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Conclusion

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Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore the term wit as a particular historical phenomenon, presenting it in its past and present contexts. The concept has been treated as a historical agent and actor, concentrating in particular on its activity at the crossroads of the early modern spaces of English literary criticism and theory and the worldly literature of politeness. The exploration was carried out within linguistic, theoretical, and historical frame, emphasizing the multi-disciplinary dimension of the term, as well as bringing into the question encounters with the French literary criticism and its usage of the term *esprit*. In these encounters, both concepts emerge as markers of anxieties and uncertainties of era of political and social upheaval, countered with renewed urges toward certainty and semantic unequivocalness. The historical agency and development of wit was examined through its activity in a range of different texts and contexts some of which are rarely discussed in the contemporary literary criticism.

At the same time, the study emphasized wit's vitality and attempted to posit it as a living concept by suggesting that its current status as "a quaint category of verbal cleverness" does not encompass the term's potential (Sitter 5). Therefore, the traditional view of the concept's agency as a predominantly verbal and literary device is challenged by proposing that the term should be viewed as aesthetic concept rather than a rhetoric-based poetic device. For this purpose, I present theory of visual arts and social conduct of the Renaissance Italy, known as *sprezzatura*, semiotic model of theatre proposed by Czech theorist Ivo Osolsobě, and a theory of games as sites for wit's employability in the spheres of non-literary nature.

As a way of concluding, I will highlight some important aspects of wit's and esprit's agency in the theories of early modern literary criticism. I will further argue that the textual analyses carried out in the second and third chapters of the thesis attest to the gradual development of wit from the device of rhetoric-based poetic to the broader and more flexible field of aesthetics. This in turn confirms the legitimacy of my suggestion to reevaluate the modern concept of wit and to consider it rather as an aesthetic concept, operative in various artistic theories, than as a narrowly verbal device confined to the field of literary production. Finally, I will suggest topics for further research branching out of the present study.

In the theories of the first French author, Dominique Bouhours, “‘Le Bel Esprit’ introduces a reader-oriented dimension designed to make manifest the moral value of reading literature (as against those who argue that literature imitates too well and is therefore immoral)” (Cronk 72). Complementing the *bel esprit*, “‘Le Je Ne Sçay’ is an attempt to establish a new literary concept which can defend forcefulness of expression (as against those who believe that literary discourse, as a second-degree imitation, is inherently flawed)” (ibid.) First of the two analyzed Bouhours’s texts – *Les Entretiens d’Artiste et d’Eugène* – reveals clearly the various tensions underlying poetic theory in the 1670s. Bouhours is evidently sensitive to the dilemmas posed for poetry by a nomenclaturist theory of language. As Cronk suggests, “the drift of discussion in the *Entretiens*, with its emphasis on the *je ne sais quoi* and the *bel esprit* points towards an aesthetic of suggestion – an aesthetic which stands in inevitable opposition to the prevailing poetic theory of unproblematic clarity” (70). Bouhours seeks to elaborate upon this notion further in *La Manière de bien penser dans les ouvrages d’esprit*, where he tries out a new term for this ineffable literary quality, *la délicatesse*.

Chevalier de Méré shares the basic premise of Bouhours, i.e. the connection of his theories of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* and *esprit* to the sphere of social decorum. In *Discours de l’esprit* he expounds his ideas of the latter term to a lady stressing the discrepancy between what is genuine *esprit* and what is mistaken for it. Associating it with judgment, he rejects falseness and artifice of behaviour and aesthetic experience, metaphorically defining *esprit* as ‘a sort of light’ which has the power to create and reflect things at the same time. The light metaphor, appearing already in Bouhours’s theories, is one of the most persistent with respect to *esprit* as well wit. One other point of connection is the relationship of Bouhours and Méré towards the question of women and their access to *esprit*. While Bouhours clearly associated *esprit* with the masculine qualities, and presented it as virtually taboo for women, Méré’s position is more ambivalent. Without explicitly addressing the topic, he constantly links women with beauty and men with courage. Furthermore, in a suggestive list of adjectives, Méré presents simplicity as a commendable quality, as it stands for limited, yet still receptive and agreeable feature.

The emphasis in Boileau’s theories on *esprit* shift from the social to the literary field as he explores wit as a two-part concept in his *Satires*. Both parts participate on the creative process which requires rationality and control as well as energy and imagination. In my analysis of the use of the term *esprit* in Boileau’s *L’Art Poétique* I identify several different meanings of the term and compare them with the English equivalents in a contemporary adaptation of the poem. Basically, *esprit* can assume four different roles depending on which of the two elements and which position towards the aesthetic object is taken. It can thus assume the role of restrained receiver of the aesthetic experience, one who appreciates the balance and the rational, or it can assume the identity of a shallow and easily impressed mind which has weakness for the frivolous and superficial. A similar dynamics can be found between the two author-like types of *esprit*: *esprit*-ego which is rash and intuitive as well as highly creative. In order to produce valuable results, it has to be restrained by a more pragmatic super-ego which is the controlling element in *esprit*. This

type of dynamics is in fact fundamental for majority of discussions of the nature of wit in the English literary and aesthetic theories which I will now expound.

John Dryden's theories of wit are a typical product of the immediate post-Restoration years. Influenced by the brand new stream of neoclassic criticism imported from France, reacting against the English variant of Baroque poetry, and burdened by the weight of literary achievements of Shakespeare and Jonson, Dryden attempts to both adopt the new neoclassic doctrines and accommodate the requirements of his own audiences. As a prolific playwright, his theories of wit make an attempt to conciliate these conflicting tendencies. This is the reason behind his rather unsystematic attitude towards wit. On the one hand, he claims that wit is 'propriety of words and words,' on the other, he suggests that "it is some lively and apt description, dressed in such colours of speech, that it sets before your eyes the absent object, as perfectly, and more delightfully than nature," (*Of Dramatic Poesy and Other Critical Essays* I 207).

Alexander Pope's theories, although not as explicitly contradictory as those of Dryden, clearly attest to the inner tension which – as I claim – is the inherent feature of wit. In his *Essay on Criticism*, a poem dealing with the issues of poetic creation and criticism and heavily influenced by Boileau's *L'Art poétique*, he presents a similar model of wit to that of the French critic, contrasting the 'pro-creation' aspect of wit to the 'pro-discipline' aspect. Also similar to Boileau is Pope's concern for the moral and aesthetic balance in the process of artistic creation and appreciation, which can be juxtaposed to the balance of the individual elements of wit. Pope sees wit as the perfect balance between the raw energy of poetic creation and the structuring, and the order-bringing faculty that supervises the act of creation. At the same time, Pope is able to playfully utilize the very concept which he theorizes in the poem which making it a unique proof of the precepts and ideas expressed in it.

The concern for pragmatic clarity and unequivocalness as opposed to the aesthetic pleasure of surprise and novelty are at the centre of Joseph Addison's theory of wit. My reading of his theories was partially informed by a debate with Brian McCrea whose study, although twenty years old now, is still the most recent study in Addison literary scholarship. Using Addison as a part of his own agenda, which – paradoxically – tries to use the author as a proof why the contemporary literary criticism does not concern itself with writers like Addison and Steele, McCrea contends that Addison opposed the element of ambiguity and surprise in his theories of wit, in order to make his texts accessible to as large number of readers as possible. However, McCrea simplifies the matter so that it serves his own case. Addison's main mission stands in a sharp contrast with the elitist nature of the post-World War II English department, nourished by the post-structuralist "valorization of inaccessibility" (Claiborne Park 662). As much as McCrea's claim brings up many thought-provoking and uncomfortable questions, my concern is that not only does he manipulate Addison's theory of wit and imagination but that his manipulations are based on misresearched claims. Furthermore, I find that McCrea bases his reading of Addison on a Habermasian premise that the development of English coffee-house culture and its "periodical press marked the emergence of a potentially egalitarian discursive space, a realm governed more by rational force of the Berger argument than

by the institutional force of existing power relations” (Pollock 707). However, in agreement with Anthony Pollock, I believe that “this interpretation of the post-Restoration public space is compromised,” especially with respect to the issues of gender and class (ibid.).

Addison systematically traces the development of wit in the seventeenth century, coming up with categories of true and false wit, which represent the final encapsulation of the qualities and features tentatively suggested by the previous theorists. This pinning down of the vital differences between the two opposing tendencies represents the culmination of the early modern theories of wit as well as a beginning of a new branch of philosophy of perception, based on categories such as taste, beautiful, and art – aesthetics. The ideas on wit expressed by Addison in the wit series of the *Spectator* were later developed by him in the series on ‘Pleasures of Imagination’, where he formulated his proper aesthetic theory.

Early modern ideas on *wit* and *esprit* explored in this study constitute a body of theory which revolved around the questions of creative process and modes of reception of its result. In the comparative subchapter of the third chapter I presented several perspectives on how the individual theories differ from one another. I tried to point out the singularities which emphasized the differences between them. Nevertheless, if we wish to find some points of agreement, they will appear before our eyes very clearly. The inherent tensions of the two elements constituting the concept are present in most theories of the French and English critics as well. They approach wit and *esprit* from various positions and explore their various aspects; however they face similar basic dilemmas and reveal identical structure of the term. Accumulating issues of gender, morals, style, and ideology, theories of wit and *esprit* unquestionably represent a vital part of the early modern aesthetic discourse.

While this study aimed at presenting the concept of wit from multi-disciplinary point of view, it did not propose to present a comprehensive account of wit’s agency either in its historical or its contemporary context, as such a task is clearly beyond its feasibility and resources. During the period of researching and writing of the study, I have come across several topics which did not suit my purposes, but which, in my opinion, deserve further investigation. The question of the relationship between the political and ideological scene – which during the latter half of the seventeenth century is extremely interesting in itself – and the discourses of wit represents one of these topics. Although the issues of style in interaction with the competing ideologies of the day are the key theme of Robert Markley’s study *Two-Edg’d Weapons: Style and Ideology in the Comedies of Etherege, Wycherley, and Congreve*, where his primary concern are Restoration comedies, he avoids the question of wit completely. And, last but not least, comparative reading of the French and English plays with respect to the interplay of wit and politics is also worth considering.