

Samuel Johnson's Pragmatism and Imagination

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By

Stefka Ritchie

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A sketch of Samuel Johnson, after Joshua Reynold (circa 1769)
By Svetlan Stefanov (2009) (<http://www.phot4oart.com>)

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ABSTRACT

It is said by modern philosophers, that not only the great globes of matter are thinly scattered thro' the universe, but the hardest bodies are so porous, that, if all matter were compressed to perfect solidity, it might be contained in a cube of a few feet.¹

This book argues that the eighteenth century is a direct inheritor of the investigative technique of Francis Bacon (1561-1626) in the advancement of knowledge as the most promising method of improving humanity's lot. But to Bacon's conceived idea of experimental science as a collaborative enterprise, guided by a strictly laid out procedure, are juxtaposed the achievements of Isaac Newton (1643-1727), a solitary scholar whose knowledge and intuition had contributed to his avant-garde formulation of the universal laws of nature and his revolutionary theory of light.

Johnson's respect for the empirical fact inclined him toward a similar view to Bacon who stressed the need for truthful representation of facts, with emphasis on the practical value of knowledge. But Newton's revolutionary ideas of colour and light and matter in motion appealed to the creative impulse of his artistic imagination. To grasp the essence and richness of Johnson's writing, one needs to be aware of the existing tension between these two traditions.

The applied critical approach acknowledges the importance of the historical perspective that allows an innovative interpretation which recognizes the peculiarities of Bacon's and Newton's methods of science and traces their influence upon Johnson's thought. In the process, this study travels through Johnson's canon and finds how he often applied Bacon's insistence on the experimental as well as Newton's vision of the universe – general yet diverse and frequently diffused. And science and art become fused into one.

By finding a coherent relation between specific scientific ideas and Johnson's mode of thinking, this book seeks to furnish those essential focal points in his critical perspective which allow us to respond to his literary works in a broadly similar way to the way one may assume he

¹ *Rambler* 8, Vol. III, p. 41.

intended. In the context of both, Bacon's experimental philosophy and Newton's revolutionary discoveries that required gigantic leaps of imagination, this study confirms Johnson's positive response to the inductive methodology of Bacon and the intuitive approach of Newton.

The conclusion reached is that to learn more about Johnson's critical outlook and artistic imagination, we need to gain an insight into the distinct characteristics of Bacon's and Newton's approaches to natural philosophy which were particularly influential during the major part of the eighteenth century. Further than that, to appreciate Johnson's literary skill more fully, a new critical perspective needs to be sought – more flexible and diverse and that acknowledges also the close affinity between science and the arts.

PREFACE

The mental disease of the present generation, is impatience of study, contempt of the great masters of ancient wisdom, and a disposition to rely wholly upon unassisted genius and natural sagacity.¹

In 2002 I completed my MPhil study ‘Samuel Johnson in an Age of Science’.² The research traced Johnson’s relation to science through his various writings, from his factual reporting, book reviewing in literary journals and the compiling of the *Dictionary*, to his essays, prefaces and dedications. The sources provided evidence of Johnson’s interest in innovative scientific thought that included Bacon’s experimental philosophy and Newton’s revolutionary concepts of physical reality. The conclusion of my thesis was that to gain a deeper understanding of Johnson’s thinking and shed a new light on the artistic merit of his literary style, we need to be aware of both, Bacon’s philosophic pragmatism and Newton’s scientific imagination.

My more recent study of Johnson’s reformist ideas showed that there has been a notable shift in the critical approach in recent decades, driven by a marked desire of broadening the critical perspective.³ However, the shift has not been sufficient to help to acknowledge the undeniable impact of science on mid-eighteenth-century art; and that of Johnson. A perusal of the encouragingly large volume of published critical material to commemorate the tercentenary of Johnson’s birth in 2009 shows a continued lack of interest in the influence of science at a time when there was a close affinity between science and the various branches of mid-eighteenth-century arts.

Further, it became evident that Johnson’s own interest in science and the skillful way in which he wove pertinent scientific notions into his writings

¹ *Rambler* 154, Vol. v, p. 55.

² Stefka Ritchie, ‘Samuel Johnson in an Age of Science’ (Unpublished MPhil Thesis, BCU, formerly UCE, 2002).

³ Stefka Ritchie, *The Reformist Ideas of Samuel Johnson* (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publ., 2017). The book is based on my PhD thesis, ‘Samuel Johnson: a promoter of social improvement’ (the University of Birmingham, UK, 2014).

had been overlooked. As a result, the artistic merit of a literary piece such as ‘The Vision of Theodore’ (1748) which he valued as the best piece he ever wrote has been denied. Similarly, when analysed in the context of pertinent scientific ideas at the time, I found that *Rasselas* (1759) and some of Johnson’s mid-eighteenth-century essays have a much richer texture with imaginatively embedded questions of science in them.

Johnson’s life spans the first three quarters of the eighteenth century. He was born on 18 September 1709 in Lichfield and died in London on 13 December 1784. And it was the few decades following his arrival in London in 1737 at the age of twenty-seven that proved decisive for the formation of his outlook as a person and writer.

In *Adventurer* 131 (1754), Johnson wrote:

Whoever, after the example of Plutarch, should compare the lives of Illustrious men, might set this part of Newton’s character to view with great advantage by opposing it to that of Bacon, perhaps the only man of latter ages, who has any pretensions to dispute with him the palm of genius of science.⁴

Johnson never came to write the parallel lives of Bacon and Newton in the fashion of Plutarch’s *Lives* as he might have intended, but he often recognised their influence upon his own mode of thinking.

Confronting past and current critical opinion and adhering closely to Johnson’s various writings, the present study explores what remains an under-researched part of Samuel Johnson’s profile as a person and writer – his positive attitude to the development of the sciences in his Age. It traces those ideas of Francis Bacon and Isaac Newton which had an irreversible impact upon the eighteenth-century mode of thinking and that of Johnson.

Johnson’s keen observations, deep insights and candid style of expression uncover the presence of an ‘intelligence perpetually on the wing, excursive, vigorous, and diligent, eager to pursue knowledge and attentive to return it’.⁵ These are Johnson’s own critical comments on Alexander Pope (1688-1744) in *Lives of the Poets* though they can well be applied to Johnson himself. Equally applicable to Johnson are his remarks on Dr John Arbuthnot (1667-1735) that read: ‘Arbuthnot was a man of great comprehension, skillful in his profession, versed in the sciences,

⁴ *Adventurer* 131, Vol. II, p. 482.

⁵ ‘Life of Pope’ in *Lives*, Vol. III, p. 216.

acquainted with ancient literature, and able to animate his mass of knowledge by a bright and active imagination ...'.⁶ Throughout Johnson's critical comments confirm that his admiration for vast theoretical knowledge was on par with that for intellectual alacrity that included also originality of thought and vivacity of style of expression.

Available evidence supports the argument that grounding in the major concepts of their philosophies will allow us to appreciate better the divergence of ideas which engaged his attention and which like darting beams upon inclined planes in Newtonian fashion converge into a single whole – firm and vibrant, yet diffused and illusory. Since 'experience' was for Johnson the source and test of art, as Bacon had stipulated, his works reveal a mind stored with an inexhaustible variety of fresh and original impressions that extended beyond the narrow compass of any one science.

For this a broader critical outlook, and necessarily a multi-disciplinary one would allow us to explore understudied avenues so that we may come to appreciate better the richness of Johnson's thought, his receptiveness to new ideas and the flights of his artistic imagination.

⁶ *Life*. Vol. I, p. 425, ft. n. 3. Johnson was in praise of the vast knowledge and public work of the Scottish physician, satirist and polymath Dr John Arbuthnot. Arbuthnot studied medicine at St Andrews University and became physician to Queen Anne from 1705 until her death in 1709; met Isaac Newton and Samuel Pepys, was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1704 and was one of the founding members of the Scriblerius Club together with Pope, Swift, Gay and Parnell. Arbuthnot invented, established and popularised the character of John Bull who became the permanent symbol of England in cartoons and literature. Moreover, Johnson admired particularly the humility of Arbuthnot who spoke and wrote for the importance of clean air arguing that crowded and poorly sanitised premises in big cities carried bad and infectious air that was closely linked to ill health, an idea of social nature that was dear to Johnson's social ethos.

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Whilst writing this book I visited numerous libraries and must express my gratitude to those who have been generous with their time and assistance, at the Bodleian and British Libraries, the local libraries at Derby, Worcester, Hereford, Birmingham, and the Cadbury Research Library.

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My gratitude also to: Ana Stefanova for her artistic composition, ‘The Torch of Truth’ based on *Rambler* 3 for the cover image of this book. A medical doctor with postdoctoral studies in Psychology, Ana is an amateur artist who adhering to the analytical psychology of C C Jung likes to explore the human psyche. And to Svetlan Stefaanov, for the production design of the cover image and illustrations – fine art photographer, painter and graphic artist, always keen to utilize the richness of digital art.

CHRONOLOGY: SAMUEL JOHNSON (1709-1784)

- 1709** Samuel Johnson was born on 18 September 1709 in Lichfield. His father Michael was a bookseller.
- 1728** A year in Pembroke College, Oxford but had to leave for Financial reasons.
- 1735** Married Elizabeth Porter (Tetty). He was 25 and she was 46.
- 1737** Arrived in London with former pupil David Garrick.
- 1738** Started writing for Edward Cave in the *Gentleman's Magazine*. Wrote the poem *London*.
- 1739** 'Life of D Hermann Boerhaave' in the *Gentleman's Magazine*.
- 1740s** *The Ivy Lane Club* founded. Members met in the King's Head near St Paul's cathedral.
- 1741** *Debates in the Senate of Lilliput* (through 1744) for the *Gentleman's Magazine*.
- 1744** 'The Life of Mr Savage' in the *Gentleman's Magazine*.
- 1746** Signed the contract for his *Dictionary of the English Language*.
- 1749** The poem *Vanity of Human Wishes*. The *Letter on Fireworks*.
- 1750** The *Rambler* essays (through 1752).
- 1752** Death of his wife (Tetty).
- 1753** Contributed to the *Adventurer* (through 1754). Took Frank Barber into his care.

- 1754** 'The Life of Cave' in the *Gentleman's Magazine*.
- 1755** Awarded an honorary Master of Arts by Oxford University (20 February)
- 1755** *Dictionary of the English Language* published. Became a member of the Society of Arts (through 1760).
- 1756** Preface to Richard Rolt's *A New Dictionary of Trade and Commerce*.
- 1756** Became editor of the *Literary Magazine*. Met Joshua Reynolds. The start of the Seven Years' War.
- 1757** Reviewed Soame Jenyns' *An Enquiry into the Origin of Evil* in the *Literary Magazine*.
- 1758** Began publishing the *Idler* essays (through 1760).
- 1759** Wrote *Rasselas* and Introduction to *The World Displayed*.
- 1762** Started receiving an annual pension of three thousand pounds.
- 1763** Met James Boswell.
- 1764** The *Literary Club* founded. Members met initially in the Turk's Head in the Strand.
- 1765** Met Henry and Hester Thrale. An eight-volume edition of *The Works of William Shakespeare* published, together with his Preface to the edition.
- 1765** Received an honorary LLD from Trinity College, Dublin.
- 1766** Worked on *A Course of Lectures on the English Law* with Robert Chambers.
- 1769** Appointed Honorary Professor of Ancient Literature. Reynolds delivered the first of his *Discourses* at the Royal Academy (founded 1768).

- 1770** *The False Alarm* published.
- 1771** *Thoughts on the Late Transactions Respecting Falkland's Islands* published.
- 1773** The revised fourth folio edition of the *Dictionary* published.
- 1773** Travelled with Boswell on a tour of the Western Islands of Scotland (Aug.-Nov.).
- 1774** Travelled with the Thrales to North Wales and the Midlands (July to 15 Oct.).
- 1775** *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* published (18 Jan.).
- 1775** Awarded honorary doctorate from Oxford University (1 April).
- 1775** Travelled to France with the Thrales and Giuseppe Barretti (Sept. to Nov.).
- 1777** Began *Lives of the Poets*. Wrote papers/letters in defence of William Dodd.
- 1779** Began publishing *The Lives of the Poets* (*Prefaces, Biographical and Critical, to the Works of the English Poets*). The first four volumes published.
- 1781** Finished publishing *The Lives*.
- 1783** The *Essex Head Club* founded.
- 1784** 13 December. Death of Samuel Johnson.

ABBREVIATIONS

The abbreviated forms given here will be used for the relevant works of Samuel Johnson and for other frequently used primary and secondary literary sources.

Samuel Johnson's Works

1. The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson

General editor: John Middendorf (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1958-).

- | | | |
|-----------------------------------|---------------|---|
| <i>Diaries</i> | vol. I | <i>Diaries, Prayers, and Annals</i> , ed. E L McAdam, with Donald and Mary Hyde (1958). |
| <i>Idler</i>
<i>Adventurer</i> | vol. ii | <i>The Idler and The Adventurer</i> , ed. W J Bate, John M Bullitt, and L F Powell (1963). |
| <i>Rambler</i> | vol.iii-v | <i>The Rambler</i> , ed. W J Bate and Albrecht B Strauss, 3 vols. (1969) |
| <i>Poems</i> | vol. vi | <i>Poems</i> , ed. E L McAdam Jr with George Milne (1964). |
| <i>Shakespeare</i> | vols vii-viii | <i>Johnson on Shakespeare</i> , ed. Arthur Sherbo, Introduction by Bertrand H Bronson (1968). |
| <i>A Journey</i> | vol. ix | <i>A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland</i> , ed. Mary Lascelles (1971). |
| <i>Sermons</i> | vol. xiv | <i>Sermons</i> , ed. Jean H Hagstrum and James Gray (1978). |
| <i>A Voyage</i> | vol. xv | <i>A Voyage to Abyssinia</i> , ed. Joel J Gold (1985) |

- Rasselas* vol. xvi 'The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia' in *Rasselas and Other Tales*, ed. Gwin J Kolb (1990).
- The Vision* vol. xvi 'The Vision of Theodore, the Hermit of Teneriffe, Found in his Cell, in *Rasselas and Other Tales*, ed. Gwin J Kolb (1990).

2. Other Works by Samuel Johnson

- The Dictionary* (1755) *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 2 vols (1755). First Folio Edition.
- The Dictionary* (1773) *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 2 vols (1773). Fourth edition.

All quotations from both editions are taken from the CD-ROM edition of *A Dictionary of the English Language*, ed. Anne McDermott (Cambridge: CUP, 1996).

- Lives*, ed. Hill *Lives of the English Poets*, ed. G B Hill, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905).
- Letters*, ed. Chapman *The Letters of Samuel Johnson, with Mrs Thrale's Genuine Letters to Him*, ed. R W Chapman, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952).
- Letters*, ed. Redford *The Letters of Samuel Johnson*, ed. Bruce Redford, 5 vols (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

3. Other Primary Johnsonian Sources

- Life* James Boswell, *The Life of Johnson*, ed. G B Hill, Rev. L F Powell, 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934; rept. 1971).
- Tour* Boswell's *Journal of a Tour to The Hebrides with Samuel Johnson*, LLD, ed. R W Chapman (Oxford: OUP, 1934).
- Works* *The Works of Samuel Johnson*, 11 vols (Oxford: Talboys and Wheeler; London: W. Pickering, 1825).

4. The Works of Francis Bacon

- Phil. Works* *The Philosophical Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. Ellis and Spedding (London: Routledge, 1905).
- Works* *The Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. J Spedding, R J Ellis, D D Heath, 14 vols; first publ. 1857-75 (London: Longman & Co, rev. ed. 1883-87).

5. The Works of Isaac Newton

- Principia* *Sir Isaac Newton's Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy and His System of the World*. Translated into English by Andrew Motte in 1729. The translations revised and supplied with an historical and explanatory appendix, by Florian Cajori, 2 vols. (Berkeley & Los Angeles University of California Press, 1966).
- Opticks* *Opticks by Sir Isaac Newton. A Treatise of the Reflections, Refractions, Inflections and Colours of Light*. With a Forward by Albert Einstein, and an Introduction by E T Whittaker (London: G Bell, 1931; rept. From the fourth ed.).

6. Other Abbreviations

<i>Bull. Hist. Med.</i>	<i>Bulletin of The History of Medicine</i>
CUP	Cambridge University Press
<i>DNB</i>	<i>Dictionary of National Biography</i>
<i>ECS</i>	<i>Eighteenth Century Studies</i>
<i>ELH</i>	<i>English Literary History</i>
<i>ELS</i>	<i>English Literary Studies</i>
<i>RSA Jnl</i>	<i>Journal of the Royal Society</i>
<i>N & Q</i>	<i>Notes and Queries</i>
OUP	Oxford University Press
<i>ODNB</i>	<i>Oxford Dictionary of National Biography</i>
<i>RES</i>	<i>Review of English Studies</i>

CHAPTER ONE

JOHNSON'S REPUTATION: SOME ASPECTS. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THIS STUDY

Where, then, is the wonder, that they, who see only a small part, should judge erroneously of the whole? Or that they, who see different and dissimilar parts, should judge differently from each other?'¹

A perusal of critical material confirms a marked reluctance by contemporary literary scholars to explore the historical significance of science in the evaluation of mid-eighteenth-century literature. Consequently, Johnson's own interest in science and the skilful way in which he wove pertinent scientific notions into his writings have been overlooked.

In questioning critical opinion, this chapter aims first to establish the main reasons for the failure of critics in general to identify Johnson's relationship to the sensibility of his Age on scientific questions.

From 8 to 12 July 1984, one hundred and fifty scholars gathered in Pembroke College, Oxford to commemorate the bicentenary of Samuel Johnson's death. The dominant theme of some fifty delivered papers was, in the words of the Egyptian Johnsonian scholar Magdi Wahba (1925-1991), 'Johnson as man of letters, linguist and moralist' with a marked 'shift of emphasis from the anecdotal, filtered through Boswell or Mrs Thrale or Hawkins, to the critical reading of Johnson's own writings'.² In his address then, Donald Greene (1914-1997) recalled the words of an earlier Johnsonian scholar, George Birkbeck Hill (1835-1903), who in

¹ *Adventurer* 107, Vol. II, p. 441.

² Magdi Wahba, 'Preface' to *Samuel Johnson Commemorative Lectures Delivered at Pembroke College, Oxford*, ed. Magdi Wahba (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1986), pp. 1-9; pp. 7-9.

1884 had directed a similar plea: 'If we are to celebrate the centenary, let us begin by destroying the grotesque figure which Macaulay embodied.'³

Macaulay's *Life of Johnson* is a parody of Johnson's physical and intellectual attributes that betrays his contempt for Johnson as a person and writer. His fictitious physical creation of the 'old philosopher, in his brown coat with the metal buttons, and the shirt which ought to be at wash', is matched by a description of the alleged inadequacies of his intellect; this is greatly reinforced by the humiliating behavioural characterisation of Johnson as a man who is 'thinking, puffing, rolling his head, drumming with his fingers, tearing his meat like a tiger, and swallowing his teas in oceans'.⁴ Ignoring the written evidence of Johnson's diverse interests, Macaulay's remarks allude to the parasitic nature of Johnson's mind that is lacking all originality:

His mind resembled those creepers which the botanists call parasites, and which can subsist only by clinging round the stems and inhibiting the juices of stronger plants. He must have fastened himself on somebody.⁵

There is nothing parasitical in Johnson's nature. On the contrary, my recent study on Johnson's social morality confirmed that Johnson often wrote on behalf of others whose ideas he shared and that his benevolent approach stemmed from the basic premise of his social morality – and the need to help others was an essential part of it.⁶

Indeed, the birth of the myth of Johnson can be traced back to the biographical sketches and anecdotes, recollections and memoirs, remarks and opinions on his character together with extracts from diaries and letters by his intimate friends and acquaintances that started appearing immediately after his death. Johnson's contemporaries were conversant

³ Donald Greene, 'The Future of Johnsonian Biography' in *Samuel Johnson: Commemorative Lectures* etc. (see above), pp. 41-59; p. 46. Greene was born in Canada, taught at the University of Toronto and later in US universities. He contributed extensively to *Eighteenth-Century Studies* (est. 1966) and *Johnsonian News Letter* along with holding the position of President of the Johnson Society, and served on the board of directors of the Johnson Society for Southern California. Greene's literary criticism has been very helpful for this study.

⁴ Lord Macaulay, 'Life of Johnson' in *Johnson's Chief Lives* from *Johnson's Lives of the Poets*, edited with Preface by Matthew Arnold; first publ. 1881 (New York: Russell & Russell, rept. 1968), pp. 1-42; pp. 41-42.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁶ See Stefka Ritchie, *The Reformist Ideas of Samuel Johnson* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publ., 2017).

with his literary works and their primary concern was the preservation and reconstruction of his life with emphasis on his incomparable conversational gift, his wit and alacrity of thought.

Numerous accounts serving as memorabilia, conveniently gathered in two volumes of *Johnsonian Miscellanies* by George Birkbeck Hill, are considered minor contributions in comparison to the three major lives of Johnson by James Boswell, Hester Thrale and John Hawkins.⁷ They all allegedly supplied some detail from the life of 'that Great Cham of literature, Samuel Johnson', as Tobias Smollett had referred to him in a letter to John Wilkes, asking his influence for the release of Johnson's black servant Frank Barber from service on the *Stag* frigate.⁸ These raconteurs were contemporaries of Johnson who shared the sensibilities of the Age; thus they would have found as much appeal in his human weaknesses as in his great strengths.⁹

Clearly, there was a tendency for emphasis to be placed on Johnson's skill as a raconteur rather than on his intellectual worth as a thinker and writer. Thus, evidently and unavoidably, the profile of the real Johnson was fading away with the passage of time, and was gradually being replaced with that of a legend created from subjective personal reflections and a change in taste and critical perspective.

1.1 Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century critical responses

Arthur Murphy (1727-1805), who met Johnson on a number of occasions and admired him greatly, found the uniqueness of his genius to be contained in the 'fullness' of his mind which embraced the Lockean philosophy that furnished him with 'a round-about view of his subject'.

⁷ *Johnsonian Miscellanies*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, 2 vols., first publ. 1897 (New York: Barnes & Noble and London: Constable; rept. 1966).

⁸ See a letter of Tobias Smollett, dated 16 March 1759, *Life*, ed. Pat Rogers (unabridged), p. 246.

⁹ In his Introduction to James Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (from now on referred to as *Life*), Pat Rogers refers to the bitter animosity and rivalry between John Hawkins, Hester Thrale and James Boswell who accused each other of carelessly assembled recollections and uncharitable conjectures. See 'Introduction' to *Life* (unabridged edition, Oxford: OUP, 1998), pp. v-xxxiv.

Rogers refers to the comments made by Mrs Barbauld who wrote that reading Boswell's *Life of Johnson* was 'like going to Ranelagh; you meet all your acquaintances; but it is a base and mean thing to bring every idle word into judgement', pp. xxxi, xxxiii.

Murphy compared Johnson's inclination to comprehend the whole with the trendy tendency at the time of 'many modern wits' solely fired with 'the ambition of shining in paradox'.¹⁰ He viewed the ability of Johnson to encompass the whole as a unique characteristic which together with 'the peculiarities of his style, new combinations, sentences of unusual structure, and words derived from learned languages made him an original thinker'.¹¹ Murphy's and Macaulay's critical appraisals cannot be more different in outlook. The former, a contemporary of Johnson, was full of praise for the writer's intellect; the latter, separated by some seventy years from Johnson's death, held a very low opinion of him, both as a person and writer. I would suggest that the reason why Johnson's literary works were losing popularity was not only due to the time factor. Instead, being subjected to a critical analysis from a different perspective, their original framework was likely to have been misinterpreted.

What is significant is that, added to the time factor, there appears to have been a distinct change of critical outlook in the nineteenth century – namely, from grasping the vast that offered a comprehensive overview of the whole which was the yearning of the mid-eighteenth-century vision, to the scrutiny of the detail. It is difficult to say whether Macaulay's view was truly representative of nineteenth-century literary taste, and thus it would be wrong to single out his ill-conceived judgement as the root of any falsely orchestrated opinion of Johnson.

This study argues that a general shift in critical outlook, more singular and narrower, was beginning to take shape in the latter part of the eighteenth century. To illustrate it, here is a disparaging appraisal of Johnson's opening verses in *The Vanity of Human Wishes* (1749):

Let Observation, with extensive view,
Survey mankind, from China to Peru,

¹⁰ Arthur Murphy, 'An Essay on the Life and Genius of Samuel Johnson, LLD' in *Johnsonian Miscellanies*, Vol. I, pp. 355-488.

¹¹ *Ibid*, Vol. I, p. 467. A barrister, journalist, actor and playwright, Arthur Murphy edited the *Gray's Inn Journal* (1752 to 1754). Also, Murphy wrote some plays, the biographies of Henry Fielding (1762), Samuel Johnson (1792) and David Garrick (1801). In 1803 Murphy was appointed Commissioner of the Bankruptcy Act for the Relief of Insolvent Debtors, a cause dear to Johnson's heart, as evidence confirms. A friend of Henry Thrale, it was Murphy who introduced Johnson to the Thrale family in January 1765.

Remark each anxious toil, each eager strife
And watch the busy scenes of crowded life;¹²

The lines are a sweeping poetic journey in the mind's eye – from east to west, encompassing Asia, Europe and America. However, a review of critical comments of nineteenth-century poets suggests that they no longer valued the vast embrace of Johnson's critical stand, as illustrated here by a few examples.

In 1785, William Shaw dryly remarked that Coleridge compared Johnson's couplet with the opening of John Dryden's translation of Juvenal's tenth satire, 'Look round the Habitable World', claiming that it was a swollen and expanded expression of these words. Coleridge referred to the first two lines as 'mere bombast and tautology', as much as to say, 'Let observation with extensive observation observe mankind extensively' and thought Johnson repeated it on four other occasions 'under the disguise of different phraseology'.¹³ Byron, though in admiration of the sublimity of Johnson's poem, deemed the first two lines 'superfluous' and thought that Pope would have omitted them, starting with 'Survey mankind from China to Peru!' since the former line, 'Let observation, with extensive view', was heavy and useless. Otherwise, Byron conceded that this was a grand poem, 'true as the 10th of Juvenal himself'. In 1822, De Quincey in his 'Essay on Rhetoric', quoted the lines as a prime instance of 'desperate tautology', saying 'certainly Dr Johnson was the most faulty writer in the kind of inanity that ever has played tricks with language'.¹⁴ Similarly, Tennyson, who otherwise liked Johnson's 'grave earnestness', wondered mockingly why Johnson could not say, 'Let observation, with extended observation,

¹² Samuel Johnson, 'Vanity of Human Wishes. In Imitation of the Tenth Satire of Juvenal' in *Poems*, Vol. IV, p. 48 (1-4).

¹³ William Shaw (1749-1831). *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of the late Dr Samuel Johnson*, ed. Arthur Sherbo (London, New York, Toronto: OUP, 1974), p. 18. A Scottish Gaelic scholar and writer, Shaw was a good friend and biographer of Johnson. See also, *Specimens of the Table Talk the Late Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Henry N Coleridge, 2 vols (London: J Murray, 1835); Vol. II, p. 354. In this context, it is worth noting that Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) was one of the founders of the Romantic Movement in England, a member of the Lake Poets.

¹⁴ See Byron's *Letters and Journals*, ed. I A Marchand, 12 vols. (London: John Murray, 1973-82), Vol. viii, p. 19; See also, *The Collected Writings of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. David Mason (London, 1887), p. 128. Quoted by Ian Donaldson, 'Samuel Johnson and the Art of Observation', *ELH*, Vol. 53 (4), Winter (1986), pp. 779-99; pp. 791-2.

observe extensively?'.¹⁵ Evidently, Coleridge (1772-1834), De Quincey (1785-1859), Byron (1788-1824), and Tennyson (1809-1892), all late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century poets no longer shared Johnson's much favoured critical stand that allowed him an overview of the whole.

These critical comments confirm that as the nineteenth century was gathering pace poets were already losing the significance of 'observation' in the context of the extensive, the vast and the infinite, and their outlook was becoming more narrowly defined.

What is striking in the opening lines of Johnson's poem is the selected elevated position from which the poet chooses to observe and survey each scene of crowded human life. To use Johnson's definition of 'survey' in *The Dictionary*, it is a stand that would allow one to 'overlook; to have under the view; to view as from a higher place'. It is a prospect that permits one an intellectual overview of the vast that is extensive and unrestricted, unlike a close observation that can prove bounded, thus restrictive. Johnson defines 'to observe' as a human act 'to find by attending, to note' and supports it with a quotation from Locke that denotes the idea of the 'infinite' as an inherent human trait, stemming 'from the power we observe in ourselves, of repeating without end our own ideas'.¹⁶ The lines illustrate the tension between the limited and bounded ('to observe') on one hand; and the vast, unlimited and infinite ('to survey') on the other hand, that is ingrained in mid-eighteenth-century poetic thought.

In a study of the nature of the eighteenth-century sublime, Anne Janowitz notes: 'The issue of possible worlds becomes a vibrant poetic trope with the dissemination of Newton's theory of gravity and his grounding of natural philosophy'.¹⁷ Newton's scientific elaborations, based on a new form of reasoning, delved into the concept of visual imagery that had helped to push closer the boundaries between science and art.

¹⁵ See *Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir by His Son*, 2 vols. (London: MacMillan, 1897), Vol. I, p. 478.

¹⁶ *To Survey* v.a. [surveoir, old French.] 'Round he surveys, and well might where he stood./So high above'. Milton; *To Observe* v.a [observer, Fr. *Observer*, Latin.] 'If our idea of *infinity* be got from the power we observe in ourselves, of repeating without end our own ideas, it may be demanded why we do not attribute infinity to other ideas, as well as these of space and duration'. Locke, *The Dictionary*

¹⁷ Anne Janowitz, 'The Sublime Plurality of Worlds: Lucretius in the Eighteenth Century' [online, 2013], Available on: www.tate.org.uk. [Accessed on: 10 February 2017].

'Survey the whole, not seek slight faults to find/Where Nature moves, and rapture warns the mind', Alexander Pope pleaded and James Thomson, Richard Savage, David Mallet amongst other mid-eighteenth-century poets oversaw the face of Nature that gave them back the picture of the mind.¹⁸ As will be illustrated in the following chapters, the imagery of the cosmic sublime excited the mid-eighteenth-century poets who in their verse asked Newton to be their guide through the immensity of the ethereal space. They were fascinated with the concept of an extensive view of the vast, the infinite and the unbound that revealed the sublimity of Nature. And a picture painted by them from memory became a dramatic evocation of a sky arching over the earth. As readers of their poetry, we envisage ourselves sitting on invisible steps outside of their vast poetic canvas, and our senses are aroused by the colour, light and dynamics of depicted reality.

Moreover, their perspective is reminiscent of Johnson's own poetic vision of the wandering eye in the *Vanity of Human Wishes* that allowed him to survey the whole.

In 1884, George Birkbeck Hill refused to accept that the difference in taste should give sufficient grounds, as he put it, 'so that he [Johnson] cannot be ranked high as a philosopher or poet'; and he put up a defence of Johnson in reply to a review in the *Times* in which his style was rendered obsolete since 'he had little disposition toward abstract thinking and no lively imagination'. Since both are present in Johnson's works, as this study will show, this calls into question the basis upon which the prevailing critical view of them was formed, and points to historical indicators for explanation.¹⁹

At the time of Johnson's death in 1784, a new era was breaking on the horizon, setting the scene for great strides in many key areas of scientific development, as Johnson put it succinctly in a remark to Sir William Scott: 'The age is running mad after innovation; and all the business of the world is to be done in a new way.'²⁰ In Johnson's day 'science' meant learning

¹⁸ Alexander Pope (1688-1744), 'An Essay on Criticism', Part Two in *Poetical Works*, ed. Herbert Davis (London: OUP, 1966), pp. 64-85; pp. 233-36.

¹⁹ Quoted by Donald Greene in 'The Future of Johnson's Biography' in *Samuel Johnson: Commemorative Lectures etc.*, pp. 41-59; p. 46.

²⁰ *Life*, Vol. IV, p. 182. Sir William Scott, Lord Stowell (1745-1836), Judge of the High Court of the Admiralty (1798-1829), was introduced to Johnson by Robert Chambers at Oxford and in 1778 he became a member of Johnson's Club, gaining access to other bright intellectual and political figures, members such as Joshua

or knowledge, and was part of Bacon's and Newton's natural philosophy where the philosophical study of nature, physical and human was viewed as one inter-connected whole; that was what fascinated and shaped the intellectual mid-eighteenth-century outlook. In contrast, in the nineteenth century, the inevitable increase of experimental and theoretical knowledge was already leading to the segregation of the disciplines. From the improved steam engine of James Watt to Thomas Young's longitudinal waves theory of light, Jean-Baptiste Lamarck's theory of inheritance and George Cuvier's fossil theory of catastrophism to Michael Faraday's demonstrations on electrical forces, Theodor Schwann's cell theory and Charles Darwin's theory of evolution – new discoveries were enlarging human knowledge of the workings of the universe. As various disciplines of science were becoming more narrowly defined, so was the artist's outlook – a far cry from the vast Newtonian 'whole' embraced by Pope, Thomson, Savage, Young and Johnson amidst other mid-eighteenth-century poets.

1.2 Twentieth-century critical overview

Travelling further into the twentieth century there still appeared to be a tendency amongst critics to examine Johnson's works guided by fashionably coined critical perspectives. For example, the post-Freudian method of psychoanalysis was employed by Walter Jackson Bate in his 1979 biography of *Samuel Johnson*.²¹ In his Preface, Bate recognised the difficulty faced by the biographer, 'created by the radical split, which began in the 1930s and 1940s, between literary biography and literary criticism'.²² He pointed out that 'a biographer of Newton will try to look closely at Newton's work or a biographer of Handel or Mozart will dwell in detail on the music of the writer' and conceded that this, after all, 'is the reason they are great'. Critical material from the last decade of the twentieth century shows that neither Newton nor Mozart escaped the trendy scrutiny of psychoanalysis. But Bate made a valid point in that it was really Newton's and Mozart's works that had made them great and that should be of utmost importance to critics. Bate also noted that in overemphasising one genre to the detriment of another, critics were limiting their vision which was likely to distort their picture of the whole.

Reynolds, Edward Gibbon, Adam Smith, Charles James Fox, William Windham, Edmund Burke, Joseph Banks and of course James Boswell, amongst others.

²¹ Walter Jackson Bate, *Samuel Johnson* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1978).

²² *Ibid*, Preface, p. xx.