

The Illegitimation of Richard Savage

GAVIN EDWARDS

No narrative is perfectly chronological, but some are more chronological than others. Histories and biographies tend to be more chronological than novels and autobiographies. Chronology seems to claim an association with objective fact, significant deviation from chronology with artifice or subjectivity. Some twentieth-century narratives deliberately make it impossible for us to reconstruct the supposed actual order of events from the order in which the text presents them to us; and while we can reconstruct the actual order of events in *The Prelude* or *Wuthering Heights*, we can do so only with great difficulty. By contrast Samuel Johnson's *Account of the Life of Mr Richard Savage, Son of the Earl Rivers* (usually known as the *Life of Savage*) is methodically chronological, using analepsis (flashback) and prolepsis very sparingly. Apart from a brief introduction and a brief conclusion, the *Life of Savage*, like Savage's life, begins at his birth and ends with his death.

In order to help us notice and analyse this aspect of narrative, some theorists have made a distinction between a narrative's story and its plot.¹ The plot of *Wuthering Heights* begins on page one, with Lockwood's departure for Liverpool. Readers who are trained as literary critics can find plenty to say about narratives of this kind, where story and plot significantly diverge. Narratives where story and plot coincide, chronological narratives, have often proved less discussable. In this essay I shall try to remedy this situation so far as the *Life of Savage* is concerned. I shall argue that the acknowledged power of this text does in fact have a lot to do with its chronological ordering.

The text starts with three paragraphs of general philosophical reflection, in which Johnson asserts the vanity of human wishes and announces the biography that is to follow as an addition to

1 This and cognate distinctions are surveyed in Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, London and New York, 1983.

those 'mournful Narratives' which describe 'the miseries of the Learned'.² The text ends with a description of Savage's physical appearance and a summary of his positive and negative qualities as a writer and a human being. Between these prefatory and concluding paragraphs Johnson gives us the events of Savage's life more or less in the order in which he believes they occurred, from the unusual circumstances of his birth in 'January 1797-8' to his death in a Bristol prison in August 1743 and his burial 'in the Church-yard of St Peter, at the Expence of the Keeper' (pp.5, 135).³

But no narrative is perfectly chronological, and the *Life of Savage* is no exception. For one thing the title itself tells us that we are about to read a biography and that the life of Savage has therefore come to an end; and the first three paragraphs tell us that this end was a bad one. All narratives are written with the benefit of hindsight and Johnson's is no exception: the end of the story (Savage's death) puts in a kind of appearance at the beginning of the plot.

There is a second, and equally commonplace, way in which Johnson's narrative separates story and plot. The first sentence provides a number of examples:

In the Year 1697, *Anne* Countess of *Macclesfield*, having lived for some Time upon very uneasy Terms with her Husband, thought a public Confession of Adultery the most obvious and expeditious Method of obtaining her Liberty, and therefore declared, that the Child, with which she was then great, was begotten by the Earl *Rivers*. (p.4)

We are told about the Countess's confession of adultery before we are told about her pregnancy and we are told about her pregnancy before we are told about the 'begetting'. But no reader will have much difficulty following the grammatical signposts that show us how to convert this plot into a story in which the

2 Samuel Johnson, *Life of Savage*, edited by Clarence Tracy, Oxford, 1971, p.4. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

3 The footnotes to Tracy's edition discuss the factual accuracy or otherwise of the *Life of Savage*, an issue not addressed by the present essay.

sequence of events is: conception, pregnancy, confession of adultery.

But readers of narratives are sometimes confused—at least for a moment—by such breaks with chronology; and some narratives trade on and deliberately prolong such confusion. Johnson, I believe, is very conscious of the possibility of confusion and wishes at all costs to avoid it. Evidence for this is provided by the fact that there is only one major departure from chronology in the *The Life of Savage*; and by the fact that Johnson signals to the reader very deliberately that it is taking place. After describing Savage's trial and conviction on a charge of murder (he had killed a man in a coffee-house fracas) Johnson tells us that

Mr *Savage* had now no Hopes of Life, but from the Mercy of the Crown, which was very earnestly solicited by his Friends, and which, with whatever Difficulty the Story may obtain Belief, was obstructed only by his Mother.

To prejudice the Queen against him, she made use of an Incident, which was omitted in the order of Time, that it might be mentioned together with the Purpose which it was made to serve. (p.36)

Johnson then describes this 'Incident' at some length. But he wishes to make it clear that the break with chronological narrative—with what he calls 'the order of Time'—is exceptional. And his mention of his own narrative procedure directs the reader to revise the story as quickly as possible: we must put the incident back in the place in the story from which it had been 'omitted'.

There are a number of reasons why Johnson is so firmly committed to writing in 'the order of Time'. One reason is that a methodically chronological narrative, which moves continually forward in a progress from birth to death, throws into vivid relief the backward-looking and regressive tendency of Savage's life. From the moment that the fifteen-year-old apprentice shoemaker discovers that he was born the son of the Countess of Macclesfield he devotes himself to an endless and obsessive attempt to undo what has subsequently been done to him. He wishes to turn the clock back, return to zero, start again as the

acknowledged son of his aristocratic mother. The relentless forward movement of the narrative helps to remind us that all such attempts to cancel out what separates us from the beginning of our lives are doomed to failure. The *Life of Savage* reveals the life of Savage as a series of attempts to abolish the ever-widening space that separates him from his origins.

Freud, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, speculated that the instincts may be inherently conservative and 'tend towards the restoration of an earlier state of things'; a tendency which produces, according to Freud, the 'impulse to repeat'.⁴ Whatever the general truth of Freud's claim, the link between repetition and regression is demonstrably real in Savage's case. This is so in a number of respects but especially in his ambivalent relationship to a long sequence of patrons and benefactors. Patronage is, quite openly, a quasi-parental relationship; but in Savage's case the parental dimension becomes especially strong and peculiarly explicit. Sir Richard Steele asserted that '*the inhumanity of his Mother had given him a Right to find every good Man his Father*' (p.13); on the death of Mrs Oldfield, Savage is described as 'wearing Mourning as for a Mother' (p.19); Savage himself at one point complained that a group of benefactors were keeping him on '*leading strings*' (p.116). Most of the relationships of this kind into which Savage enters are brief and discordant, and from the way Johnson describes them it seems clear that each involves an attempt—a necessarily futile attempt—to find his way back to his first relationship.

So the forward-moving narrative, the narrative that follows the order of time, contrasts with and highlights Savage's obsessive attempts to go back to the beginning. But if this contrast separates Savage from Johnson and ourselves we should not therefore assume that Johnson feels immune to the regressive tendencies to which Savage succumbs. On the contrary, I believe that Johnson regards these tendencies as highly contagious both for himself and for his readers. He is afraid that any narrative deviation from the order of time may lead him and his readers, like Savage, to believe that it is in fact possible to alter the order

4 *Collected Papers*, translated by James Strachey, 22 vols, London 1937, XVIII, p.19.

of time, and in particular to believe that the past can be altered.

Clearly, any analepsis involves us in altering our *understanding* of the past. But we may sometimes be confused because it seems to alter the past itself. Is the 'Incident' which was 'omitted in the order of Time' really compatible with the 'story so far' into which it now has to be reinserted? It probably is; but in many narratives it is possible to feel that the analeptic separation of story and plot is a device for allowing the writer to offer us a new character while claiming to offer us only new information about a familiar character.⁵ In other words, analepsis is a device that can allow author and readers to surreptitiously rewrite history, re-live the past (which is why a character's acts of memory are so frequently the occasion for analepsis in fictional narrative).

Common sense and most philosophy tell us that the past, unlike the present and the future, is over and done with and is not open to human intervention. We constantly alter our understanding of our collective and individual pasts but we cannot, surely, alter the past itself. Analepsis and fantasy may often delude us about this but reason tells us that life follows the order of time.

But in Savage's case is this really true? If he seems set on undoing his own past and starting again this may be because, contrary to common sense, he knows from bitter experience that it can be done.

When Richard Savage was fifteen the 'Nurse, who had always treated him as her own son, died' (p.10), and he discovered from her papers that he was the son of the Countess of Macclesfield. In other words, Savage's understanding of his own origins and history is abruptly and radically altered. He is now a different person from the one he thought he was, except of course that he is also the same person, a person who has, as we say, 'lived a lie'. For such a person, at such a moment—and well beyond that moment—the distinction between one's understanding of the past and the past itself, while intellectually

5 The information about Henry Morton provided in Chapter 13 of *Old Mortality* is a notable case in point.

evident, may in emotional practice be impossible to make.

The discovery that what has established itself as your past is not your past is the stuff of which numerous plays, novels and autobiographies are made. Narratives of this kind—*Oedipus Rex*, *Great Expectations*, *My Place*—try to make us share something of the experience of their protagonists. They normally do this by separating the order of events in the story from the order of events in the plot, withholding from audience or reader some of the same information that has been withheld from the protagonist.

Johnson has discovered something close to a fictional stereotype in the real life of his friend Savage and has then written that life up in a way that is diametrically opposed to the standard fictional way. The *Life of Savage* does not participate, and does not allow us to participate, in the discovery and peripeteia experienced by Savage himself. Committed to the order of objective time, Johnson does describe Savage's discovery but only after he has described those facts of Savage's birth and early life which are the substance of the discovery.

More needs to be said at this point about just what it is that Savage discovered. What he discovered was that at a very early period of his life—within two months of his birth, according to Johnson—his past had in fact been changed. In trying to change the past Savage is only trying to do what had, he now discovers, been done to him. The following passage, in which Johnson describes the very complicated circumstances of Savage's birth, explains this bizarre situation:

In the Year 1697, *Anne* Countess of *Macclesfield*, having lived for some Time upon very uneasy Terms with her Husband, thought a public Confession of Adultery the most obvious and expeditious Method of obtaining her Liberty, and therefore declared, that the Child, with whom she was then great, was begotten by the *Earl Rivers*. Her Husband, being as may be easily imagined, thus made no less desirous of a Separation than herself, prosecuted his Design in the most effectual Manner; for he applied not to the Ecclesiastical Courts for a Divorce, but to the Parliament for an Act, by which his Marriage might be dissolved, the nuptial Contract totally

annulled, and the Child of his Wife illegitimated. This Act, after the usual Deliberation, he obtained, tho' without the Approbation of some, who considered Marriage as an Affair only cognizable by Ecclesiastical Judges; and next year on *March 3d* was separated from his Wife, whose Fortune, which was very great, was repaid her; and who having, as well as her Husband, the Liberty of making another Choice, was in a short Time married to Colonel *Bret*.

While the Earl of *Macclesfield* was prosecuting this Affair, his Wife was, on the tenth of *January 1697-8*, delivered of a Son, and the Earl *Rivers*, by appearing to consider him as his own, left none any Reason to Doubt of the Sincerity of her Declaration; for he was his Godfather, and gave him his own Name, which was by his Direction inserted in the Register of *St Andrew's* Parish in *Holbourn*, but unfortunately left him to the care of his Mother, whom, as she was now set free from her Husband, he probably imagined likely to treat with Great Tenderness the Child that had contributed to so pleasing an Event. It is not indeed easy to discover what Motives could be found to overbalance that natural Affection of a Parent, or what Interest could be promoted by Neglect or Cruelty ...

But whatever were her Motives, no sooner was her Son born, than she discovered a Resolution of disowning him; and in a very short Time removed him from her Sight, by committing him to the Care of a poor Woman, whom she directed to educate him as her own, and enjoined never to inform him of his true Parents. (pp.4-6)

An annulment, as distinct from a divorce, alters the past. The couple who were married are retrospectively declared not to have been married; and the declaration is what would now be called a 'performative' utterance since it actually effects the (retrospective) change of status to which it refers. In changing people's understanding of the past it does also change the past. And what is true of annulment is true, certainly in this case, of 'illegitimation'. Johnson emphasizes this retrospectiveness in a subsequent paragraph:

Such was the Beginning of the Life of *Richard Savage*: Born with a legal Claim to Honour and to Riches, he was in two Months illegitimated by the Parliament, and disowned by his Mother, doomed to Poverty and Obscurity, and launched upon

the Ocean of Life, only that he might be swallowed by its Quicksands, or dashed upon its Rocks. (p.6)

The extent of the paradox involved in the annulment and illegitimation can be grasped if we realize that there is no way in which the English tense system will allow us to describe such a situation without our description immediately requiring correction. If one had been speaking prior to the Act of Parliament it would have been correct to say that the Earl and Countess of Macclesfield were a married couple and that the Countess's son was legitimate (since legitimacy is a condition defined by law rather than biology). But if one is speaking after the Act has been passed, it becomes equally true to say that prior to the Act the couple were not married and the son was not legitimate. There are, in effect, two versions of that earlier period, two incompatible true stories. Johnson perhaps gets round this problem by saying that Savage was 'Born with a legal Claim', a statement that (since it may be taken to mean either that Savage had the right to inherit or only that he may have had the right to inherit) can be taken as more or less true whether it is said from a point of view prior to or subsequent to the Act of Parliament. Johnson registers the paradox most openly and vividly in the metaphor that follows, when he describes Savage as 'launched upon the Ocean of Life, only that he might be swallowed by its Quicksands, or dashed upon its Rocks'. This is an image of being driven *back* (from ocean to sands and rocks); it even suggests that Savage never reached the ocean it says he reached. The ship was launched, and then unlaunched.