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

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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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