For Samuel Johnson, poetical judgments were no mere exercise in dry evaluation; rather, they reflected deep emotional responsiveness. In this provocative study, Philip Smallwood argues for experiencing Johnson’s critical texts as artworks in their own right. The criticism, he suggests, often springs from emotional sources of great personal intensity and depth, inspiring translation of criticism into poetry and channelling prose’s poetic potential. Through consideration of other critics, Smallwood highlights singularities in Johnson’s judgments and approach, showing how such judgments are irreducible to philosophical doctrines. “Ideas,” otherwise the material of criticism’s propensity to systems and theories, exist for Johnson as feelings that “slumber in the heart.” Revealing Johnson’s humor and intellectual reach, Smallwood frames his criticism in unresolved ironies of time and forms of historical change. This title is part of the Flip it Open Programme and may also be available Open Access. Check our website Cambridge Core for details.

PHILIP SMALLWOOD is Emeritus Professor of English at Birmingham City University. He has written widely about Johnson’s criticism and has lectured on his work internationally. Previous books include Johnson Re-Visioned (2001) and Johnson’s Critical Presence (2004), which won the Choice “Outstanding Academic Title” Award for 2005. This was followed by Critical Occasions (2011), his study of eighteenth-century critical history.
THE LITERARY CRITICISM OF
SAMUEL JOHNSON

Forms of Artistry and Thought

PHILIP SMALLWOOD

Birmingham City University
In Memoriam

Tom Mason 1948–2022
Ernest: But is Criticism really a creative art?

Gilbert: Why should it not be? It works with materials, and puts them into a form that is at once new and delightful. What more can one say of poetry? Indeed, I would call criticism a creation within a creation. For just as the great artists, from Homer and Æschylus, down to Shakespeare and Keats, did not go directly to life for their subject-matter, but sought for it in myth, and legend, and ancient tale, so the critic deals with materials that others have, as it were, purified for him, and to which imaginative form and colour have been added. Nay, more, I would say that the highest criticism, being the purest form of personal impression, is in its way more creative than creation . . . and, in fact, its own reason for existing, and, as the Greeks would put it, in itself, and to itself, an end.

(Oscar Wilde, *The Critic as Artist*, 1890)
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Preface

It may be hard to see, given the distance in time, why the most celebrated literary critic of the eighteenth century should require further analysis and exposition in the first quarter of the twenty-first. In some fields of enquiry, a point is reached where uncertainties are settled and every issue addressed. A mathematical conundrum, once solved, stays solved. But when the material is critical, imaginative, historical, or poetical – when it is art – perspectives will change with every successive present. New questions arise as priorities shift and the past we thought we knew is transformed. Much has happened since the past of Samuel Johnson’s criticism was the present; and in recent years much has been said to discredit the critic’s evaluative role. Doubtless the heat of controversy has now cooled: the term “criticism” is now less prey to the vaunted centrality it formerly claimed. Yet practice of the art of judging art goes on going on. In its wake, the smaller enterprise of writing by critics present about critics past has likewise not noticeably faltered. The penalty, incurred by this book, is that of seeming to stand two stages removed from the literature that critics depend upon. If the old slur that critics are parasites, lice on the locks of literature, cannot be ignored, critics of criticism must slip one further step down this scale of dependence. I am trusting that this conventional order of esteem can be somewhat qualified or revised in this book.

Working with literary critics of the past entails problems of definition and raises questions of historical thought. The story of the critical past shows how criticism came to be what it is today; but histories of criticism are also distancing agents, and their narrative requirements mean that some critics appear more remote than others. The best writings burst the bindings of the vast volumes of the critical histories that account for them and strike their reader with the force of art. I have explored this phenomenon elsewhere with reference to the Essay on Criticism of Alexander Pope, a text both in and of critical history and a poem evoking principle within
In the present volume, while drawing on thoughts first aired over a decade or so ago, I return to Samuel Johnson’s criticism, and to the artistry and thought which keep its value in the present alive. I ask with Oscar Wilde: “What more can one say of poetry?”

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Versions of chapters in this book have first appeared in the following publications. I am grateful to the editors and presses for their permission to reproduce, revise and adapt copyright material, and to the poet David Ferry, who has kindly permitted me to reproduce complete two of his poems and to quote an extract from a third:


Acknowledgments


Abbreviations

Except where indicated, parenthetical references throughout are to the following works. Other references are given in notes to each chapter.


Works I Diaries, Prayers, and Annals, ed. E. L. McAdam, Jr., with Donald and Mary Hyde (1958)
Works II The Idler and the Adventurer, ed. W. J. Bate, John M. Bullitt, and L. F. Powell (1963)
Works III–V The Rambler, ed. W. J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss (1969)
Works VI Poems, ed. E. L. McAdam, Jr., with George Milne (1964)
Works X Political Writings, ed. Donald J. Greene (1977)
Works XVI Rasselas and Other Tales, ed. Gwin J. Kolb (1990)
Works XIX Biographical Writings: Soldiers, Scholars, and Friends, ed. O M Brack, Jr., and Robert DeMaria, Jr. (2016)

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Works xx  Johnson on Demand: Reviews, Prefaces, and Ghost-Writings, ed. O M Brack, Jr., and Robert DeMaria, Jr. (2018)

Other Publications
AJ  The Age of Johnson: A Scholarly Annual
CQ  The Cambridge Quarterly
Dictionary  Samuel Johnson, A Dictionary of the English Language (London, 1755)
JNL  The Johnsonian News Letter
TLS  Times Literary Supplement