

### **SAMUEL JOHNSON THE HISTORY OF RASSELAS, PRINCE OF ABYSSINIA (1759)**

This extract is from Chapter X of one of Johnson's own works of fiction where the characters discuss the nature of literature. Here, the character Imlac, Johnson's mouthpiece, argues, firstly, "in almost all countries, the most ancient poets are considered as the very best" (319). He advances a number of possibilities why this might be the case, the most important being the view that the "first writers took possession of the most striking objects for description, and the most probable occurrences for fiction, and left nothing to those that followed them, but transcriptions of the same events, new combinations of the same images" (319). Imlac contends that it is widely acknowledged that the earliest writers are "in possession of nature, and their followers of art" (319), the former "excel in strength and invention, and the latter in elegance and refinement" (319).

After this intervention in the so-called Ancients versus Moderns debate, Imlac advances the view that the modern writer must emulate the desire of the Ancients to hold a mirror up to Nature rather than the art itself of the Ancients. Given his own desire to become a writer, he came to the realisation no man was ever great by imitation [i.e. emulation]. My desire of excellence impelled me to transfer my attention to nature and to life. Nature was to be my subject, and men to be my auditors: I could never describe what I had not seen: I could not hope to move those with delight or terror, whose interests and opinions I did not understand. (319)

For this reason, he realised that his "sphere of attention was suddenly magnified: no kind of knowledge was to be overlooked. I ranged mountains and deserts for images and resemblances, and picture upon my mind every tree of the forest and flower of the valley" (319-320), etc. It is for this reason that, to a poet,

nothing can be useless. Whatever is beautiful, and whatever is dreadful, must be familiar to his imagination: he must be conversant with all that is awfully vast or elegantly little. The plants of the garden, the animals of the wood, the minerals of the earth, and the meteors of the sky, must all concur to store his mind with inexhaustible variety. (320)

The goal in so doing is ultimately moral: "every idea is useful for the enforcement of moral or religious truth" (320). He "who knows most, will have most power of diversifying his scenes, and of gratifying his reader with remote allusions and unexpected instruction" (320).

Rasselas interrupts him at this point to say that no matter how much one tries, there will always be some things, even in one's vicinity, which one will not be able to acquaint oneself. Imlac contends that the goal of artistic imitation is not to ferret out the finer details of nature but to paint in the broadest of strokes, to capture not particulars but *universals*: the "business of a poet" (89), he writes, is to examine, not the individual, but the species; to remark general properties and large appearances: he does not number the streaks of the tulip, or describe the different shades in the verdure of the forest. He is to exhibit in his portraits of nature such prominent and striking features, as recall the original to every mind; and must neglect the minuter discriminations. (320)

Nature per se is only part of the picture: the other part to be depicted is human nature. To this end, he argues, the poet must

be acquainted . . . with all the modes of life . . . the happiness and misery of every condition; . . . the power of all the passions in all their combinations; and . . . the changes of the human mind as they are modified by various institutions and accidental influences of climate or custom, from the spriteliness of infancy to the despondence of decrepitude. (320)

In order to capture human nature in general, the poet must

divest himself of the prejudices of his age and country; he must consider right and wrong in their abstracted and invariable state; he must disregard present laws and opinions, and rise to general and transcendental truths, which will always be the same. (89)

The poet must not seek fame but "commit his claims to the justice of posterity" (320). The poet is, for all these reasons, not only the "interpreter of nature" (320) but also, more importantly, the "legislator of mankind" (320). This is because he must realise that he presides "over the thoughts and manners of future generations" (320) and is, as such, a "being superior to time and place" (320).

