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“HAD I NOT THE EVIDENCE OF MY OWN SENSES”

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NOTIONS OF AUTHENTICITY  
IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

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To all who supported me, especially YOU.

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# I

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## INTRODUCTION

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“HAD I NOT the evidence of my own senses”<sup>1</sup>: This sentence seems to say everything about the eighteenth-century notion of authenticity there is worth mentioning. The world and everything we know about it can be perceived through our senses. This is all there is to it. To speak in computer terminology: What we see is what we get. Why then write 15,000 words about it, rehearsing the well known arguments of the empiricists that give authority to our sense perceptions? There is one good reason, namely that the above quoted sentence is spoken by Arabella, the heroine of *The Female Don Quixote*, the person everybody in the novel, except perhaps her servant, regards as insane or at least as ridiculous regarding her way to perceive the world. Surprisingly, Arabella is as convinced as any other person around her that everything she sees happening is based on the “evidence of her senses”. This astonishing connection between Arabella and empiricism leads to numerous exciting questions: Is Arabella’s conviction to be, so to speak, an empiricist simply her “madness” or is there more to it? What exactly does it mean to speak of the evidence of the senses? Are there operations which participate in our perception of the world other than sense perception? In legal procedures for example the hearing of evidence has to be followed by a conclusion drawn from it. Is something like “naive” empiricism, the statement that sense perception is enough to establish what there is, really imaginable? What is even more important: Was this really the position of late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century empiricism? And finally: How does all this relate to notions of authenticity?

Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary* defines *authenticity* as “Authority; genuineness; quality of being authentic.” and *authentic* as “1. Genuine; not fictitious. 2. Approved by authority; having the sanction of authority.” The quality of authenticity, then, is contrasted to fiction, or, to express it in a positive way, consists in “being in accordance with fact”, in “being real, actual” according to the Oxford English Dictionary. This relation between authenticity and the factual makes it necessary to establish a method to arrive at facts in order know what is authentic. This, indeed, was one of the predominant occupations of the late seventeenth and the eighteenth century and implicated such diverse fields as religion, natural philosophy, epistemology, history and literary criticism. I want to outline this situation in the first part of my discussion, i.e. section two, as a context for

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<sup>1</sup>Charlotte Lennox, *The Female Don Quixote; or, The Adventures of Arabella*, ed. by Margaret Dalziel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 114

my particular points of reference. It will show that an uncertainty about facts and therefore about authenticity is a characteristic of this period. One symptom of this uncertainty is a preoccupation with deceit, fraud, counterfeiting and hypocrisy. An exemplary record of this obsession, apart from the many instances in contemporary novels, is Fielding's Essay 'On the Knowledge of the Characters of Men' which will also be discussed.

After Fielding's search for marks and signs that can give us certainty about a person's character an examination of the empirical philosophy of the age becomes necessary which, as I hope, will underpin the impression of uncertainty regarding authenticity. This is done in section three, where Locke and Hume will be my examples. To be sure, it was, as Hans Aarsleff points out, Locke's "great message . . . to set us free from the burden of tradition and authority"<sup>2</sup> by giving authority to everybody's experience, but far from regarding our knowledge of the world as completely obvious and certain, these philosophers acknowledged that mental operations were necessary to complement sense perception in arriving at a picture of the world. And not only were these mental operations regarded as extremely prone to error and delusion by Locke, Hume also thought of them as belonging to the faculty of the imagination which leads us back to fiction. By arriving at these results with the help of the empirical method, i.e. the observation of experience, by almost being forced to position fact and fiction so closely together, the empiricists of the late seventeenth and eighteenth century enforced and participated in the epistemological uncertainty of their time which has been diagnosed by many scholars of eighteenth-century literature and culture. At the same time they struggled to keep fact and fiction apart, to establish sensible and sensual boundaries between both categories, to be able to distinguish reality from illusion, truth from error, to establish what is authentic. It is this tension between a fusion of the categories of fact and fiction, the acknowledgment that often it is almost impossible to tell them apart, and the need to separate them and create distinct and exclusive concepts which in my opinion is one of the predominant features of the eighteenth century.

In a fourth part I want to trace this tension in fictional and factual stories of madness. One of these narratives is *The Female Don Quixote* where Arabella constantly confuses fact and fiction until she is cured of her, as I want to show, very sane insanity. Another fictional story is Samuel Johnson's mad astronomer in *Rasselas*. These will be complemented by comments on the contemporary discourse surrounding madness. The discussion of insanity is of interest in this context because the diagnosis of madness necessarily involves the possibility to distinguish delusion from reality, mental fiction from outside fact. On what grounds can this distinction be made in the face of epistemological uncertainty and an admission that the imagination plays an active part in every kind of perception?

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<sup>2</sup>Hans Aarsleff, 'Locke's influence', in *The Cambridge Companion to Locke*, ed. by Vere Chapell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 252–289, (p. 252)

I hope to show that the confusing factor between fact and fiction, the factor that creates uncertainty about authenticity is an awareness of the activity of interpretation as an essential part of perception. The danger and tension this awareness creates is also expressed in an attempt to deny the existence or validity of any interpretation. It is a common characteristic of all the texts I will discuss to give voice to both tendencies at the same time. Of course many scholars have already noticed that, as John Richetti states it, “the divide between fact and fiction . . . is still blurry”<sup>3</sup> in the eighteenth century. Many of them, however, have argued for a more or less linear process in which the factual comes to be clearly distinguished from the fictional, whereas I want to stress the coexisting awareness of a strong connection between fact and fiction. My choice of texts is, of course, very limited. On the other hand, every single text can be regarded as a manifestation of culture, so that I hope my selection is nevertheless suitable to serve as a foundation for my argument.

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<sup>3</sup>John J. Richetti, ‘Introduction’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Eighteenth-Century Novel*, ed. by John Richetti (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 1–8, (p. 2)

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## II

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“I APPREHEND THERE IS NO CERTAINTY  
THAT YOUR SUSPICIONS ARE TRUE”<sup>1</sup>

### THE CULTURAL CONTEXT

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IT HAS ALREADY been mentioned that Johnson’s *Dictionary* defines *authentic* as “genuine; not fictitious.” The more surprising is the fact that one of the quotations used to illustrate this meaning of the word is taken from the fictional work *Joseph Andrews*. Moreover, in the quoted sentence Fielding recommends his novel to the reader by insisting that it is an “*authentic* history, with which I now present the public”. Simply by using Johnson’s *Dictionary*, then, we are plunged into the confusion surrounding the concept of authenticity in the eighteenth century.

Like many scholars J. Paul Hunter notes that the eighteenth century which was “once regarded as one of the most stable, placid and complacent of times . . . now seems a vibrant, unpredictable, troubled, and precarious cultural era”<sup>2</sup>. One aspect of this precarious situation is, in Margaret Anne Doody’s words, “the somewhat disturbing idea that there is no truth that is fully known to human beings”<sup>3</sup> and a new or renewed awareness of the problematic nature of human beliefs<sup>4</sup>. Joel Weinsheimer argues that this awareness was in part created by interpretative schisms both in religion and in politics<sup>5</sup> which lead to an experience of the uncertainties caused by and the conflicts arising from contradictory interpretations<sup>6</sup>. In addition to this there was a disorienting experience of historical relativity in the field of natural philosophy when past dogmas were overthrown by new discoveries and the temporary nature of contemporary knowledge was felt

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<sup>1</sup>Lennox, p. 259

<sup>2</sup>J. Paul Hunter, ‘The Novel and Social / Cultural History’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Eighteenth-Century Novel*, ed. by John Richetti (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 9–38, (p.12)

<sup>3</sup>Margaret Anne Doody, ‘Samuel Richardson: Fiction and Knowledge’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Eighteenth-Century Novel*, ed. by John Richetti (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 90–119, (p.97)

<sup>4</sup>Robert W. Uphaus, *The Impossible Observer: Reason and the Reader in Eighteenth-Century Prose* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1979), p. 2

<sup>5</sup>Joel Weinsheimer, *Eighteenth-Century Hermeneutics: Philosophy of Interpretation from Locke to Burke* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. ix

<sup>6</sup>This argument can be found in J. Paul Hunter, *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century Fiction* (New York and London: Norton, 1990), p. 207.

in the prospect of future possibilities<sup>7</sup> The consequence of these experiences was a doubt concerning the availability of truth combined with a preoccupation with signals of certainty<sup>8</sup> The effects of this mixture can be found in almost every sphere of human life. The question is always the same: Is something real? Is it authentic? Is it in accordance with the facts? And on what grounds can these questions be answered? What are the signs of authenticity?

Paul Baines, for example, argues that forgery can be regarded as the “special crime” of the eighteenth century.<sup>9</sup> Countless times it was committed in real life and in fiction and included such acts as the forging of a signatures, wills, letters, the meddling with texts, misquotation, political propaganda and the forging of entire works of literature.<sup>10</sup> As Baines points out, the personal signature was of great importance in a time when the financial system was widely based on credit. A forged signature could be as ruinous as an intercepted credit card number. And as much as people today worry about the safety of data transmission in the Internet in the eighteenth century the inhabitants of Britain feared that the authenticity of signature could not be guaranteed. There was a great controversy concerning the signs of an authentic signature, whether it had to be characterized by a “natural variability” or a “natural sameness” and what degrees of variability and sameness were required to proof that the authenticity of a signature was beyond suspicion.<sup>11</sup> Whole letters could be forged by an imitation of handwriting, as Lovelace does in *Clarissa*, and style came to be regarded as another sign for the authenticity of texts, especially for the authenticity of biblical texts. Religious groups accused each other of forgery of the scripture, either in the form of deliberate misquotations or in the form of accepting parts of the Bible as authentic which others regarded apocryphal. The former allegation was proved by stylistic evidence while the latter was judged on the grounds of consistencies or inconsistencies of content. On the whole, scriptural history seemed to be radically unreliable. Many believed that textual transmission was inherently corrupt.<sup>12</sup> This was also of concern for editors of secular texts. Baines notes, for example, that during the eighteenth century editors sought to recover the “original” Shakespeare from the distortions of different versions caused by oral performances or errors of folio reprints.<sup>13</sup> It was generally the great age of the false imprint and the pseudonymous author. Well known authors were accused of imitation and plagiarism, sometimes on the grounds of obscure versions of their

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<sup>7</sup>This argument can be found in Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600–1740* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 69.

<sup>8</sup>This argument can be found in Kevin L. Cope, *Criteria of Certainty: Truth & Judgment in the English Enlightenment* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990), p. 4.

<sup>9</sup>Paul Baines, *The House of Forgery in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Aldershot and Brookfield, MO: Ashgate, 1999), p. 11

<sup>10</sup>Baines, *Forgery*, p. 50

<sup>11</sup>Baines, *Forgery*, p. 14–20

<sup>12</sup>Baines, *Forgery*, pp. 30–32

<sup>13</sup>Baines, *Forgery*, p. 43



work,<sup>14</sup> and Ossian is only the most famous forgery of the time. Authenticity was indeed hard to establish.

This is also true in the case of travel writing. In his examination of eighteenth-century travel-literature Charles L. Batten notes that very often readers doubted the authenticity of a traveler's description because of blurred distinctions between fiction and nonfiction in the travel writing of the time.<sup>15</sup> Since travel writing was one of the most popular genres of the century and therefore very profitable many accounts were written by persons who never traveled abroad at all. Their material was usually stolen from already existing travel and geography books mixed with details taken from the imagination. The most famous author of such a forgery, regarding both his book and his identity, was George Psalmanazar who convinced London society that he was a native of Formosa which was supposed to give authenticity to his narration of the place. Because of such uncertainties critics tried to establish signs for truthful writings. A very simple one was the authors reputation as a truthful person. Another one was the existence of seeming absurdities in the text. This criterion was, of course, prone to error when it was applied to texts which dealt with places no one had seen before, and mistakes did happen. But at least accounts of giants could be safely excluded on its grounds. It was therefore not regarded as sufficient to write truthfully but as necessary to depict the probable in order to gain belief. The similarity between accounts of the same places was also seen as evidence for accordance with facts. On the other hand, the similarity could equally well be an indicator that one traveler had plagiarized another. It was therefore important to mix general descriptions with an account of particular experiences which had to differ from those of other travelers. But then again a too detailed and too contrived narrative of particular experiences was frequently criticized as fiction. And even the fact that someone had traveled physically was no guarantee for an accordance to the facts of the foreign place. It was well known that many people did not travel mentally and were generally inattentive so that their accounts could be as deceptive as those of the forgers. Once again signs are difficult to read and everything can be doubted.

Not only in travel writing the line between fact and fiction is a thin one. Novels can start as manuals for letter writing and look exactly like the real thing. And fiction claims to be authentic. Richardson insists in his 'Preface' to *Pamela* that he is only the editor and not the author of the following letters "which have their foundation both in *Truth* and *Nature*"<sup>16</sup>. According to Peter Conroy, in the case of letters "it becomes almost impossible to distinguish the real from the fictitious using only internal criteria".<sup>17</sup> But this is not only the case in

<sup>14</sup>for example Milton as is shown by Baines, *Forgery*, pp. 81–96

<sup>15</sup>This argument can be found in Charles L. Batten, *Pleasurable Instruction: Form and Convention in Eighteenth-Century Travel Literature* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 56–64.

<sup>16</sup>Samuel Richardson, *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded*, ed. by Peter Sabor (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1985), p. 31

<sup>17</sup>Peter V. Conroy Jr., 'Real Fiction: Authenticity in the French Epistolary Novel', *Romanic*

epistolary fiction. Several scholars of the eighteenth century have shown that the novel is in many ways related to non-fictional writing. J. Paul Hunter, for example, argues for a relation between the novel and the tradition of casuistical and other didactical texts in which the narrations of example tended to become longer and more elaborate.<sup>18</sup> He also states that novels and non-fictional texts of the period share common concerns, especially “the preoccupation with how to read signs”. Both fictional and factual writing are seen as manifestations of “a climate of incessant questioning and second guessing”. This climate was strongly influenced by religious practices of the time. The writers of spiritual diaries, for example, recorded each day in great detail. This was supposed to hint to patterns of meaning regarding God’s plan in their lives. Everything could be a sign for something.<sup>19</sup> A similar connection is seen by Douglas Lane Patey when he observes that the rules of reading literary texts correspond to those of reading nature.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, like every other text, the novel was regarded as a mode of enquiry<sup>21</sup> and it was often enough read as a guidebook to life<sup>22</sup> that could teach the reader how to read the world. Lennard Davis points to an additional relation between fictional and factual writing by arguing that both the novel and factual news/history developed out of “a kind of undifferentiated matrix”<sup>23</sup>. Many authors were directly associated with journalism so that fictional narratives participated in a journalistic discourse. At the same time libel laws made a claim of fiction important for many works of the news discourse. This resulted in the paradoxical situation that a definition of fact and fiction by the law forced factual texts to insist on fictionality while pure fiction had to claim authenticity in order to appear in print.<sup>24</sup>

But not only texts were infected with uncertainty about authenticity. Its effect, the search for signs combined with a fear of fiction, i.e. fraud, can be found in much more physical spheres of human interest. Tassi Gwilliam’s discussion of “counterfeit maidenheads” shows that the possibility of falsified virginity was of great concern in eighteenth-century Britain.<sup>25</sup> Both, techniques to counterfeit virginity and methods to uncover fraud are available in books of the time. Gwilliam attributes the fear of fraud to a great uncertainty about the proper physical signs of virginity. Again authenticity is not really obvious. The confusion which is caused by this uncertainty of signs even leads to the fact that authentic virgins

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*Review*, 72 (1981), 409–424, (p. 424)

<sup>18</sup>Hunter, *Before Novels*, p. 92 and p. 245

<sup>19</sup>Hunter, *Before Novels*, pp. 46–54

<sup>20</sup>Douglas Lane Patey, *Probability and Literary Form: Philosophic Theory and Literary Practice in the Augustan Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 133

<sup>21</sup>Doody, p. 91

<sup>22</sup>Hunter, *Before Novels*, p. 94

<sup>23</sup>Lennard Davis, *Factual Fictions: The Origins of the English Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 67

<sup>24</sup>Davis, pp. 101–115

<sup>25</sup>Tassi Gwilliam, ‘Female Fraud: Counterfeit Maidenheads in the Eighteenth Century’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 6.4 (1996), 518–548

that naturally lack established signs of virginity are encouraged to forge these signs so that the authenticity of their virginity may not be doubted.

A similar discussion surrounding authenticity and fraud is connected to the eighteenth-century idea of female modesty.<sup>26</sup> Physical signs were named which would lead to the certain diagnosis of a virtuous woman: Downcast eyes, head turned aside, a blush.<sup>27</sup> Then it was questioned whether these signs really pointed to modesty. A modest girl, some people argued, had no reason to blush because she had no improper thoughts. A blush should therefore be regarded as a sure signal of improper thoughts which indicated a loss of virtue rather than modesty.<sup>28</sup> Signs, however, are not only uncertain because it is difficult to know exactly which signs refer to which quality. They are even more uncertain because they can be affected. Every outward sign can be feigned: the downcast eyes, the trembling body, the turned head. This would become extremely important for the discussion whether Pamela was really virtuous or only a servant girl taking advantage of her situation. “There was always a great worry”, Yeazell notes, “that the modest woman’s virtue is only seeming”<sup>29</sup>. Appearances can be deceptive. For some the blush remained the only certain sign because it was thought to be impossible to feign. But what if it was the effect of lost virtue after all? In any case, the painted blush could be taken as an absolutely certain signal for deceit. Someone hoped to feign something. Fortunately the colour was too long lasting to deceive the discerning observer.

The climax of the confusion surrounding authenticity was the masquerade. Of course, its contemporary critics saw it, according to Terry Castle, “as the symptom of a culture full of illusion and deception”<sup>30</sup> It was an infallible sign of the inability or unwillingness of parts of society to be authentic. But the masquerade was also a more disturbing challenge to the cognitive order of culture<sup>31</sup> which was, as we have seen, a symbolic one. Information had to be derived from signs. These signs could be feigned: The duchess could dress and act like a milk maid while the servant girl could try to signal in the opposite social direction. The man could dress up and behave like a woman, the woman like a man. But the overall effect was not only inauthenticity. It was almost a dissolution of meaning because signs lost their power to point to anything stable. Their function to represent something factual or authentic was suspended because there was nothing authentic left which could be represented. Everything dissolved into deception and nothing but deception. Perhaps one of the greatest fears of the eighteenth century was the possibility that this could be true for all signs.

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<sup>26</sup>This argument can be found in Ruth Yeazell, *Fictions of Modesty: Women and Courtship in the English Novel* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

<sup>27</sup>Yeazell, p. 5

<sup>28</sup>Yeazell, p. 67

<sup>29</sup>Yeazell, p. 11

<sup>30</sup>Terry Castle, *Masquerade and Civilization: The Carnavalesque in Eighteenth-Century English Culture and Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 79

<sup>31</sup>Castle, p. 81

A text which brings together all the elements mentioned above is Fielding's 'Essay on the Knowledge and Character of Men'<sup>32</sup>. Suspicion, doubt, deceit, signs, the masquerade, all appear in the work and the uncertainties surrounding authenticity are the reason for its production. "The whole World", Fielding complains, "becomes a vast Masquerade, where the greatest Part [of mankind] appear disguised under false Vizors and Habits; a very few only shewing their own Faces, who become, by doing so, the Astonishment and Ridicule of all the rest." ('Essay', p. 155) Deceit is everywhere and Fielding is determined to renew the certainty of the "innocent and undesigning" ('Essay', p. 153) by giving them rules for the correct diagnosis of the character of any person they are acquainted with, however disguised he<sup>33</sup> may be. This is possible because "Nature, which unwillingly submits to the Imposture, is ever endeavouring to peep forth and shew herself" ('Essay', p. 155). There is always something behind the disguise, the stable nature of a deceiving and hypocritical character is lying beneath it, and its signs can be seen. This is Fielding's observation and experience. By knowing these signs the reader can recognize them. Certainty comes within his reach. Fielding's reader will be able to look behind deceptive appearances and Fielding is sure that more often than not there is a discrepancy between outside and inside to be found.

Repeatedly he uses the terms "Symptoms" and "Diagnostics". Like a physician the reader is asked to observe the evidence and draw his conclusion from it. In order to do this properly, rules have to be established concerning the meaning of the symptoms. One group of them are the "Marks on the Countenance" which Fielding conceives as imprints of "the Passions of Men" ('Essay', p. 157) and the important question is which mark is caused by which passion. According to Fielding "Austerity, or Gravity of Countenance", are the effects of "Pride, Ill-nature, and Cunning." ('Essay', p. 157) The "glavering, sneering smile" is a "Compound of Malice and Fraud" and indicates "a bad Heart" ('Essay', p. 158) whereas "a fierce Aspect" denotes "a Bully" ('Essay', p. 161). His general rule to distinguish any authentic expression of the face from its feigned counterpart is his notion of "the true Symptoms being finer, and less glaring." ('Essay', p. 162) A more certain guide to the knowledge of character is seen in "the Actions of Men" ('Essay', p. 161). While the signs of the facial expression need an "Observer of much Penetration" who can never be sure whether something escapes "the highest Discernment" he is capable of, actions are regarded as "the truest Standards by which we may judge" ('Essay', p. 162). Even here, however, mistakes are possible since the imposture has several means at his disposal to interfere with the ability to observe the facts. These means are flattery, the profession of great esteem and the promising of unasked favours. ('Essay', pp. 164-166) They try

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<sup>32</sup>Henry Fielding, 'An Essay on the Knowledge of the Characters of Men', in *Miscellanies*, ed. by Henry Knight Miller, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 1, pp. 153-178. In the following text the work will be quoted as 'Essay' with page numbers in parenthesis.

<sup>33</sup>The personal pronoun is to be taken literally here because the essay explicitly does not apply to women.

to affect the vanity of the observing person which in turn impairs the judgment. ('Essay', p. 174) Fielding therefore suggests a way to avoid such impairment by observing "the Actions of Men with others, especially with those to whom they are allied in Blood, Marriage, Friendship . . . or any other Connection." ('Essay', p. 175) He argues that a man who does not behave in a proper way towards his wife will never be a true friend to anybody else.

Fielding rehearses these rules in his examination of the hypocrite: His words and his face testify to sanctity but it is precisely this outward expression which indicates the deceit since "all Ostentation of Virtue, Goodness, or Piety" ('Essay', p. 172) is "foreign to the Nature of Virtue" ('Essay', p. 173). Instead, authentic virtue is characterized by "a modest Backwardness" and it is "little desirous of exposing it to the public View." ('Essay', p. 174) For Fielding then, the authenticity of virtue is indicated by an absence of outward signs. In addition to this violation of the external representation of virtue, the hypocrite's actions contradict his professed character. He is ill-natured and always ready to censure others. ('Essay', p. 168) At the same time his pious actions are confined to an observance of external forms because his main motivation is "to procure Praise, by acquiring and maintaining an undeserved character" and "to obscure and contaminate the Virtues of others." ('Essay', p. 170)

Fielding is convinced that with his rules he has given an "infallible Guide" to the reader "on the Efficacy of which we may with the greatest Certainty rely." ('Essay', p. 162) In his opinion it is possible to "distinguish with . . . Certainty, the true from the fictitious" ('Essay', p. 167) because "Nature doth really imprint sufficient Marks . . . to inform an accurate and discerning Eye" ('Essay', p. 161). Observers only have to be willing to "believe their Eyes, and judge of Men by what they actually see them perform" ('Essay', p. 175). His rules, therefore, simply state what is to be seen. Considering what has been discussed so far this attitude seems to be surprising. In the midst of forgery, deception, imposture and numerous arguments asking which signs represent what Fielding maintains that he can see through this confusion. Physiognomy, he admits, is a difficult method of sign reading because the meaning of signs is often misunderstood. ('Essay', p. 157) Austerity is mistaken for wisdom, the sneering smile for good nature, the fierce aspect of the face for courage. But this has nothing to do with the problematic nature of physiognomic signs. Mistakes do not happen because rules in principle are open to question and uncertainty. They happen because people use rules which "are utterly false" ('Essay', p. 157). Fielding's rules are, of course, not of that sort. Since they correspond to facts they guarantee an arrival at authenticity even in a world that has become a masquerade. This statement of certainty and conviction is as typical of the eighteenth century as the above mentioned manifestations of uncertainty, suspicion and doubt. In fact, the former can be seen as caused by the latter. The same connection is observed by J. Paul Hunter who argues that "an anxious sense of crisis" leads to texts with

a tone of authority and the air of certainty<sup>34</sup>. This is literally true in the case of Fielding's essay. He does not write it because everything is safe and sound, far from it: in his eyes the world is a place of deceit, illusion and inauthenticity but something has to be done about it. And the certainty he arrives at is not a calm one. Impostors and hypocrites have to be seen through and resisted. His text creates almost the same urgent, driven and single-minded atmosphere that is produced by claims of sanity written by persons accused of madness which will be examined later. There is no room for different points of view or different possibilities of reading signs. Austerity indicates pride, ill nature and cunning, period. Every other opinion is "utterly false". If you stick to the rules everything will be certain, infallible, accurate. Fielding stresses this again and again. If you don't, uncertainty and illusion will prevail. Paradoxically, the first step towards certainty is a well trained sense of suspicion. In Fielding's words: "it is better that one Saint should suffer a little unjust Suspicion, than that Ninety Nine Villains should impose on the World" ('Essay', p. 167). Fielding maintains that he has safe rules which will decide whether his suspicion turns out to be justified and what lies behind the false appearance. But in spite of – or perhaps because of – his constant assertions the uncertainty behind his claims and the urgency of his writing have an unsettling effect. The cultural uncertainty about the meaning of all kinds of signs, the questioning whether they pointed to authenticity or fraud, also shows that many people did "apprehend there is no Certainty that your Suspicions are true."

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<sup>34</sup>J. Paul Hunter, *Before Novels*, pp. 240–241

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### III

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“WHAT’S THE MEANING OF ALL THIS?”<sup>1</sup>

THE EMPIRICAL PHILOSOPHY OF  
HUMAN UNDERSTANDING

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AFTER SO MUCH uncertainty about the possibility of human knowledge, so much confusion about the meaning of signs it seems necessary to have a look at the philosophy of human understanding of the time. By putting this examination behind an outline of the cultural context I want to emphasize that the atmosphere of uncertainty was not created by some philosophers. Rather, their texts participated in the tendencies of the culture at large and can be seen as a further manifestation of it. Therefore, I see it as an effect of the cultural context that numerous studies of human understanding were published at the end of the seventeenth and during the eighteenth century. This fact seems to indicate a special interest in the subject and an urgency to come to terms with it. The texts I will discuss are just two prominent examples of a large number of others.

The predominant philosophy of the time was, of course, empiricism which developed out of several aspects of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century culture characterized by a turn from authority and tradition as the determining factors of what has to be regarded as truth. One such revolution certainly was the religious movement of the reformation which transferred authority concerning religious truth from the priest to the individual. Another was the making of new discoveries in the natural sciences or natural philosophy, as it was called at the time. New grounds for truth had to be established, especially after the experience of the dangerous consequences of the fragmentation of opinion during the political events of the seventeenth century when everybody believed to be on the side of truth and many truths existed at the same time. According to Joel Weinsheimer this experience was an important motivation for Locke’s writing of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*<sup>2</sup>. The co-existence of so many different opinions, all held with an equal amount of conviction, made it clear there was more to truth than simply stating the obvious, or, in Fielding’s case, stating the not so obvious which was therefore even more true. Locke, Weinsheimer argues, was motivated by this precariousness of the situation and made an attempt to find

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<sup>1</sup>Lennox, p. 258

<sup>2</sup>John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by Roger Woolhouse (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1997). In the following text this work will be quoted as *Essay* with page numbers in parenthesis.

new and hopefully firm grounds on which “to avoid the bloody consequences”<sup>3</sup>. Regarding the “history of this essay” Locke himself says in an ‘Epistle to the Reader’ “that five or six friends meeting in my chamber, and discoursing on a subject . . . found themselves quickly at a stand, by the difficulties that rose on every side.” (*Essay*, p. 8) This experience is named as the moving force which lead to the idea that “it was necessary to examine our own abilities, and see what objects our understanding were, or were not fitted to deal with.” (*Essay*, p. 8) The cause of the *Essay* therefore is not very different from Fielding’s motivation to help his readers finding their ways through the masquerade of the world.

Locke’s expressed pupose is “to inquire into the original, certainty, and extent of human knowledge; together, with the grounds and degrees of belief, opinion, and assent” (*Essay*, p. 55). Such an inquiry has become necessary because

those persuasions, which are to be found amongst men, [are] so various, different, and wholly contradictory; and yet asserted . . . with such an assurance, and confidence, that he that shall take a view of the opinions of mankind, observe their opposition, and at the same time, consider the fondness, and devotion wherewith they are embraced . . . may perhaps have reason to suspect, that either there is no such thing as truth at all; or that mankind hath no sufficient means to attain a certain knowledge of it. (*Essay*, pp. 55–56)

These are indeed disturbing consequences which Locke draws from the fragmentation of opinion. It is possible that there is no truth at all. More probable, however, is the attitude that human beings are not able to arrive at it because they lack the necessary faculties which is, however, equally unsettling for his readers. All this first of all means, Locke says, that all violence to convince others is completely useless. Instead we should, in the consciousness of our limitations, “moderate our persuasions” and “be more cautious in meddling with things exceeding . . . comprehension” (*Essay*, p. 56). The above mentioned “bloody consequences” are prevented and security is re-established by an acknowledgment of epistemological uncertainty. But it is hard to tell which kind of insecurity, physical or mental, is more frightening. Locke is, of course, aware of this. In the first four pages of his *Essay* he therefore performs a figure of thought which will be repeated again and again. A clear judgment of the very disturbing limitations of the human understanding is directly followed by a flood of assurances that there is no reason at all to worry about it. It is true, he admits, that “the *comprehension* of our understandings comes exceeding short of the vast extent of things;” but “the candle, that is set up in us, shines bright enough for all our purposes.” (*Essay*, p. 57) It is also true that it does not make sense to “demand certainty where probability only is to be had”. But the fact that certainty is out of reach in many spheres of human life is no reason to “to disbelieve everything” (*Essay*, p. 57).

Locke’s greatest assurance that there is no reason for despair is his theory of knowledge. But it is an assurance which also uncovers its own pitfalls and

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<sup>3</sup>Weinsheimer, p. 24



shortcomings and tries to mend the resulting gaps of ambivalence and doubt on its way. After dismissing the notion of innate ideas Locke examines how the “white paper, void of all characters” (*Essay*, p. 109) which is the human mind at the beginning of its life is filled step by step. All our knowledge, he argues, is based on experience. It is derived from

our observation employed either about *external sensible objects*; or about *the internal operations of our minds, perceived and reflected on by ourselves* . . . These are the two fountains of knowledge, from whence all the ideas we have, or can naturally have, do spring. (*Essay*, p. 109)

With this theory Locke bases knowledge on a firm because objective ground. But all is not as easy and straightforward as it sounds. There are “*our senses*” which do “*convey into the mind, several distinct perceptions of things*” (*Essay*, p. 109). By affecting the senses external objects cause a sensation which in turn leads to the perception of these objects, or rather their qualities, in the mind. Then there is the other source of knowledge, “*the perception of the operations of our own minds within us*” which supplies the mind “with another set of ideas, which could not be had from things without” (*Essay*, p. 110). With this distinction knowledge ceases to be independent of the activity of the mind. This means that it becomes hard to determine whether the content of our mind is simply a mirror of the world or whether it is a picture the mind in a way constructs. The firm objective ground starts to become unsteady.

Things are complicated by Locke’s division of ideas into different kinds. There are simple ideas and complex ones. In the perception of simple ideas the mind is passive. Here it is certainly a mirror:

These *simple* ideas, when offered to the mind, *the understanding can no more refuse to have, nor alter, when they are imprinted, nor blot them out, and make new ones itself, than a mirror can refuse, alter, or obliterate the images or ideas, which, the objects set before it, do therein produce.* (*Essay*, p. 121)

In the formation of complex ideas, however, the mind is active. Once it is filled with simple ideas received from the perception of external objects it “has the power to repeat, compare, and unite them even to an almost infinite variety, and so can make at pleasure new complex ideas.” (*Essay*, pp. 121–122) Here the mind is certainly constructing something. And even in regard to simple ideas it is not always a faithful mirror for there is a further distinction to be made, this time between our simple ideas of primary qualities and those of secondary qualities. The former are “*real qualities*, because they really exist in those bodies” we perceive (*Essay*, p. 137) and therefore “we have by these an idea of the thing, as it is in itself” (*Essay*, p. 139). The latter, however, “in truth are nothing in the objects themselves, but powers to produce various sensations in us” (*Essay*, p. 135) . Locke names colour, smell, taste and sound as examples of secondary qualities

which should not be understood as realities of or resemblances to something in the object. (*Essay*, p. 136) Colours are only sensations of the human eye, smells sensations of the human nose, sounds sensations of the human ear. A red rose is never red in itself, it is only red for us so that concerning secondary qualities “there is nothing like our ideas, existing in the bodies themselves.” (*Essay*, p.136) From this Locke concludes

were there no fit organs to receive the impressions fire makes on the sight and touch; nor a mind joined to those organs to receive the idea of light and heat . . . there would yet be no more light or heat in the world, than there would be pain, if there were no sensible creatures to feel it (*Essay*, p. 337).

The effect of Locke’s observations is unsettling even though they are presented in a calm manner. At first sight the assertion that our knowledge is based on experience seems to put a safe ground beneath it. Now we have to ask ourselves — literally — to what on earth the content of our mind really relates. With the exception of our simple ideas of primary qualities our perceptions of external objects do not represent them as they really are. Ideas derived from the perception of the operation of our mind do not relate to anything in the outside world and our complex ideas are of our own making. How can we ever be able to distinguish fact from fiction in this condition? Locke himself admits that often “we take that for the perception of our sensation, which is an idea formed by our judgment” (*Essay*, p. 145). He also notes that in “varying and multiplying the objects of its thoughts” the mind “is not confined barely to observation” (*Essay*, p. 160). He even goes as far as saying that it is a completely normal capacity of our understanding to form “*the most abstruse ideas*” (*Essay*, p. 161). In his peculiar manner of reasoning Locke does not mean to disconcert his reader with this observation. In the end, he assures us, everything can only be “derived from *sensation, or reflection*”, “how remote soever” our ideas “may seem from sense, or from any operation of our minds” (*Essay*, p. 161). So don’t worry, we are still on safe grounds.

But as Locke continues his investigation the safety of this ground again turns out to be fragile. Thus Hans Aarsleff points to the amount of space Locke devotes “to telling us how we could go wrong, fall into error, put trust in illusion and become unreasonable”, not when we fall into madness but as persons of average sanity.<sup>4</sup> He lists “*defaults which usually occasion . . . confusion*” of ideas on six pages (*Essay*, pp. 326–334). The hoped for effect of this list certainly is an increased awareness of these defaults in order to avoid them. But at the same time this awareness increases the reader’s doubts concerning the reliability of his understanding.

Firm ground comes within reach again when Locke examines the distinction between real and fantastical ideas. Real ideas, he argues, “have a conformity

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<sup>4</sup>Aarsleff, p. 269

with the real being, and existence of things” while fantastical ones “have no foundation in nature” (*Essay*, p. 334). According to his opinion all simple ideas are real, even those of secondary qualities, because they are all caused by external objects in a way which is “ordained by our Maker” (*Essay*, p. 334). Real ideas, then, are characterized by a “steady correspondence they have with the distinct constitution of real beings” whereas fictional ideas lack this connection (*Essay*, p. 335). Based on this criterion Locke hopes to guarantee an accordance with facts even for complex ideas which are always formed with “some kind of liberty” (*Essay*, p. 335). Locke acknowledges that complex ideas always differ from each other, one man’s idea of gold is often different from another man’s idea of it, but he insists on a distinction between real and “barely imaginary combinations” (*Essay*, p. 335). In a factual complex idea the combination of simple ideas has to correspond to the coexistence of the same simple ideas in the external object.

This sounds reasonable enough. The only question is whether Locke’s theory of ideas really makes it possible to use this criterion in every case. Already during the eighteenth century Locke has been accused of creating an “impenetrable veil” between the perceiver and the external world by working with the concept of ideas.<sup>5</sup> It was argued that the concept of ideas interferes with the immediacy of perception. What our minds work with is not the real thing but its representation, or, as Locke expresses it: “the mind knows not things immediately, but only by the intervention of the ideas it has of them.” (*Essay*, p. 499) Experience has to go through, or rather is made available by a mediating construct.<sup>6</sup> Can it, then, be possible to ascertain whether the product of this mediating construct is in accordance with facts when we are not able to experience anything without it? Locke himself is aware of this problem when he asks “How shall the mind, when it perceives nothing but its own ideas, know that they agree with things themselves?” (*Essay*, p. 499) Hume will give a negative answer to the question while Locke clearly believes that this knowledge is possible to some degree. He conceives ideas as mind- and perception-dependent<sup>7</sup> and regards the dependence on perception as a secure enough connection to the external world. Without really explaining how he states several times that we are able to discover the coexistence of ideas in nature. This allows us to form complex ideas which are “not, perhaps, very exact copies” of things but, nevertheless, “the subjects of real (as far as we have any) *knowledge* of them.” (*Essay*, p. 504) This mixture of granted certainty and recognized uncertainty is typical for Locke. The qualification “as far as we have any” allows us to feel the thin ground of Locke’s struggle to reconcile an epistemology based on an acknowledgment of the limitations of human knowledge with a sufficient amount of certainty. We will encounter the same struggle in the discussion of Hume the mere difference being the shifted balance between fact

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<sup>5</sup>This argument can be found in Vere Chappell, ‘Locke’s Theory of Ideas’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Locke*, ed. by Vere Chappell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 26–55 (p. 31)

<sup>6</sup>This argument can be found in Cope, p. 6

<sup>7</sup>Chappell, p. 32

and fiction.

How close even Locke comes to admit that great parts human knowledge are simply constructs of the mind, i.e. fiction, can be seen in his statement that many complex ideas are “archetypes of the mind’s own making, not intended to be copies of anything, nor referred to the existence of anything” (*Essay*, p. 500). A good example of this group is mathematics. But again Locke does reject the conclusion that these ideas are merely fictional and not real. Instead he assures his readers that mathematical truth is in every way “*real knowledge*; and not the bare empty vision of vain insignificant chimeras of the brain” (*Essay*, p. 500). In his typical way of reasoning he simply argues that an idea “which is not designed to represent anything but itself can never be capable of a wrong representation, nor mislead us from the true apprehension of anything” (*Essay*, p. 500). Therefore, as long as the combination of these ideas is consistent and “conformable to our ideas . . . we cannot miss of a certain undoubted reality.” (*Essay*, p. 500)

The most dangerous principle leading to the formation of imaginary complex ideas is, in Locke’s opinion, the *Association of Ideas*. Its effects are “obstinacy”, “unreasonableness”, even “a sort of madness”. This, however, does not mean that it is only a special characteristic of people that are diagnosed as insane. Although insanity does “spring from the very same root” the disturbing news is that “there is scarce a man so free from it, but that if he should always, on all occasions, argue or do as in some cases he constantly does, would not be thought fitter for Bedlam, than civil conversation.” (*Essay*, p. 354) Fortunately, Locke is able to identify the principle which is the weak point of every human understanding so that we can take “the greater care in its prevention and cure.” (*Essay*, p. 355) By now we are accustomed to Locke’s optimism to expect that this is possible. The criterion he gives for the distinction between right and wrong combinations of ideas is “a natural correspondence and connexion one with another” (*Essay*, p. 355). Thus, while some ideas are “allied by nature” others are only connected by “chance or custom”. (*Essay*, p. 355) When the “accidental connexion” is established either by great force or by long habit it “has such an influence . . . to set as awry in our actions, as well moral as natural, passions, reasonings, and notions themselves, that perhaps there is not any one thing that deserves more to be looked after.” (*Essay*, pp. 356–357) The instances of associations of ideas Locke quotes are those of conditioned reflexes. He gives the example of a man who after seeing a friend die in a certain room reacts with pain or sickness to the thought of places like it because in his mind the impression of the pain is associated to the impression of the room. (*Essay*, p. 357) A patient who has been cured “by a very harsh and offensive operation” associates his suffering with the sight of the doctor who treated him. (*Essay*, p. 358) Other associations concern “intellectual habits”, as Locke calls them. The connection of the idea of infallibility with a person is, according to Locke, nothing but an unreasonable association of ideas. He argues that this kind of association is in general responsible for the “irreconcilable opposition between different sects of

philosophy and religion (*Essay*, p. 359). And it is so dangerous because “it hinders men from seeing and examining” (*Essay*, p. 359). This is an interesting point. A man under the influence of such an association is unable to distinguish real from fantastical complex ideas because “two things in themselves disjoined, appear to the sight constantly united” (*Essay*, p. 359). And, as Locke observes, “if the eye sees these things riveted, which are loose, where will you begin to rectify the mistake that follow in two ideas, that they have been accustomed so to join in their minds?” (*Essay*, p. 359) The same argument could, of course, apply to any complex idea and leads us back to the discussion whether Locke’s criteria for an accordance with facts can really be used. On one hand, Locke states clearly, that a person who perceives two ideas as connected is unable to perceive them as separated. There seems to be no method to correct the connection. On the other hand, Locke is convinced that he can decide whether ideas are “allied by nature” or not, when the only thing he can really say is whether they conform to the connections he has made so far. Delusion seems to become a relative concept. Not surprisingly, again Locke does not want to draw this conclusion. He can identify those views which contradict the connections made by nature and so can everybody else.

In the last book of the *Essay* Locke comes back to the question he set out to answer, namely what is the extent of human knowledge. He starts by distinguishing three kinds of knowledge which differ in their degrees of clearness. At first there is “*intuitive knowledge*” which is “the clearest, and most certain, that human frailty is capable of”. (*Essay*, p. 472) The second degree of knowledge is “*demonstrative knowledge*” which is still certain but not as easily perceived as intuitive knowledge because it involves a logical proof. (*Essay*, pp. 472–476) The third category is *sensitive knowledge* which only applies to “the existence of things actually present to our senses” (*Essay*, p. 479). This sounds like a lot of certainty but this time Locke prefers to stress its limits. According to him “*the extent of our knowledge* comes not only short of the reality of things, but even of the extent of our own ideas.” (*Essay*, p. 479) It is important to keep in mind that for Locke knowledge, strictly spoken, implies certainty and it is this which does not apply to all the material in our minds. Locke goes as far as saying that regarding the “*real, actual existence* of things, we have an intuitive knowledge of our own *existence*; a demonstrative knowledge of the *existence* of God; of the *existence* of anything else, we have no other but a sensitive knowledge, which extends not beyond the objects present to our senses.” (*Essay*, p. 490) Certainty is limited indeed. The reason for this is that our faculties are “suited not to the full extent of being, nor to a perfect, clear, comprehensive knowledge of things free from all doubt and scruple” (*Essay*, p. 560). All we are left with is probability. Locke defines probability as the “likeliness to be true” (*Essay*, p. 578) and the faculty which decides whether and to what degree something is probable he calls judgment (*Essay*, p. 576). The grounds of probability are two: “conformity of anything with our own knowledge, observation, and experience” and “the testimony of others”. (*Essay*, p. 579). The greatest degree of probability

is achieved when our own experience concurs with the reports of all other men. The assurance that is produced in this case is, according to Locke, “approaching to knowledge” (*Essay*, p. 584). Thus, probability is not only determined by experience but also by common consent. This point is very important for Locke. In his discussion of enthusiasm he insists that “the strength of our persuasions are no evidence at all of their own rectitude” (*Essay*, p. 620). On the other hand, he calls the behaviour of “*giving up our assent to the common received opinions*” a wrong measure of probability “which keeps in ignorance, or error, more people than all the other [wrong measures] together”. Truth is not to be established “by the vote of the multitude” (*Essay*, p. 633).

By now the reader of Locke’s investigation might feel quite lost in these repeated movements of destroying certainty and rebuilding a safe ground which starts to dissolve again while reading on. There is no final resolution of this tension although Locke is acting as if. In his final chapter he restates his observation that “there is nothing more common, than contrariety of opinion; nothing more obvious than that one man wholly disbelieves what another only doubts of, and a third steadfastly believes, and firmly adheres to.” (*Essay*, p. 623) The natural explanation for this situation seems to be the lack of certainty, the fact that we are left with mere probability as Locke himself states. But Locke does not draw this conclusion. Contrasting opinions exist because “men come to give their assent contrary to probability.” (*Essay*, p. 623) Suddenly everything is certain again. Probability just seems to be certainty’s new name under which it enters the ring again. There is something to fight for after all.

IT WAS HUME who, according to Bertrand Russell, developed the empirical philosophy of Locke to its logical conclusion, “and by making it self-consistent made it incredible.”<sup>8</sup> Like Locke Hume undertakes an examination of the human understanding in his *Treatise of Human Nature*<sup>9</sup> and again in his *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding*<sup>10</sup>. Hume also works with a theory of ideas which are caused by impressions (*Treatise*, p. 5), thereby also assuming that our access to the world is mediated. The conclusion Hume draws from this assumption, however, is completely different from the one Locke draws. Although he admits that “there is no impression nor any idea of any kind, of which we have any consciousness or memory, that is not conceived as existent” (*Treatise*, p. 66) Hume argues that there is no certainty available

<sup>8</sup>Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1946; repr. 2000), p. 634

<sup>9</sup>David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. by L.A. Selby-Bigge and P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978). In the following text the work will be quoted as *Treatise* with page numbers in parenthesis.

<sup>10</sup>David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by L.A. Delby-Bigge and P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975). In the following text this work will be quoted as *Enquiries* with page numbers in parenthesis.

that that the perceptions of the mind must be caused by external objects, entirely different from them, though resembling them (if that be possible) and could not arise either from energy of the mind itself, or from the suggestion of some invisible and unknown spirit, or from some other cause still more unknown to us (*Enquiries*, pp. 152–153)<sup>11</sup>

This conclusion refers us back to the accusation of the “impenetrable veil” which was made against Locke. According to Hume this accusation is a logical consequence of the theory of ideas since “the mind has never anything present to it but the perceptions, and cannot possibly reach any experience of their connexion with objects.” (*Enquiries*, p. 153) When experience is unable to establish such a connection between perception and idea on the one side and external object on the other Locke’s distinction between primary and secondary qualities turns out to be completely imaginary. It can neither be based on experience and observation nor on reasoning. The human understanding is completely incapable of deciding whether any quality it perceives exists in the object itself or not, or, as Hume expresses it: “we should never have any reason to infer, that our objects resemble our perceptions.” (*Treatise*, p. 216) This sounds unsettling enough but Hume’s view of the limitations of the human mind is even more disturbing. Not only do we not know *how* things in themselves really are we also lack the competence to find out *whether* things are at all.

In case we never intended to be so bold as to make a final decision on such a fundamental question but were content to know the content of our minds and the order of things it established Hume has another bad news for us. All our ordering, he says, is based on connections between ideas and the most basic of these connections is the one of cause and effect. According to Locke our idea of cause and effect is derived “from what our senses are able to discover in the operations of bodies on one another” (*Essay*, p. 293). But what exactly, Hume asks, are our senses able to discover? First of all we perceive that “whatever objects are consider’d as causes or effects, are *contiguous*” (*Treatise*, p. 75). Then we are able to observe a succession of events or objects. (see *Treatise*, p. 76) Another perceivable aspect is their constant conjunction. (see *Treatise*, p.87). But this is all there is to see. This is the only evidence of the senses which leads us to “associate together the ideas of these objects, and unite them in the imagination” (*Treatise*, p. 92). The union in the imagination we then call causation. And the only ground this union is based on boils down to custom. As soon as “we are accostum’d to see two impressions conjoin’d together”, Hume argues, “the appearance or idea of the one immediately carries us to the idea of the other.” (*Treatise*, p. 103) Thus, Locke’s concept of the association of ideas by habit which, in his opinion, was the source of error and illusion and even the root of madness, becomes, in Hume’s reasoning, the principle by which all our ideas are connected. In Hume’s conception, it is nothing but “a sufficient custom” in

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<sup>11</sup>Since the argument contained in Hume’s *Enquiries* is more or less a rewriting of the earlier *Treatise* I regard it as possible to combine quotations of the two texts.

the experience of contiguity, succession and constant conjunction which leads us to suppose that there is a relation of cause and effect. And since this relation is merely based on “this customary transition of the imagination from one object to its usual attendant” (*Enquiries*, p. 75) Hume is able to conclude that “when we say . . . that one object is connected with another, we mean only that they have acquired a connexion in our thought” (*Enquiries*, p. 76). This is all we are capable of meaning. Hume admits that his conclusion “is somewhat extraordinary” (*Enquiries*, p. 76) but this can only be Scottish understatement. It is deeply disturbing, especially since this is not the only thing which exists solely in our minds. In fact, the fancy “enters into all our reasonings.” (*Treatise*, p. 140) Our conviction of a continued and independent existence of objects in a world around us, for example, is not derived from perception (*Treatise*, p. 188) but “must be entirely owing to the IMAGINATION” (*Treatise*, p. 193), it is, in fact, “a fiction of the imagination” (*Treatise*, p. 201), even an “error and deception” (*Treatise*, p. 202). In addition to this Hume holds that the assumption that expectations derived from past experiences are also always imaginary. (*Enquiries*, p. 33) All our expectations, he argues, “proceed upon the supposition that the future will be conformable to the past.” (*Enquiries*, p. 34) But for this supposition we can have no evidence since all the information our perception can give us is only valid for the present moment. Therefore, the inference from past to future events is nothing but “a process of thought” (*Treatise*, p. 34) which is not based on experience but again on custom. (see *Enquiries*, p. 44) Thus, an investigation which set out with the assumption that “all the laws of nature, and all the operations of bodies without exception, are known only by experience” (*Enquiries*, p. 29) arrives by a close examination of that experience at the conclusion that “upon the whole, there appears not, throughout all nature, any one instance of connexion which is conceivable by us. All events seem entirely loose and separate . . . we never can *observe* any tie between them.” (*Enquiries*, p. 74, emphasis mine) Hume himself pretends to be rather surprised by this outcome:

I begun this subject with premising, that we ought to have an implicit faith in our senses, and that this wou’d be the conclusion, I shou’d draw from my whole reasoning. But to be ingenuous, I feel myself *at present* of a quite contrary sentiment, and am more inclin’d to repose no faith at all in my senses, or rather imagination, than to place in it such an implicit confidence. (*Treatise*, p. 217)

The confusing consequence of Hume’s argument seems to be that the distinction between fact and fiction completely ceases to exist. Everything is purely imaginary, everything is an illusion, or at least there is no possibility left to distinguish illusion from reality. This is, as Bertrand Russel observes, “a desparate point of view” for “there is no intellectual difference between sanity and insanity”.<sup>12</sup> And of course, Hume does not leave it like that.

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<sup>12</sup>Russel, p. 646



Instead, throughout his investigations he makes a difference between an imagination which is in accordance with something, whatever that may be, and an imagination which is merely fantastical. Surprisingly, Hume's point of reference is perception. Even in the absence of any knowledge whether our senses "represent nature justly, or be mere illusions" it is possible to rely on their coherence. As long as perceptions are coherent, he argues, we do have every right to draw inferences from them. (*Treatise*, p. 84) He even goes as far as saying that based on an instinct implanted by nature there is "a kind of pre-established harmony between the course of nature and the succession of our ideas". (*Enquiries*, p. 54) Like Locke he also notes that the "creative power of the mind amounts to no more than the faculty of compounding, transporting, augmenting, or diminishing the materials afforded us by the senses and experience." (*Enquiries*, p. 19) And he insists that "some fact must always be present to the senses or memory, from which we may first proceed in drawing . . . conclusions" (*Enquiries*, p. 45), otherwise they "would be chimerical and without foundation." (*Treatise*, p. 83) We can recognize ideas based on perception by their "force and vivacity" which is "superior to what is found in those, which are mere fictions of the imagination." (*Treatise*, p. 85) He also maintains that belief which is characterized by a special force and vivacity "distinguishes the ideas of the judgement from the fictions of the imagination." (*Enquiries*, p. 49) Because "ideas of an enchanted castle . . . are very different to the feeling" they are not able to cause belief.

But on the whole Hume is not very consistent in his argument concerning the differing degrees of vivacity and forcefulness caused by, to take up Lennard Davis' book title, factual fictions and mere fictions. He notes, for example, that "a vigorous and strong imagination is of all the talents the most proper to procure belief" and admits that "the vivacity produc'd by the fancy is in many cases greater than that which arises from custom and experience." This is the reason why we can get "hurried away by the lively imagination of our author". (*Treatise*, p. 123) In addition to this, passions influence the formation of our beliefs so that "a person of a sorrowful and melancholy disposition, is very credulous of every thing, that nourishes his prevailing passion" (*Treatise*, p. 120). In the end it is hard to determine in all cases what comes first, belief which causes vivacity and force or vivacity and force causing belief. Hume argues that we can read the same book as a romance or as factual history, thereby achieving different effects. While a reading as factual history produces a "lively conception" a reading as romance only results in a "faint and languid conception". (*Treatise*, pp. 97–98) If Hume is right he has not given a reason for the different effects of fact and fiction as such but for the effects of already established preconceptions. Finally, to leave no piece of firm ground undisturbed, Hume points out that any idea of the imagination can, by habit, acquire such a force and vivacity that it passes as an idea based on perception and "counterfeit[s] its effects on the belief and judgment." (*Treatise*, p. 86) Thus, we are back in the world of the masquerade where ideas commit deceit, reality is disguised by perception and everything is nothing but imagination. In his conclusion of the first book of the *Treatise* Hume

himself is unable to regain safe ground beneath his epistemological feet: “I . . . begin to fancy myself in the most deplorable condition imaginable, environ’d with the deepest darkness, and utterly depriv’d of the use of every member and faculty.” (*Treatise*, p. 269) In one sentence he is certain that something will “obliterate these chimeras” of his conviction that our ordering of the world is so fundamentally based on the imagination and “lies merely in ourselves” and in the next moment he fears to fall back into “indolent belief” when he returns to the common affairs of life and the certainty about the external world connected with them. (*Treatise*, p. 269) Deliberately Hume does not resolve the unsettling tension resulting from our inability to decide on what side the illusion lies. “A true sceptic”, he concludes, “will be diffident of his philosophical doubts, as well as of his philosophical conviction; and will never refuse any innocent satisfaction, which offers itself, upon account of either of them.” (*Treatise*, p. 273) Hume has left certainty behind.

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## IV

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“WHICH CONTINUALLY DISTURBED MY  
IMAGINATION”<sup>1</sup>

### FICTIONAL AND FACTUAL MADNESS

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WITH HUME WE have moved right into the realm I want to consider next: the fictions of the imagination in the literal sense of the expression. In this chapter the term is applied to fictional writing and madness and I want to start with the discussion of a text which combines both aspects, Charlotte Lennox’ *The Female Quixote*<sup>2</sup> The novel narrates the “adventures” of Arabella, a young woman who was, or rather brought herself up by reading romances. Since Arabella believes the claims of authenticity made in romances she takes them to be “real Pictures of Life” and consequently reads them as both history- and conduct books. And since she lives “wholly secluded from the world”, in a “perfect Retirement” where no other experiences are available for her the result is that her “Ideas, from The Manner of her Life, and the Objects around her, had taken a romantic Turn” because “she drew all her Notions and Expectations” from her romances. (*Quixote*, p. 7) Keeping Locke’s and especially Hume’s theory of the human understanding in our minds this outcome cannot surprise us. All our ideas, these philosophers say, are based on experience and there is no reason why reading cannot be regarded as one form of it. Arabella’s romance experience is even, and this is important to note, in accord with her sense perceptions since the physical world of the romance, at least in its basics, resembles her actual environment. Thus, her ideas can easily be derived from the experience she makes in her books. In fact, according to Hume’s theory nothing is more natural. We have already seen that, from his point of view, each set of ideas receives forcefulness and vivacity simply from the belief in it. He also supposes that “a vigorous and strong imagination” procures belief and notes that “the vivacity produc’d by the fancy is in many cases greater than that which arises from [physical] custom and experience.” And as soon as fictions resemble reality by “borrowing names of their persons, and the chief events . . . from history”, as Arabella’s romances often do, they “enter easily into the conception” even when they are regarded as “pure offsprings of the fancy”. This is the case because the belief which is connected to the “real” elements “bestows a force and vivacity on the others, which are related to it.” (*Treatise*, p. 122)

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<sup>1</sup>Lennox, p. 212

<sup>2</sup>In the following text the novel is quoted as *Quixote* with page numbers in parenthesis.

It would be easy to dismiss Hume's argument as the strange opinion of a Scottish sceptic would not contemporary criticism of romance and novel reading show how much such ideas were part of the cultural discourse at large. Samuel Johnson, for example, observes that fictional narratives often

serve as lectures of conduct, and introductions into life. They are the entertainmant of minds unfurnished with ideas, and therefore easily susceptible of impressions; not fixed by principles, and therefore easily following the current of fancy; not informed by experience, and consequently open to every false suggestion and partial account.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, fictions can have a strong effect on human minds, especially on those of "the young" and "the ignorant" (*Rambler*, p. 176) which, of course, applies to Arabella.

The exact danger connected to fictional narratives results from the general assumption that "fiction was . . . the supplement to personal experience and thus an avenue to empirical knowledge"<sup>4</sup> Two aspects are important in this context. One of them is the notion of "the power of the example". According to Johnson it "is so great as to take possession of the memory by a kind of violence, and produce effects almost without intervention of the will" (*Rambler*, p. 176) and William B. Warner observes, that this notion promoted the fear "that the novel reader will become absorbed in an unconscious mimicry"<sup>5</sup>. Thus, in the eighteenth-century the imitation inducing effect of the novel was as much dreaded as the violence producing influence of television and movies is feared today. At the same time, however, it was used in order to promote exemplary behaviour. This is, of course, done by Charlotte Lennox who, according to one reading of her novel, tries to cure her readers from the consumption of romances by ridiculing and curing Arabella. The other aspect of the danger seen in fictional narratives is the general acceptance that, as Locke and Hume showed, our access to reality is mediated by something, namely our ideas and the connections we make between them. There was an awareness that reality is in a way constructed<sup>6</sup>, that the constitution of reality always included interpretation, and it is exactly this aspect which, deliberately or not, is demonstrated by *The Female Don Quixote*.

Again and again Lennox' novel shows Arabella in the act of drawing conclusions from observations. Thus, after observing a gentleman repeatedly gazing at her at Church she concludes that he is deeply in love with her. (*Quixote*, p. 10) When nothing happens to support this interpretation she is willing to correct

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<sup>3</sup>Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler*, no. 4, in *Samuel Johnson*, ed. by Donald Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 175–179, (p. 176). In the following text the work will be quoted as *Rambler* with page numbers in parenthesis.

<sup>4</sup>Erich Rothstein, *Systems of Order and Inquiry in Later Eighteenth-Century Fiction* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1975), p. 245

<sup>5</sup>William B. Warner, *Licensing Entertainment: The Elevation of Novel Reading in Britain, 1684–1750* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1998), p. 143

<sup>6</sup>Hunter, *Before Novels*, p. 198

it, assuming that “her Charms had not the Effect she imagined.” (*Quixote*, p. 11) When she sees a servant who is “tolerably genteel”, has “an Understanding something above his Condition” and uses a “Language vastly superior to his condition” she takes all this as signs marking a “Person of Quality”. And since there must be some reason for a gentleman to walk around disguised as a servant Arabella infers that he “had introduced himself into her Father’s Service, in order to have an opportunity of declaring a Passion to her.” (*Quixote*, p. 23)

Of course, Arabella’s latter interpretation of her observation sounds a little far-fetched and the same is true for the first one considering that the said gentleman was probably just attracted by her peculiar way of dressing and her beauty. But these inferences are as much based on experience as everybody else’s are. The only difference is that Arabella’s experiences are taken from romances, thereby leading to a concept of decorum which differs from the generally accepted one. From this point of view, Arabella behaves less like a Don Quixote who mistakes windmills for giants than like a female Crocodile Dundee. “Decorums”, Douglas Lane Patey reminds us, “are general rules stating typical lines of . . . signification.”<sup>7</sup> These rules regulate what kind of signs signify what, for example respectful behaviour, the expression of emotions, vice or virtue. Lane Patey also understands decorums as “laws of probability”<sup>8</sup> which regulate our expectations. In both aspects of decorum Arabella’s set of rules constantly clashes with the set recognized by other people. Nevertheless, she interprets her observations according to the dictates of her probability<sup>9</sup> and behaves according to her notions of polite behaviour. Thus, Arabella is convinced that “it is an unpardonable Crime to tell a Lady you love her” because “all the illustrious Heroines of Antiquity, whom it is a Glory to resemble, would never admit such Discourses.” (*Quixote*, p. 44) Her ideas of the “visible Marks” of “sincere Repentence” and of the “unfeigned Signs” of sorrow (*Quixote*, p. 61) are likewise derived from her romance experience. When Arabella hears about the case of a young girl who fell in love with her writing-master she is horrified by the “Offence to Probability” her new acquaintance commits while telling the story and insists that the writing-master was a disguised nobleman since “these things happen every Day.” (*Quixote*, p. 72) Whenever she observes men following her she has, according to her rules of probability, “Reason to expect” that she will experience violence just as “many illustrious Ladies have done before me” (*Quixote*, p. 92) because she knows that there is not “any thing more common, then Ladies being carried, by their Ravishers, into Countries far distant from their own” (*Quixote*, p. 261). These examples demonstrate that Arabella’s interpretation of the world around her is, in principle, always based on sense perception and probability, just as everybody else’s is. This is also indicated by the fact that the whole novel is per-

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<sup>7</sup>Lane Patey, p. 87

<sup>8</sup>Lane Patey, p. 106

<sup>9</sup>This point is also made by Wendy Motooka, ‘Coming to a Bad End: Sentimentalism, Hermeneutics, and *The Female Don Quixote*’, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, 8 (1996), 251–270, (p. 257).

vaded with expressions for sense perception combined with terms like *sign*, *mark*, *probability*, *conclusion* or *interpretation*. Thus, Wendy Motooka is in a way right to call Arabella an empiricist.<sup>10</sup> The least we can say is that Arabella's misconceptions are founded on sane methods. And this, again, is disturbing enough. It also proves that people like Johnson and Richardson were right in demanding a resemblance to truth in fictional narratives, since literature assisted readers in developing rational expectations based on the "prognostics" from the possibilities of real experience.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, the reader is left in no doubt that Arabella is "prepossessed with . . . fantastical ideas" and stumbles from mistake to mistake. (*Quixote*, p. 21) The narrator of the novel is not really interested in disturbing us with the unsettling notion that we are all living in a fiction although at times she comes very close to it. One such incident is Arabella's conversation with the countess who tries to convince our heroine that the decorum found in romances is not applicable to contemporary life. She explains to Arabella that customs have changed and goes as far as saying "Custom . . . changes the very Nature of Things." (*Quixote* p. 328) And although the sentence is here concerned with morality it almost refers us back to Hume when we think of the the role he gave to custom in the construction of our picture of the world. Arabella, however, is confused enough by considering that "what was honourable a thousand Years ago, may probably be look'd upon as infamous now" (*Quixote*, p. 328) The countess tries to recover safe ground by admitting that "the Natures of Virtue or Vice cannot be changed", it can only be mistaken. (*Quixote*, p. 328) But even this statement introduces the concept of moral relativity which might be the reason why, after this discussion, we never hear again of the countess.

Arabella's cure is left to a "Pious and Learned Doctor" who is determined to demonstrate that the books she has read "as Copies of Life, and Models of Conduct, are empty Fictions" (*Quixote*, p. 377). But it is not easy to convince Arabella. The doctor's elaborate argument that romances do not resemble truth because they "disfigure the whole Appearance of the World, and represent every Thing in a Form different from that which experience has shewn" (*Quixote*, p. 379) is wasted on her. Even a closer contact with contemporary society, i.e. new experience, has not unsettled Arabella's habit of reading the world in accordance with romance decorum. In the end the doctor advances an argument which, since Locke, seemed to be as outdated as romance reading: "your Ladyship must suffer me to decide, in some Measure authoritatively, whether Life is truly described in those Books". His reason for this assertion of authority is Arabella's inability to judge "the Likeness of a Picture" when she lacks "a Knowledge of the Original". (*Quixote*, p. 379) But, of course, this reasoning is completely circular. What it shows is first of all the limitation of empiricism to establish on its own grounds what is authentic. Once a habit of perception and interpretation is acquired there

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<sup>10</sup>Motooka, p. 252

<sup>11</sup>Lane Patey, p. 217

seems to be no empirical way out of it. Accordingly, the narrator of Arabella's adventures observes that "she had such a strange Facility to reconcile every Incident to her own fantastick Ideas, that every new Object added Strength to the fatal Deception she laboured under." (*Quixote*, p. 340). It is disturbing that empiricism has to resort to authority to decide matters of authenticity — but this is precisely the second definition of *authentic* in Johnson's *Dictionary*: "Approved by authority".

In the course of the *The Female Quixote* Arabella is repeatedly suspected of being insane. Most people she comes into contact with are "persuaded that her head is not quite right" (*Quixote*, p. 60) or "concluded that she was absolutely mad." (*Quixote*, p. 339) In the narration these claims serve to emphasize Arabella's epistemological isolation. Instead of focusing on methodological similarities between differing "decorums" of perception and interpretation, a diagnosis of insanity underlines otherness. The question is how this otherness is defined and on what grounds it is judged. Whether it is based on a difference in quality or a difference in degree. According to Allan Ingram the eighteenth century was obsessed with madness because people feared its power and proximity, and it engaged the leading medical and philosophical minds of the time.<sup>12</sup> Their attempts to explain or at least define the principles of madness show that the quality by which it is distinguished from sanity is authenticity. While sane persons perceive the world in an authentic way, i.e. in accordance with facts, mad persons are deluded and live in a fictional world. The reason for this clear separation, however, seems to be a difference of degree in the strength of the imagination.

We have already seen that Locke regards the association of ideas as the root of madness and it is worth noting that he does not regard it as the result of a lost faculty of reasoning. Instead, he states that madmen "join . . . together some ideas very wrongly" and then "mistake them for truth". It is "the violence of the imagination" which causes them to take "their fancies for realities" and after having been forced to do so "they make right deductions from them." As an example Locke quotes a man who believes to be a king and then expects to receive the adequate respect. The most unsettling aspect of Locke's examination is his notion that madness has degrees which reach into everybody's normal way of life. Every predominantly sane person suffers now and again from an association of ideas. And for Locke there is nothing wrong with comparing the delusions of madmen to the errors of those "that argue right from wrong principles". (*Essay*, p. 157)

Hume likewise states that every "lively imagination" can "degenerate into madness . . . and bears it a great resemblance in its operations." Both, the lively imagination and madness, "influence the judgment after the same manner", separated only by degrees of forcefulness. A disordered imagination is characterized by such a force and vivacity that

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<sup>12</sup>Allan Ingram, *The Madhouse of Language: Writing and Reading Madness in the Eighteenth Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 12–16

there is no means of distinguishing betwixt truth and falshood . . . Every chimera of the brain is as vivid and intense as any of those inferences, which we formerly dignify'd with the name of conclusion concerning matters of fact, and sometimes even as the present impression of the senses. (*Treatise*, p. 123)

This proximity of the ability to the impossibility to establish authenticity is only logical, since Hume was not even afraid of calling our everyday conclusions fictions of the imagination. The only criterion he can name to distinguish sanity from insanity is a conformity with the prevailing custom of connecting ideas.

Not surprisingly, Samuel Johnson cannot share this position. In the episode of the mad astronomer in Johnson's *Rasselas*<sup>13</sup> Imlac prefers to separate "fictions", "false opinions", and "dreams" completely from "realities". But he also claims that the astronomer's insanity was caused by "the reign of fancy" and that this reign is established by degrees. This constitutes a process which sounds quite similar to Locke's association of ideas in which "the mind dances from scene to scene, unites all pleasures in all combinations" and which leads to the focusing of the attention on "some particular train of idea". Although at first this train of ideas might seem absurd it becomes familiar by habit until it is taken for reality. (*Rasselas*, pp. 406–407)

The theory that madness is caused by a disturbed imagination is agreed upon by many physicians and patients in the eighteenth century.<sup>14</sup> When persons diagnosed as insane write about their delusions they always refer to their imagination. George Trosse, for example, speaks of his "wild and troubl'd Fancy", notes that he "fancy'd to saw" devils, remembers that his "Fancy" gave "*Hellish Interpretations*" to the ringing of a bell and mentions that he sometimes saw heaven itself "exceedingly degraded by my *carnal* and *dirturb'd Fancy*".<sup>15</sup> But not only the forms of insanity proper which we consider as psychoses today are understood in this way. James Boswell believes that the suffering of the "Hypochondriack" is also caused by a "corrosive imagination" so that the affected person "imagines that everybody thinks meanly of him" or "is sensible, he imagines, of a total change in all the objects of his contemplation."<sup>16</sup> The physician Peter Shaw expresses the same opinion when he observes that "the Hippo . . . has not its Substratum in Matter . . . this Disorder . . . principally resides in the Fancy". And not only did Shaw diagnose that "many illnesses arise from a perverted Imagination" he was also convinced that "some of them are cured by affecting the Imagination only".<sup>17</sup> The most influential physician in the treatment of madness was William

<sup>13</sup>Samuel Johnson, *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia*, in *Samuel Johnson*, ed. by Donald Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 335–418. In the following text the work will be quoted as *Rasselas* with page numbers in parenthesis.

<sup>14</sup>Their writings are collected in Allan Ingram, ed., *Patterns of Madness in the Eighteenth-Century: A Reader* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1998)

<sup>15</sup>George Trosse in *Patterns of Madness*, pp. 12–14

<sup>16</sup>James Boswell in *Patterns of Madness*, pp. 126–128

<sup>17</sup>Peter Shaw in *Patterns of Madness*, pp. 69–70



Battie. He concurs with Locke's view that the root of madness is a deluded imagination which allows the patient to judge right on wrong principles.<sup>18</sup>

One effect of understanding insanity as a result of a disturbed imagination is an insistence on the reality of the experience which was shared by many sufferers and physicians. Timothy Rogers, for example, stresses that "*it is a Real Disease a Real Misery that they are tormented with: And if it be Fancy, yet a diseased Fancy is as great a Disease as any other*".<sup>19</sup> This brings us back to the confusion surrounding the question of authenticity. Insanity is here seen as an authentic suffering, however imaginary it may be. This sketch of the contemporary attitude towards madness has further demonstrated that insanity is also seen as an involuntary state of inauthenticity which can be experienced by everybody at any time in every degree, without any awareness of delusion while the experience lasts. How unsettling this possibility of an inauthentic perception is can be concluded from narratives written by persons who have been diagnosed as insane at one time in their lives.<sup>20</sup> Some of them argue urgently that they never have been mad and support their case by quoting every single testimony given by any person who met them stating that the alleged madman "behaved very sensibly", "always spoke sensibly, and behaved well, and much like a Gentleman", and "shewed no signs of Madness".<sup>21</sup> Others prove their sanity by reinterpreting their past experience of madness according to the rules of a sane perspective.<sup>22</sup> They call perceptions delusions, no longer "saw" but "seemed to see" and their whole experience becomes a "ridiculous Conceit".<sup>23</sup> They have experienced that perception and reflection, observation and interpretation are not necessarily sufficient to guarantee authenticity and this growing awareness, expressed by the thin line between madness and sanity disturbs many imaginations in the eighteenth century.

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<sup>18</sup>William Battie in *Patterns of Madness*, p. 112

<sup>19</sup>Timothy Rogers in *Patterns of Madness*, p. 39

<sup>20</sup>see Allan Ingram, ed., *Voices of Madness: Four Pamphlets, 1673–1796* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1997)

<sup>21</sup>for example Alexander Cruden in *Voices of Madness*, pp. 23–74

<sup>22</sup>Ingram, *Madhouse of Language*, p. 120–123

<sup>23</sup>George Trosse, *Patterns of Madness*, p. 12–16

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### CONCLUSION

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“’TIS VAIN TO RACK OURSELVES WITH FARTHER  
THOUGHT AND REFLEXION UPON THIS SUBJECT.”<sup>1</sup>

BY NOW THE reader might be as confused about notions of authenticity in the eighteenth century as the author was during her preparation for these pages. Arabella claims to have the evidence of her senses but, as we have seen, this is not sufficient to arrive at any picture of the world, authentic or not. Fielding’s view of the world as a masquerade almost turns out to be the most comforting one since in this world we only have to struggle with the fictions of appearances and not with the fictions of interpretation. Nevertheless, Fielding demands from us to read signs and draw our conclusions but, fortunately, assures us that his rules are certain and almost infallible. Other examples of sign reading intended to establish all kinds of authenticity, that of the Bible, the signature, the travel narrative, the virgin, virtue and modesty, proved to be far more confusing with signs pointing in all kinds of directions at the same time.

Even the philosophers were of no real help, although it was probably foolish to hope to find illumination in their works. Instead, Locke and Hume argued at great length for the limitations of human understanding, stating that certainty was almost completely out of human reach and that we had to content ourselves with probability. In addition to this Locke underlined our liability to error and illusion, pointing out that nothing could be known without doubt. Unfortunately, Hume took this literally and started to doubt everything, every connection we had established between our ideas, concluding that all our ordering and inferring might be just a fiction of the imagination. At the same time, both philosophers, though in different ways and to differing degrees, argued that it was still possible to distinguish between fact and fiction, illusion and reality, authenticity and inauthenticity.

Even Arabella’s learned and pious doctor could bring no convincing order into this confusion of matters of fact, factual fictions and the impenetrable veil of habits of perception and interpretation. In the end he had to resort to authority which is exactly the point Locke wanted to depart from. Thus, authenticity turns out to consist of several aspects: observation, interpretation and authority. At

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<sup>1</sup>Hume, *Treatise*, p. 77

the same time, this combination guarantees that everybody can be deluded at any time.

Therefore, the eighteenth-century, at least in its first half, is not only attempting to draw a clear line separating fact from fiction but also is acknowledging the connection which exists between these two categories. The tension created by these contrasting movements can be felt in many texts of the period and it is astonishing that this tension is kept up for such a long time without being resolved one way or the other.

I want to close by arguing that the fuzzy line between fact and fiction, the wish to keep these concepts apart and the awareness that they somehow belong together is an experience we share with the eighteenth-century, though perhaps to a different degree. It has already been noted that our anxieties about the effects of television and videos are very similar to those of the anti-romance and anti-novel discourse. A recent newspaper article, for example, reports an assumption made by film director David Cronenberg's about the destructive effects of videos and computers on our nervous system and the reporter comments that this is conceivable since so many people are no longer able to separate fantasy from fact.<sup>2</sup> This does sound familiar. Manfred Geier adds that our culture is losing the distinction between illusion and reality not only in the modern world of multi-media but also in a discipline dedicated to the investigation of the factual, natural science. Geier claims that modern science becomes increasingly based on abstract models separated from their factual foundations. Science, he observes, has become more fictional than science fiction<sup>3</sup>. A similar tendency to fictionality is noticed in journalism and contrasted with a tendency to factuality in fiction by Dante Andrea Franzetti. Franzetti finds it hard to understand why more and more fictional works are read with a need for information whereas information is designed to meet esthetical and emotional needs.<sup>4</sup> Don't worry, Mr Franzetti, this is not the end of the world as we know it, quite the contrary. This is going on for three hundred years by now.

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<sup>2</sup>Stefan Stosch, 'Nabelschnur zum Cyberspace', *Hannoversche Allgemeine Zeitung*, 18. November 1999, p. 9

<sup>3</sup>Manfred Geier, *Fake: Leben in kuenstlichen Welten: Mythos – Literatur – Wissenschaft* (Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch, 1999), pp. 184–208

<sup>4</sup>Dante Andrea Franzetti, 'Die Zukunft der Fakten', *Die Zeit*, 15. June 2000, pp. 49–50

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