

Sir Joshua and the Tumbling Walls

by Theodore Dalrymple (June 2015)

The association of ideas is itself an idea that has fallen into comparative desuetude of late because of its supposed lack of explanatory power, but it still seems to me useful as a way of describing how one idea evokes another. Certainly I seem very rarely to read a book nowadays without it calling forth in my mind memories or other kinds of associations: perhaps this is merely testimony to the length of my life, or alternatively to my choice of reading matter.

When I picked up a book, then, of Sir Joshua Reynolds' previously unpublished writings (previous, that is, to 1952), I thought back to my days as a student when I attended a lecture by a (then) famous art historian, whose name I shall protect from obloquy by not mentioning it, in which he said that Reynolds was a shallow, vulgar painter, a remark that struck me, despite the prissy fastidious curl of the lip with which it was delivered, as itself rather shallow and vulgar. I am an admirer of Reynolds both as a painter and a man; and at their best his portraits penetrated the complex and deep character of their subjects. His portraits of Samuel Johnson, for example, whom he loved and admired above all men, are reverent without flattery. He does not try to make Johnson a handsome man, but he makes him what he was, a remarkable one. If Reynolds did not work always at his best (he was, after all, very prolific), I remember Somerset Maugham's dictum that only a very mediocre writer is always at his best.

In this book, *Portraits*, Reynolds shows that it was no accident that his portraits penetrated the character as well as they represented the physical appearance of his sitters. The book contains three character sketches in words of three of the great men of his time, Oliver Goldsmith, Doctor Johnson and David Garrick. These character sketches were not intended for publication, that of Doctor Johnson having been for the private use of James Boswell in writing his great *Life*[here](#).

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