

SAMUEL JOHNSON RAMBLER 4 (March 31, 1750)

Here, Johnson draws a distinction between the genre of the romance inherited from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, on the one hand, and the “works of fiction” (317) which were beginning to be produced around this time (i.e. some of the earliest examples of *prose* fiction which as a genre was only then in its infancy). Offering what is one of the earliest accounts of modern realism, i.e. realist literature of the modern period, Johnson argues that works of fiction are “such as exhibit life in its true state, diversified only by accidents that daily happen in the world, and influenced by passions and qualities which are really to be found in conversing with mankind” (317). He contends that its “province is to bring about natural events by easy means, and to keep up curiosity without the help of wonder: it is therefore precluded from the machines and expedients of the heroic romance” (317).

Johnson belittles the “wild strain of imagination” (317) that afflicted the writers of the traditional Romance:

we cannot wonder that . . . the authors were willing to continue it: for when a man had by practice gained some fluency of language, he had not further care than to retire to his closet, let loose his invention, and heat his mind with incredibilities; a book was thus produced without fear of criticism, without the toil of study, without knowledge of nature, or acquaintance with life. (317)

In all this, Johnson has in mind the use by Romance writers of stock in trade conventions such as fair ladies kidnapped by giants, heroic knights who come to their rescue, wild “deserts” (317), and “imaginary castles” (317).

With realism comes a moral responsibility, Johnson argues. The “task of our present writers is very different” (317): their works are based, “together with that learning which is to be gained from books” (317) on “that learning which can never be attained by solitary diligence, but must arise from general converse, and accurate observation of the living world” (317). They are “engaged in portraits of which everyone knows the original, and can detect any deviation from exactness of resemblance” (308). He argues that fear on the part of poets of not being “approved as just copiers of human manners” (318) (i.e. for their veracity or fidelity to nature) is less important than a consideration of the work’s effect upon the reader. Demonstrating a keenly Platonic concern with the role of literature in the education of the young, Johnson argues that a consideration of the work’s impact is imperative given that books are written chiefly to the young, the ignorant, and the idle, to whom they serve as lectures of conduct and introductions into life. They are the entertainment of minds unfurnished with ideas, and therefore easily susceptible of impressions; not fixed by principles, and therefore easily following the current of fancy; not informed by experience, and consequently open to every false suggestion and partial account. (318)

He contends that the “highest degree of reverence should be paid to youth” (318) as a result of which “nothing indecent should be suffered to approach their eyes or ears” (318). Caution is required “to secure them from unjust prejudices, perverse opinions, and incongruous combinations of images” (318).

In the case of romances, because “every transaction and sentiment was so remote from all that passes among men” (318), the reader was “in very little danger of making any applications to himself” (482). He cannot draw lessons, good or bad, from either the “virtues and crimes” (318) of “heroes . . . traitors, deliverers and persecutors” (318) who are perceived as “beings of another species, whose actions were regulated upon motives of their own, and who had neither faults nor excellences in common with himself” (318). However,

when an adventurer is leveled with the rest of the world, and acts in such scenes of the universal drama as may be the lot of any other man, young spectators fix their eyes upon him with closer attention, and hope, by observing his behaviour and success, to regulate their own practices when they shall be engaged in the like part. (318)

The reason for this, he explains (like Sidney), is that fiction is “perhaps of greater use than the solemnities of professed morality” (318) (i.e. abstract moral philosophising) in that it conveys “knowledge of vice and virtue with more efficacy than axioms and definitions” (318). Because the “power of example is so great as to take possession of the memory by a kind of violence, and produce effects almost without intervention of the will” (318), “care should be taken that . . . the best examples only should be exhibited” (318).

Censorship is, consequently, a key theme of Johnson. He is of the view that art should not be held indiscriminately up to nature in all its aspects. Given that it is the “greatest excellency of art to imitate nature” (318), he argues, it is vital to “distinguish those parts of nature which are most proper for imitation” (318). Literature akin to a “mirror which shows all that presents itself without discrimination” (318) is a dangerous thing because the greatest care is “required in representing life, which is so often discolored by passion or deformed by wickedness” (318). Hence, he argues, that it is “not a sufficient vindication of a character that it is drawn as it appears, for many characters ought never to be drawn” (318). Similarly, it is not enough to compose a narrative in which the “train of events is agreeable to observation and experience” (318). The reason for this is that “that observation which is called knowledge of the world will be found much more frequently to make men cunning than good” (318). The “purpose” (318) of prose fiction, Johnson argues, is “surely not only to show mankind but to provide that they may be seen hereafter with less hazard” (318). Many writers, he argues, “for the sake of following nature, so mingle good and bad qualities in their principal personages, that they are both equally conspicuous” (318). As a result, “we accompany them through their adventures with delight, and are led by degrees to interest ourselves in their favour; we lose the abhorrence of their faults, because they do not hinder our pleasure, or, perhaps, regard them with some kindness for being united with such merit” (318). Johnson points out that some men are “indeed splendidly wicked, whose endowments threw a brightness on their crimes, and whose scarce any villainy made perfectly detestable, because they never could be wholly divested of their excellences: (318). Such men “have been in all ages the great corrupters of the world and their resemblance ought no more to be preserved, than the art of murdering without pain” (318).

Johnson next tackles the argument that it is not realistic to depict characters as either entirely good or entirely bad. Some have argued, he points out, “without due attention to the consequences of this notion, that certain virtues have their correspondent faults” (319) as a result of which “to exhibit either apart is to deviate from probability” (318). This argument is based on the view, Johnson contends, that they may differ from each other but originate in the same source, “brute impulse” (319). Arguing that it is of the “utmost importance to mankind, that positions of this tendency should be laid open and confuted” (319), Johnson contends that such a view pays no heed to the role played by reason in humans: “though it should be allowed that gratitude and resentment arise from the same constitution of the passions, it follows not that they will be equally indulged when reason is consulted” (319). As long as men “consider good and evil as springing from the same root, they will spare the one for the sake of the other” (319). “To this fatal error all those will contribute, who confound the colours of right and wrong, and instead of helping to settle their boundaries, mix them with so much art, that no common mind is able to distinguish them” (319).

Johnson accordingly advocates the depiction in “narratives, where historical veracity has no place” (319) of the “most perfect idea of virtue; of virtue not angelical, nor above probability, for what we cannot credit we shall never imitate, but the highest and purest that humanity can reach, which, exercised in such trials as the various revolutions of things shall bring upon it, may . . . teach us what we may hope, and what we can perform” (318). By the opposite token, the depiction of vice (which is “necessary to be shewn” [319]),

should always disgust; nor should the graces of gaiety or the dignity of courage be so united with it as to reconcile it to the mind. Wherever it appears, it should raise hatred by the malignity of its practices, and contempt by the meanness of its stratagems; for while it is supported by either parts or spirit, it will be seldom heartily abhorred. . . . It is therefore to be steadily inculcated, that virtue is the highest proof of understanding, and the solid basis of greatness, and that vice is the natural consequence of narrow thoughts, that it begins in mistake, and ends in ignominy. (319)