, the kick and the philosophical prestige of Berkeley).[23] Johnson's faith in material authenticity is in this way often at odds with movements in his own day to extend the role of fiction and with the imaginings of recent theorists who have cast doubt on the reality of a given objective world standing in sharp contrast to the made up worlds of literary artists. "[I]f we could ever become reconciled to the idea that most of reality is indifferent to our description of it," writes Richard Rorty wistfully, "and that the human self is created by the use of a vocabulary rather than being adequately or inadequately expressed in a vocabulary, then we should at last have assimilated what was true in the Romantic idea that truth is made rather than found."[24] Granted, some facts in Johnson's "found" reality are more a matter of dispute than others – history, like science, proceeds on the assumption that its findings can be overturned by new scholarship, fresh interpretation or experimental refutation. But if all established facts were open to dispute to the same degree, then Johnson would have no use for history or knowledge of material sources.

In his discussion of the fictional use of real events in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, the philosopher Isaiah Berlin was to find evidence of the great novelist's devotion to first causes and a determination "to go to the root of the matter at whatever cost":

> History, only history, only the sum of the concrete events in time and space – the sum of the actual experience of actual men and women in their

[23] "I observed," Boswell records, "that though we are satisfied [Berkeley's] doctrine is not true, it is impossible to refute it. I never shall forget the alacrity with which Johnson answered, striking his foot with mighty force against a large stone, till he rebounded from it, "I refute it *thus*." Boswell, vol. I, p. 471. The anecdote relates to an event dated Saturday, August 6, 1763.

[24] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 7. Johnson's reaction to the eighteenth-century precursor of such a philosophical imagination was amiable derision: "Being in company with a gentleman who thought fit to maintain Dr. Berkeley's ingenious philosophy, that nothing exists but as perceived by some mind; when the gentleman was going away, Johnson said to him, 'Pray, Sir, don't leave us; for we may perhaps forget to think of you, and then you will cease to exist.'" Boswell, vol. IV, p. 27.

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> relation to one another and to an actual three-dimensional, empirically experienced, physical environment – this alone contained the truth, the material out of which genuine answers – answers needing for their apprehension no special sense or faculties which normal human beings did not possess – might be constructed.
>
> This, of course, was the spirit of empirical enquiry which animated the great anti-theological and anti-metaphysical thinkers of the eighteenth century, and Tolstoy's realism and inability to be taken in by shadows made him their natural disciple before he had learnt of their doctrines.[25]

Johnson, who is one of the "thinkers of the eighteenth century" not "taken in" by the "shadows" of superstition, turns to tangible, verifiable, irresistible, concrete reality, when and if this can be known – as against the delusive manifestations of the other-worldly or figments of the poet's "voluntary dreams." If what is depicted in an imaginative poem really happened, then that matters; but the fact that it really happened leaves intact the imaginative pleasure of a poetry that draws on history. Ascertainable, factual, historical truth enhances the emotional appeal of such a poetry because it is undiminished by the arcane poetical consciousness not available to normal apprehension.

Johnson claims that the "undisputed" historical basis of *Eloisa*'s horrific narrative, as traced through the letters, gives Pope's imaginative construct a similar validity. In the case of Dryden's *Alexander's Feast*, a Johnsonian favorite celebrated for at least 150 years following its publication in 1697, the remarks famously develop the comparison between the two St. Cecilia's Day odes of Dryden and Pope: "The passions excited by Dryden are the pleasures and pains of real life, the scene of Pope is laid in imaginary existence. Pope is read with calm acquiescence, Dryden with turbulent delight; Pope hangs upon the ear, and Dryden finds the passes of the mind" (*Lives*, vol. IV, pp. 67–68). Reference to historical origins counts when distinguishing the different *effect* of the odes – one on the "ear," one on the "mind"; one at a superficial level, one having psychological penetration. The test is the experience of the reader: "it was not clear if the passions of 'real life' were excited in Alexander," write Tom Mason and Adam Rounce of Dryden's ode. But "it is clearly the reader whose

[25] Isaiah Berlin, "The Hedgehog and the Fox," in *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays*, ed. Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer (London: Pimlico, 1998), pp. 443–44. David Ferry writes of "the Tolstoyan severity and sympathy of the 'Life of Savage.'" "What Johnson Means to Me," *JNL*, vol. 55, no. 2 (September 2004), pp. 7–10, at 7.

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attention is held, the reader who feels turbulent delight, and the reader the 'passes' of whose mind are found."[26]

Historical truth, writes Berlin, is "the material out of which genuine answers – answers needing for their apprehension no special sense or faculties which normal human beings did not possess – might be constructed."[27] In a universe of which our understanding is uncertain, a call for the "genuine" and "normal" as against the special is as instinctive to Johnson as it is to Tolstoy. Johnson writes to related effect at the close of the "Life of Gray" of a poetry grounded in the "common sense" of an unspoilt "common reader" who, "after all the refinements of subtilty and dogmatism of learning," stands "uncorrupted with literary prejudices." By this nonspecialist standard, available to normal faculties and apprehensions, "must be finally decided all claim to poetical honours" (*Lives*, vol. IV, p. 184).

A statement of what remains when all is said and done we have encountered in Johnson's *Preface to Shakespeare*: "Nothing can please many, and please long," he writes, "but just representations of general nature." Whatever sensations are excited by fiction, "the mind can only repose on the stability of truth" (Works VII, pp. 61–62). "After *all* the refinements"; "*finally* decided"; "*Nothing* can please"; "*only* repose" (my emphases). Such formulations evoke the finalist foundations of Johnson's criteria. The fictional spirit that Tolstoy shared with Johnson is anchored by history, and will call into question not only the insincerities and untruths of *Lycidas* but all efforts to overrate the impalpable, the enigmatic, the undecidable, the ambiguous, the mesmeric or the occult. Johnson invokes historical source material when appraising the strange, dark, singularity of the narrative of *Eloisa* and its early appeal to the luminous, youthful imagination of Pope. In his final sentence on *Eloisa* Johnson says that the story "supercedes invention, and imagination ranges at full liberty without *straggling* [my emphasis] into scenes of fable." Johnson's earthy horticultural metaphor, "a fruitful soil, and careful cultivation," suggests how even the dark fictions of *Eloisa* are grounded and knowable. Fiction may legitimately grow out of history, and history remains, other things being equal, particularly "fruitful soil" (*Lives*, vol. IV, p. 72).

[26] Tom Mason and Adam Rounce, "*Alexander's Feast; or the Power of Musique*: The Poem and Its Readers," in *John Dryden: Tercentenary Essays*, ed. Paul Hammond and David Hopkins (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), pp. 140–73, at 154.

[27] Berlin. *The Proper Study of Mankind*, p. 444. As the historical novelist Hilary Mantel observed in the first of her series of five Reith Lectures on historical fiction, "Resurrection: The Art and Craft," facts are not truth, though they are part of it. The first lecture, broadcast on BBC Radio 4, June 13, 2017, is available as a podcast on the BBC website (www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/b08tcbrp) under the title "The Day is for the Living."

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