

All inordinate indulgence in works of fiction tends to pervert our views of life instead of enlarging them, which, if judiciously chosen, and read in moderation, they will do; and to quench benevolence, which under similar restrictions, they will tend to cherish. The young mind is but too prone of itself to live in a world of fancy; but this tendency, difficult to control at the best, is apt to be fatally strengthened by undue indulgence in fictitious literature. Strange as it may seem, its effect is still more pernicious on *benevolence*. Sympathy and sensibility depend in a very high degree on the activity of the imagination—on our power of vividly picturing to ourselves the joys and sorrows of others, and yet excess in reading fiction tends to weaken practical benevolence, and a morbid indulgence of sympathy and sensibility is but too likely to end in extinguishing benevolence altogether. As sympathy with *fictitious* distress, and sensibility to it increases, active benevolence may be in precisely inverse ratio. This depends on a curious law of our mental mechanism which was pointed out by Bishop Butler. This great philosopher lays bare these two facts, viz., “That, *from our very faculty of habits*, passive impressions, *by being repeated*, grow weaker, and that practical habits are formed and strengthened by repeated acts.” As long as the balance is maintained between the stimulus given to *imagination* with the consequent *emotions*, on the one hand, and our *practical habits*, which those emotions are chiefly designed to form and strengthen, on the other, so long the stimulus of the imagination will not stand in the way of benevolence, but aid it; and, therefore, if persons will read a novel *extra* now and then, let them impose upon themselves the corrective of some extra visits to the abodes of poverty and distress; and thus keep a sort of debtor and creditor account of sentimental indulgence and practical benevolence. But if benevolent feeling be separated from action, then Butler’s paradox becomes a ter-

rible truth and “the heart is not made better,” but worse, by it. The poverty, misfortune, and vulgarity which real benevolence encounters, are carefully excluded from works of fiction, and so that fastidiousness is created which if the practice of benevolence has not been in proportion, cannot tolerate the repulsive features which present themselves when benevolence would be practised. Pleasurable sympathy with *fictitious* distress, and benevolent desire to relieve *real*, differ infinitely. Sentimental philanthropists, who reveal in secret well-doing, transcend the Gospel maxim of not “letting their left hand know what their right hand doeth,” for they let neither “right” nor their “left hand” know anything of the matter.

So little is emotion,—even the best and most refined,—in itself any index of virtue, that emotion may be awakened, and indeed *is* so, by every practical advance in virtue. While our passive emotions decay in vividness by repetition, our practical habits *strengthen* by exercise; so that a man may be advancing in moral excellence by that very course which deadens his emotions. Novel reading young ladies and gentlemen often entirely mistake the matter, when they call a man hard-hearted only because he does not display all the sensations and clamorous sentiments of their own important benevolence, but just quietly *does* all that they talk of, and perhaps *blubber* about. A benevolent medical man may take off a limb as coolly as he would eat his dinner, and yet feel ten times as much real sensibility for the sufferer as a fine lady who would run away, hide her face in her hands, and throw herself on a sofa in the most approved attitude for fainting or hysterics at the sight of even a drop of blood. Those who indulge in superfluous expressions of sentiment are always neophytes in virtue at the best; and, what is worse, they are very often among the most heartless of mankind. Sterne and Rousseau were types of this class, having in perfection the “form” of virtue, but “denying the power thereof.”  
Rye.