

Biography as the Redemptive Text in Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the English Poets**

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This paper attempts to look into some of Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the English Poets* (1925) and find out the common feature these biographical texts share. The close reading and detailed analysis demonstrate that Samuel Johnson manages to redeem and restore the biographical subjects' (the poets') life, honor, and status in their different but similar biographies; that is, each biography is a redemptive text in its own way. In specific, the credible life story is re-presented with selected biographical materials, the poets' lives together with their achievements are reevaluated under Johnson's corrective observation, and Johnson's empathy with the poets reestablishes the reader's understanding of the poets' literary careers.

Keywords: Samuel Johnson, biography, redemptiveness, redemptive text

Introduction

Samuel Johnson was a literary giant in 18th-century England. Thanks to the popularity of James Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (1791), Johnson has become a fascinating biographical subject, almost as lively and familiar as some fictional characters. Many readers take him as an old man "blinking, puffing, rolling his head, or drumming with his fingers, tearing his meat like a tiger, and swallowing his tea in oceans" (Macaulay, 1905, p. 42). Johnson's personality is far better known than his writings, so is his conversation than his literary genius. However, the great conversationist is only part of Johnson, for it was with his writings rather than his conversation that Johnson first impressed his age. Like every great author, Johnson lives in his works. With multi-dimensional talent, Johnson could rise up to different occasions and does not touch any genre that he could not adorn. Time assures that his *Rambler* (1750) essays, *Rasselas* (1749), and the *Lives of the English Poets* (1925) deserve lasting praise and making indelible contributions to the flourish of English literature.

Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the English Poets* (abbreviated as *Lives*) comprises short biographies and critical appraisals of 52 poets, most of whom lived during the 18th century. This collection of biographies has been well known more as insightful literary criticism than as reliable biographies of the literary men. However, unmistakably the *Lives* is a particularly harmonious mixture of biography and criticism, whose critical insightfulness as well as biographical informativeness often impresses the reader deeply. Since it is always an understandable disadvantage that the biographer of those days has no easy access to plain biographical facts, Johnson's success in the *Lives* displays his skillful management with and then expertly surpasses this impediment.

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Actually the biographical texts in the *Lives* illustrate how Johnson makes up for the lost or absent biographical materials, so as to reconstruct or redeem one's life story, and presents a "redemptive text".

This "redemptive text" does not mean to illuminate, eulogize, and even exaggerate those poets' life stories in a religious sense. Clingham (1997) stated, "The 'redemptiveness' of the *Lives* is a delicate notion. Although the term 'redemptive' is the right word for Johnson's work, it is not meant to convey any theological or strictly religious meaning" (p. 186). Indeed, the *Lives* does not demonstrate the miraculous story of some perfect men, but the ordinary lives of the extraordinary literary figures. Moreover, to write somebody's biography is itself a process of redeeming the person's past, restoring his honor, worth, or reputation to the reader, and creating certain continuity between the poet and his work. Johnson perfectly fulfils this task. His redemptive biographical method is "not providential", but "does register the moral and spiritual power of a person's life with regard to the quality and influence of his work" (Clingham, 1997, p. 187). In this sense, the "redemptiveness" of the *Lives* is reflected in Johnson's success in filling up the gap between the poet's life, his work, and the reader and putting reader's understanding of every poet in right perspective. Hence, this paper attempts to investigate into the "redemptiveness" of some *Lives* from the following aspects: Johnson's representation of selected biographical materials instead of the whole truth, his reevaluation of the poets' lives and literary achievements with the corrective criticism¹, and his empathetic reestablishment of the poets' image to the reader.

To Redeem One's Credible Life With Selected Biographical Materials

To redeem the life story of the biographical subject, Johnson insists on telling credible lives and presenting selective rather than the whole truth. This can be seen clearly in the "Life of Savage" (1903), Johnson's first critical biography in the strict sense. In this biography, Johnson has managed to interpret the poet's life meaningfully and merge Savage's life experience with insightful criticism on his literary works. In Johnson's time, the question of Savage's identity has been hotly argued and many people doubt about Savage's claim of being the disowned bastard of the Earl Rivers. This poses a tricky problem for Johnson's biographical writing, as no truth is definite and ascertained, and the so-called claimed facts might just weave between fiction and reality. However, to write about this biographical subject, Johnson does not directly solve but seems to intentionally avoid or dismiss such delicate and debatable problems as Savage's identity and his parentage, which need most careful proof to testify. The "Life of Savage" just presents a credible surface. Concerning Savage's dramatic discovery of his identity, Johnson writes succinctly in a matter-of-fact tone: the letters of Savage's nurse "informed him of his birth" and he was "so touched with the discovery of his real mother" (Johnson, 1903, pp. 9-10). Without further questioning, Johnson shuns the direct discussion of Savage's identity and parentage problem.

Commenting on this, O'Shaughnessy (1990) stated, "[I]n his [Johnson's] silent refusal to acknowledge the particular problem of Savage's identity, Johnson responds to a wider and more threatening indeterminacy in identity itself" (p. 488). Under Johnson's pen, the indeterminacy is skillfully highlighted and effectively turned into the consideration of the universal nature of identity. Meanwhile, this concern with the universality of identity problem leads to the readers' temporary holding of their doubt, which provides the foundation for the production of a reliable biography. This relinquished suspicion is also achieved together with Johnson's vivid depiction of

¹ By corrective criticism, here it means the biographer tries to rectify the past or popular opinion of the biographical subject's life and achievements, which, though widely accepted, might be not so right or fair.

Savage's sufferings:

He [Savage] lodged as much by accident as he dined, and passed the night sometimes in mean houses which are set open at night to any casual wanderers; sometimes in cellars, among the riot and filth of the meanest and most profligate of the rabble; and sometimes, when he had not money to support even the expenses of these receptacles, walked about the streets till he was weary, and lay down in the summer upon the bulk, or in the winter, with his associate, in poverty, among the ashes of a glass-house. (Johnson, 1903, p. 86)

While Savage might become every reader and every human being if identity is considered as a problem, socially or philosophically, the above affective details will easily arouse the sympathy of everyone, which, at least for a while, delays his concern with Savage's identity problem. Johnson's redeeming of selective truth instead of whole truth is thus meaningful.

Moreover, this "redemptiveness" arises from Johnson's notion of biographical writing. For one thing, Johnson knows well that there are lots of biographical facts irretrievable, which may need human imagination to fill in the empty space; for another, the arrangement of known facts may be a fictionally creative process and convey more sense and veracity. When writing these *Lives*, Johnson is not the familiar friend of most poets. Like other biographers, most of life stories Johnson records are but what he heard from other people or got from other biographers' or the poets' writing. His imagination, personal preference, and even ideology are inseparable elements within the textual facts. The collection of biography is therefore part of the biographer's repetitive, redemptive, and reproduced work, while he adheres to the supposed relative reality.

The criticism of reader response also justifies this redemptive way of biographical writing. Notably, readers' acceptance itself will double the difficulty in representing the biographical fact truthfully, because the reader also participates in recognizing, accepting, or inventing what he wants to know, and can continually interpret and reinterpret the text to his preference. The poet's biography is thus in essence composed of the selected biographical materials. It depends on the Johnson's literary representation, the narrative method as well as the readers' reinterpretation or reproduction. Clingham (1997) even contested, "Johnson's theory and practice of biography entail a representation implying consciousness of artifice and of differences between art and life" (p. 165). Similarly, Meyers (2002) asserted that Johnson's biography was "to define biography as an attempt to understand the lives of others, as 'an act of the imagination'" (p. 40). This accounts for Johnson's selective redeeming of biographical facts. With the selected details, the vanished facts and the poets' past are connected with the present and get their redemption in a relatively credible biography to the contemporary reader.

To Restore the Poet's Image With Insightful Perception of His Life and Work

To Johnson, the biographical "redemptiveness" specially means to enter into the poet's work and come up with a possible merging point between his individuality and work, the action and human will. The "Life of Milton" is a case in point. In this biography, we can behold Milton's "sullen desire of independence... pride disdainful of superiority" (Johnson, 1925, p. 93) and then recognize his supreme pride, hatred of any authority and possibly fervid passion; perceptively, it will be easy for the reader to understand Milton, who had written so many pamphlets to fight for liberty and rebel against tyranny of any form. Milton's character finds illustration and expression in his *Paradise Lost* (2004). Furthermore, as we read, "[T]he heat of Milton's mind might be said to sublimate his learning", and "[H]e had accustomed his imagination to unrestrained indulgence, and his

conceptions therefore were extensive” (Johnson, 1925, p. 10), it can be deduced that Milton’s characteristics may have served to nurture Milton’s literary genius. In this way, Johnson seems to tell the reader, without leading such a life, suffering all pains, and possessing that personality, Milton’s talent may not be able to find nutritious earth to grow and develop. Similarly, his great work, *Paradise Lost*, can only be the production of a mind, “fermented by study, and exalted by imagination” (Johnson, 1925, p. 108). So, under Johnson’s pen, Milton’s character becomes a clue to interpret Milton’s work and achievements.

Johnson thereby redeems the life and achievements of the biographical subject to the reader. He knows well that “Each poet and oeuvre is circumstantially contingent, and each poet realizes his character through his work differently” and he could “establish continuities between Milton’s life and work” (Clingham, 1997, p. 176). Besides, this practice can successfully help the realization of Johnson’s didactic purpose in writing biography, because, if the biographer can offer similar clue for the reader to interpret his subject’s life and work, the biography would be more reliable and the reader could easily feel sympathetic or delighted and willingly accept the instruction. Maybe Johnson the great biographer had just this idea in mind when writing his *Lives*. And the “Life of Milton” just typifies that Johnson successfully creates continuity between Milton’s poetic work and biographical records. Though Johnson’s Milton may disappoint the reader with his commonness and peculiarities, he is closer to life. Besides, the established closeness will easily affect the reader to be sympathetic with Milton’s unhappy marriage, blindness, and his suffering, and possibly to be able to perceive the secret of his genius.

To reveal the proper continuity between the poet’s personality and his works, biography is required to give fair and correct criticism, so as to rebuild the poet’s image and to instruct or delight the reader. Aware of this, Johnson does not blindly accept established judgment, but adjusts them flexibly. He observes the poets’ character, judges how much more or less praise or attack the poets have received, and then tries to rectify misapplied applause or refutation. For instance, though *Paradise Lost* receives lots of critical applause, Johnson relentlessly points out its failings, such as “It comprises neither human actions nor human manners” (Johnson, 1925, p. 107) and “[T]he want of human interest is always felt” (Johnson, 1925, p. 108). Some critics contradict these commentaries of Johnson. De Quincey (1995) even argued that Milton’s supposed neglect as a poet “is not a wrong which Milton does, but which Milton suffers” (p. 316). Yet the author agrees with Johnson in his saying that “*Paradise Lost* is one of the books which the reader admires and lays down, and forgets to take up again” (Johnson, 1925, p. 108). This is a realistic picture of what some common readers will do in reading *Paradise Lost*. They know the grandeur of the story, theme, and language, but they cannot enjoy it for a long time due to its lack of familiar elements and failure to arouse their sympathy.

Johnson’s unique but insightful commentary on *Paradise Lost* displays that in the *Lives*, he aims to give corrective, neither minimized nor exaggerated, but precise criticism. There is no violent burst of passionate denounces or praises in this collection of biographies. Yet his plain words can make views easier to accept and follow. To present his corrective criticism, though Johnson cannot be absolutely fair in judgment, he does not agree or contradict simply because of his similar ideology or aesthetic taste with his subject. The “Life of Savage” and “Life of Milton” (1925) are the examples. Despite close friendship, Johnson does not hide Savage’s failings; despite political antagonism, Johnson does not grudge his praise for Milton. Sticking to his principle, Johnson tries to consider the poet and his work as a whole. As Booth (1976) observed:

By pronouncing corrective approval or disapproval on poets, poems, and details of poetry, he [Johnson] seeks to

adjust the public's responses to the particulars of English literature, and so to bring to bear the educative power of the good, and the bad, example of literary practice. (p. 505)

Hence, Johnson's corrective criticism further embodies his instructive purpose of writing literary biography and successfully redeems the author's proper position in the reader's understanding.

To Reevaluate the Poet's Life and Career With Empathetic Understanding

In the *Lives*, Johnson applies varied approaches to different poets and thereby redeems each one's deepest and most characteristic feature in his biography. Empathetic understanding is also part of Johnson's redemptive biographical method. By empathetic understanding, here the author means that sometimes any similarity between Johnson and the poet is Johnson's secretly explored theme, helping him think in the poet's position, better understand their work, and produce the empathetic *Lives*, reestablishing the poet's image, and affecting the reader. Indeed, each *Life* presents the typical feature of Johnson's biographical subject.

In "Life of Dryden" (1925), Dryden's economic dependence on his patron and the market reminds Johnson of his own hard-won independence as a professional writer. When we read that "He [Dryden] commenced a writer for the stage; compelled undoubtedly by *necessity*, for he appears never to have loved that exercise of his genius, or to have much pleased himself with his own dramas" (Johnson, 1925, p. 183; italics the author's), and "Dryden and Settle had both placed their happiness in the claps of multitudes" (Johnson, 1925, p. 191), we cannot help but remember Johnson's letter to Lord Chestfield to narrate his poverty and claim his own independence. Indeed, with similar personal experience, Johnson could easily understand Dryden's economic and professional dilemma. His "Life of Dryden" (1925) generally "responds to a potentially acute conflict between the economic and moral burdens of authorship" (Adams, 1990, p. 467). Dryden's similar hardship does make it easy for Johnson to describe the conflict between material and moral dimensions of Dryden's authorship and to investigate into Dryden's unusual genius and swaying personality. This is both Johnson's and the reader's clue to understand Dryden's life and work. Thus, set in the social context of both Dryden's and Johnson's times, the reader can see that the discrepancy between Dryden's poor economic stature and great poetic achievement may result from his paradoxical situation, in which he found himself economically dependent but intellectually free. However, while Adams (1990) argued that in Johnson's view, the very "meanness" of Dryden's flattery was his source of inventive power (p. 483), the author sees Dryden's economic straits as the power that constitutes a great poet. Because Johnson has informed us of Dryden's being a writer out of necessity and having to flatter for social and economic reward, Johnson's focus is on Dryden's economic straits as the special formative power of a dependent writer. A quite fresh image of Dryden is thus redeemed to the contemporary reader.

To other poets, Johnson also gives similar responses and reflects on their similarities with him in social reality and some situations. In "Life of Pope" (1925), when Johnson pitifully delineates Pope's deformed figure, his thus spoiled selfishness, and relative independence from economic predicament, he might think of his physical deformity and extreme self-pride, hence easily relating these elements in connection with Pope's poetic genius. For instance, Johnson implies that Pope is "'invested' in armor by the domestic deities before going out to battle with the world" (Clingham, 1997, p. 180). Understandingly, Pope's sarcastic satire may come from his defensive spirit against the worldly bias. And his intellectual independence and imaginative heights of his poetry may rise from his intention to belittle his physical weakness and dependence on others. Suffering continuous

pains and deformed in figure, Johnson could easily understand Pope's physical weakness and thought, and thereby could redeem an interesting biography of Pope's life.

Similarly, when Johnson observes that Pope has the free genius to let his mind "always aspiring; in its widest searches still longing to go forward, in its highest flights still wishing to be higher" (Johnson, 1925, p. 211), he explains the basis of this freedom in these words, "His [Pope's economic] independence secured him from drudging at a task, and laboring upon a barren topic", and "[W]hen he could produce nothing new, he was at liberty to be silent" (Johnson, 1925, p. 212). Hence, it is the Pope's independence and the resulted freedom that recompose the critical elements of his genius. This might be the same case when Johnson got the pension and felt no pressure for writing. Hence, Clingham (1997) observed that "Johnson's vision sensitively connects and contrasts Pope's human weakness—the physical weakness shown up repeatedly in the perpetually striving for transcendence of the earthly in the poetry" (p. 180). Here the author agrees that Pope's weakness plays an important role and acts as a thematic metaphor and even a material basis for Pope's particular imagination. Johnson's successful *Lives* displays the importance of his empathy with the biographical subject, in addition to the reader's showing empathy to get the instruction or delight from biography. This empathy inspires Johnson to get the clue to connect and interpret the poet's life and his achievements in his biography.

Conclusions

As is argued above, the *Lives* of Savage, Milton, Dryden, and Pope, etc., inform the reader of their interesting life as well as their conspicuous achievements through Johnson's sensible, corrective, and empathetic critical perspective. More importantly, Johnson successfully creates continuity between one's life, works, and career with proper redemption of the important textual facts, as Clingham (1997) argued that "Each poet realizes his character through his work differently" (p. 176). In specific, Johnson's redemptive biographical method "does register the moral and spiritual power of a person's life with regard to the quality and influence of his work" (Clingham, 1997, p. 187). Every biography typifies the poet's individual life and career. Yet, as a collection of biographies, similarity can always be found among all the individual differences, just as Johnson comments on Dryden that there should be always "*another and the same*" (Johnson, 1925, p. 230). Given Johnson's selective depiction of the poet's life, his perceptive and corrective connection of one's life and work, and his empathetic representation of biographical materials, the sameness in the *Lives* is the biography as the redemptive text. The reader can always see a represented and restored image of the poet in each of the *Lives*.

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