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In Time and Out of Time: Memory and Imagination in Johnson's Highland Journey

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In Time and Out of Time: Memory and Imagination in Johnson's Highland Journey

Critical commentary on Samuel Johnson's *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* has long circled the same familiar observation: the text seems strikingly under-visualised, curiously reticent in its descriptions, and preoccupied with what Johnson does not 'see' or chooses not to record. Much of the existing scholarship emphasises Johnson's apparent detachment from the Highland landscape, noting how he repeatedly bypasses detailed scenic description.[1] Several critics have sought to authenticate or dispute Johnson's representations of the Scottish terrain, while others have speculated whether his severe myopia curtailed his aesthetic responsiveness, or whether the physical strain and unease of the journey dulled his capacity for sensory and emotional engagement.[2] While these readings offer valuable insights, they tend to rehearse a narrow line of inquiry—and in doing so, they miss more intricate narrative strategies at work. Johnson's *Journey* is not merely a travel account conspicuously lacking in visual descriptions?; it is a text that deliberately questions how travel can be narrated at all.

Recent scholarship on eighteenth-century travel writing has increasingly highlighted the genre's persistent tension between 'objective' and 'subjective' modes of representation, challenging the long-standing assumption that travel narratives offered unmediated visual access to the world. Foundational studies by William Edinger, Charles L. Batten, and Jean Viviès show that early eighteenth-century travel accounts negotiated a delicate balance

[1] See Arthur Sherbo, 'Johnson's Intent in the Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland', *Essays in Criticism*, 16.4 (Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 382–97, doi:10.1093/eic/XVI.4.382; Nigel Leask, and others, *Curious Travellers: Dr Johnson and Thomas Pennant on Tour* (University of Wales Center for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies, 2018); David Francis Taylor, 'Johnson's Textual Landscape', *The Eighteenth Century*, 59.3 (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), pp. 65–83, doi:10.1353/ecy.2018.0003; Anne M. Thell, *Minds in Motion: Imagining Empiricism in Eighteenth-Century British Travel Literature* (Bucknell University Press, 2017).

[2] See Paul Smethurst, 'Landscape and Nation-Building', *Travel Writing and the Natural World, 1768–1840* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp.109–127, doi:10.1057/9781137030368_6; Ian Donaldson, 'Samuel Johnson and the Art of Observation', *ELH*, 53.4 (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), pp. 779–99, doi:10.2307/2873174.

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between empirical observation and classical allusion, with the *ut pictura poesis* principle advocating vivid, pictorial description. At the same time, social and critical conventions often discouraged overtly personal or reflective perspectives.[3] As Amy Elizabeth Smith, Giorgia Alù, and Sarah Patricia Hill demonstrate, the genre's prevailing norms privileged exteriority and the authority of the observing eye, largely suppressing autobiographical reflection until the later eighteenth century, when the aesthetics of the picturesque established a visual ideal that was abstract, stylised, and geometrically composed.[4]

This privileging of visual perception as the chief measure of travel experience became a defining feature of the genre, producing a strong visual bias in both travel narratives and their subsequent criticism. This preoccupation—what Martin Jay has termed 'ocularcentrism'—underpins much of the period's travel writing and continues to shape critical debate.[5] Some scholars, such as Paul Smethurst, affirm the Enlightenment's ideal of empirical observation, commending travel writers for their pursuit of detached objectivity and accuracy, and thus viewing works like Johnson's as deficient by those standards. Others, such as Margaret Topping, expose this visual bias as a form of colonialism, arguing that the genre's dependence on sight is entangled with Eurocentric narratives of power, mastery, and commodification.[6] In contrast, critics such as Nicholas Thomas, Elizabeth Bohls, and Nigel Leask foreground the mediated nature of travel writing, showing how accounts are shaped by

[3] See William Edinger, 'Johnson on Conceit: The Limits of Particularity', *ELH*, 39.4 (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), pp.597–619, doi:10.2307/2872702; Charles L. Batten, *Pleasurable Instruction: Form and Convention in Eighteenth-Century Travel Literature* (University of California Press, 1978), doi:10.1525/9780520338357; and Jean Viviès, *English Travel Narratives in the Eighteenth Century: Exploring Genres*, trans. by Claire Davison (Routledge, 2017), doi:10.4324/9781315256429.
[4] See Amy Elizabeth Smith, 'Travel Narratives and the Familiar Letter Form in the Mid-Eighteenth Century', *Studies in Philology*, 95.1 (University of North Carolina Press, 1998), pp. 77–96; Giorgia Alù and Sarah Patricia Hill, 'The Travelling Eye: Reading the Visual in Travel Narratives', *Studies in Travel Writing*, 22.1 (Routledge, 2018), pp. 1–15, doi:10.1080/13645145.2018.1470073.
[5] See Martin Jay, 'The Rise of Hermeneutics and the Crisis of Ocularcentrism', *Poetics Today*, 9.2 (Duke University Press, 1988), pp.307–26, doi:10.2307/1772691.
[6] See Smethurst, 'Landscape and Nation-Building', and Margaret Topping, 'Travel Writing and Visual Culture', in *The Routledge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. by Carl Thompson (Routledge, 2015), pp.78–88, doi:10.4324/9780203366127-9.

historical contingency, cultural entanglement, and imaginative reconstruction. Joanna Stalnaker adds further nuance by demonstrating that description functions less as a complete visual record than as an open-ended epistemic form.[7]

More recent scholarship has turned to the embodied, affective, and multisensory dimensions of travel, further challenging the dominance of the visual.[8] These studies highlight the complex interplay of bodily sensation, memory, and imagination in travel writing, complicating the very notion of direct perception. Within this evolving critical field, Johnson's *Journey* can be read not simply as an exercise in descriptive restraint, but as a text that self-consciously dramatizes the instability of perception, memory, and narrative. By situating Johnson's *Journey* within these broader debates about mediation and indeterminacy, this essay moves beyond the familiar question of what Johnson 'saw' or failed to see, toward a more nuanced reading of how travel writing itself tests the limits of knowledge and representation—a tension that Johnson's own descriptive practice makes vividly apparent.

The limits of description

The essay reconsiders the *Journey* as an inquiry into the interplay between memory, perception, and temporality. Rather than treating travel as an act of unmediated visual apprehension—or confining his narrative to the straightforward documentation of sights

[7] See Nicholas Thomas, *Colonialism's Culture: Anthropology, Travel and Government* (Princeton University Press, 1994); Elizabeth Bohls, *Women Travel Writers and the Language of Aesthetics, 1716–1818* (Cambridge University Press, 1995); Nigel Leask, *Curiosity and the Aesthetics of Travel Writing, 1770–1840* (Oxford University Press, 2002); Joanna Stalnaker, *The Unfinished Enlightenment: Description in the Age of the Encyclopedia* (Cornell University Press, 2010).

[8] See Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Duke University Press, 1992), who explores how travel and collecting are bound up with the body and the desire for authentic experience and objects; Bohls, *Women Travel Writers and the Language of Aesthetics*, who situates eighteenth-century aesthetic discourse within a material and sensory understanding of the body; and Charles Forsdick, 'Travel and the Body: Corporeality, Speed and Technology', in *The Routledge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. by Carl Thompson (Routledge, 2015), pp.68–77, doi:10.4324/9780203366127-8, who analyses how bodily hardship and physical experience in travel narratives unsettle assumptions about travel and its textualisation.

seen—Johnson composes a work that moves through gaps and absences. His strategic use of rhetorical ellipses, modal constructions, and temporal layering produces a travel narrative saturated with epistemological uncertainty and interpretive complexity. What emerges is not a straightforward chronicle of sensory impressions, but a recursive inquiry into how imagination and memory intervene in the experience of travel—often stepping in to compensate for the failures of perception itself.

Johnson's landscape is not one of picturesque views or sublime astonishment, but of obstruction, ambiguity, and withdrawal. His descriptions frequently emphasise what a scene is not, or what it fails to offer. Reaching 'the bosom of the Highlands' where he has 'full leisure to contemplate the appearance and properties of mountainous regions', Johnson uses litotes and negative constructions to describe the scene:

> An eye accustomed to flowery pastures and waving harvests is astonished and repelled by this wide extent of hopeless sterility. The appearance is that of matter incapable of form or usefulness, dismissed by nature from her care and disinherited of her favours, left in its original elemental state, or quickened only with one sullen power of useless vegetation.[9]

Rather than offering a direct account of the landscape's 'appearance and properties', Johnson frames his description through negation—'incapable', 'dismissed', 'disinherited'. The scene is defined less by what is present than by what is withheld. This method creates a kind of rhetorical ellipse, sketching absence rather than filling it and compelling the reader to navigate the gaps in visual detail. The phrase 'original elemental state' exemplifies this

[9] Samuel Johnson, *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* (London: printed for W. Strahan; and T. Cadell, 1775), p. 84.

technique: it gestures toward an abstraction while deflecting attention from the specifics of the scene. These negatives refuse a clear, affirmative depiction, structuring the description around what cannot—or will not—be specified. The result is a series of fragments that never resolve into a stable image, leaving the reader suspended between recognition and uncertainty. Even the choice of 'an eye' rather than 'I' introduces deliberate distance, stripping the description of personal immediacy and rendering it almost schematic. Through such ellipses and negative constructions, Johnson emphasises the limits of direct description, continually gesturing toward a landscape his text refuses to pin down—a narrative shaped less by what is seen than by what remains unsaid.

Sight and imagination

The detached, disembodied 'eye', presented in the passive voice—being 'astonished and repelled by this wide extent of hopeless sterility'—bears a resemblance to the passive reception of imagination in Joseph Addison's thought, where the viewer is likewise 'struck' by what they see.[10] Yet this resemblance only serves to sharpen the contrast. In Addison's theory of imagination, perception is defined by immediacy and effortlessness, a seamless movement from sight to impression, in marked opposition to Johnson's more resistant, mediated mode of seeing, which foregrounds distance and deferral. At the opening of his *Spectator* papers on 'the pleasures of the imagination', Addison asserts:

> The Pleasures of the Imagination have this Advantage, above those of the Understanding, that they are more obvious, and more easie to be acquired. It is but

[10] Joseph Addison, *The Spectator, Vol. 3*, ed. by Donald F. Bond (Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 538, doi:10.1093/actrade/9780198186120.book.1.

> opening the Eye, and the Scene enters. The Colours paint themselves on the Fancy, with very little Attention of Thought or Application of Mind in the Beholder. We are struck, we know not how, with the Symmetry of any thing we see, and immediately assent to the Beauty of an Object, without enquiring into the particular Causes and Occasions of it.[11]

For Addison, the movement from sight to imagination is 'obvious' and 'easie to be acquired', a simple matter of 'opening the Eye, and the Scene enters'. Imagination draws directly from vision, without delay, mediation, or conscious labour. 'Attention of Thought or Application of Mind in the Beholder' is unnecessary; the perceiver is passively 'struck' and 'immediately assents' to beauty, bypassing deliberation entirely.

Addison's essays on imagination in *The Spectator* (Nos. 411–421) were widely read and reprinted throughout the century, significantly influencing the early development of aesthetic theory in the period. Johnson, however, offers a more complex and skeptical view of imagination, recognising that the movement from sight to thought is not seamless but marked by gaps, disjunctions, and acts of interpretation. In the *Journey*, imagination does not simply absorb what the eye beholds; it wrestles with perception, pauses, and reshapes what is seen before it becomes thought. His understanding of travel—as reflected in the definitions of 'Travel' in his *Dictionary*, etymologically linked to 'Travail'—frames it as an arduous endeavour, comparable to laborious toil or even the pains of childbirth.[12] For Johnson, perception is not a passive aesthetic reflex but a form of exertion. His awareness of travel's demanding nature—its labour, its 'travail'—shapes his descriptions and governs how his imagination integrates what he sees. His language makes clear that the act of seeing in the

[11] Addison, *The Spectator*, p. 538.
[12] 'Travel, n.s. (2)', *A Dictionary of the English Language*, by Samuel Johnson (1755), <https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/1755/travel_ns_2> [Accessed 27 June 2025].

Highlands is not simply 'opening the eye', but a task, a negotiation between perception and the capacities of memory and imagination to bridge what vision cannot supply. This becomes clear when, upon reaching the wild expanse of the Highlands, Johnson reflects,

> We were in this place at ease and by choice, and had no evils to suffer or to fear; yet the imaginations excited by the view of an unknown and untravelled wilderness are not such as arise in the artificial solitude of parks and gardens, a flattering notion of self-sufficiency, a placid indulgence of voluntary delusions, a secure expansion of the fancy, or a cool concentration of the mental powers.[13]

Johnson's engagement with 'the artificial solitude of parks and gardens, a flattering notion of self-sufficiency, a placid indulgence of voluntary delusions, a secure expansion of the fancy, or a cool concentration of the mental powers' stands in deliberate contrast to 'the imaginations excited by the view of an unknown and untravelled wilderness' where he now stands. His phrasing works through absence, defining the present setting by evoking what it is not. By describing only through the negative, that is, by putting into language the quality of a place where he distinctly is not, Johnson creates a disjunction or a deficit which either opens up possibilities of meaning or shows a genuine loss of language and words between the juxtaposition of two experiences.

Addison, by contrast, frames the imagination as sovereign over sensory material. In another *Spectator* essay, he states:

> We cannot indeed have a single Image in the Fancy that did not make its first Entrance through the Sight; but we have the Power of retaining, altering and

[13] Johnson, *Journey*, p. 87.

> compounding those Images, which we have once received, into all the varieties of Picture and Vision that are most agreeable to the Imagination; for by this Faculty a Man in a Dungeon is capable of entertaining himself with Scenes and Landskips more beautiful than any that can be found in the whole Compass of Nature.[14]

Addison posits an imagination that transforms the visible world into agreeable visions through retention, alteration, and compounding: 'A Man in a Dungeon is capable of entertaining himself with Scenes and Landskips more beautiful than any that can be found in the whole Compass of Nature'. Such a view grants the subject mastery over perceptual data. Yet Johnson's *Journey* is preoccupied with moments where that imaginative mastery falters. The Highland landscapes he encounters do not yield easily to embellishment; they resist being transmuted into 'agreeable visions', confronting the traveller with scenes that strain, rather than simply feed, the work of imagination.

Admittedly, Addison's emphasis on 'retaining, altering and compounding' images reflects a certain slippage—or perhaps a deliberate conflation—between images drawn from objects directly before the viewer ('such as arise from visible Objects […] when we have them actually in our view') and those summoned from memory ('calling up Ideas into our Minds by Painting, Statues, Descriptions, or any the like Occasion'). Rather than undermining his argument, this conflation expands the scope of the imagination's reach. memory is not a secondary or hesitant supplement to vision but an equally legitimate source of imaginative pleasure. Both the immediate perception of the eye and the stored image recalled from memory flow seamlessly into the same faculty, sustaining its power to 'retain, alter and compound'.[15] He articulates the distinction explicitly:

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[14] Addison, *The Spectator*, p. 537.

[15] See Julie Ellison, 'The Politics of Fancy in the Age of Sensibility', in *Re-Visioning Romanticism* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), pp. 228–55 (p. 228), who notes the difference between fancy and imagination used in the period: 'By the late eighteenth century, fancy was established in aesthetic writings as an inferior but

> By the Pleasures of the Imagination, I mean only such Pleasures as arise originally from Sight, and that I divide these Pleasures into two kinds: […] Primary Pleasures of the Imagination, which entirely proceed from such Objects as are before our Eyes; and […] Secondary Pleasures of the Imagination which flow from the Ideas of visible Objects, when the Objects are not actually before the Eye, but are called up into our Memories, or form'd into agreeable Visions of Things that are either Absent or Fictitious.[16]

Despite Addison's distinction between the 'Primary Pleasures of the Imagination', drawn from objects immediately before the eye, and the 'Secondary Pleasures', derived from memories and recollected images, his purpose is ultimately to stress a seamless connection between visual input and imagination—a faculty that can 'enlarge, compound, and vary them at her own pleasure'.[17] He celebrates the figure of 'A Man of a Polite Imagination' who 'possesses a kind of Property in everything he sees, and makes the most rude uncultivated Parts of Nature administer to his Pleasures', discovering 'Charms that conceal themselves from the generality of Mankind'.[18] This gentlemanly framing assumes that the viewer is 'flung into a pleasing Astonishment' by the 'Prospects of an open Champian Country, a vast uncultivated Desart, of huge Heaps of Mountains, high Rocks and Precipices'.[19] For Johnson, this framework does not hold. In the *Journey*, the Highland landscape does not present itself as a ready source of 'pleasures' for the imagination. Instead, the imaginative faculty strains to

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therapeutic faculty. Definitions of fancy take the form of catalogues of verbs referring to things done to images and ideas: aggregating, associating, collecting, combining, connecting, disposing, embellishing, mixing'. Addison, however, uses the two terms interchangeably.

[16] Addison, *The Spectator*, p. 537.
[17] Addison, *The Spectator*, p. 559.
[18] Addison, *The Spectator*, p. 538.
[19] Addison, *The Spectator*, p. 540.

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assert control over a topography that withholds the stimuli Addison's model presumes—offering not effortless charms but gaps, absences, and disruptions that unsettle the neat circuit between sight, imagination, and pleasure.

Memory and the shape of temporality

The narrative indeterminacy that characterises Johnson's descriptive strategies also extends to his treatment of time, where perception, memory, and imagination remain in constant negotiation. His *Journey* repeatedly folds moments of observation into later acts of recollection, creating a narrative that is both situated in the present of travel and continually reworked from the vantage of retrospection. Johnson's writing thus performs what it means to be 'in time and out of time', moving between immediate experience and reflective distance in a way that unsettles linear chronology. This temporal layering is especially visible in his account of sitting beside Loch Cluanie:

> I sat down on a bank, such as a writer of Romance might have delighted to feign. I had indeed no trees to whisper over my head, but a clear rivulet streamed at my feet. The day was calm, the air soft, and all was rudeness, silence, and solitude. Before me, and on either side, were high hills, which by hindering the eye from ranging, forced the mind to find entertainment for itself. Whether I spent the hour well I know not; for here I first conceived the thought of this narration.[20]

Johnson's closing sentence—'whether I spent the hour well I know not; for here I first conceived the thought of this narration'—is a crucial instance of how the text shapes its own

[20] Johnson, *Journey*, p. 86.

temporal framework. In one compressed statement, Johnson folds together several temporal registers. The first clause ('whether I spent the hour well I know not') belongs to the Johnson writing later, reflecting in the present tense on an earlier experience. The second clause ('for here I first conceived the thought of this narration') reaches back to the moment of origin, marking the spot where the idea of the *Journey* first took shape. This collapse of perception into memory and narration creates a deliberate temporal ambiguity, revealing Johnson's careful negotiation between experience and composition as he shapes his raw notes into the layered structure of the *Journey*.

The effect is more than stylistic variation. By weaving these tenses together, Johnson causes observation, recollection, and composition to overlap: the 'I' sitting by the loch, the 'I' who later questions whether the time was well spent, and the 'I' who begins to write coexist within the same sentence. The result is a prose moment suspended in time and out of time—caught between the immediacy of perception and the reflective work of memory.

This temporally layered writing is echoed in Johnson's use of modal verbs—particularly 'may' and 'might'—which recur throughout the *Journey*. These verbs do more than hedge claims; they open a space for speculation and contingency, loosening any sense of fixity in his descriptions. Johnson often sets these tentative modals against clauses that otherwise assert certainty, creating an internal friction that destabilises what might initially appear settled. Consider, for example, the following passage in his narrative:

> Whoever had been in the place where I then sat, unprovided with provisions and ignorant of the country, might, at least before the roads were made, have wandered among the rocks, till he had perished with hardship, before he could have found either

> food or shelter. Yet what are these hillocks to the ridges of Taurus, or these spots of wildness to the desarts of America?[21]

Johnson opens with the indefinite pronoun 'whoever', a construction that typically signals universality and prepares the reader for a categorical assertion. Ordinarily, this would be followed by a modal verb of certainty—'must' or 'will'—but Johnson instead employs the weaker 'might have wandered', immediately shifting the sentence into conjecture. The main clause is further interrupted by qualifiers and conditionals ('at least before the roads were made…till he had perished with hardship…before he could have found either food or shelter'), creating a structure whose very fragmentation mirrors its semantic uncertainty. What begins as an apparently authoritative formulation gives way to speculation, unsettling the expectation of definiteness that the opening phrase sets up. From here, Johnson's perspective moves into a different imaginative register. What he had described as 'high hills [that] hinder the eye' is demoted to 'hillocks' and 'spots of wildness', only to be measured against the far grander 'ridges of Taurus' and the 'desarts of America'. The passage ends with a rhetorical question, leaving the comparison suspended and compelling the reader to weigh the relativity of Johnson's perception rather than accept a single, settled conclusion.

The temporal structure of the passage reinforces this instability. It opens in the past perfect ('had been'), frames a hypothetical danger in the subjunctive ('might… have wandered'), and overlays this speculative scenario with references to the mythic geographies of Taurus and America. These allusions expand the moment into a broader, almost legendary temporality, echoing Locke's formulation in the *Second Treatise*, 'In the beginning, all the World was America', folding the Highlands into a conceptual frame that reaches back to the

[21] Johnson, *Journey*, p. 88.

imagined origins of the world.[22] This layering produces a heterogeneous sense of time: conditional past, speculative subjunctive, and mythic reference coexist within a single passage, refusing to settle into a single temporal plane. Johnson's narrative is not bound to the immediate present of sitting by the loch, nor to a linear chain of recollection. Instead, it moves fluidly across remembered experience, speculative scenario, and cultural memory—demonstrating how his prose entwines perception, reflection, and imagination into a temporal structure that is at once synchronised and disjunctive.

In his article 'Johnson and Time', Philip Smallwood explores the concept of 'temporal self-accounting' in Johnson's *Annals*—a fragment of autobiography from the 1760s—where Johnson reflects on his yet-to-be-born and infant-self using the past tense from the perspective of an adult. Smallwood examines how Johnson's imaginative and rhetorical expressions grapple with 'the enduring perplexity of how, curiously and at once, we can exist in time and yet seem to observe time as it flows "over" our heads'.[23] Johnson's oscillation among temporal positions in the *Journey*—shifting from the stationary 'I' of immediate experience, to the retrospective 'I' of future narration, and back to the originating 'I' who conceives the narrative—exemplifies Smallwood's argument that 'by uniting observer and object, Johnson's writing […] gives us first hand, as it were, an experience of what it means to be in time and out of time as an intimately shared condition'.[24]

The concept of being 'in time and out of time' is central to understanding the temporal disjunctions of Johnson's travel narrative. Smallwood's insight suggests that, in contrast to Addison's emphasis on 'immediacy', Johnson's narrative presents a case of 'simultaneity'. He operates within a temporality in which multiple timescapes are navigated at once. This

[22] See John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. by Peter Laslett (Cambridge University Press, 1960), p. 301.
[23] Philip Smallwood, 'Johnson and Time', in *Samuel Johnson: The Arc of the Pendulum*, eds by Freya Johnston and Lynda Mugglestone (Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 11–23 (p. 17), doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199654345.003.0002.
[24] Smallwood, 'Johnson and Time', p. 17.

blending of spatial and temporal dimensions is essential for contextualising his experience in the Highlands, where travel entails not only geographical movement but a sense of moving through different historical layers. In this setting, past, present, and future become overlapping frames that shape and complicate Johnson's perceptions.

Paul Alkon similarly views Johnson as a writer who seeks to master time in literature rather than submit to it.[25] As Alkon notes, Johnson claimed that 'Time is, of all modes of existence, most obsequious to the imagination'.[26] This conviction reverberates in the *Journey*, where Johnson writes: 'Whatever withdraws us from the power of our senses; whatever makes the past, the distant, or the future predominate over the present, advances us in the dignity of thinking beings.'[27] For Johnson, time is pressed into service as a means of filling its own void and warding off both idleness and the potential for ill-doing at bay. This dynamic is evident at Loch Cluanie, where, finding himself idle, he 'conceived the thought of narration', transforming a moment of temporal emptiness into the very origin point of the *Journey* itself. [28]

Johnson expands on this idea in *Rambler 41*:

> So few of the hours of life are filled up with objects adequate to the mind of man, and so frequently are we in want of present pleasure or employment, that we are forced to have recourse every moment to the past and the future for supplemental satisfactions,

[25]Alkon states that 'Johnson sounds like a writer confident that where literature is concerned he controls time, not vice versa'. Paul Alkon, 'Johnson and Time Criticism', *Modern Philology*, 85.4 (The University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 543–57 (p. 545), doi/10.1086/391662.
[26] See Johnson's quotation from Samuel Johnson, 'Preface to Shakespeare', in *The Works of Samuel Johnson, Vols 7–8*, ed. by Arthur Sherbo (Yale University Press, 1968), p. 78.
[27] Johnson, *Journey*, p. 242.
[28] See Stuart Sherman, *Telling Time: Clocks, Diaries, and English Diurnal Form, 1660–1785* (University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 191. Sherman suggests for Johnson, what appears as a void in time can be 'transformed into a plenum by text'.

> and relieve the vacuities of our being, by recollections of former passages, or anticipation of events to come.[29]

While Johnson demonstrates an acute capacity to manipulate temporality in his writing, I remain sceptical of Alkon's suggestion that his control over time is straightforward or seamless. In this *Rambler* passage, Johnson reflects that he is 'forced to have recourse every moment to the past and the future', suggesting not effortless mastery but an ongoing, even involuntary, negotiation with time. Earl Wasserman, in his study of ambiguity in Johnson's *Rasselas*, describes this narrative quality as an 'oscillation between opposites, neither of which is either sufficient or stable. All is process'.[30] Wasserman's observation reinforces the sense that Johnson's analogies and comparisons, extending across disparate temporal and spatial frames, create a narrative that feels inherently contingent and oscillatory. The duplicity of time, therefore, is an abiding element of Johnson's experience and a defining feature of his travel narrative. His prose, eschewing straightforward or purely literal description, is continually inflected by imaginative forays into the past and future.

The fragility of cultural memory

If Johnson's meditations on time and perception reveal the fragility of individual recollection, his encounters with oral accounts in the Highlands expose an equally precarious form of collective memory. The *Journey* repeatedly depicts moments when Johnson seeks knowledge from local informants, only to be met with contradictions, revisions, or confidently asserted inaccuracies. These episodes do more than mark failed attempts at

[29] Samuel Johnson, *The Works of Samuel Johnson, Vols 3–5*, eds. by W. J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss (Yale University Press, 1969), p. 221.
[30] Earl R. Wasserman, 'Johnson's *Rasselas*: Implicit Contexts', *Journal of English and German Philology*, 74.1 (University of Illinois Press, 1975), pp. 1–25 (p. 11).

fact-finding; they become integral to the narrative's larger exploration of the instability of remembrance in a landscape shaped by trauma, loss, and historical rupture. One of the clearest examples appears in Johnson's discussion of Highland testimony:

> Many of my subsequent inquiries upon more interesting topicks ended in the like uncertainty. He that travels in the Highlands may easily saturate his soul with intelligence, if he will acquiesce in the first account. The Highlander gives to every question an answer so prompt and peremptory, that skepticism itself is dared into silence, and the mind sinks before the bold reporter in unresisting credulity; but, if a second question be ventured, it breaks the enchantment; for it is immediately discovered, that what was told so confidently was told at hazard, and that such fearlessness of assertion was either the sport of negligence, or the refuge of ignorance.[31]

Despite his resolve to endure the rigours of inquiry, Johnson recognises that the pursuit of certainty in the Highlands often generates further ambiguities. His observations reveal that the promptness and confidence of local responses frequently collapse under scrutiny ('The Highlander gives to every question an answer so prompt and peremptory, that scepticism itself is dared into silence'). Yet Johnson also concedes that those who pose the questions are not immune to credulity: the traveller too readily 'saturate[s] his soul with intelligence' and 'acquiesce[s] in the first account', the mind 'sink[ing] before the bold reporter in unresisting credulity'. The result is an 'enchantment' of sorts—an illusion of knowledge created by the sheer force of assertion and the allure of novelty. Johnson writes:

[31] Johnson, *Journey*, p. 111.

> That which is strange is delightful, and a pleasing error is not willingly detected. Accuracy of narration is not very common, and there are few so rigidly philosophical, as not to represent as perpetual, what is only frequent, or as constant, what is really casual.[32]

In this passage, Johnson identifies a wider challenge: the difficulty of moving from isolated observations to reliable generalisations—a crucial step in turning experience into knowledge. He insists this process requires fine distinctions between what is merely frequent and what is truly constant, a task made especially fraught in an unfamiliar setting and during the fleeting encounters of travel. He recognises the contradictions within individual testimony, observing that 'If individuals are thus at variance with themselves, it can be no wonder that the accounts of different men are contradictory'. The unreliability of a single account ('that what was told so confidently was told at hazard') thus scales up into the larger problem of piecing together collective knowledge from conflicting reports. For Johnson, the strangeness of the Highlands—their partial foreignness within Britain—renders them especially susceptible to the same processes of myth-making and error that travel literature so often perpetuates rather than corrects.

This epistemological instability is not confined to isolated anecdotes but implicates the broader possibility of historical knowledge. Cultural memory in the Highlands, mediated through fragile oral testimony, becomes emblematic of the difficulty—perhaps the impossibility—of securing consensus in the face of conflicting recollections and shifting narrative self-presentations. The implications are political as well as epistemic. Johnson is travelling through a post-Jacobite landscape, in the aftermath of uprisings and brutal suppression, where historical trauma remains raw. The fragility of memory in the *Journey*

[32] Johnson, *Journey*, p. 63.

thus resonates with a wider cultural amnesia—or perhaps a deliberate silencing—surrounding that history. The contradictions in Highland testimony are not simply confusions of detail; they reveal what is at stake in how cultural memory is preserved, distorted, or effaced in a Scotland reckoning with the consequences of rebellion.

These themes culminate in Johnson's extended reflections on architectural ruins—particularly the remnants of monastic or aristocratic power—which can be read as offering a material analogue to the instability of oral narrative. Of the monastery at Aberbrothick, Johnson writes:

> Its extent might, I suppose, easily be found by following the walls among the grass and weeds, and its height is known by some parts yet standing [. . .] Mr. Boswell, whose inquisitiveness is seconded by great activity, scrambled in at a high window, but found the stairs within broken, and could not reach the top. Of the other tower we were told that the inhabitants sometimes climbed it, but we did not immediately discern the entrance, and as the night was gathering upon us, thought proper to desist. Men skilled in architecture might do what we did not attempt: They might probably form an exact ground-plot of this venerable edifice. They may from some parts yet standing conjecture its general form, and perhaps by comparing it with other buildings of the same kind and the same age, attain an idea very near to truth.[33]

This passage stages several overlapping forms of inquiry—speculation, measurement, embodied exploration, local tradition, and comparative analysis—yet none yields certainty. The prose is saturated with modal verbs ('might', 'could', 'perhaps', 'suppose') that mark every avenue of inquiry as tentative and conjectural. By 'supposing' that the monastery's

[33] Johnson, *Journey*, p. 19.

'extent' and 'height' can be 'easily known' through tracing its walls and assessing its structure, Johnson imagines a form of engaged, physical reconstruction. Boswell's own attempt to climb through a window—thwarted by broken stairs—introduces another mode of bodily engagement, an effort to reach and quite literally grasp the building's historical 'truth'. Local reports that 'the inhabitants sometimes climbed it' add yet another strand, showing that the ruin is not inert but remains woven into living memory and practice. Finally, Johnson speculates that 'men skilled in architecture' might, by measuring and comparing the remains to other buildings of the same type and age, 'attain an idea very near to truth'. Yet even as Johnson assembles these fragments of evidence, the ruin resists full recovery. Like the broken testimonies he gathers elsewhere in the Highlands, it gestures toward a past that can be imagined, partially reconstructed, but never entirely secured; in both oral and architectural registers, *the Journey* depicts cultural memory as provisional, layered, and often contradictory—a site not of stable archive, but of gaps, distortions, and fragments whose very incompleteness becomes part of their meaning.

Imagination and the body of experience

Johnson's *Journey* examines not only the fragility of cultural memory but also how imagination and emotion might restore what memory and perception leave uncertain. As the narrative moves from unreliable testimony to moments of solitary reflection, Johnson turns increasingly to the sensory and affective dimensions of travel, showing how bodily experience and emotional resonance shape what the traveller can know. This becomes especially clear in his visit to the Buller of Buchan, a collapsed sea cave near Slains Castle, where description gives way to an almost immersive staging of disorientation. Johnson recounts an ambitious exploration of 'the Buller at the bottom' with his companions:

unwilling to merely circle the path that skirts the chasm, he pressed for a more daring encounter. They hauled a boat down a slope and manoeuvred it through the archway, braving the fierce onslaught of the sea. His reflections on this experience are distilled in a striking passage:

> We were inclosed by a natural wall, rising steep on every side to a height which produced the idea of insurmountable confinement. The interception of all lateral light caused a dismal gloom. Round us was a perpendicular rock, above us the distant sky, and below an unknown profundity of water. If I had any malice against a walking spirit, instead of laying him in the Red-sea, I would condemn him to reside in the Buller of Buchan.[34]

Rather than cataloguing the Buller of Buchan as a geological site or listing its measurable features, Johnson stages an experience of sensory deprivation. The space becomes a 'natural wall', a site of 'insurmountable confinement', and a place where 'lateral light' is 'intercepted', plunging the scene into 'dismal gloom'. These phrases build a lexicon of negation—'insurmountable', 'interception', 'unknown'—that renders the Buller less a location than an un-mappable experience. The 'unknown profundity of water' below, combined with the blocked view of the horizon, suggests a prison-like setting where vision, orientation, and certainty break down. Here Johnson is not simply describing a landscape; he conveys the bodily unease of being trapped and the unsettling effect of staring into an unfathomable depth.

This recalls Edmund Burke's formulation of the sublime as that which is obscure, indeterminate, and resistant to full comprehension. In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Burke distinguishes between ideas that are

[34] Johnson, *Journey*, p. 39.

clear and those that move the imagination, observing: 'It is one thing to make an idea clear, and another to make it affecting to the imagination.'[35] Burke explains that while a drawing of a palace, temple, or landscape might present a clear image, this clarity does not necessarily translate into emotional force, since the 'picture can at most affect only as the palace, temple, or landscape would have affected in the reality'.[36] Conversely, he argues that 'the most lively and spirited verbal description I can give, raises a very obscure and imperfect idea of such objects,' yet this does not weaken its impact. For Burke, the capacity to provoke deep emotional responses often operates apart from visual clarity, leading him to remark, 'A clear idea is therefore another name for a little idea.'[37]

Seen in this light, Johnson's frequent refusals to describe directly—and his reliance on negation and conditional phrasing—are not evasions but deliberate strategies. He avoids a meticulous depiction of the Scottish Highlands' physical landscapes, departing from the expectation of clarity or immediacy and resonating with Burke's belief in the emotional force of the vague and indeterminate. His approach also anticipates aspects of the picturesque: his preference for evoking atmosphere and emotional resonance over strict topographical detail aligns with William Gilpin's emphasis on stirring the imagination through scenes that are neither classically beautiful nor fully sublime, but textured with irregularity, suggestive detail, and mixed emotion.

In Johnson's *Dictionary*, 'Imagination' is defined as the power of creating visions of the absent—'the power of representing things absent to one's self or others'. He illustrates this with a citation from Glanville, describing imagination as the mental counterpart to sensory perception: 'Our simple apprehension of corporal objects, if present, is sense; if

[35] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (London: printed for R. and J. Dodsley, in Pall-Mall, 1757), p. 57.
[36] Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, p. 57.
[37] Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, p. 100.

absent, imagination.'[38] In *Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences*, Philip Fisher traces a shift from Descartes's emphasis on vision to Pascal's more elusive conception of the imagination. For Pascal, imagination operates in an endless cycle of 'repetition and extrapolation', inhabiting a realm where 'nothing is known or can be known'.[39] It encompasses, as he suggests, 'all that can never be experienced.'[40] Johnson's interpretation of imagination—rooted in the notion of absence as defined in his lexicography—aligns with this Pascalian sense of the imaginary as a space beyond what sight or direct experience can fully apprehend. This resonance becomes tangible when Johnson describes the Laird's hospitality amidst Raasay's rugged setting:

> Raasay has little that can detain a traveller, except the Laird and his family; but their power wants no auxiliaries. Such a seat of hospitality, amidst the winds and waters, fills the imagination with a delightful contrariety of images. Without is the rough ocean and the rocky land, the beating billows and the howling storm: within is plenty and elegance, beauty and gaiety, the song and the dance.[41]

Johnson's description of the imagination, teeming with a 'contrariety of images', gives it physical form. By claiming that the imagination itself 'fills' with these images, Johnson frames it as something with palpable volume and texture, capable of being occupied like a vessel. The images he offers are not static but kinetic—the 'rough ocean', 'beating billows', and 'howling storm' seem to press against the mind's surface, while the counter-images of 'plenty', 'elegance', and 'gaiety' settle and soften within it. Imagination becomes, in this

[38] 'Imagination, n.s.', *A Dictionary of the English Language*, by Samuel Johnson (1773) <https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/1773/imagination_ns> [accessed 27 June 2025].
[39] Philip Fisher, *Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences* (Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 54.
[40] Fisher, *Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences*, p. 55.
[41] Johnson, *Journey*, p. 149.

moment, a kind of sensorium, an interior chamber where the external world is absorbed and felt almost tangibly.

A broader examination of Johnson's use of 'imagination' in the *Journey* reveals that the term reaches beyond mere cognitive activity. Throughout the narrative, Johnson's descriptions of imagination blur the boundary between mental and physical experience, implying that the body—its capacity to feel, respond, and register sensation—plays a crucial role in the act of imagining. He repeatedly characterises imagination with tactile or affective verbs: it can be 'soothed', 'stroked', 'delighted', 'excited', 'filled', 'impregnated', 'amused', 'heated', and 'affected'. These verbs span a spectrum from the gently caressing to the ardently impassioned, giving imagination a visceral texture and portraying it as a faculty that is internally driven yet deeply embodied.

This materiality of imagination mediates between the physical experiences of travel and the mental construction of those experiences. Upon reaching Fores, the town visited by Macbeth, Johnson reflects, 'Our imaginations were heated, and our thoughts recalled to their old amusement.'[42] This 'heating' of imagination suggests a bodily response, a kind of passionate quickening that blurs the line between thought and sensation. At the celebrated Fall of Fiers, he writes: 'Towards evening we crossed, by a bridge, the river which makes the celebrated fall of Fiers. The country at the bridge strikes the imagination with all the gloom and grandeur of Siberian solitude.'[43] The verb 'strike', forceful and percussive, conveys that the imagination is not a passive observer but something that can be jolted into affective response. Likewise, when Johnson describes the festive hospitality of Raasay, he notes that it 'str[ikes] the imagination with a delight surprise, analogous to that which is felt at an unexpected emersion from darkness into light'.[44] In this moment, imagination is rendered

[42] Johnson, *Journey*, p. 50.
[43] Johnson, *Journey*, p. 69.
[44] Johnson, *Journey*, p. 131.

almost corporeal—able to register joy as a physical sensation, like the eye's abrupt adjustment to light after darkness.

Johnson's *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* is more than a record of travel through the Highlands. It is a study of how travel is experienced, remembered, and written, and of how memory, time, and imagination shape what a traveller can know. Johnson resists straightforward description and the simple cataloguing of facts or visual details, preferring gaps, speculation, and shifting temporal perspectives to register uncertainty. Though the *Journey* has often been aligned with the empirical and topographical traditions of eighteenth-century travel writing, its structure unsettles the assumptions of those modes. It is not a confident ledger of sights and facts, but a sceptical meditation on the fragility of memory, the disjunctions of time, and the enduring opacity of experience.

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