

David Hume's Theory of Fiction

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The purpose of this paper is to consider David Hume's theory of fiction in connection with the rise of the novel in literary history. In literary studies, the problem of realism has been discussed in relation to the rise of the novel. Realism, which became prevalent in literature in the eighteenth century, is a literary style that tries to imitate the outer world as faithfully as possible, and the genre of the novel is agreed to be characterized by systematic use of this method. However, the notion of realism has a long and complex history. As Ian Watt, one of the most influential commentators on the rise of the novel, suggests, the birth of literary realism is connected with the historical change of the notion of reality. It is well known that, in medieval scholastic philosophy, reality referred to universal and abstract truth, so individual and physical things were thought to lack the attributes of the real because they are transient and ephemeral. However, this thinking has been reversed in the modern era, with individual and physical objects coming to be considered as real. Reflecting this change in intellectual history, literary realism tried to describe and imitate concrete physical objects rather than abstract ideas. Watt argues that literary realism, fully employed in the genre of the novel, is marked by the "the correspondence of words and things" (30) and that "the function of language is much more largely referential in the novel than in other literary forms" (33). This referential language of realism can make a fictional world seem as if it were a faithful copy of the real world, which radically differentiates the realist novel from other traditional literary genres. Religious allegories like John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, for example, refer to biblical stories as their "master text," and poetical works in the neo-classical tradition in many cases treat themes that derive from classical texts. In other words, the language of these traditional literary texts refers not to the external world but to the preceding texts they are based on. In contrast, what the language of realist novels refers to is the real world. A problem arises due to this close connection between literary realism and the genre of the novel: according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word

“fiction,” which can now be synonymous with “novel,” also means a “lie” or a “fake.” Therefore, in a sense, the terms “realist novel” and “literary realism” may be, as it were, oxymora like “real lie” or “true fake.” What, then, is the referent of the language of realist novels? After Watt, many literary critics, such as Lennard Davis and Catherine Gallagher, have discussed the problem of realism in terms of the relation between fiction and reality.¹ However, to discuss the question of the birth of realism only in the light of the rise of the novel would obscure the real importance of the issue, as the birth and spread of realism in eighteenth-century Britain probably reflected a structural change in the relationship between fiction and reality in the epistemological space of the age. To address some of these issues, in the following I will read some passages from David Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*, written contemporaneously with early British novels, in which he analyzes the process by which the external world is constructed, and tries to elucidate the role fiction plays in this construction.² Hume's theory of fiction as developed in this book, I would argue, gives us a clue to understanding the rise of realism in literary history, and helps us account for the ideological function of modern realist novels.

To understand Hume's theory of fiction, we have to be familiar with the basic ideas of his theory of knowledge.³ His philosophy is based on the premise of empiricism, that is, that humans have no innate ideas and all knowledge is derived from sense perception. Hume says all perceptions are divided into two kinds: “impressions” and “ideas.” The vivid and forceful perceptions we receive from senses are impressions, and when they lose their force and vivacity they change into ideas. What differentiates ideas from impressions, therefore, is only a difference in force and vivacity. We combine ideas to make more complex ones; therefore, any huge and complex architecture of thought can, in principle, be divided into simple ideas, which can in turn be traced back to direct impressions. According to Hume, direct impressions are always clear and reliable, but the ideas that are copies of those impressions are weak and unreliable in comparison. Therefore, the best way to acquire precise knowledge is to examine the direct impressions at the base of ideas. While philosophers and mathematicians often employ obscure and abstract ideas to conceal the “absurdities” in their systems, philosophers' real task is to treat as clear ideas as possible,

and the surest way to get clear ideas is to refer them to the sense impressions they copy (T 1.3.1.7 ; SBN 72-73).⁴ However, Hume suggests that there are many ideas that cannot be traced back to sense impressions ; to make the matter more complicated, some of those ideas play a crucial role in forming the basic structure of our knowledge. He calls the idea that lacks a corresponding direct impression a “fiction.” As we will observe below, fiction is created by the imagination. The ideas of “space” and “time” are two such fictions that play an essential role in human thinking. According to empiricism, all ideas have their origins in sense impressions rather than being innate. Contrarily to this, Hume argues that we cannot identify any sense impressions that correspond to particular ideas, such as those of space and time. He explains how the notion of space is invented by the imagination as follows. When we perceive external objects by sight, what we actually see are numerous, variously arranged colored points, which give no information about space. When we repeat experiences of this kind, we start to find patterns in the appearance of those colored points and, by abstracting the commonalities in these patterns, we form the idea of space. The same theory applies to the origin of the idea of time. We form the notion of time, for example, when we hear a series of five notes played by flute. Time is not, Hume argues, a sixth independent idea we receive from that experience. We derive the notion of time from the manner of the notes’ arrangement, but we do not have a direct impression of that manner in itself. As space and time are complex ideas fabricated by the imagination in our mind, there are no independent sense impressions that corresponds to them. “Fiction” is the name Hume attributes to such ideas, including ones like “causation,” “external object,” and “human identity,” which form the basic elements of human thinking. If fiction, meaning a “lie” or “fake,” constituted an integral part of human thinking, the reliability of human knowledge would face a serious crisis. In order to determine what is reliable knowledge, therefore, philosophers must identify the function of the imagination as the mental faculty of producing fictions, and mark the line that distinguishes fiction from reality.

However, when we read Hume’s argument, we find that it is difficult to distinguish fiction from reality. In Hume’s account, accurate knowledge is only acquired through either intuition or demonstration, and it is only algebra and arithmetic that can provide us with knowledge of perfect exactness and certainty. In the realm of the sciences, where knowl-

edge is acquired through sense perception, what we can achieve is at best “probability” (T 1.3.1 ; SBN 69–73). As we have mentioned above, to make an idea reliable we have to trace it back to the original impression it copies, and to do that we have to distinguish “the *memory* from the imagination” (T 1.3.5.3 ; SBN 85).⁵ However, as Hume admits, it is often difficult to differentiate between ideas from a memory based on experience and fictitious ideas invented by the imagination, because both are ultimately ideas. The distinctive feature of the imagination is its capacity to decompose the original order of ideas, freely arranging and reuniting them in different ways. However, the arrangement of ideas does not help us because the limit of the human memory makes it impossible to always recall their original order. Hume says :

When we search for the characteristic, which distinguishes the *memory* from the imagination, we must immediately perceive, that it cannot lie in the simple ideas it presents to us ; since both these faculties borrow their simple ideas from the impressions, and can never go beyond these original impressions. These faculties are as little distinguish'd from each other by the arrangement of their complex ideas. For tho' it be a peculiar property of the memory to preserve the original order and position of its ideas, while the imagination transposes and changes them, as it pleases ; yet this difference is not sufficient to distinguish them in their operation, or make us know the one from the other ; it being impossible to recal the past impressions, in order to compare them with our present ideas, and see whether their arrangement be exactly similar. (T 1.3.5.3 ; SBN 85)

Therefore, the only difference between fiction and memory is found in the different degrees of force and vivacity that attend them. We can conceive ideas that we know are not true, like “Caesar *dy'd in his bed,*” or “*mercury [is] heavier than gold*” (T 1.3.7.3 ; SBN 95), and we can clearly understand the ideas even when we know they are false. What constitutes reality, then, is not the clearness of the idea, as there is no essential difference between fiction and reality in the nature of the ideas themselves. We come to believe ideas, instead, when they are delivered in a very vivacious manner. This means that any fiction can pass for truth

if it assumes strong force and vivacity. Therefore, what is important for acquiring reliable knowledge is to elucidate what gives ideas force and vivacity, promoting them to the status of reality. This problem leads us to the question of the plausibility or verisimilitude of literary fiction.

The problem of literary fiction in Hume's argument appears as the difference between "history" and "romance." It is generally thought that history is a faithful record of real events and romance is an obviously fictitious story invented by the imagination, a difference that corresponds to that between memory and the imagination, but in the framework of Hume's theory it is difficult to tell what constitutes this difference. It is just after arguing the difficulty in distinguishing fiction from memory that Hume introduces the problem of the difference between history and romance. He argues that, when we read a story in one case as a romance and in the other case as a history, we receive from the same story quite different impressions :

If one person sits down to read a book as a romance, and another as a true history, they plainly receive the same ideas, and in the same order ; nor does the incredulity of the one, and the belief of the other hinder them from putting the very same sense upon their author. His words produce the same ideas in both ; tho' his testimony has not the same influence on them. The latter has a more lively conception of all the incidents. . . . While the former, who gives no credit to the testimony of the author, has a more faint and languid conception of all these particulars ; and except on account of the style and ingenuity of the composition, can receive little entertainment from it. (T 1.3.7.8 ; SBN 97-98)

This passage poses a very interesting question. Hume's aim here is to support his own argument that there is no difference in the nature of ideas between memory and imagination, as the same story can be read either as history or as romance, but it gives a much stronger impression when read as a history. People believe history as reliable facts, but do not believe a story of romance. The problem that must be considered is where this difference comes from. Because the ideas that constitute the story in this case are exactly the same,

the difference necessarily arises from a difference in the reader's attitudes. We, as readers, know that a romance is an empty fiction that does not have its origin in the real world, but because history is a record of real events, we suppose that if we trace back the testimonies and evidences, we can, theoretically at least, reach the direct impression of somebody who witnessed the events in person. We believe, for example, that Caesar was killed in March because the fact is established by the unanimous testimonies of historians, and we believe that if we can trace the records we can arrive at "those who were eye-witness and spectators of the event" (T 1.3.4.2 ; SBN 83). Of course, the reader of history does not try to verify every single fact mentioned in the story, but the presupposition that ideas presented in the book of history are traceable to events that happened in the real world makes history more impressive than romance. It is not the story itself, in other words, but the attitudes of the reader that decide the degree of plausibility of the story. We believe history but not romance because we change our judgement according to the context in which the ideas are presented. This means that a story's credibility is decided by the authority of the genres to which it is classified ; some genres of discourse are, in this view, authorized to tell us about reality. The authority of various discourses, however, cannot always be measured by rational standard, often depending on each person's taste and what genre of discourse they put their faith in. When Hume says "'Tis not solely in poetry and music, we must follow taste and sentiment, but likewise in philosophy" (T 1.3.8.12 ; SBN 103), he means that the probability of an idea is greatly influenced by imagination and sentiment even in rational thinking. If the reliability of ideas is determined by imagination and sentiment, ideas that charm and capture people's imagination can possibly usurp the position of the truth. In fact, Hume, who lived in an age that still retained a vivid memory of the political turmoil of the previous century, feared that extraordinary ideas advocated by religious fanatics might assume divine authority and instigate people to action, as even preposterous ideas can be pass for the truth if the necessary conditions are satisfied.

Hume's assertion that the difference between fiction and memory lies in the different degree of their force and vivacity, thus, makes the boundary between the two ambiguous. If fact, we believe many ideas that we cannot trace back to their original impressions. However, of course, most people have a sober sense of reality and distinguish reality from fiction

without much difficulty. What is reality, then? Hume's definition is enlightening.

Of these impressions or ideas of the memory we form a kind of system, comprehending whatever we remember to have been present, either to our internal perception or senses ; and every particular of that system, joined to the present impressions, we are pleas'd to call a *reality*. But the mind stops not here. For finding, that with this system of perceptions, there is another connected by custom, or if you will, by the relation of cause or effect, it proceeds to the consideration of their ideas ; and as it feels that 'tis in a manner necessarily determin'd to view these particular ideas, and that the custom or relation, by which it is determin'd admits not of the least of change, it forms them into a new system, which it likewise dignifies with the title of *realities*. The first of these systems is the object of the memory and senses ; the second of the judgment. (T 1.3.9.4 ; SBN 108)

For Hume, reality is a system composed first of all of “ideas of the memory”; that is, humans make up their reality by combining separate pieces of memory. As the sphere in which one person can have first-hand experience is limited, he or she adds to the system ideas associated with those of the memory, extending the limit of the real world. That is, reality is composed both of the memories of direct impressions on the one hand, and of ideas not based on, but strongly associated with, direct impressions on the other. Therefore, a person who has never been to Rome can firmly believe in the existence of the city. However, people don't believe in fairy tales because fairyland is not part of their system of reality, which means that ideas conveyed by fairy tales are weaker than those we encounter in the real world. For an idea to be recognized as real, its correspondence to reality is not necessary. It is possible, as we have seen above, that even false and incorrect ideas, if they by some accident captivate our imagination, are recognized as real, and this possibility is the source of errors and mistakes. People heated by wild imagination can believe even outlandish, extravagant ideas and “degenerate into madness and folly” (T 1.3.10. 9 ; SBN 123). This deranging effect of the imagination can be found in literary fiction to some degree. How, then, do people prevent their minds from being too much heated by the imagi-

nation and maintain the healthy judgment needed to distinguish fiction from reality? In answering this question, Hume takes up the case of poetic fictions again. Literary fiction is an exemplary case for Hume in considering the epistemological problem of fiction because it is evident that poetry and romance are fictitious, however vividly they are depicted :

Poets themselves, tho' liars by profession, always endeavour to give an air of truth to their fictions ; and where that is totally neglected, their performances, however ingenious, will never be able to afford much pleasure. . . . Poets have form'd what they call a poetical system of things, which tho' it be believ'd neither by themselves nor readers, is commonly esteem'd a sufficient foundation for any fiction. We have been so much accustom'd to the names of MARS, JUPITER, VENUS, that in the same manner as education infixes any opinion, the constant repetition of these ideas makes them enter into the mind with facility, and prevail upon the fancy, without influencing the judgment. (T 1.3.10.5-6 ; SBN 121)

This statement that poets are professional liars means that everyone knows that the story told by poets is a fiction. The aim of literary fiction is to entertain readers, and to make their tales enjoyable poets have to give force and vivacity to the ideas that make up their stories. If the ideas in a fictitious story are not represented vivaciously, it will not capture the reader's interest. In this case, how do poets animate their fictitious stories so that readers enjoy them without at the same time confusing such a story with reality? In Hume's account, poets do this by inventing "a poetical system of things" or a world inhabited by fabulous figures and ruled by literary conventions. Poets create a world peopled by such mythical figures as Mars, Jupiter, or Venus, and, by depicting that world repeatedly, succeed in giving strong impressions to readers. Readers know well that these fabulous figures do not really exist, but they start feeling attracted to them through reading their stories over and over again. Hume presents an interesting theory here with regard to literary criticism. He says that literary texts, which refer only to imaginary figures and literary conventions, have no referents in the real world ; that is, they refer only to their preceding texts. While readers may be entertained by this, Hume says, however vivid and forceful the impressions the

readers receive from the story, they are not in danger of mistaking the poetic illusion for reality. This is because fiction and reality are different systems of ideas. Those who have never seen Rome believe in its real existence because Rome is part of the system of “reality,” but they do not believe in the reality of “the *Elysian* fields” (T 1.3.9.5 ; SBN 109) because they belong to the “poetic system.” These self-evident systems of classifying our ideas into fiction and reality seemingly work very well. We can avoid confusing fiction with reality as long as we realize the difference between those systems, and it seems that we can safely distinguish between fabulous fiction and solid reality by marking the line between those different systems. In fact, ordinary people usually have enough common sense to distinguish poetic fictions from reliable knowledge of reality. In this way Hume seems to succeed in drawing a clear line between reliable knowledge rooted in the real world and the entertaining but empty fictions offered by poets. However, when we proceed to read Hume’s argument in *Treatise*, this distinction between fiction and reality is again obscured because he asserts that the external world is actually fictitious. This assertion is puzzling because, if the external world is a fiction, every distinction set up between reality and fiction is nullified. To understand the meaning of this perplexing claim, we have to read his argument concerning the existence of external objects.

It is in Part 4 of Volume 1 (in Section 2 entitled “Of Scepticism with regard to the Senses,” in particular) that Hume develops his skeptical argument about the outer world. He raises here the surprising question of why and how people believe in the existence of the external world that surrounds us. This question is surprising because it is the physical external objects that constitute what we usually call reality. The outer world is, as it were, the bottom line of reality for most people. According to Hume, however, the continued existence of outer objects is in fact a fiction invented by the imagination, which cannot be rationally proved or verified. He knows well, of course, that almost all people believe in the existence of the physical world. What he questions is not if the external world exists, but how and why people easily and firmly believe in things that cannot be rationally verified (T 1.4.2.2 ; SBN 187-188). Hume, in search of the sources of that belief, examines the three faculties of the human mind : “senses,” “reason,” and “imagination.” He argues that the

senses cannot produce the belief in the external world because they only give us internal and short-lived information, based on John Locke's distinction between primary and secondary qualities. Hume argues that the impressions we have of external objects only exist internally because we know an outer object only through secondary qualities such as sound, color, smell or taste, which Locke and other modern philosophers showed have independent existence from the outer object itself. The information we get through the senses, therefore, does not have the authority to tell us about the qualities of outer objects. Moreover, sense perceptions are not only internal but also ephemeral. The duration we can keep looking at one object, for example, is biologically limited, and it is theoretically possible that an object we observe might disappear or change its form while we are sleeping or looking at other objects. Hume concludes that sense perceptions, such as they are, cannot be the source of our belief in the continued existence of outer objects. It is also evident that reason does not produce that belief because it is universally observed that even children and vulgar people who know nothing about rational reasoning believe in the outer world ; while they have neither heard about the difference between primary and secondary qualities, nor had any training in rational thinking, they nevertheless firmly believed in the continued existence of the external world. Therefore, it is clear that reason plays no part in forming this belief in the outer world.

Hume thus reaches the conclusion that it is the imagination that plays a crucial role in forming our belief in the existence of the external world. The imagination, however, does not suppose that any object of perception is external and continuous. According to Hume, an object to which the imagination attributes enduring existence has two characteristics : "constancy" and "coherence." Some objects, like houses, trees, or mountains, do not seem to change when we look at them after interruptions, but rather remain the same, which constitutes "constancy." Other objects, like fire in the hearth and the position of the sun during the day, continue to change form, but the pattern of this change seems always the same. Even mountains and trees, in fact, change over time, and this change follows the same pattern. This constitutes "coherence." The imagination makes us believe that objects with the characteristics of constancy and coherence continue to exist while we are not looking at them. While sense perceptions are perishing and internal, it is quite uncom-

fortable to be in such an unstable situation, so we suppose the existence of outer objects to fill the gaps in our sense perceptions. When we observe outer objects that have some consistent patterns in their change, we imagine that our interrupted perceptions are integrated in an imperceptible “real existence” and convert the idea of that existence, enforced by the object’s constancy and coherence, into a firm belief. Hume says :

In order to free ourselves from this difficulty, we disguise, as much as possible, the interruption, or rather remove it entirely, by supposing that these interrupted perceptions are connected by a real existence, of which we are insensible. This supposition, or idea of continu’d existence, acquires a force and vivacity from the memory of these broken impressions, and from that propensity, which they give us, to suppose them the same ; and according to the precedent reasoning, the very essence of belief consists in the force and vivacity of the conception. (T 1.4.2.24 ; SBN 199)

Hume analogizes this function of the imagination to the movement of a boat : when we stop rowing, the boat continues to proceed for a while. In the same manner, when we stop seeing objects, the imagination supposes that they continue to exist while we are not looking at them. Even though our sense perceptions are fragmented, our imagination makes up a continued and consistent world view using the material of sense data. In this way, our imagination attributes the qualities of externality and continuity to outer objects—qualities that can be endorsed neither by the senses nor by reason. This means that we do not perceive the outer world as it is, but create it by imagination. In Hume’s account, we can never acquire direct knowledge of outer objects because they appear as perceptions in our mind, and those perceptions are the only object of our knowledge ; that is, the human mind is nothing but “the universe of the imagination” (T 1.2.6.8 ; SBN 68). There is no final ground that guarantees the correctness of our perception of outer objects. If impressions of the outer world are invented and colored by the imagination, therefore, the distinction between the poetic system and the system of reality inevitably becomes quite obscure.

Hume’s argument in *Treatise* about fiction seems thus enigmatically contradictory. On

the one hand, he tries to distinguish fiction from reality ; for him, fictions like poetry and romance are clearly inferior in their plausibility compared with history. He takes pains to draw a clear line between groundless fiction and well-founded reality. On the other hand, he declares that the external world is a fiction invented by the imagination. What does Hume's seemingly contradictory attitudes toward fiction mean? What must be noticed here is that, even if the external world is a fiction, this fiction is natural to humans and indispensable for our survival. While there is no rational ground for our belief that external objects continue to exist even when our perception is interrupted, not even philosophers reject this belief. Only radical skeptics would do so. If we accept "scepticism concerning our senses," we start feeling as if the physical world surrounding us is a groundless illusion. A person who falls into the mood of extreme skepticism, Hume says, cannot believe in the existence of such common things as the chamber in which he is in, the door on that chamber, the porter who brings a letter from a friend, or the stairs he mounts to come to the room (T 1.4.2.20 ; SBN 196-197). If our knowledge of the world inevitably contains ingredients of fiction, it can never be accurate and absolute, but our belief in the independent and continued existence of the world is so deeply rooted in our nature that even skeptical philosophers, including Hume himself, cannot but accept this common opinion as the basis of their speculation. Except for very few extreme skeptics, almost everyone lives everyday life without suspecting the fictitiousness of the physical world.

If there is a lesson literary theorists can take from Hume's theory of fiction, it is that the simple-minded binary opposition between fiction and reality is ineffective. As Watt has suggested, modern realism in both philosophy and literature began to find reality in individual and concrete things. In Hume's account, the reality of physical objects that constitutes the world is a fiction. Because our perceptions—ideas and impressions—are internal and perishing, their relation to the outer world is actually unknown. Hume says that it is the task of "anatomists and natural philosophers," not moral philosophers, to inquire into the way the senses receive impressions from the physical world (T 1.1.2.1 ; SBN 8). Moral philosophers' interest should lie, Hume urges, in the internal structure of the human mind, consisting of the senses, the imagination, and reason, and in its content, composed of impressions and ideas, rather than in such unsolvable metaphysical question as whether the outer world

really exists or not. In everyday life, people think that they directly perceive the outer world without any problem. We cannot, and need not, endure sheer skepticism. This commonsensical reliance on the real world is, philosophically speaking, false but very natural, and the natural way of thinking prevails in the end. Moreover, only a natural way of thinking can smoothly drive people's social lives. As his political essays show, at the center of Hume's social philosophy is quite a commonsensical and pragmatic attitude, but his pragmatism in fact comes from his skepticism; in other words, in his philosophy, skepticism and pragmatism are inseparable. His theory of fiction, which is a production of his peculiar amalgam of skepticism and commonsensical philosophy, I would urge, gives us a clue to understanding the rise of realism as a new form of fictionality in eighteenth-century Britain. In what follows, I would like to conclude my argument by placing Hume's theory of fiction in its social and historical context.

When we read Hume's texts, we find several different narrative voices in his language, among which are the voice of a radical skeptic who doubts the real existence of the external world, that of a man of commonsense who is immersed in the business of everyday life, or that of a rationalist who believes in laws of necessity.⁶ It would be of no use to try to decide which voice is his real one, as each represents an aspect of the ideal citizen who can survive in modern commercial society. Eighteenth-century Britain is where modern commercial society began to take shape—a society in which fiction plays a very important role. It seems to me that Hume's theory of fiction offers a model of the mental attitudes required of citizens who live in a modern commercial society, and from this point of view we can find a link between modern realist novels and Hume's theory of fiction. What, for Hume, is the ideal citizen? To understand this, it would be convenient to think about the opposite: the type of person Hume hates and denounces is, above all, the religious fanatic who believes in chimerical ideas as the divine truth delivered to him or her. Fanatics are the most unsuitable and often most dangerous people in modern commercial society. On the other hand, Hume does not think positively of vulgar people who are unskilled to deal with fiction either, because modern commercial society is full of unreliable fictions and representations. What characterizes modern commercial society is the circulation of an enormous amount of fictitious rep-

representations—a situation unthinkable in the pre-modern world. For example, in a commercial society, not only commodities and money circulate, but also various kinds of “credit.” Hume writes on money, trade, and credit in his political essays.⁷ For him, money minted from precious metal is a mere representation of commodities, but as commercial society develops, paper money and paper credit come to represent a species that is a representation in itself and can be exchanged for commodities in the market. Money is a fiction forged and supported by the imagination of people who participate in a market economy. Any person with average sense can understand that money is a representation, its value being fictitious, but anyone living in a modern market economy has to behave as if they believe in the value inherent in coins and bank-notes. A skeptical person who cannot accept this fictitious value cannot survive in modern society, but neither can a naïve person who easily confuses fiction and reality. There are various kinds of uncertain opportunities of investment or speculation that promise a large profit in the future, and naïve people willing to uncritically invest in such unreliable opportunities would soon lose their fortunes. People living in modern society, where both real commodities and fictitious credits are exchanged, and fiction and fact are often difficult to distinguish from each other, have to acquire the skill to accept some kinds of fiction as if they are real, but decidedly reject other kinds of fiction as fake. Hume thinks that commercial society will develop healthily as long as it is based on money that represents the real wealth of a nation, but when people start excessively investing their money toward an imaginary and fictitious profit in the future, a nation's political and economic system is destined to collapse. He thought that, in Britain, the process of destruction was in progress in the form of an extravagant enlargement of the government's debt.⁸ For him, metal money is basically a good fiction, but national credit is a bad and harmful fiction. The problem is that it is never easy to draw a clear line between good and bad fictions, and people living in modern society are often forced to make the distinction for themselves. Both Hume and his contemporary realist novelists raised the same problem of how to live a good life in a society where we incessantly encounter a flood of fictions. The novelists of this age ceased to write stories based on precedent master-narratives such as Arthurian legend, biblical stories or classical myths, or to satirize well-known scandals of their contemporary celebrities, and started writing plausible stories, for example, that of a sailor who survived on a

lonely island for more than twenty years, or that of a maidservant who succeeded in getting married to the young aristocratic master, after refusing to be his mistress. In this kind of writing, fiction and reality are so intricately mingled that the reader sometimes cannot distinguish between them. Hume made it clear that a large part of our everyday life is made of fictions, while his contemporary novelists brought reality into their fictitious world, evidencing the fact that the line between fiction and reality is obscure in modern commercial society. This problem lies at the center of Hume's thought, having recognized that fiction pervades the world. What Hume tried to do, then, is not to exclude fiction from the sphere of precise knowledge, but to elucidate its function in human thinking and to decide the limit of its authority in reliable knowledge, an issue he had in common with realist novelists. It seems to me that, in this time, there occurred some structural change in epistemological space by which fiction and facts became more and more difficult to distinguish: the discourse of the writers of this age was made in response to this, Hume's discourse being a theoretical response and that of realist novels an imaginary one. This does not mean, of course, that Hume was interested in the rise of the novel itself. While He wrote several essays on literature, they are of limited interest as literary criticism, his topics being confined to classical genres like tragedy or the epic, and his theory being confined within classical mimetic theory that regards literary fictions as inferior imitations of reality. It is a fascinating irony of intellectual history that it is when Hume writes on topics other than literature, such as epistemology or political economy, that his writing offers a deep insight into the complicated nature of literary language.

Notes

¹ Davis discusses the rise of the novel in relation to the birth of modern journalism which thinks its task is to report facts. Gallagher urges that the fictionality of realist novels that present plausible stories is different from that of traditional literary genres of previous ages.

² As is recounted in the glossary of the Oxford edition of *Treatise* edited by Norton & Norton, Hume uses the word "fiction" in two different senses—"artificial fiction" and "natural fiction." The former is an artificially created story or fabrication; literary works belong to this category. The latter is one that plays an essential role when humans acquire knowledge of the outer world and constitutes an indispensable part of human thinking. Their difference is very important, but, as we shall see later, the obscurity of the border between

them brings about a serious problem that leads to philosophical skepticism.

- ³ For useful guides to Hume's philosophy, see Smith ; Bennett ; Yolton ; Noonan ; Wright ; Schmitt. As for Hume's position in the field of literary criticism and aesthetics, see Townsend ; Costelloe.
- ⁴ The text of *Treatise* used in this paper is from the new Oxford edition by Norton & Norton and the older Oxford edition by Nidditch. The former is referred to as "T" and the latter as "SBN" parenthetically in the text.
- ⁵ As we shall see below, in Hume's theory "memory" plays an essential part in forming our sense of "reality."
- ⁶ Baier has already analyzed Hume's different voices or personae in *Treatise*. For an analysis of *Treatise* from the viewpoint of literary criticism, see Richetti ; Christensen.
- ⁷ For a useful account of Hume's theory of political economy, see Hirschman ; Miller. Caffentzis offers a very useful argument about Hume's theory of money in relation to the problem of fiction.
- ⁸ Hume discusses the serious problem that would be brought about by the prevalence of public credit in Britain in his essay "On Public Credit" (*Essays* 349-365). For an illuminating account of Hume's pessimistic and sceptical view of public credit, see Pocock (1975 ; 1985).

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David Hume's Theory of Fiction

Sho OKOCHI

The purpose of this paper is to consider David Hume's theory of fiction in connection with the rise of the novel in literary history. Realism, which became prevalent in literature in the eighteenth century, is a literary style that tries to imitate the outer world as faithfully as possible, and the genre of the novel is agreed to be characterized by systematic use of this method. The language of realism is usually thought to be more "referential" than that in traditional genres such as romance, fable or allegory; that is, words in the realist fiction are thought to correspond to the objects in the real world. However, because the word "fiction" almost synonymous with "novel" also means a "lie" or a "fake" that has no referent in the real world, the "realist fiction" is, in a sense, an oxymoron like "true lie" or "real fake." Many commentators have discussed realism in terms of the rise of the novel. However, to consider the birth of realism in the eighteenth century only in connection with one literary genre would fail to comprehend the significance of this new form of fictionality because the birth of realism is a part of a structural change in the epistemological field of this age. This paper attempts to consider the rise of literary realism in a wider context of intellectual history. For that purpose, I read several passages from David Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*, a book written contemporaneous with early British novels. A close reading of Hume's argument about fiction will help us understand the ideological function of modern realist novels and elucidate the paradoxical relation between fiction and reality that characterizes the epistemological field of the modern age.