

THE LITERARY CRITICISM OF SAMUEL JOHNSON

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.

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THE LITERARY CRITICISM OF
SAMUEL JOHNSON

Forms of Artistry and Thought

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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

an emotional experience of poetry.¹ 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?"

¹ Philip Smallwood, *Reconstructing Criticism: Pope's Essay on Criticism and the Logic of Definition* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2003).

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Abbreviations

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

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Works I	<i>Diaries, Prayers, and Annals</i> , ed. E. L. McAdam, Jr., with Donald and Mary Hyde (1958)
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Works III–V	<i>The Rambler</i> , ed. W. J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss (1969)
Works VI	<i>Poems</i> , ed. E. L. McAdam, Jr., with George Milne (1964)
Works VII–VIII	<i>Johnson on Shakespeare</i> , ed. Arthur Sherbo, with an Introduction by Bernard H. Bronson (1968)
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Works XVIII	<i>Johnson on the English Language</i> , ed. Gwin J. Kolb and Robert DeMaria, Jr. (2005)
Works XIX	<i>Biographical Writings: Soldiers, Scholars, and Friends</i> , ed. O M Brack, Jr., and Robert DeMaria, Jr. (2016)

xiv	<i>List of Abbreviations</i>
Works xx	<i>Johnson on Demand: Reviews, Prefaces, and Ghost-Writings</i> , ed. O M Brack, Jr., and Robert DeMaria, Jr. (2018)
Works XXI–XXIII	<i>The Lives of the Poets</i> , ed. John H. Middendorf et al. (2010)

Other Publications

AJ	<i>The Age of Johnson: A Scholarly Annual</i>
Boswell	<i>Boswell's Life of Samuel Johnson, LLD.</i> , ed. G. B. Hill, rev. and enlarged by L. F. Powell, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934–50)
CQ	<i>The Cambridge Quarterly</i>
Dictionary	Samuel Johnson, <i>A Dictionary of the English Language</i> (London, 1755)
JNL	<i>The Johnsonian News Letter</i>
Letters	<i>The Letters of Samuel Johnson</i> , ed. Bruce Redford, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992–94)
Lives	Samuel Johnson, <i>The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets</i> , ed. Roger Lonsdale, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006)
TLS	<i>Times Literary Supplement</i>
Warton's History	<i>Thomas Warton's History of English Poetry</i> , with introduction by David Fairer, 4 vols. (London: Routledge/Thoemmes Press, 1998)