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EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY PRINT CULTURE AND  
THE “TRUTH” OF FICTIONAL NARRATIVE

AS A SESSION entitled “Truth” at a recent Modern Language Association of America annual convention has demonstrated, the obsession with the epistemologies of truth is alive and well. Our “familiar ways of thinking and talking about truth,” as one of the speakers, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, observed, remain “theoretically elusive, discursively slippery, and hard or perhaps impossible to articulate clearly in relation to other current concepts and ideas”<sup>1</sup>—an irresistible invitation to further thinking and talking on the subject. My essay enters this conversation by attempting to contemplate truth not as a stable attribute but as a ongoing attribution, that is, not as an inherent *property* but rather as a dynamic *process* predicated upon functional idiosyncrasies of our evolved cognitive architecture. The broad question posed here is this: What if our never-ending quest for truth is itself cognitively constructed and the various forms that this quest takes manifest the (not necessarily harmonious) interaction between our evolved cognitive capacities and the ever-changing specifics of our cultural environment?

Consider just one of the forms of such an interaction, namely, our age-long preoccupation with the “truth” of literary narrative. In many respects, this preoccupation is counterproductive: the most “fantastic” story contains a number of contingently useful “truths” about the world, whereas the most “factual” narrative manipulates facts by virtue of being a *narrative* or a subjective *arrangement* of information. Still, we persevere in wanting to put the label “fiction” or “nonfiction” onto any story that comes our way. As I will argue, the bookstore’s organization of its sections satisfies this species of “cognitive” craving as well as

reinforces it, making it seem culturally inevitable. Viewed from this perspective, our culture appears to be a multifaceted feedback mechanism engaged in the process of satisfying, reinforcing, struggling with, and manipulating our cognitive predispositions.

The cultural manipulation of our cognitive predispositions is the topic of the present essay, which discusses several examples of such manipulation that respond to our desire to assign a certain “truth-value” to a given narrative, i.e., to attach a label to it announcing its “factuality” or “fictionality.” “Truth-value” is a loaded term, resisting definition, and liable to lead me into trouble. Imperfect as it is, however, I need it in order to shuffle between two scholarly discourses that do not (yet) have much vocabulary in common: literary criticism and cognitive science. The reason for turning to cognitive science in my discussion of literary narrative is that cognitive anthropologists and psychologists frequently engage the same problems that we do when we ask, What is “Fiction”? How is it different from “History”? How do we decide whether what we are reading is “true?” The key difference between the two approaches is, however, that whereas the literary critic focuses on specific texts produced and read in specific cultural circumstances, the cognitive anthropologist pays attention to the cross-cultural insistence with which people wish to and often claim to distinguish “truth” from “fiction” and inquires into the possible evolutionary history of the cognitive architecture implicated in our never-ending quest for “truth.” The latter perspective can thus be useful for literary studies because, by suggesting that our evolved cognitive architecture often “encourages” us to construe the world as a negotiation of “truths” and “nontruths,” this perspective begins to account—at least on some level—for the fact that people may approach a complex cultural artifact, such as a novel, with a “truth”/“non-truth” binary in mind that is ultimately not very productive.<sup>2</sup> Evolutionary psychologists and anthropologists frequently point to disjunctions between the tasks that our brain evolved to solve and the tasks that we have to deal with in the modern environment; our vexed insistence on determining the truth-value of the 500-page printed narrative—not an object one would come across in the Pleistocene—can be seen as yet another instance of such a disjunction.

Thus, I suggest that, on the one hand, there is no “one-size-fits-all” definition of the truth-value of a given text and no cross-cultural yardstick against which such a value could be measured. On the other

hand, we have a recurring tendency, grounded, possibly, in what Leda Cosmides and John Tooby characterize as our system of cognitive “information management,”<sup>3</sup> to look for cues attesting to the (however arbitrarily defined) “truth” of a given text and to react strongly when our initial assessment of the text’s “truth-value” has been disappointed. What this means is that at certain historical junctures, when a new medium is entering a culture and the cues needed to evaluate (however subconsciously and subjectively) the “truth” of narratives transmitted through this medium appear to be in flux, the proliferation of those hard-to-classify narratives leaves people deeply anxious, grasping for “labels” and uncertain about the new rules of “labeling.” We are living at one such juncture right now, with the deluge of information coming at us through the Internet.

My focus here, however, is on an earlier historical instance of such culture-wide “cognitive uncertainty”—the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century—when English readers, living through what scholars today see as the first stage of the distinctly modern explosion of mass media, were faced with a challenge of orienting themselves amidst the sudden flood of printed texts. I argue that the revolutionary and widespread introduction of new media into culture creates a space where authors can experiment with readers’ expectations concerning the “truth” of their stories, and that, whereas it is too early to tell what cultural forms such an experimentation will ultimately take in our own Internet-besieged time, back in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, it generated numerous narratives that consciously challenged readers’ expectations about their “truth-value.” By doing so, these experimental narratives renegotiated the boundaries of genres and broadened the concept of fiction as such. In arguing that the Enlightenment’s experimentation with literary forms was, in part, a function of our cognitive response to the advance of the print media, I am not offering yet another version of the “rise of the novel” paradigm so central to contemporary eighteenth-century studies. Instead, the eighteenth century here serves as a case study for hypothesizing a conceptual framework sensitive to the ways in which the functioning of our evolved cognitive architecture *both* informs and is informed by specific cultural circumstances. Positing people’s psychological reaction on the basis of cognitive predispositions establishes a crucial link between connecting the “historical” and the “literary,” and thus demonstrates that a cognitive approach provides a new perspective on the

relationship between two much commented-upon cultural developments: the expansion of print media in the Enlightenment and the concurrent experimentation with literary genres.

What are some of the possible features of our evolved cognitive architecture that could underlie and structure the endless variety of our context- and culture-specific quests for truth, including our desire to gauge the truth-value of fictional narratives? Evolutionary psychologists and anthropologists posit as one such feature our cognitive ability to store verbally transmitted information in different formats, appending it with special mental “tags” that specify the scope of inferences that could be drawn from this information. Cosmides and Tooby argue that humans stand out “within the extraordinary diversity of the living world” because of their ability to use “information based on relationships that [are] ‘true’ only temporarily, locally, or contingently rather than universally and stably” and because of the corresponding “economics of information management” that allow them to navigate (with varying success) the sea of data opened up by this admission of local, contextualized truths. One crucial feature of this system of cognitive information management is our “capacity to carry out inferential operations on sets of inferences that incorporate suppositions or propositions of conditionally unevaluated truth value, while keeping their computational products isolated from other knowledge stores until the truth or utility of the suppositions is decided, and the outputs are either integrated or discarded.” In other words, we have cognitive architecture that allows us to store certain kinds of information under advisement, limiting the scope of inferences we draw from it until more data either strengthening or weakening the “truth-value” of this initial information becomes available. The news that it is raining outside, for instance, has a relatively unlimited scope of inferences. To use Tooby and Cosmides’s terminology, one would easily integrate the “computational product” of this information with “other knowledge stores,” thus making it possible to generate a broad variety of inferences, such as, “I better take an umbrella to work”; “Peaches will be cheaper at the Farmer’s Market this weekend because the drought seems to be over, so I will take more cash with me when I go shopping”; “I should postpone making any important announcements until the second part of my lesson because many of my students will be struggling to find parking around the campus and will be late for class,” etc. On the other hand, the news that it is raining golden coins would have a limited scope of inferences, because we would not immediately make the computational

product of this information available to other knowledge stores. We would not assume, for example, that because we would soon have a bucket full of golden coins in our backyards, we could start spending our savings right away. At the same time, we would not ignore or discard the information, but rather store it for further consideration, if only to arrive later at certain conclusions about the personality of the bearer of this information.

Tooby and Cosmides suggest that this capacity to store information under advisement “is essential to planning, interpreting, communicating, employing the information communication brings, evaluating others’ claims, mind-reading, pretence, detecting or perpetrating deception, using inferences to triangulate information about past or hidden causal relations, and much else that makes the human mind so distinctive.” They further argue that such “suppositionally” stored information is prevented from circulating freely within the cognitive system by “scope operators,” that is, by “tags” specifying the source of information (“it was Eve who told me that Adam is a bad colleague”), its creedal value (turns out that Eve has a long-standing grudge against Adam and that her stories might well be untrue), the attitude of the agent providing the information, time and place specification, the specific context in which information could be applied, etc., and they call the representations that are “bound or interrelated by scope operators *scope-representations*.” They also point out that “once a fact is established to a sufficient degree of certainty, source, attitude, and time tags are lost . . . e.g., most people cannot remember who told them that apples are edible or that plants photosynthesize.”<sup>4</sup>

Fictional stories, according to this hypothesis, are an example of scope-representations par excellence—they are representations with a limited scope of inferences. As Cosmides and Tooby put it, narratives “explicitly labeled as fiction (e. g., Little Red Riding Hood) ought to never be retired without a source tag. . . . [Without such a tag], a fiction would be stored as a reality.” Cosmides and Tooby add that cognitive systems that have evolved to differentiate among representations, storing some of them with scope-limiting tags, such as a source tag in the case of fiction, “are, no doubt, far from perfect, [but] without them, our form of mentality would not be possible.”

The “imperfection” of such systems is, in fact, the focus of an argument developed by Ellen Spolsky, who opens up the category of fiction to include a broad array of cultural representations, such as larger ideological formations and local fictions we “live by.” I see the

larger significance of Spolsky's argument—though I am not sure she would agree with me on this—in her problematization of Cosmides and Tooby's implicit assumption that complex cultural representations such as printed texts or social fictions are in principle as easily described in terms of scope-representational framing as relatively uncomplicated informational bits (e.g., "Adam is a bad colleague"). One of Spolsky's examples involves a "young man who needs (according to one of his cultural stories) to drink a lot of beer of an evening, even though, according to another story, he needs to drive his date safely home." There is no "evolved mechanism," Spolsky points out, "that will inform the fellow that the first story is a local cultural fiction, and the second a [reality] . . . The fact that it would be desirable to be able to make reliably strong and clear judgments doesn't mean it is always possible to do so."<sup>5</sup> Evolutionary psychologists would agree with Spolsky that our presumably evolved cognitive ability to store information with scope-limiting tags does not translate into a concrete fitness advantage in the modern environment; in this case, it would not enable the young driver to discriminate between harmful (i.e., false) and salutary (i.e., true) cultural stories. As Cosmides and Tooby point out, evolution did not have a crystal ball; the adaptations that contributed to the survival of human species hundreds of thousands years ago and thus became part of our permanent cognitive makeup can be neutral or downright harmful in contemporary circumstances. At the same time, the point that Spolsky's example brings home so forcefully is that even if we agree that there are cognitive adaptations that enable us to store certain kinds of information as scope-representations—and Spolsky is skeptical about the whole idea of scope-representations—those adaptations have evolved in response to relatively less complex units of information conveyed by verbal communication, and they do not work so smoothly (or not at all) when applied to complex cultural artifacts like printed texts or social fictions.

My argument is indebted both to Cosmides and Tooby's exploration of how we store representations "explicitly labeled as fiction" and to Spolsky's skepticism about approaching a complex cultural artifact with a scope-representational paradigm. I am interested in what happens *before* certain texts get explicitly marked as fiction and stored as perpetual scope-representations, and in how writers may attempt to capitalize on the cognitive uncertainty (predicated arguably upon the representational complexity of the text in question) accompanying this labeling/categorization process. Broadly speaking, if our obsession with

the notion of “truth” is but a surface articulation of our underlying cognitive tendency to depend on “scope-operators” (or “tags”) that allow us to sort the incoming representations according to their inferential potential, then we must find ourselves again and again at the mercy of cultural agents who provide us with the cues that we need for such a sorting. Nancy Easterlin comments on the ease with which “children . . . learn the cultural conventions that separate fictional and nonfictional narratives” (“Making Knowledge,” 143). This ease in learning may suggest that there is no necessarily clear-cut ontological division between fictional and nonfictional narratives—as Spolsky would argue, the notion of such a division is deeply problematic—but rather that we might be particularly attuned to the environmental cues that could be construed as constituting the difference between fiction and nonfiction. If Cosmides and Tooby are right, our evolved cognitive architecture makes us (dangerously) dependent on cultural manipulation of the relevant cues signaling the “truth-value” of the narrative.

I suggest thus that each medium of communication (oral communication, print, video, Internet) may necessarily respond to our cognitive predilection to seek out cues that would allow us to assess the relative “truth-value” of information transmitted through the medium, and each medium frames the information so as to enable (and manipulate) the assessment process. The cues may differ depending on the nature of the medium (i.e., the way it caters to a particular perceptual channel) and its cultural history. In what follows, I will briefly consider some of the cues used specifically in the print media and discuss how these cues can be manipulated by the producers of cultural representations. I will then turn to a series of eighteenth-century texts, such as *Robinson Crusoe*, *Clarissa*, and *Memoirs of Martinus Scriblerus*, to show how their authors experimented with readers’ expectations concerning the tagging of “truth” accompanying the introduction of the narrative into a culture and how by doing so they transformed the modern category of fiction as such.

Imagine that a certain historian X writes a book where she claims that a certain event Y took place. She wants her readers to process her description of the event Y as a matter of fact, or as close to matter of fact as possible, and not store it with an inference-limiting source tag, “X claims that Y.” To minimize the amount of scope-representational framing undertaken by her readers in processing her book, this historian would provide certain *extratextual* and *intratextual* cues to which she knows her readers would be attuned. The extratextual cues



will pertain to the source of information. X's book will have the imprimatur of, hopefully, Oxford University Press—and not of Disney—on its cover. The author's scholarly credentials will be prominently displayed. Moreover, there will be nothing frivolous about the design of the cover and the choice of print. In other words, as much as possible, the author will employ *whatever visual cues in her culture are understood to attest to the respectability and integrity of the source of this particular type of printed information.*

The second group of cues—I call them intratextual cues—have to do with the content of the book. Note, however, that in real life the division between extratextual and intratextual cues is impracticable. Even before we get to the first sentence of a volume, we have already taken in all sorts of extratextual cues and have formed some sort of an intuitive expectation about the “truth-value” of its contents. In fact, the book can convey some impression about the “truth-value” of its content even in the absence of any prominent source-identifying marks. Before the printing of books became cheap, the very fact that somebody had expended so much energy and money sponsoring the production of a book must have rendered the expectations about its “truth-value” quite high to any reader even before he or she got to the actual text. (Hence, perhaps, the lingering cultural anxiety accompanying the novel from the time of the ancient Greek romance: the awareness of the value-conferring labor that went into the production of the manuscript/printed volume clashed with the recognition that this manuscript/printed volume contained deliberate “non-truths.”)

For the sake of this argument, though, let us consider intratextual cues as isolated from extratextual ones. The very first sentence in any book provides the first set of intratextual cues in so far as it implies, or does not imply, the group of people for whom the subject matter of this sentence is of direct relevance. The easier it is to envision the group of people for whom the information contained in the opening sentence is relevant, the less scope-representational framing the reader intuitively expects from the book that opens with this sentence.<sup>6</sup> For example, the sentence that tells that Mrs. Stanhope was a woman accomplished in “the art of rising in the world”<sup>7</sup> signals the incipient fictionality of the narrative to follow, because we cannot readily identify a group of people outside of Maria Edgeworth's novel *Belinda* whom the information about Mrs. Stanhope would immediately concern. Noting this *non-referential* quality of fiction, Catherine Gallagher points out that “the character came into *fictional* existence most fully only when he or she



was developed as nobody in particular.”<sup>8</sup> By contrast, the text that opens by addressing the King’s “Loving Subjects” and promising to touch “the Causes and Reasons That moved Him to Dissolve the Two last Parliaments”<sup>9</sup> signals at least the intention of nonfictionality/“truth” by quickly establishing the group of people—here, presumably, all English subjects—for whom the forthcoming information is relevant. The following sentence provides a radical example of rapidly established nonfictionality: “This guide provides complete instructions for setting up and operating your new SuperScript 860 printer.” This information is relevant for the proud new owners of the SuperScript 860 printer—and only them. Faced with such an opening, we instinctively expect that the information that follows will require minimal or no scope-representational framing, that is, that we will “store” it as a “matter of fact.”

Of course, the initial assessment of the expected scope-representational framing may be adjusted as we continue to read. For example, we may come to consider the text that promises a relatively low amount of such framing (i.e., a relatively weak “tagging”) as not living up to its promise. The Declaration to the King’s “Loving Subjects” may turn out to be recognizably manipulative and misleading. The realization that the “actual” amount of scope-representational framing required by the text is different from the one “promised” by the author through her system of extratextual and intratextual cues may provoke a wide range of emotional reactions, from downright anger or irritation to smug self-congratulation—readers may be proud their ability to read between the lines and of recognizing a political proclamation as a carefully crafted piece of rhetoric, “fictional” for many practical purposes.

Extratextual cues—those related to the source of information—and intratextual cues—those establishing the level of relevance—can combine and overlap in an infinite number of ways. The cumulative effect of each particular combination is such that it provides us with an intuitive assessment of the amount of scope-representational framing involved in processing the text, and when we try to articulate this intuitive assessment we may use such words as “truth-value” of the text, “true story,” or “true history.”

There are certain structural benefits in introducing the notion of the intuitively assessed cumulative amount of scope-representational framing involved in processing a literary narrative. After all, this notion reflects the long-noted paradox inherent in our interaction with such a narrative, namely, that we persist in categorizing it as a single “fictional” unit even though it contains plenty of information that is true

(“nonfictional”) on many levels. (This, incidentally, has nothing to do with the distinction between “realist” and “nonrealist” novels; both are still classified as “fiction” according to this conceptual framework.) Each poem or novel includes data that agrees with what we know about the world and can thus be assimilated nearly automatically, requiring minimal or no scope-regulation, which makes it possible for us to make sense of what we read.<sup>10</sup> In the eighteenth century, the tension between the assessment of the truth-value of the text as a whole and that of its constituent parts revealed itself both in the readers’ perplexed reaction to the works of such writers as Defoe, Richardson, and Swift, and in the eagerness with which those writers courted and cultivated their readers’ perplexity.

Witness, for example, the indignation of the early readers of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), who had been promised by the title page of the first edition “a just history of fact” but had then been given a “feign’d” story instead. Responding to the charges of “lying like the truth,” Defoe felt compelled to tell his “ill-disposed” critics that his “story is not “feign’d” and “though Allegorical, [it] is also Historical, [because it contains] Matter of real History.”<sup>11</sup> Clearly, Defoe’s novels contain plenty of information that requires very little or no scope-representational framing, the truth-value of which is thus quite high. For example, they contain information fully compatible with our basic ontological assumptions about causation, naïve physics, and mental states, as well as information compatible with culture-specific encyclopedic knowledge, for example, that eighteenth-century Englishmen engaged in overseas trading; that they used slave labor; and that they followed their primogeniture laws. Strictly speaking, the presence of this kind of information allowed Defoe to claim that his novels were “true histories” because they contained “matters of fact”; yet his critics accused him of lying and would discard his “matters of fact” claim because, apparently, their intuitive assessment of the extensive scope-representational framing involved in processing *Robinson Crusoe* as a whole overrode their intuitive assessment of the scope-representational framing needed to process this novel’s constituent parts (i. e., the parts that could be stored with few or no scope-restricting tags).

Back then, Defoe was hardly alone in his eagerness to test his readers’ tolerance for “lying like the truth.” The English literary history of the first half of the eighteenth century can be construed as a multifaceted effort to experiment with the reading audience. In 1714, Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope, John Arbuthnot, John Gay, Thomas Parnell, and

Robert Harley embarked upon the collaborative project of publishing a series of fake scientific, literary, and historical treatises attributed sometimes to real people, sometimes to the fictitious scholar, Martinus Scriblerus. The purpose of this hoax was to “obscure the already dubious line between authentic and spurious publications until the reading public become bewildered.”<sup>12</sup> Another eighteenth-century writer, Samuel Richardson, took pains to assure his readers that his first novel, *Pamela* (1739), was an edited collection of authentic familial letters. For his second book, *Clarissa* (1748), he cultivated ontological ambiguity; on the one hand, he did not want the letters that comprised *Clarissa* to be thought genuine, on the other hand, he did not want to admit explicitly that they were fictional. As he wrote to one of his friends, by keeping the veridical status of *Clarissa* ambiguous, he would avoid “hurting that kind of Historical Faith<sup>13</sup> which Fiction itself is generally read with, tho’ we know it to be Fiction.”<sup>14</sup>

Note that it is not at all obvious that the antics of the Scriblerians (Pope, Swift, etc.) and the experimental novels of Defoe and Richardson belong to the same category. Several literary scholars have recently inquired into Defoe’s and Richardson’s negotiations of the status of their fictions in relation to history and “matters-of-fact.” So Robert Mayer suggests that Defoe, by asserting that “novels consist of matters of fact,” had forced both eighteenth-century readers and twentieth-century academics to rethink “how this form of fiction refers to historical reality” (p. 239). Everett Zimmerman points out that, whereas eighteenth-century readers might have “expressed contempt for, or alarm at, the notion that fiction is in any serious way connected to history,” the very existence of novel implied that it was “a needed supplement to history, its probabilistic truths adding an essential dimension to historical understanding even if they are not verifiably referential.”<sup>15</sup> Zimmerman carefully differentiates between the writers’ “pleas for some kind of historical faith” and the literary hoaxes that willfully misled readers about the ontological status of a given literary work, asserting that “*Clarissa* is not a hoax” (p. 2). It is precisely this distinction that my argument seeks to suspend temporarily. Literary endeavors as distinct as *Memoirs of Martinus Scriblerus* and *Clarissa* can be aligned under one broad rubric of writers’ experimentation with readers’ expectations concerning the “truth-value” of a given publication and can be viewed as both responding and contributing to the cognitive anxiety accompanying the mass advance of the print media.

Consider the eighteenth-century writers’ manipulation of the extra-

and intratextual cues attesting to the truth-value of their texts that they knew their readers would be looking for. Not stopping at promising the “just history of fact” on the title page of *Robinson Crusoe*, or at bringing forth that notorious hybrid of history and fiction, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, Defoe framed his novels *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana* as true biographies edited by a hired hand and claimed that his stories differ from “most of the Modern Performances of this Kind . . . in this Great and Essential Article, Namely, That the Foundation of This is laid in Truth of Fact; and so the Work is not a Story, but a History.”<sup>16</sup> The Scriblerians made particularly liberal use of one of the traditional extratextual cues attesting to the high truth-value of the book—the editorial apparatus including numerous foot- and endnotes—appending numerous “scholarly” notes to their spurious scholarly treatises. Swift’s 1729 *A Modest Proposal* stands out as one of the most spectacular outcomes of the sprawling Scriblerian scheme. Legend has it that a certain bishop died believing that Swift’s outrageous treatise—which advocates eating one-year-old Irish babies—should be taken at its face value. The outcry against the Proposal reflected not only its sociopolitical subversiveness but also its “cheating” of the public through Swift’s mobilization of extratextual and intratextual cues attesting to the low-level scope-representational framing necessary for processing this text and thus falsely signalling its high truth-value.

It is useful to remember the sober look of the first edition of *A Modest Proposal*. Even the fact that the author’s name did not appear on the title page did not detract from the overall impression: it was still a common practice of the time to publish anonymously. Nothing on that page prepared the reader for the exorbitant amount of scope-representational framing that the Proposal would require. Nothing in the opening sentence did either: “It is a melancholy object to those who walk through this great town or travel in the country, when they see the streets, the roads, and cabin doors, crowded with beggars of female sex, followed by three, four, or six children, all in rags and importuning every passenger for an alms.” This sentence immediately establishes the audience for whom the information contained in the treatise would be relevant: the civic-minded people of Ireland caring about its distressed poor, the benevolent “projectors” as they were called at the time. In fact, it is not until the speaker gets to the frankly cannibalistic part of his proposal that his readers realize that the truth-value of what they are reading may be very different from what the author wanted them to believe initially. To get some idea of what such a discovery might have

meant at the time, imagine buying an obviously scholarly book brought forth by a fairly respectable publishing house and warming up to its argument only to realize somewhere in the middle that it was meant as a hoax, and a brazenly politically incorrect hoax at that.

Speaking of the long process of working out the system of culturally agreed-upon extratextual and intratextual cues attesting to the relative truth-value of the printed text, it is quite remarkable that the eighteenth-century epistolary novel—which seemed to tread a particularly fine line between fact and fiction—was perfected (though not invented, of course<sup>17</sup>) by a man professionally involved in setting up its system of production, the prominent London printer Samuel Richardson. Knowing first-hand about the importance of foregrounding the extratextual and intratextual cues that alert the reader to the truth-value of the book, Richardson used this knowledge to calibrate the ambiguous position of his novels, which he (note his rhetoric!) did not want to be “thought genuine, [but] only so far kept up . . . as that they should not prefatically be owned not to be genuine” (p. 85). Besides claiming to have edited the “real” familial letters (though not pressing this claim too far), Richardson capitalized on the ambiguous position of a published private letter as poised precariously between “fact” and “fiction.” To see how such an ambiguity is achieved, consider the opening of *Clarissa*:

Letter I: Miss Anna Howe to Miss Clarissa Harlowe

Jan. 10

I am extremely concerned, my dearest friend, for the disturbances that have happened in your family.<sup>18</sup>

What such an opening signals is that the information to follow can be relevant to at least two people in the real world—the author of the letter and the addressee; to use Gallagher’s term again, *Clarissa* and *Anna* do not immediately attain the “nobodiness” required for true literary characters. The effect of this implied relevance is that the story takes on a certain ontological ambiguity as not quite fact and not quite fiction. Reading on, one of course gets enough cues that serve to reassert the fictional status of the book.

The ultimate effect of this initial experimentation with the ontological status of the story is that readers (and writers) discover new possibilities of fiction.<sup>19</sup> We realize that we can push much further than we did before and profitably encroach on the territory of “history” or

other discourses that are perceived as requiring a relatively low degree of scope-representational framing. The “boundaries of fiction” described by Zimmerman still hold because our intuitive assessment of the high amount of scope-representational framing of the fictional text as a whole still overrides our intuitive assessment of the amount of scope-representational framing involved in processing its constituent parts (e.g., those filched from history). It is in this sense that *The Memoirs of Martinus Scriblerus* and *A Modest Proposal* as well as *Clarissa* can be considered parts of the same literary-historical phenomenon.<sup>20</sup> By playing with readers’ expectations about the truth-value of the narrative, writers such as Swift, Defoe, and Richardson opened up new cognitive spaces for processing fictional narrative, and in doing so started an irreversible process that made possible numerous forms of modern experimentation with literature.<sup>21</sup>

How can we explain that large-scale experimentation with the “boundaries of fiction” did not start happening until the early eighteenth century, even though, as Elizabeth Eisenstein argues in *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, the printing press had already begun transforming the political and economic outlook of English society in the sixteenth century?<sup>22</sup> It turns out that the period from the late seventeenth to the first half of the eighteenth century stood out even at that time of overall change as a moment of unprecedented expansion of the market for the print media. The current situation with the Internet is a condensed parallel to what was happening then. Although the computer has been around since the 1950s and the number of people using it has been growing exponentially for several decades, only the last few years have witnessed the massive advance of the Internet in our everyday life, and only now are we forced to figure out what cues testify to the “truth-value” of information coming at us through this new medium. Similarly, Paula McDowell designates the period from the late 1670s to the 1730s as witnessing “some of the most important transformations in [the] history [of] . . . the English press.” The lapse, in 1695, of the Licensing Act ended “official pre-publication censorship and government restrictions on the number of master printers throughout Britain. This event, combined with ongoing political turmoil, contributed to another major period of growth in the London book trades.”<sup>23</sup> Paul Hunter notes that by the end of the eighteenth century, “a vast majority of adult males could read and write, whereas two centuries earlier only a select minority could do so.”<sup>24</sup>

Scholars of eighteenth-century culture stress the dynamic, fluid

nature of the social institution of print in the period from the late seventeenth to early eighteenth century. William Warner sees it as the time of “an arduously Protestant testing of the individual reader through an unfiltered and robust exposure to the diversity of books.”<sup>25</sup> McDowell points out that “the ongoing gradual shift in the dominant mode of textual production in England—from courtly, manuscript literary culture to the print-based, market-centered system we know today—was giving rise to a recognizably modern literary marketplace” (p. 5). Hunter characterizes this period as the formative time for “the daily habits of a modern, print-centered culture” (p. 656). Furthermore, in the classic study of the psychological and political implications of the move from the manuscript to mechanical technology, Marshall McLuhan notes that “in the later seventeenth century there [was] a considerable amount of alarm and revulsion expressed concerning the growing quantity of printed books,” and he quotes Leibnitz’s 1680 prediction that “the horrible mass of books which keeps on growing” will eventually lead people to “fatal despair” and “barbarism.”<sup>26</sup>

But it was precisely this atmosphere of “alarm” and “revulsion” at the deluge of hard-to-classify printed texts that provided a fruitful breeding ground for the writers’ experiments with “true” stories. Thus, one immediate payoff of approaching the eighteenth century’s anxiety about the “truth” of fiction from the cognitive perspective is that this approach offers a new way of conceptualizing the interdependence of the expansion of print media in the Enlightenment and the accompanying experimentation with literary genres. In her recent study of the period’s rethinking of the notion of literary character, Deidre Lynch argues for the importance of understanding the novels “of the early and mid-eighteenth century as artifacts of the era’s typographical culture. Adapted in function to particular relations of reception, those artifacts observe rhetorical protocols and exploit social analyses that were products of a culture-market irrevocably altered by the recent boom in the publishing of printed texts and images.”<sup>27</sup> The cognitive perspective enhances the critical discussion of the impact of burgeoning print culture on eighteenth-century literature, positing the fruitful experimentation with the boundaries of genres as an implied function of our cognitive response to the changing means of communication. Swift, Defoe, Richardson, and a handful of contemporaneous writers took advantage of a “cognitive unease” accompanying the mass introduction of printed information into culture and by doing so broadened our understanding of the possibilities of fictional narrative.



The literary-historical inquiry into the particularities of such a response allows us to take a step back and to consider our reaction to cultural representations before they get “explicitly labeled as fiction,” as Cosmides and Tooby put it. Cosmides and Tooby argue that “people are relatively indifferent to the truth of a narrative, as compared to its other aesthetic qualities. . . . False accounts may add to one’s store of knowledge about possible social strategies, physical actions, types of people, better than true, accurate but boring accounts of daily life. This does not mean that falsehoods are, other things being equal, preferred: True narratives about relevant people and situations—‘urgent news’—[can temporarily] displace stories. . . .” People may indeed be relatively indifferent to the truth of the narrative, once they conclude it is fictional, but, as I have attempted to demonstrate in this essay, the process of drawing that conclusion warrants further attention.

Let me recapitulate. The premium placed by our species on the concept of “truth” can be an implicit function of our evolved cognitive makeup. When it comes to our interaction with narrative, it is possible that the structural requirements of our cognitive information management “encourage” us to look for cues that would allow us to intuitively assess the inference potential of narrative and “store” it with an “appropriate” scope-regulator. When a new medium takes over a large part of the means of communication, such cues are typically in flux. This creates conditions for experimentation with readers’ expectations about the truth-value of the narrative, experimentation that can result in pushing the limits of the established genres and creating new hybrid forms of fictions. In other words, the introduction of a new medium exploits the nuances of our engagement with the narrative. Of course, the experimentation with readers’ expectations regarding the “truth-value” of the narrative can take place any time and is by no means limited to periods of momentous change in the means of communication, but periods of change provide a particularly inviting environment for the manipulation of our cognitive predisposition for “truth-seeking.” The exact forms that such experimentation takes depends on personalities and circumstances of individual writers. No single explanatory framework, including a cognitive one, can account for such a complex cultural phenomenon; yet no explanation that ignores the cognitive makeup of the players is complete.

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1. Barbara Herrnstein Smith, "Netting Truth," *PMLA* 115 (2000): 1089–1095.
2. See Nancy Easterlin's "Making Knowledge: Bioepistemology and the Foundations of Literary Theory" for an important discussion of binary thinking as grounded in our evolutionary heritage; *Mosaic* 32 (1999): 144.
3. Leda Cosmides and John Tooby, "Consider the Source: The Evolution of Adaptations for Decoupling and Metarepresentations," *Metarepresentation*, ed. Dan Sperber (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming). Unless otherwise stated, all further references to Cosmides and Tooby's work are to this essay.
4. Cosmides and Tooby's notion of scope representations is closely aligned to Alan Leslie's discussion of metarepresentations in "ToMM, ToBy, and Agency: Core Architecture and Domain Specificity," *Mapping the Mind: Domain Specificity in Cognition and Culture*, eds. Laurence A. Hirshfeld and Susan A. Gelman (Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 119–148, and Dan Sperber's "The Modularity of Thought and the Epidemiology of Representations" in the same volume, pp. 39–67, as well as Sperber's argument in "Intuitive and Reflective Beliefs," *Mind and Language* 12 (1997): 67–83.
5. Ellen Spolsky, "Why and How to Take the Wheat and Leave the Chaff," *SubStance*, forthcoming.
6. For a related discussion about the role of first sentences, see Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), pp. 160–1.
7. Maria Edgeworth, *Belinda*, ed. Kathryn J. Kirkpatrick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).
8. Catherine Gallagher, *Nobody's Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670–1820* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 174.
9. Quoted in James Anderson Winn, *John Dryden and His World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 342; italics mine.
10. The distinction between the units of information that can be easily assimilated and those that cannot is indebted to Pascal Boyer's study of the ontologies of religious representations, particularly *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas: Outline of a Cognitive Theory of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) and "Cognitive Constraints on Cultural Representations: Natural Ontologies and Religious Ideas," in *Mapping the Mind*, pp. 391–411; see n. 4 above.
11. Quoted in Robert Mayer, *History and the Early English Novel: Matter of Fact from Bacon to Defoe* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 2, 224.
12. Charles Kerby-Miller, ed., *The Memoirs of the Extraordinary Life, Works, and Discoveries of Martinus Scriblerus, Written in Collaboration by the Members of the Scriblerus Club, John Arbuthnot, Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift, John Gay, Thomas Parnell, and Robert Harley, Earl of Oxford* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 29.
13. Eighteenth-century writers often used the word "history" interchangeably with "story." By "Historical Faith" Richardson means the faith in his story.

14. Selected Letters of Samuel Richardson, ed. John Carroll (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), p. 85. Unless otherwise noted, all further references to Richardson will be to this edition.
15. Everett Zimmerman, *The Boundaries of Fiction: History and the Eighteenth-Century British Novel* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 2.
16. Daniel Defoe, *Roxana The Fortunate Mistress, or, a History of the Life and Vast Variety of Fortunes of Mademoiselle de Beleau, Afterwards call'd the Countess of Wintelsheim, in Germany. Being the Person known by the Name of the Lady Roxana in the Time of King Charles II*, ed. David Blewett, (Penguin Books, 1987), p. 35.
17. In his use of the epistolary subgenre, Richardson was preceded by Aphra Behn, among others, who published her three volumes of *Love Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister* in 1684–87.
18. Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa, or The History of a Young Lady*, ed. Angus Ross, (Viking, 1986), p. 39.
19. Easterlin suggests, discovering the new possibilities of fiction and thus introducing ever more intricate scope-representational framing may constitute our attempt to adapt ourselves to the increasingly complex cultural environment (personal communication). Similarly, Easterlin argues elsewhere that “while our need to adapt as a species is perhaps less pressing now than it was thousands of years ago, the individual effort to adapt to a culture of great complexity has become more and more of a challenge.” See “Play, Mutation, and Reality Acceptance: Toward a Theory of Literary Experience,” in *After Poststructuralism: Interdisciplinarity and Literary Theory*, ed. Nancy Easterlin and Barbara Riebling (Northwestern, 1993), p. 115.
20. For reasons of space, I do not discuss in my essay the earliest examples of the English romans à clef, such as Mary de la Riviere Manley’s *The New Atlantis* (1709)—another glaring instance of the early eighteenth-century conflation of fiction with a “true” story.
21. For an example of a contemporary experiment with the tags of veracity, see Jorge Luis Borges’ “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*.”
22. Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early-Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).
23. Paula McDowell, *The Women of Grub Street: Press, Politics, and Gender in the London Literary Marketplace 1678–1730* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 4–5.
24. J. Paul Hunter, *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction* (New York: Norton, 1990), p. 65.
25. William B. Warner, *Licensing Entertainment: The Elevation of Novel Reading in Britain, 1684–1750* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 138.
26. Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (University of Toronto Press, 1965), p. 254.
27. Deidre Shauna Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 28.