

## SAMUEL JOHNSON SELECTIONS

Johnson, Samuel. Selections. Critical Theory Since Plato. Ed. Hazard Adams. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971. 316-327.

Johnson arguably came to occupy the role of Neoclassical England's most important man of letters after Pope had passed on. Where Pope is normally associated with the early stages of Neo-Classical thought, Johnson's name is synonymous with the latter half. Where Pope's focus is on the point of view of the critic and the standards by which he should a literary work (especially poetry), Johnson's emphasis is on the realism of prose fiction (by contrast to earlier genres such as the Medieval romance) and drama (this is the theory of mimesis) and, more importantly, the didactic function of literature (what Abrams calls the 'pragmatic' pole of criticism).

### 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)

### **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).

### **Preface to Shakespeare (1765)**

In his preface to his edition of the collected works of Shakespeare, Johnson begins by noting that we often seem to cherish the works of the past and to neglect the present. Praises, he writes, are often "without reason lavished on the dead" (320) as a result of

which it sometimes seems that the "honours due only to excellence are paid to antiquity" (320). Everyone, Johnson suggests, is "perhaps . . . more willing to honour past than present excellence; and the mind contemplates genius through the shades of age" (320). Time is the test of genius, Johnson contends:

To works . . . of which the excellence is not absolute and definite, but gradual and comparative; to works not raised upon principles demonstrative and scientific, but appealing wholly to observation and experience, no other test can be applied than length of duration and continuance of esteem. What mankind have long possessed they have often examined and compared; and if they persist to value the possession, it is because frequent comparisons have confirmed opinion in its favour. . . . [I]n the productions of genius, nothing can be styled excellent till it has been compared with other works of the same kind. (320)

With this test in mind, Johnson suggests that Shakespeare meets these criteria and "may now begin to assume the dignity of an ancient, and earn the privilege of established fame and prescriptive veneration" (321) because he has "long outlived his century, the term commonly used as the test of literary merit" (321). That he deserves such acclaim can be verified by "comparing him with other authors" (321).

The question which arises, given the fallibility of "human judgment" (321), is "by what peculiarities of excellence Shakespeare has gained and kept the favour of his countrymen?" (321). He argues that Shakespeare's perhaps most important skill concerns accurate characterisation: he offers "representations of general nature" (321) rather than of "particular manners" (321) peculiar to individuals or particular places and times. In a view of Shakespeare that has come to be constantly regurgitated, he praises the Bard's characterisation in particular for its fidelity to human nature in general:

Shakespeare is above all writers . . . the poet of nature; the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life. His characters are not modified by the customs of particular places, unpractised by the rest of the world; by the peculiarities of studies and professions . . . ; or by the accidents of transient fashions or temporary opinions: they are the genuine progeny of common humanity, such as the world will always supply, and observation will always find. His persons act and speak by the influence of those general passions and principles by which all minds are agitated. . . . In the writings of other poets a character is too often an individual; in those of Shakespeare it is commonly a species. (321)

Where other dramatists offer "hyperbolic or aggravated characters" (322), Shakespeare's "scenes are occupied only by men, who act and speak as the reader thinks that he should himself have spoken or acted on the same occasion" (322).

Characterisation "ample and general" (322) in this way, that is, his "adherence to general nature" (322), is supplemented by appropriate strokes of individuality: "no poet ever kept his personages more distinct from each other. . . . [T]hough some may be equally adapted to every person, it will be difficult to find any that can be properly transferred from the present possessor to another claimant" (322). However, Johnson hastens to add, Shakespeare "always makes nature predominate over accident; and if he preserves the essential character, is not very carefully of distinctions superinduced and adventitious" (322).

Even when dealing with supernatural matters, Johnson stresses, Shakespeare "approximates the remote, and familiarises the wonderful; the even which he represents will not happen, but if it were possible, its effects would probably be such as he has assigned" (322). All in all, Shakespeare "has not only shewn human nature as it acts in

real exigencies, but as it would be found in trials, to which it cannot be exposed" (322). Whatever his subject matter, as Shakespeare's

personages act upon principles arising from genuine passion, very little modified by particular forms, their pleasures and vexations are communicable to all times and to all places; they are natural, and therefore durable; the adventitious peculiarities of personal habits, are only superficial dyes, bright and pleasing for a little while, yet soon fading to a dim tinct, without any remains of former lustre; but the discriminations of true passion are the colours of nature; they pervade the whole mass, and can only perish with the body that exhibits them. (323-324)

As such, his "drama is the mirror of life" (322) from which other writers can learn much simply "by reading human sentiments in human language, by scenes from which a hermit may estimate the transactions of the world, and a confessor predict the progress of the passions" (322).

Moreover, if his characterisation is realistic, so too are his dialogues. Johnson, the editor of the first dictionary of the English language, argues that Shakespeare has captured the enduring spirit of the English language: there is

in every nation, a style which never becomes obsolete, a certain mode of phraseology so consonant and congenial to the analogy and principles of its respective language as to remain settled and unaltered; this style is probably to be sought in the common intercourse of life, among those who speak only to be understood, without ambition of elegance. The polite are always catching modish innovations, and the learned depart from established forms of speech, in hope of finding or making better; those who wish for distinction forsake the vulgar. . . . [B]ut there is a conversation above grossness and below refinement, where propriety resides, and where this poet seems to have gathered his comic dialogue. (324)

The speech of each of Shakespeare's characters is "so evidently determined by the incident which produces it, and is pursued with so much ease and simplicity, that it seems scarcely to claim the merit of fiction, but to have been gleaned by diligent selection out of common conversation, and common occurrences" (321).

Johnson then turns his attention to the criticisms commonly made of Shakespeare's plays, not least that he did not follow the prescribed rules. Firstly, he deals with the view that Shakespeare is guilty of blurring the genres of tragedy and comedy which ought to be distinct. Johnson argues that the ancient poets, out of the "chaos of mingled purposes and casualties" (322) and "according to the laws which custom had prescribed" (322), had "selected, some the crimes of men, and some their absurdities; some the momentous vicissitudes of life, and some the lighter occurrences; some the terrors of distress and some the gaieties of prosperity" (322). It was for this reason that there "rose two modes of imitation, known by the names of tragedy and comedy, compositions intended to promote different ends by contrary means, and considered . . . little allied" (322). More recently, Johnson contends, there has been a tendency to divide Shakespeare's work into tragedies, comedies and histories but that these are not distinguished "by any very exact or definite ideas" (323). For these, comedy was defined simply as an "action which ended happily to the principal persons, however serious or distressful through its intermediate incidents" (323). To be a tragedy, similarly, "required only a calamitous conclusion" (323), as a result of which "plays were written, which, by changing the catastrophe, were tragedies today, and comedies tomorrow" (323). Histories were viewed as plays consisting of a "series of actions, with no other than chronological succession, independent on each other" (323). Histories, Johnson argues, are "not always very nicely distinguished from tragedy"

(323).

Johnson argues that Shakespeare's plays, however, through "all these denominations of the drama" (323), are neither tragedies nor comedies in the strict sense of these terms, but

compositions of a distinct kind; exhibiting the real state of sublunary nature which partakes of good and evil, joy and sorrow, mingled with endless variety of proportion and innumerable modes of combination; and expressing the course of the world, in which the loss of the one is the gain of the other. (322)

Shakespeare has "united the powers of exciting laughter and sorrow not only in one mind, but in one composition" (323) as a result of which almost all his plays are "divided between serious and ludicrous characters" (323). Shakespeare's "mode of composition" (323) is always the same: an "interchange of seriousness and merriment, by which the mind is softened at one time, and exhilarated at another" (323).

Johnson justifies Shakespeare's "mingled drama" (323) on the grounds that the mixture of sorrow and joy is more realistic and, thus, morally instructive:

there is always an appeal open from criticism to nature; . . . the end of poetry is to instruct by pleasing. That the mingled drama may convey all the instruction of tragedy or comedy cannot be denied, because it includes both in its alteration of exhibition and approaches nearer than either to the appearance of life. (323)

In response to the "specious" (323) view that the "change of scenes" (323) in this way causes the "passions" (323) to be "interrupted in their progression" (323) and "wants at last the power to move" (323), Johnson argues that the "interchanges of mingled scenes seldom fail to produce the intended vicissitudes of passion. Fiction cannot move so much, but that the attention may be easily transferred" (323). All "pleasure persists in variety" (323).

Johnson then proceeds to list all the defects which many have detected in Shakespeare's plays. The most important of these is his failure to respect the unities of action, time and place. Johnson is on Shakespeare's side in these respects. With regard to the unity of action, Johnson argues that the laws applicable to tragedies and comedies are not applicable to Shakespeare's histories. All that is required of such plays is that the "changes of action be so prepared as to be understood, that the incidents be various and affecting, and the characters consistent, natural, and distinct. No other unity is intended, and therefore none is sought" (325). In the other plays, there is unity of action: "his plan has commonly what Aristotle requires, a beginning, a middle and an end; one event is concatenated with another, and the conclusion follows by easy consequence" (325). The "end of the play is the end of expectation" (325). With regard to the unities of time and place, Johnson argues that these "are not essential to a just drama" (327) even though they arise from the "supposed necessity of making the drama credible" (325). The argument is that the "mind revolts from evident falsehood, and fiction loses its force when it departs from the resemblance of reality" (326) as a result of which the failure to depict on stage one location and a duration corresponding to the length of the audience's presence in the auditorium is dramatic heresy. All this does not matter, Johnson argues, because "spectators are always in their senses and know . . . that the stage is only a stage" (326). Vraisemblance is not adversely affected, firstly, by changes in location: the "different actions that complete a story may be in places very remote from each other; and where is the absurdity of allowing that space to represent first Athen, and then Sicily, which was always known to be neither Sicily nor Athens, but a modern theatre?" (326), he asks. Secondly, he argues, time is "obsequious to the imagination; a lapse of years is as

easily conceived as a passage of hours. In contemplation we easily contract the time of real actions, and therefore willingly permit it to be contracted when we only see their imitation" (326). All in all, the "delight of tragedy proceeds from the *consciousness* of fiction; if we thought murders and treasons real, they would please no more" (my emphasis; 326). "Imitations produce pain or pleasure, not because they are mistaken for realities, but because they bring realities to mind" (326).