
THE GENERAL AND THE PARTICULAR

ARISTOTLE: [Poetry and History Contrasted]

It is, moreover, evident from what has been said, that it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen—what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity. The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose. The work of Herodotus¹ might be put into verse, and it would still be a species of history, with meter no less than without it. The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen. Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular. By the universal I mean how a person of given character will on occasion speak or act, according to the law of probability or necessity; and it is this universality at which poetry aims in the names she attaches to the personages. The particular is—for example—what Alcibiades did or suffered.

[From *Poetics* IX.1–liv (3rd century B.C.), tr. S. H. Butcher]

HORACE: [Character Types in Comedy]

Mark in each stage of life how nature veers,
 240 The temper varying with the varying years.
 What time the tongue has mastered every sound,
 And steadier footsteps learn to print the ground,
 Behold the schoolboy frolicsome and gay
 Scampering to join his comrades at their play,
 245 Vexed with a straw, but soothed as soon as vexed,
 In tears this moment and in smiles the next.
 The beardless youth, his freedom proud to gain,
 Loves horses, hounds, and Mars's sunny plain;
 Ductile as wax to vice his yielding soul,
 250 Deaf to the warning voice of dull control,
 Profuse of purse, impatient of delay,
 Taking no thought but for the present day,
 Of lofty spirit, of affections strong,
 Pleased with what's new, but pleased with nothing long.
 255 Shifting his views, see riper manhood crave
 Place, power, and patronage—ambition's slave;
 Wary betimes each oversight to shun,
 And slow to do what he may wish undone.
 A thousand ills declining age attend,
 260 Still brooding o'er its bags, still loath to spend,
 In council cold, and tardy to decide,

1. Greek historian (ca. 480–ca. 425 B.C.).

In thrifty forecast placing all its pride;
 Full of prospective bliss and present pain,
 Suspicious and splenetic, fretful, vain;
 265 Loud in the praises of the good old times,
 And croaking stern rebuke on modern crimes.

[From *Ars Poetica* (late 1st century B.C.), tr. Francis Howes]

SIR WILLIAM DAVENANT: [Poetry and History Contrasted]

Lucan,² who chose to write the greatest actions that ever were allowed to be true, which for fear of contemporary witnesses obliged him to a very close attendance upon fame, did not observe that such an enterprise rather beseeemed an historian than a poet: for wise poets think it more worthy to seek out truth in the passions than to record the truth of actions; and practice to describe mankind just as we are persuaded or guided by instinct, not particular persons as they are lifted or leveled by the force of fate, it being nobler to contemplate the general history of nature than a selected diary of Fortune. And painters are no more than historians when they draw eminent persons, though they term that “drawing to the life”; but when, by assembling divers figures in a larger volume they draw passions, though they term it but story, then they increase in dignity and become poets.

[From Preface to *Gondibert*, 1650]

ANTHONY ASHLEY COOPER, THIRD EARL OF SHAFTESBURY:
 [The General and the Particular in Painting]

A painter, if he has any genius, understands the truth and unity of design; and knows he is even then unnatural, when he follows Nature too close and strictly copies life. For his art allows him not to bring all Nature into his piece, but a part only. However, his piece, if it be beautiful and carries truth, must be a whole, by itself complete, independent, and withal as great and comprehensive as he can make it. So that particulars, on this occasion, must yield to the general design; and all things be subservient to that which is principal, in order to form a certain easiness of sight: a simple, clear, and united view, which would be broken and disturbed by the expression of anything particular or distinct.

Now the variety of Nature is such as to distinguish everything she forms by a peculiar original character; which, if strictly observed, will make the subject appear unlike to anything extant in the world besides. But this effort the good poet and painter seek industriously to prevent. They hate minuteness and are afraid of singularity; which would make their images or characters appear capricious and fantastical. The mere face-painter, indeed, has little in common with the poet; but, like the mere historian, copies what he sees, and minutely traces every feature and odd mark. ’Tis otherwise with the men of invention and

2. Marcus Annaeus Lucanus (A.D. 39–65), author of the historical poem *Pharsalia* which dealt with

the civil war between Julius Caesar and Pompey.

design. 'Tis from the many objects of Nature, and not from a particular one, that those geniuses form the idea of their work. Thus the best artists are said to have been indefatigable in studying the best statues, as esteeming them a better rule than the perfectest human bodies could afford. And thus some considerable wits have recommended the best poems as preferable to the best of histories, as better teaching the truth of characters and nature of mankind.

[From *Sensus Communis* iv.iii, 1709]

SAMUEL JOHNSON: [The Particular in Biography]

The general and rapid narrative of history, which involve a thousand fortunes in the business of a day, and communicate innumerable incidents in one great transaction, afford few lessons applicable to private life, which derives its comforts and its wretchedness from the right or wrong management of things which nothing but their frequency makes considerable * * * and which can have no place in those relations which never descend below the consultation of senates, the motions of armies, and the schemes of conspirators.

I have often thought that there has rarely passed a life of which a judicious and faithful narrative would not be useful. For not only every member has, in the mighty mass of the world, great numbers in the same condition with himself, to whom his mistakes and miscarriages, escapes and expedients, would be of immediate and apparent use; but there is such an uniformity in the state of man, considered apart from adventitious and separate decorations and disguises, that there is scarce any possibility of good or ill, but is common to human kind. A great part of the time of those who are placed at the greatest distance by fortune or by temper must unavoidably pass in the same manner; and though, when the claims of nature are satisfied, caprice and vanity and accident begin to produce discriminations and peculiarities, yet the eye is not very heedful or quick which cannot discover the same causes still terminating their influence in the same effects, though sometimes accelerated, sometimes retarded, or perplexed by multiplied combinations. We are all prompted by the same motives, all deceived by the same fallacies, all animated by hope, obstructed by danger, entangled by desire, and seduced by pleasure. * * *

* * * The business of the biographer is often to pass slightly over those performances and incidents which produce vulgar greatness, to lead the thoughts into domestic privacies, and display the minute details of daily life, where exterior appendages are cast aside, and men excel each other only by prudence and virtue.

[From *Rambler* 60, 1750]

SAMUEL JOHNSON: [The Simplicity of Grandeur]

Poetry cannot dwell upon the minuter distinctions, by which one species differs from another, without departing from that simplicity of grandeur which fills the imagination; nor dissect the latent qualities of things, without losing its general power of gratifying every mind by recalling its conceptions.

[From *Rambler* 36, 1750]

SAMUEL JOHNSON: [*Hudibras* and the Particular]

But human works are not easily found without a perishable part. Of the ancient poets every reader feels the mythology tedious and oppressive. Of *Hudibras*, the manners, being founded on opinions, are temporary and local, and therefore become every day less intelligible and less striking. What Cicero says of philosophy is true likewise of wit and humor, that “time effaces the fictions of opinion and confirms the determinations of Nature.”³ Such manners as depend upon standing relations and general passions are coextended with the race of man; but those modifications of life and peculiarities of practice which are the progeny of error and perverseness, or at best of some accidental influence or transient persuasion, must perish with their parents.

[From *Life of Butler*, 1779]

SAMUEL JOHNSON: [The Grandeur of Generality]⁴

The fault of Cowley and perhaps of all the writers of the metaphysical race is that of pursuing his thoughts to their last ramifications, by which he loses the grandeur of generality; for of the greatest things the parts are little; what is little can be but pretty, and by claiming dignity becomes ridiculous. Thus all the power of description is destroyed by a scrupulous enumeration; and the force of metaphors is lost, when the mind by the mention of particulars is turned more upon the original than the secondary sense, more upon that from which the illustration is drawn than that to which it is applied. * * *

[From *Life of Cowley*, 1779]

JOSEPH WARTON: [On Thomson’s *Seasons*]

Thomson was blessed with a strong and copious fancy; he hath enriched poetry with a variety of new and original images, which he painted from nature itself, and from his own actual observations: his descriptions have therefore a distinctness and truth, which are utterly wanting to those of poets who have only copied from each other, and have never looked abroad on the objects themselves. Thomson was accustomed to wander away into the country for days and for weeks, attentive to “each rural sight, each rural sound”; while many a poet who has dwelt for years in the Strand⁵ has attempted to describe fields and rivers, and generally succeeded accordingly. Hence that nauseous repetition of the same circumstances; hence that disgusting impropriety of introducing what may be called a set of hereditary images, without proper regard to the age, or climate, or occasion, in which they were formerly used. *** Innumerable are the little circumstances in his descriptions totally unobserved by all his predecessors. What poet hath ever taken notice of the leaf that, towards the end of autumn,

3. *De Natura Deorum* II.ii.5.

4. For other important remarks on this subject by Johnson, see his *Rasselas*, Chapter X, and the discussion of the representative and the individual in

Shakespeare’s dramatic characters (Preface to Shakespeare).

5. A busy London street, leading from Temple Bar to Charing Cross.

Incessant rustles from the mournful grove,
Oft startling such as studious walk below,
And slowly circles through the waving air?⁶

Or who, in speaking of a summer evening, hath ever mentioned

The quail that clamors for his running mate?⁷

Or the following natural image, at the same time of the year?

Wide o'er the thistly lawn, as swells the breeze,
A whitening flower of vegetable down
Amusive⁸ floats.

Where do we find the silence and expectation that precedes an April shower insisted on, as in verse 165 of *Spring*, or where

The stealing shower is scarce to patter heard
By such as wander through the forest walks,
Beneath the umbrageous multitude of leaves.⁹

* * * In no one subject are common poets more confused and unmeaning than in their descriptions of rivers, which are generally said only to wind and to murmur, while their qualities and courses are seldom accurately marked; examine the exactness of the ensuing description, and consider what a perfect idea it communicates to the mind.

Around the adjoining brook, that purls along
The vocal grove, now fretting o'er a rock,
Now scarcely moving through a reedy pool,
Now starting to a sudden stream, and now
Gently diffused into a limpid plain,
A various group the herds and flocks compose,
Rural confusion!¹

* * * A minute and particular enumeration of circumstances judiciously selected is what chiefly discriminates poetry from history and renders the former, for that reason, a more close and faithful representation of nature than the latter. And if our poets would accustom themselves to contemplate fully every object before they attempted to describe it, they would not fail of giving their readers more new images than they generally do.

[From *An Essay on the Writings and Genius of Pope*,
Section II, 1756]

HUGH BLAIR: [THE PARTICULAR IN DESCRIPTIVE POETRY]

Description is the great test of a poet's imagination, and always distinguishes an original from a second-rate genius. To a writer of the inferior class, nature, when at any time he attempts to describe it, appears exhausted by those who have gone before him in the same track. He sees nothing new or particular in

6. *Autumn*, lines 990–92.

7. *Summer*, line 1657, slightly misquoted.

8. From the verb "to amuse," defined by Johnson

as "to entertain with tranquility."

9. *Spring*, lines 177–79.

1. *Summer*, lines 480–86.

the object which he would paint; his conceptions of it are loose and vague; and his expressions, of course, feeble and general. * * * whereas a true poet makes us imagine that we see it before our eyes: he catches the distinguishing features; he gives it the colors of life and reality; he places it in such a light that a painter could copy after him. This happy talent is chiefly owing to a strong imagination, which first receives a lively impression of the object, and then, by employing a proper selection of circumstances in describing it, transmits that impression in all its full force to the imagination of others.

* * * of all the English poems in the descriptive style, the richest and most remarkable are Milton's *Allegro* and *Penseroso*.

[Quotes *Il Penseroso*, lines 65–94]

Here there are no unmeaning expressions. All is particular; all is picturesque; nothing forced or exaggerated, but a simple style and a collection of strong expressive images, which are all of one class and recall a number of similar ideas of the melancholy kind * * *

Everything, as I before said, in description, should be as marked and particular as possible, in order to imprint on the mind a distinct and complete image. A hill, a river, or a lake, rises up more conspicuous to the fancy, when some particular lake, or river, or hill is specified, than when the terms are left general.

[From Lecture XL, "Didactic Poetry—Descriptive Poetry," in *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, 1783]

SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS: [The General and the Particular in Painting—The "Grand Style"]

I

All objects which are exhibited to our view by nature, upon close examination will be found to have their blemishes and defects. The most beautiful forms have something about them like weaknesses, minuteness, or imperfections. But it is not every eye that perceives these blemishes. It must be an eye long used to the contemplation and comparison of these forms; and which, by a long habit of observing what any set of objects of the same kind have in common, has acquired the power of discerning what each wants in particular. This long, laborious comparison should be the first study of the painter who aims at the great style. By this means, he acquires a just idea of beautiful forms; he corrects nature by herself, her imperfect state by her more perfect. His eyes being enabled to distinguish the accidental deficiencies, excrescences, and deformities of things, from their general figures, he makes out an abstract idea of their forms more perfect than any one original; and, what may seem a paradox, he learns to design naturally by drawing his figures unlike to any one object. This idea of the perfect state of nature, which the artist calls the ideal beauty, is the great leading principle by which works of genius are conducted. * * *

Thus it is from a reiterated experience and a close comparison of the objects in nature that an artist becomes possessed of the idea of that central form, if I may so express it, from which every deviation is deformity. * * *

To the principle I have laid down, that the idea of beauty in each species of beings is an invariable one, it may be objected that in every particular species

there are various central forms which are undeniably beautiful; that in the human figure, for instance, the beauty of Hercules is one, of the Gladiator another, of the Apollo another;² which makes so many different ideas of beauty.

It is true, indeed, that these figures are each perfect in their kind, though of different characters and proportions; but still none of them is the representation of an individual, but of a class. And as there is one general form, which, as I have said, belongs to the human kind at large, so in each of these classes there is one common idea and central form, which is the abstract of the various individual forms belonging to that class. Thus, though the forms of childhood and age differ exceedingly, there is a common form in childhood, and a common form in age, which is more perfect as it is more remote from all peculiarities. * * *

However the mechanic and ornamental arts may sacrifice to fashion, she must be entirely excluded from the art of painting; the painter must never mistake this capricious challenging for the genuine offspring of nature; he must divest himself of all prejudices in favor of his age and country; he must disregard all local and temporal ornaments, and look only on those general habits which are everywhere and always the same; he addresses his works to the people of every country and every age, he calls upon posterity to be his spectators, and says, with Zeuxis,³ *In aeternitatem pingo*. * * *

[From *Discourse III*, 1770]

2

I am very ready to allow that some circumstances of minuteness and particularity frequently tend to give an air of truth to a piece, and to interest the spectator in an extraordinary manner. Such circumstances, therefore, cannot wholly be rejected: but if there be anything in the art which requires peculiar nicety of discernment, it is the disposition of these minute circumstantial parts; which, according to the judgment employed in the choice, become so useful to truth, or so injurious to grandeur.

However, the usual and most dangerous error is on the side of minuteness: and therefore, I think caution most necessary where most have failed. The general idea constitutes real excellence. All smaller things, however perfect in their way, are to be sacrificed without mercy to the greater * * * Even in portraits, the grace, and, we may add, the likeness, consists more in taking the general air than in observing the exact similitude of every feature.

[From *Discourse IV*, 1771]

3

* * * I do not forget that a painter must have the power of contracting as well as dilating his sight; because he that does not at all express particulars, expresses nothing; yet it is certain that a nice discrimination of minute

2. Reynolds refers to three well-known Roman statues: the Farnese Hercules (now at Naples), the Apollo Belvedere (in the Vatican), and, according to Robert Wark, the Borghese Warrior (now in the Louvre).

3. Greek painter of the 5th century C.E. The phrase "I paint for eternity" is apparently based on an anecdote twice told by Plutarch, once in his *Moralia* ("De Amicorum Multitudine") and once in the *Life of Pericles*, Chapter XIII.

circumstances and a punctilious delineation of them, whatever excellence it may have * * * never did confer on the artist the character of genius.

The detail of particulars, which does not assist the expression of the main characteristic, is worse than useless; it is mischievous, as it dissipates the attention and draws it from the principal point. It may be remarked that the impression which is left on our mind even of things which are familiar to us is seldom more than their general effect, beyond which we do not look in recognizing such objects. To express this in painting is to express what is congenial and natural to the mind of man, and what gives him by reflection his own mode of conceiving. The other presupposes *nicety* and *research*, which are only the business of the curious and attentive, and therefore does not speak to the general sense of the whole species, in which common, and as I may so call it, mother tongue, everything grand and comprehensive must be uttered. * * *

I remember a landscape painter in Rome, who was known by the name of "Studio," from his patience in high finishing, in which he thought the whole excellence of art consisted; so that he once endeavored, as he said, to represent every individual leaf on a tree. This picture I never saw, but I am very sure that an artist who looked only at the general character of the species, the order of the branches, and the masses of the foliage would in a few minutes produce a more true resemblance of trees than this painter in as many months.

A landscape painter certainly ought to study anatomically (if I may use the expression) all the objects which he paints; but when he is to turn his studies to use, his skill as a man of genius will be displayed in showing the general effect, preserving the same degree of hardness and softness which the objects have in nature; for he applies himself to the imagination, not to the curiosity, and works not for the virtuoso⁴ and the naturalist, but for the common observer of life and nature.

[From *Discourse XI*, 1782]

WILLIAM BLAKE: [The Aesthetic Value of the General Denied]

To generalize is to be an idiot. To particularize is the alone distinction of merit. General knowledges are those knowledges that idiots possess.

What is general nature? is there such a thing? what is general knowledge? is there such a thing? Strictly speaking, all knowledge is particular.

Distinct general form cannot exist. Distinctness is particular, not general.

[From his marginalia in Reynolds' *Discourses*, ca. 1808]

4. "A man skilled in antique or natural curiosities; a man studious of painting, statuary, or architecture" (Johnson's *Dictionary*).