

From Rational Construction to Emotional Co-creation: A Comparative Study of Biographical Narrative in Boswell's *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* and Contemporary Fan Culture

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Abstract—The 18th century was the golden age of Western biographical literature, and James Boswell's *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* is a prime example of a travelogue biography. Through literary narrative strategies, it constructs the intellectual authority and contradictory human nature of Samuel Johnson. This study uses this work as a starting point to analyze the characteristics of biographical literature in the cultural context of the Enlightenment era. It then shifts to Taylor Swift: *Love Story* by Triumph Books, discussing the biographical writing characteristics of fan culture in the 21st century. By comparing these two cultural contexts, this study identifies the cross-era features of biographical literature. The 18th-century biographies focus on rational worship and multidimensional depictions, emphasizing authenticity and detailed accounts. Contemporary fan biographies, on the other hand, rely on digital media, idol worship, and emotional interaction, presenting characteristics of immediacy, participation, emotional resonance, and mass appeal. Through textual analysis and theoretical investigation, this study explores the different features of biographical texts across cultural contexts and attempts to understand the historical causes of these differences: the alienation of spiritual life due to modern society's high pressures and fast pace, the development of media technology in the digital age, and the redistribution of culture under the power discourse and technological empowerment.

Keywords—biographical literature, fan culture, rational worship, emotional interaction, media transformation

I. INTRODUCTION

Biographical literature, as a significant genre for recording and shaping human figures, has always been closely linked to socio-cultural contexts. The 18th-century Scottish writer James Boswell's (1740–1795) *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson* (1785, hereafter referred to as *The Journal*) uses the travelogue as its vessel. Together with his *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791), it forms a dual paradigm of biographical writing.

The 1773 journey through the Scottish Highlands documented in *The Journal* was both a geographical excursion for the two literati and a meticulously designed narrative field by Boswell. Through thirteen weeks of close companionship, conducted almost like anthropological fieldwork, Boswell completed the project of constructing Johnson's identity. Through verbatim dialogue records, he shaped Johnson into an Enlightenment idol possessing both intellectual authority and contradictory humanity. This construction was neither simple biographical recording nor pure artistic fiction, but a complex product interwoven with

Enlightenment rationalism and personal subjective emotion. *The Journal* not only pioneered the genre of “fandom biography” but also reflected the Enlightenment era's dual pursuit of reason and morality.

The evolution of contemporary fan culture has reconstructed the paradigms of biographical writing and given rise to new modes of cultural production driven by an “emotional economy.” Taking Taylor Swift, one of the most influential superstars in contemporary popular music, as an example, her impact extends beyond traditional musicianship, encompassing music, commerce, and socio-cultural influence, making her a global phenomenon in popular culture. Her fan biography, *Taylor Swift: Love Story* (2013, hereafter referred to as *Taylor*), focuses on Swift's early career and personal growth, intertwining her musical creations and public image. It captures the crucial transitional period in her career, providing a vivid case study for examining her early image construction and fan culture. It also presents readers with a relatively comprehensive “fan perspective” image of Taylor, exhibiting significant creative features in its textual production: bidirectional interaction, emotional investment, co-creative authorship, and popularized narrative.

This study takes *The Journal* and the contemporary fan biography *Taylor* as examples of cross-era biographical works. Through close textual reading and analysis, it attempts to elucidate the characteristics and differences between elite writing in the Enlightenment era and fan co-creation in the digital era as manifested in the texts. It further explores the epochal motivations behind these differences, thereby revealing the transformation of fan culture through the lens of biographical texts.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the 18th century, biography was an essential medium for Enlightenment discourse, with Boswell's *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* epitomizing a biographical style based on rational empiricism. These works emphasized truth-seeking, intellectual authority, and the recording of private imprints of intellectual giants, while reinforcing the legitimacy of elite cultural discourse [1, 2]. Biographies from this period were dominated by educated elites, often using Latin and structured formats to assert authority and cultural dominance.

In contrast, contemporary idol biographies, shaped by fan culture, focus on emotional identification. The rise of new

media and consumer culture has shifted biographies from rational interpretations to emotional connections between fans and idols. Zhang (2024) [3] argues that fans, in the fast-paced modern world, use idol figures as emotional anchors, with biographies taking on a therapeutic role. Digital media, particularly images and videos, have made modern biographies more fragmented, visual, and affective (Fu Senhui, 2024). Fiske's (1992) [4] concept of "emotional community" explains how fans form collective identities through emotional resonance, as seen in the empathetic connection fans have with Taylor Swift's growth narrative. While 18th-century biographies were unidirectional (author-reader), modern idol biographies involve a "idol-fan-author" collaboration through social media [2]. Zhu and Han (2017) [5] highlight the "pseudo-intimacy" between fans and idols, showing how participatory media fosters close fan-idol connections. This shift allows fans to co-author biographical content.

This study will explore the differences between 18th-century and contemporary idol biographies, focusing on changes in textual structure, communication mechanisms, and power dynamics. It will analyze how digital platforms and fan culture shape modern biographies, making them more fragmented, visual, and emotionally resonant.

III. RATIONAL CONSTRUCTION IN 18TH-CENTURY TRAVELOGUE BIOGRAPHY

A. Authenticity and Detail

Enlightenment-era biography emphasized objective recording and meticulous attention to detail, grounded in an empirical spirit. Throughout the recorded dialogues in *The Journal*, Boswell deliberately set numerous intellectual debate topics. On August 16th alone, he recorded up to 12 topics, ranging from the essentials of writing personal biography to discussions on the historical and political origins of Scotland and England, and from the authenticity of Ossian's poetry to religious customs [6]. The breadth, depth, and granularity of coverage, achieved through relatively objective and truthful recording of Johnson's words and deeds, constructed Johnson's humanistic erudition as a "walking encyclopedia."

In the entry for August 18th, Boswell and Johnson overlook the bay scenery from Edinburgh Castle. Johnson quotes Ovid's Latin verse, "Una est injusti caerula forma maris" ("The sea has a single form, unjustly blue"), to express admiration for the sea's beauty. This then leads into a discussion on import-export trade and a legal debate sparked by a forged will related to a drowned man [6].

This embedding of historical context and precise anchoring of spatiotemporal coordinates reinforce the text's objectivity and authenticity: Boswell explicitly marks the time (August 18th), place (Edinburgh Castle), and participants (Johnson, Nairne, etc.), forming archival-like spatiotemporal markers. This mode of writing is isomorphic with Enlightenment scientific observation logs (like Linnaeus's botanical classification records), dissolving Romantic subjective embellishment and making the dialogues exemplars of Enlightenment empiricism.

Johnson's shift from an aesthetic appreciation of Ovid's verse to a critique of import-export trade ("harbours far exceeding actual needs") occurs abruptly. Boswell adds no

transitional explanation, preserving the native discontinuity of the conversation. This anti-rhetorical treatment rejects logical beautification of the subject's thoughts, objectively recording the jumpiness of Johnson's thought processes. Simultaneously, it shapes Johnson's intellectual authority, authentically showcasing his vast intellectual span, profound depth of thought, and extensive cognitive reserves. The mention of the "economic disparity between the East and West coasts" in the trade discussion precisely corresponds to the reality of regional economic division in 18th-century Scotland—agricultural decline on the East Coast versus the rise of tobacco trade on the West Coast. The author embeds macro-historical structures within private conversations, precisely constructing Johnson's intellectual image through detailed records. These details act as prisms reflecting facets of the era, elevating the text beyond private memory into a social cognitive tool dissected with the scalpel of detail.

B. Rational Veneration of the Subject

Boswell's rational veneration of Dr. Johnson is highlighted through multiple narrative strategies. In the August 26th record, when Boswell praises the practicality of the corridor architecture in Elgin from an emotional perspective, he does not conceal Johnson's starkly opposite rational critique. Instead, he meticulously records the latter's logical argument with near-scholarly rigor: Johnson first points out the physical flaw of corridors causing insufficient room lighting, then analyzes geographical features—Scotland's low rainfall—and constructs a scenario—few pedestrians on rainy days—to deduce a "convenience imbalance" [6]. This faithful presentation of critical thinking creates a strong contrast with Boswell's own intuitive feelings, precisely highlighting Johnson's insight that transcends appearances. In shaping Johnson's intellectual authority, Boswell simultaneously displays a form of rational personal veneration.

Furthermore, Johnson's rigorous logical reasoning not only demonstrates the systematic authority he pursued in compiling the *Dictionary of the English Language* but also mimics the classic debate model of "proposing a thesis—encountering refutation" found in 18th-century London clubs [7]. Boswell uses his own views as a foil, allowing Johnson to shatter the original perspective with a counter-argument, mirroring the club tradition where authority was established through intellectual collision. The "corridor debate" becomes a microcosmic theater of ideas, projecting the mechanism for constructing rational authority within the Enlightenment movement [8].

C. Complexity and Multi-dimensional Portrayal of Character

Literature's deconstruction of the contradictory human essence is fundamentally a demystification ritual of the myth of reason. Since the Enlightenment, intellectuals have often been portrayed as spokespersons for truth, elevated to the "pantheon" by biographers, their authority built upon logic and morality. The value of literature stems precisely from its gaze upon this contradiction—tearing open the solemn robe of reason to expose the flesh entangled with prejudice, blind spots, and power complicity. In Boswell's travel writing, this deconstruction occurs not through explicit critique, but via fissures in dialogue, undercurrents of irony, and subtle negotiations of national identity, embedding the complex

spectrum of humanity within the historical scene, allowing the “perfect marble statue” of intellectual authority to breathe again as a living contradiction.

In the August 29th record, Johnson’s rational discourse on the Anglo-Scottish Union and Boswell’s subtle response of finding it “amusing” constitute a literary deconstruction of intellectual authority. Johnson analyzes the “benefits” Scotland gained from the Union in a seemingly objective tone, yet inadvertently reveals an Anglocentric cultural bias [9]. For instance, he simplifies Scotland’s historical predicament as its own “bad state,” ignoring the inequalities of the colonial structure. This arrogance wrapped in rationality is punctured by Boswell’s humorous observer perspective—when Johnson, the Enlightenment giant who compiled the Dictionary, falls into a one-sided assertion characterized by “copious exaggeration” on the national issue [5], the halo of his intellectual authority reveals cracks. Boswell does not directly refute; instead, by recording Johnson’s contradictory words and actions (e.g., declaring “I do not hate the Scotch” while comparing them to “a frog in a chamber”), he transforms the dialogue into an ironic play about Enlightenment reason. This narrative strategy exposes the identity blind spots intellectuals struggle to escape and dismantles the idealized image of the “perfect philosopher,” revealing the symbiosis of rationalism and human limitation. As American literary historian David Damrosch noted, Johnson’s prejudice often disguised itself as “teasing,” actually implying a testing of cultural power [10]. With a biographer’s acuity, Boswell transforms this contradiction into a profound annotation on human complexity, breaking the Enlightenment tradition of deifying intellectuals and dissolving the perfect image of the rationalist.

IV. BIOGRAPHICAL TRANSFORMATION IN CONTEMPORARY FAN CULTURE

A. Narrative Style: Accessibility to the Masses

Contemporary biographies adopt a narrative style that is more accessible to the masses, using colloquial and approachable language. The book Taylor Swift narrates Taylor’s story vividly, interspersed with many of her personal quotes and inner thoughts, making readers feel as if they are conversing with her face-to-face. Examples include: “I think that Christmas tree farm in Pennsylvania was just the perfect place to raise a country singer” [11]; “I never needed to drink, do drugs, or anything like that to escape bad days. For me, music is the best escape” (p. 78). These utterances are full of life, bridging the distance with readers and enhancing the biography’s readability.

B. Immediacy and Bidirectional Interaction: Deepening Digital Connection

Contemporary fans are no longer satisfied with passively appreciating their idols’ work; they deeply participate in the idols’ lives and careers through various online and offline means. In Triumph Books’ Taylor Swift, Taylor frequently interacts with fans using social networking tools like MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter. “Taylor often updated her blog on these social sites, uploaded personal videos, and even replied to fans’ messages” [11]. Her official website was designed like a scrapbook and diary, making fans feel intimately connected. “On MySpace, she had a massive

fanbase, with her music played over 200 million times” [11]. This online interaction breaks the sense of distance traditionally separating stars and fans, allowing fans to understand Taylor’s activities in real-time, as if sharing the same space with the idol. This enhances fans’ sense of participation and belonging, embodying the immediacy and closeness of online interaction in contemporary fan culture.

Offline, Taylor interacted with fans on numerous occasions. “Once, some fans spotted her at Nashville International Airport and asked her to sing live. Taylor immediately asked the band to bring out instruments and held a concert right there at the airport. Another time, after a performance in Fresno, California, she performed a mini-concert for a girl and her friends and family whom she met while buying ice cream on the street” (p. 48). These offline interactions not only brought surprise and unforgettable experiences to fans but also made them feel Taylor’s respect and care, further deepening the emotional bond between fans and the idol, reflecting the authenticity and emotionality of offline interaction in contemporary fan culture.

V. CROSS-ERA COMPARISON: FROM RATIONAL VENERATION TO EMOTIONAL INTERACTION

A. Textual Construction: From Rational Empiricism to Emotional Resonance

The 18th-century travelogue biography held the objective presentation of “truth” as its highest principle, manifesting as recording authenticity, detail, and the biographer’s rational veneration of the subject. In *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, Boswell meticulously noted time, place, and participants, treating Johnson’s every word and action as empirical material, striving to recreate the historical scene in a “relatively objective” manner. Dialogues lacked excessive polish; theory and fact were treated equally; even abrupt intellectual leaps or arguments were preserved as-is, embodying the diversity and charm of reason.

Conversely, contemporary celebrity biographies prioritize emotional resonance. Taylor Swift does not rigidly adhere to chronological order or logical completeness. Instead, through a scrapbook-style collage of images, text, video screenshots, and excerpts from lengthy social media posts, it pieces together one highlight moment after another designed to evoke fans’ heartfelt resonance: her youthful crushes, tears backstage, the surprise airport flash mob... The author intentionally downplays “objective sequence,” emphasizing a multi-perspective, multi-channel, three-dimensional representation of the subject’s inner world to stimulate readers’ emotional investment.

This shift from “verbatim record” to “emotional representation” reflects a societal value transition from venerating “objective truth” to highlighting “subjective experience” and “emotional identification.” At its core, it signifies the replacement of the empirical rationality of the print-capitalism era by the emotional efficacy of the digital-capitalism era. In the 18th century, influenced by print, people’s thought patterns were shaped accordingly; textual construction served knowledge enlightenment and public reason, with people caring deeply about the truthfulness and reliability of the knowledge they received. Today, with global economic development and the rapid growth of industries like

5G and AI, material needs have been met to an unprecedented degree. With material needs satisfied, people have turned their pursuit towards emotions. Additionally, as discussed by Zhang (2024) [3], the high-intensity pressure and fast pace of modern society, coupled with the alienation of spiritual life by the flood of materialization, have caused spiritual emptiness and a lack of ideals and beliefs. People seek spiritual solace through online idols, transmitting their emotions to the idol while also hoping to receive emotional value in return. Contemporary biographical construction thus serves the emotional bond between fans and idols, emphasizing identity affirmation and spiritual comfort.

B. Communication and Interaction: From Unidirectional Reading to Immediate Bidirectional Co-creation

In the era of print publication, interaction involved embedding historical context and precise anchoring of spatiotemporal coordinates. Boswell anchored the historical scene with the precision of a scientific observation log, details as rigorous as Linnaeus's plant classification. Like placing a final bet, once published, the biography solidified into a "definitive edition." Reader participation was limited to book reviews, private exchanges, and salon discussions, with little opportunity for direct author response. Layers of intermediaries – publishers, bookstores, social salons – stood between Boswell and his readers. Even fans could only experience the text's emotions unidirectionally.

Entering the era of digital media, social platforms enable "zero-distance" dialogue between idols and fans: real-time updates on Weibo, behind-the-scenes snippets on Instagram Stories, rehearsal clips on TikTok... Fans' comments are no longer just "chatting while reading"; they may directly appear in the next updated edition of the official biography. The idol's live Q&As, online polls, and even fan-organized offline flash mobs are incorporated into the "official vision." This "bidirectional co-creation" interaction model transforms biography from an "author-reader" product into a collaborative work of "idol-fan-author" [2]. Zhu and Han (2017) proposed the concept of "pseudo-intimacy relationship" to describe this intimate relationship between fans and idols in digital space [5]. The development of information technology has broadened the bridge for interaction and communication between idols and fans, making the relationship more flexible compared to the unilateral, fixed interaction of the 18th century, and diversifying the modes of content presentation.

The development of modern media technologies, such as the internet, social networks, and streaming platforms, has provided new channels of dissemination and modes of expression for biographical literature. This has not only changed the modes of production and reception of texts but also made interactions between idols and fans more frequent and immediate, thereby further promoting the diversified development of biographical texts [1].

From Boswell's 18th-century "empirical archive" to the contemporary "emotional co-creation" of fan biography, we witness not only the rapid development of media technology but also profound transformations in social values, power structures, and public discourse fields. Enlightenment discourse prioritizing reason gives way to identity affirmation prioritizing emotion; unidirectional print dissemination is

replaced by bidirectional online interaction; elite-monopolized cultural discourse shifts towards flattened mass co-creation; static archives evolve into dynamic fragments; regional elite influence escalates into globally resonant cultural phenomena. All of this is not merely a formal metamorphosis of biographical texts but a refraction of synergistic evolution across multiple dimensions—social, political, economic, and cultural: from Enlightenment reason to postmodern emotion, from elite discourse to grassroots co-creation, from printed definitive editions to living digital drafts, from local influence to global resonance. It is precisely within this epochal context that biographical literature continuously reshapes existing paradigms, offering us a highly indicative research perspective for understanding contemporary cultural ecology.

VI. CONCLUSION

This comparative study reveals fundamental paradigm shifts in biographical literature from the 18th century to the digital era. Boswell's *Journal* exemplifies Enlightenment values: rational empiricism, meticulous archival documentation, and unidirectional elite discourse, constructing intellectual authority through objective detail and logical rigor. In contrast, contemporary fan biographies like *Taylor Swift: Love Story* prioritize emotional resonance, fragmented visual narratives, and participatory co-creation, facilitated by digital media's immediacy and interactivity.

The transition from "rational construction" to "emotional co-creation" reflects broader socio-historical transformations: the decline of print-capitalism's empirical ideals, the rise of affective economies under digital capitalism, and the democratization of cultural production through technological empowerment. Where 18th-century biographies reinforced elite authority, modern fan texts dissolve hierarchical boundaries, fostering collective identity through bidirectional engagement. These divergent textual practices underscore biography's evolving role—from enshrining rational monuments to curating living emotional archives—revealing media's profound agency in reshaping cultural memory.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Zou Weiyang proposed the research questions, constructed the theoretical framework, investigated contemporary fan culture, analyzed *Taylor Swift: Love Story*, and examined the role of digital media in biographical co-creation; Sima Xiaoyu drafted the comparative analysis sections, synthesized theoretical foundations, and coordinated cross-era comparisons; Tong Yuanxian conducted the literature review and performed textual analysis of Boswell's *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*; all authors contributed to critical revisions of the manuscript and approved the final version.

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