

Bicanová, Klára

Dominique Bouhours and poetic ideologies of the bel esprit

In: Bicanová, Klára. *From rhetoric to aesthetics: wit and esprit in the English and French theoretical writings of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries*. Vyd. 1. Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2013, pp. 56-68

ISBN 978-80-210-6662-5

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/129634>

Access Date: 30. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

Theories of *esprit* in the texts of Boileau, Bouhours and Méré demonstrate that the term serves as a catalyst of this gradual change, partly because it is so flexible in its semantic and contextual usage. Also, tracing its interplay with the already mentioned *je-ne-sais-quoi* and *sublime* will hopefully yield new insights into the ways various streams and doctrines of French neoclassicism interacted and responded to each other. The tensions between them are part of my interest in this chapter, and emphasis on the social dimension of *esprit* is detectable in Bouhours's theories of the *bel esprit*, where the adjective adds an appreciative tone to the expression.

2.1 Dominique Bouhours and Poetic Ideologies of the Bel Esprit

2.1.1 The *bel esprit* and the *je-ne-sais-quoi*

Dominique Bouhours was born in 1628 in Paris where he also died in 1702. Although today he is usually remembered as an essayist and neo-classical critic, during his time he was also known in his capacity of Jesuit priest, as he engaged in theological and literary polemic with the Jansenists. For the purpose of my reading of Bouhours, the most important fact is that he was a frequent and influential visitor to the salon of Madeleine de Scudéry, where he made a name as an expert on matters of style and language – this fact is attested by Nicolas Boileau and Jean La Bruyère who considered him a foremost authority in this field and Jean Racine who allegedly sent him *Phèdre* for approval.

When considering the terms of the *bel esprit* and the *je-ne-sais-quoi* which lie at the heart of Bouhours's poetic theory I will be concerned specifically with how these terms were strategically employed by the French author in his discourse of cultural, social, and literary elitism. I do not attempt to separate the literary from the social and cultural sphere in my approach, as I believe this particular period perceived them to be interconnected in a way that defies any clear-cut compartmentalization. In this respect, I agree with Richard Scholar, who points out that “[w]hat is striking about the discourse of art and artistic appreciation in late seventeenth-century France culture is how embedded it is in the discourse of social distinction” (Scholar 199). Authors of this period were used to deploy their social credentials as artists to explain the qualities of their writings; indeed, Bouhours and others talk about these two spheres “as if they were one and the same thing” (*ibid.*). I also believe that this intertwining of qualities renders the period's literary creative and critical output considerably inaccessible but at the same time it is the reason for its fertility in terms of interpretive possibilities.

Taking into account the nature of the relationship between the literary and the cultural, my approach will therefore posit the two terms as tools of literary and social exquisiteness employed by the members of the polite circles and salons in order to establish and maintain their exclusiveness. In Bouhours's two major critical works, *Les Entretiens d'Artiste et d'Eugène* and *La Manière de bien penser dans les ouvrages d'esprit* both the *bel*

esprit and the *je-ne-sais-quoi* play an important role of indispensable tools of cultural and ideological appropriation. This role is also the possible reason for their elusiveness, which is not a result of incapability on the part of their users but a carefully designed strategy. In the following account I will partly draw on my comments concerning *sprezzatura* and *préciosité* movement the previous chapter.

2.1.2 *Les Entretiens d'Artiste et d'Eugène*: The Key Concepts of the New Aesthetic Introduced

In *Les Entretiens d'Artiste et d'Eugène* (1671, henceforth *Les Entretiens*) Bouhours introduces the *bel esprit* and the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as key terms of what will become his alternative aesthetic theory and devotes a great deal of attention to their description. The text is composed of six dialogues, two of which are devoted to the concepts of the *bel esprit* and the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. The dialogues involve two friends, Ariste and Eugene, who are based on Bouhours himself and René Rapin, his friend and fellow Jesuit. The names of the characters are derived from Greek and Latin and both mean “well-born”. The two men converse in the agreeable discursive manner of the well-informed amateurs which had become established in the salons or – in the words of the narrator – “the free and familiar conversations that well-bred people have [...], and which do not fail to be witty, and even knowledgeable, though one never dreams there of making wit show, and study has no part in it”²⁵ (*Les Entretiens* 2).

The subjects of the conversations are chosen and dealt with in erudite, but not pedantic manner. The six topics covered by the interlocutors are the sea, regarded to be an object of contemplation, the French language, secrets, true wit (“Le Bel Esprit”), the ineffable (“Le Je ne sais quoi”) and poetical devices (“Les Devises”).^{*} Commenting on the choice of topics, Charles Harrison points out that “[c]ontrary to the predominant intellectual rationalism of the time, Bouhours uses the dialogue form to explore the nature of those indefinable critical qualities that are perceived instantaneously through the workings of intuition, rather than gradually through the operations of reason” (*Art in Theory 1648-1815* 222). Thus, the *bel esprit* is conceived as a person who acts decisively on the basis of individual but justifiable intuition while the *je-ne-sais-quoi* may be seen as that which the *bel esprit* or the ‘true artist’ uniquely generates. As these suggestions imply, the tendency represented in Bouhours’s speculations is more isolation of an ineffable critical virtue from the wider category of aesthetic production, and of the ‘artist’ from the ‘illustrator,’ the ‘designer’ or the ‘entertainer’.

*) The first “entretien” on sea has been analyzed in a great detail by R. G. Maber in his “Bouhours and the Sea: The Origins of the First “Entretien d’Ariste et d’Eugène” which appeared in *The Modern Language Review* 75.1 (1980), pp. 76-85. Also, an extensive account of the whole text is presented in Nicholas Cronk’s *The Classical Sublime: French Neoclassicism and the Language of Literature* (chapter 3 ‘Inventing le je ne sais quoi: Bouhours’s *Les Entretiens d’Artiste et d’Eugène*’, pp. 51-76) which partly informs this subchapter.

Entretien IV: The *bel esprit* as a tool of poetic truth

The concept of the *bel esprit* is the central topic of the fourth ‘encounter’ of Eugene and Ariste. The two protagonists set out to define the *bel esprit* by clarifying its relationship to common sense. Right from the start of the dialogue it is clear that for them the *bel esprit* is not opposed to common sense, but rather represents its specific kind:

True wit, [...], is inseparable from common sense, and it is a mistake to confuse it with that sort of vivacity which has nothing to do with it. One might think that judgment is the foundation for beauty of wit; or rather *bel esprit* is of the nature of those precious stones which are not less solid than brilliant. There is nothing more beautiful than a well-cut and well-polished diamond; it shines on every side and on every facet.²⁶ (*The Continental Model* 161)*

The dialogue continues with metaphorical description of the *bel esprit*: “It is solid but brilliant matter, it dazzles but has consistency and body. The union, the mixture, the proportion of the brilliant with the solid give it all its charm and all its value. There is a symbol for *bel esprit* as I conceive it”²⁷ (*ibid.*). As the metaphor unravels, the *bel esprit* is being described in even more glamorous terms:

It is equally brilliant and solid; it might well be defined as common sense which sparkles. For there is a kind of gloomy, bleak common sense which is hardly less the contrary of wit than is a false brilliance. The common sense I am speaking of is entirely different; it is gay, lively, full of fire [...]; it proceeds from a straight and luminous intelligence and from a clear and pleasant imagination.²⁸ (161-2)

Bouhours’s *bel esprit*, then, has to command both vivacity as well as common sense; the perfect balance of these two faculties “renders the mind subtle but not vapid, brilliant but not too brilliant, quick to conceive an idea, and sound in all its judgments”²⁹ (162). This kind of wit thinks of things properly and expresses them correctly, it is concise, and even though it is “concerned more with things than with words” it does not “scorn ornaments of language” while not seeking them out³⁰ (*ibid.*).

Nicholas Cronk contests that, although Bouhours’s explanations of the *bel esprit* are not entirely coherent, the whole dialogue has “poetic language as its central concern, [and] the emphasis on ‘le *bel esprit*’ and ‘le *génie*’ takes the discussion beyond the mimetic framework of the earlier part of [*Les Entretiens*]” in that the author seems to be making a radical suggestion that ‘le *bel esprit*’ and ‘le *discernement*’ are active qualities required in the reader of a literary work (Cronk 60). The discussion of the *bel esprit* further provides an answer to those who criticized the moral function and status of literature. If the writer is possessed of ‘a gift from heaven [...] a divine I know not what’,

*) *Les Entretiens* had not been translated into English before the twentieth century. The only translation of the text appeared as *The Conversations of Aristo and Eugene* in the anthology *The Continental Model: Selected French Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century in English Translation*, eds. Scott Elledge and Donald Schier.

and if readers are equipped with the *bel esprit* to help them interpret the writer's inspired pronouncements, it is hard to argue that poetry obfuscates truth³¹ (*The Continental Model* 163). On the contrary, it is 'discernment' which allows the reader to see "things [...] for what they are in themselves"³² (161). At the same time, it is the writer's inspiration which reveals "all things to the soul in their true light"³³ (169). Cronk concludes that "Bouhours is adamant that poetic language has the power to reveal higher truths; by implication, [...] it can be a force for moral good" (Cronk 61).

The *bel esprit* as a tool of cultural appropriation

Bouhours's *bel esprit* can also be regarded as a highly selective tool for reader's interpretation of authorial intentions. In the last part of the dialogue, the French critic is concerned with the conditions under which one is eligible to possess the *bel esprit*. The two main ones are race and gender. The latter is adumbrated already in the first part of the dialogue, where Eugene suggests that "[t]he beauty of wit is a masculine and gallant beauty which has in it nothing soft or effeminate"³⁴ (quot. in *Art in Theory* 224). Later, Bouhours attempts to put forward a 'climatic' theory of genius in his dialogues on the *bel esprit*, when he suggests that scarcity of *les beaux esprits* in northern countries is owing to the cold, damp climate, and that climate is responsible for the particular nature of the French genius. While Ariste maintains that the *bel esprit* is accessible to all nations, Eugene's arguments make him eventually admit that "the *bel esprit* is rarer in cold countries because nature in those parties is drearier and more languishing so to speak" with Eugene further asserting that the quality of "the *bel esprit* as you have defined him is not at all compatible with the coarse temperament and the massive bodies of northern peoples"³⁵ (*The Continental Model* 175).

As Faith Beasley suggests, Bouhours's account of the influence of the worldly culture on the quality of the *bel esprit* is underscored by the influence of national identity when he writes that "[it is] the fate of the French nation to have this fine quality of mind today when other peoples do not have it"³⁶ (176). Later he states that "one might say that all the intelligence and all the learning of the world are now among us and that all other nations are barbarous when compared with the French"³⁷ (179). According to Beasley, "Bouhours's temporal identification of these distinguishing qualities of the French language [as well as] his emphasis on the fact that *esprit* and *bon sens* are now common whereas they 'used to be so rare' can be viewed as further evidence of the worldly milieu's pervasive influence by the 1660s" (73-4). I believe Beasley reveals a significant inner contradiction in Bouhours's viewpoint when she suggests that while appearing to praise the significance of the worldly influence, the text "also reflects the growing opposition to this influence, especially its female component" (74). Contrary to the common respect paid to women on basis of their role in the spreading of the policies of the *bel esprit* and *bon sens* (as mentioned in the account of the seventeenth-century French society in the first chapter), Bouhours seems to be refusing most women the faculty of *esprit*, and consequently, the title of *bel esprit*:

That bright flame and that good sense [...] do not result from a cold and moist complexion: the cold and moisture which make women “weak, timid, indiscreet, light, impatient and talkative [...], prevent them from having the judgment, the solidity, the strength, and the precision which *bel esprit* demands. That phlegm with which they are filled and which gives them their delicate coloring does not agree well with delicacy and vivacity of mind; it blunts the cutting edge of the intellect and dims its light. If you reflect on this question you will see that what is brilliant in women partakes of the nature of lightning which dazzles for a moment and which has no solidity; women shine a bit in conversation, and provided the talk be of trifles they do well; but beyond this they are not very reasonable. In a word, nothing is thinner or more limited than the female mind.³⁸ (*The Continental Model* 180)

In Bouhours’s theory the *bel esprit* represents the exclusive propriety (and property) of a very narrow section of society, and can only be achieved through education and social experience. The subtle charm of the *bel esprit* is not a natural state of affairs but a result of the process of linguistic and social betterment. According to Richard Scholar, the *bel esprit* is the term that Bouhours uses “to repackage aristocratic *honnêteté*. The narrator of the texts describes Ariste and Eugene as ‘honestes gens’ at the beginning of their *Entretiens*” (208). In fact, the *bel esprit* is established as the quintessence of *honnêteté* by the fourth *entretien* in which Ariste and Eugene distinguish true *beaux esprits* from “crude-minded peasants, obtuse pedants, and the super-subtle poetasters who have usurped their title in recent years” (209). The *beaux esprits* form a quasi-aristocratic elite that Ariste and Eugene’s intervention serves to protect and sustain. As Scholar suggests, the very fact that such intervention is regarded as necessary suggests that “the identity and constitution of this elite is in fact an object of ideological and social conflict” (ibid.). When they come to define true *bel esprit*, the two friends play a familiar game. Ariste’s definition of *bel esprit* as ‘good sense which sparkles’ is strategically incomplete: beyond all the definable qualities of the *bel esprit*, there is something more³⁹: “the mind must have besides a certain clarity which all great geniuses do not have”⁴⁰ (*The Continental Model* 166). The indefinite adjective ‘certain’ (‘une certain’) adds a considerable degree of ineffability here, just as Eugene does when he asserts that the *bel esprit* must possess ‘je ne sçay quell agrément’ (I know not what charm). The quintessence of *honnêteté* is the *bel esprit*, but the essence of the *bel esprit* seems to be the *je ne sais quoi*, the topic of the fifth *entretien* and of the following section.

Entretien V: The je-ne-sais-quoi

The fifth dialogue of *Les Entretiens* deals with a *mot juste* that describes the things that cannot be expressed, i.e. the *je-ne-sais-quoi* – an expression which is usually described as the ineffable aspect of beauty or style and which had been taken by the French from the Spanish (*el no sé qué*) in the first half of the seventeenth century. This *je ne sais quoi*, the indefinable quality that can be felt in an object of all kinds as well as in a person but cannot be described in any simple terms emerges as a topic of the discussion Ariste and

Eugene are having without any introduction or prelude, as if quite naturally, in the easy flow of the conversation. One of my goals of this subchapter is to show that this kind of nonchalant introduction of topics is Bouhours's specific strategy to enhance his aesthetic theories with modish concepts. The two gentlemen reveal themselves in this respect to be true *beaux esprits*, go-betweeners connecting the worlds of learning and wit. Before demonstrating how the ineffability of the *bel esprit* relates to that of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, I will provide a brief introduction to the latter term.

Scholar identifies three realms the term can be related to: passions (i.e. psychology), culture and nature. In the confines of the first realm the *je-ne-sais-quoi* "draws two individuals [...] into sympathy or antipathy at first sight" (Scholar 59-60). In the realm of culture "the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is not a particular relation, but instead, a universal quality" (60). This claim resonates with Ariste who says that "there are certain mysterious qualities which are universal so that everybody is equally touched by them" (*The Continental Model* 188).⁴¹ Therefore, a culture can collectively recognize a distinguishing quality in some of its individual members or works of art. In the third realm, nature, the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is responsible for the inexplicable movements of attraction and repulsion which regularly occur between the magnet and iron, the tides' ebb and flow, the human body and the diseases that it suffers. In these three realms, Scholar argues, "the *je-ne-sais-quoi* remains sealed within the lived world of created nature" (Scholar 60).

Finally, there is a fourth, tentative realm, proposed by the two friends: that of the transcendental relationship between humans and their divine maker. Ariste describes hope for salvation, and indeed salvation itself, as "I know no what of a different kind" and Eugene reinforces this upward direction of the term out of the created world into the realm of the divine by suggesting that "this mysterious quality partakes of the essence of grace as well as of nature and art" to which Ariste replies in the form of rhetorical question which makes his proposal the more decisive: "[T]hat grace, I say, what is it but a mysterious quality of a supernatural order which can be neither explained nor understood?"⁴² (*The Continental Model* 191)

The *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a sign of quality

Scholar makes a powerful claim which establishes the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a topic of polite conversation in the third quarter of the seventeenth century. I follow his argument, but would like to suggest that the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is not only *the topic* of the conversation but also – and perhaps more importantly – the ideological tool of the discussion, not unlike the *bel esprit*. Scholar in fact seems to hold a similar view when he suggests that the *je-ne-sais-quoi* represents a sign of quality. Following his line of argument as well as expanding my own argument concerning the *bel esprit*, I will now demonstrate how the two terms participate in establishing a culturally defensive mechanism of a certain social group amidst the society of the seventeenth-century France. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* becomes the indefinable stamp of quality of a very selective social group, relying on the previously mentioned lexical sign of the *bel esprit* with its

already demarcated exclusiveness; the other three signs are *honnêteté*, *galanterie*, and *urbanité*.

Around the mid-seventeenth century a circle of minor nobles and bourgeois supported the monarchist cause during the burst of civil war, and they were subsequently rewarded for their loyalty. The group was in need of fashioning a social identity and *galanterie* was convenient as it emphasized cultural distinction over noble origins. This model then spread among other – mostly Modern – authors and their supporters – Bouhours, Fontenelle, Madame de Scudéry – and this conversational ideal was reiterated by portrayal in literary works. Scholar suggests that what he calls ‘game of nescioquiddity’ is at play in the case of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* just as it was in the case of the *bel esprit*. The game takes place in salon conversation among the members of polite circles. Where the previous circles used a certain manner of conversation and demeanor to articulate a particular philosophical position, the gallant circle makes the manner itself the topic of conversation (185).

The “*je-ne-sais-quoi* game” follows a stereotypical pattern: a member of the polite circle wonders aloud what it is that lends some people (and their literary, social or other achievements) an air of ‘quality’. The initial name for this quality was *honnêteté*, which was then replaced by *urbanité*, and the *bel esprit* respectively. The interlocutors attempt each in turn to define this elusive quality which generates a series of adjacent adjectives of quality. These are used to describe the ways in which it makes itself felt in particular situations. The ultimate attempt, i.e. a definition of the sum of the qualities, is, however, a failure which is then admitted by all participants. This, Scholar argues, is a necessary outcome of the ‘game of nescioquiddity’, as its function is to reinforce the elitism of the group by not being able to find a definition of the requirements for joining the circle in the first place. Thus, the members manage to keep the outsiders out while constantly electing themselves as insiders by effectively denying a workable definition of the qualities needed for entering the circle. To support this hypothesis, Scholar quotes Norbert Elias who argues that “through their necessary contacts with rich bourgeois social strata, the seventeenth-century courtly aristocracy could not prevent ‘the spreading of their names, their customs, their tastes and their language to other classes’” (Scholar 190). By renewing the indefinable signs of their own quality, its vogue words, members keep the circle intact when the signs threaten to spread beyond. The game of nescioquiddity is thus a playful defense mechanism of cultural elitism. Scholar summarizes this mechanism in the following lines: “The polite circle suggests that its subtle charm is, like magnetic attraction, a truly inexplicable occult quality. But this charm can be shown to be an instrument designed to protect and further the interests of a particular group” (Scholar 211).

An important feature of the defense mechanism of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is *sprezzatura*. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* is so well made that it tricks the outsiders into thinking that it is in fact a gift of nature. Without mentioning this connection directly, Bouhours makes a very explicit claim concerning the relationship between the two terms when he writes: “the great masters [...] have always tried to give charm to their works by hiding their art with great care and skill”⁴³ (*The Continental Model* 190). The *je-ne-sais-quoi* in Bouhours is a cultural

practice that masquerades as a natural property: the tag ‘ars est celare artem’ (the art lies in concealing the art), which appears in the rhetorical works of Aristotle and Cicero, here describes an entire culture. Bouhours’s *Les Entretiens* are themselves a perfect proof of this assumption: the topics of the dialogues are carefully assembled to testify to this theory – the dialogue on sea with its unfathomable depths and air of mystery, the dialogue on the secrets all represent notions in which the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is very easily located, and the dialogue on the French language explores the site of the battle for undefinability itself. Both the *je-ne-sais-quoi* and the *bel esprit* have an important place in Bouhours’s expansion of the poetic theory of cultural elitism in another of his critical texts, *La Manière de bien penser dans les ouvrages d’esprit*.

2.1.3 *La Manière de bien penser dans les ouvrages d’esprit*: The theory expanded

La Manière de bien penser dans les ouvrages d’esprit (1687, henceforth *La Manière*) consists of four dialogues between two men of letters, Eudoxe and Philanthe. As usual, the names stand for qualities the two speakers represent: the former is associated with “classical simplicity and good sense, while the latter suggests fancy and floridity” (Clark 263). The first dialogue deals with “false thoughts”, equivokes, hyperboles, puns, conceits, etc., and shows that no thought should be admitted, however agreeable, unless it is “true”; the second and third dialogues discuss the true and the false in the *sublime* and wit ; and the fourth deals mainly with obscurity (ibid.).

The *bel esprit* and le sublime: Bouhours’s theory of la délicatesse

The *bel esprit* recurs in *La Manière de bien penser dans les ouvrages d’esprit* (translated into English as *The Art of Criticism or, the Method of Making a Right Judgment upon Subjects of Wit and Learning* in 1705) during a discussion of true and false wit. However, it is not the central theme of the text, but merely one of the conditions and necessary qualities which a person or a work of art has to possess in order to reach the ultimate goal of aesthetic efforts – the natural. The set of aesthetic terms Bouhours uses to present his theory includes, apart from *esprit*, classical categories such as beauty (*beauté*), the natural or inborn (*naïf*), the great (*grand*), the delicate (*délicate*), the pretty (*le joli*), and the plain (*simple*). Bouhours’s agenda is quite complex in this text as it takes a direct part in the heated aesthetic and ideological disputes of his own time.

First, the dialogues function as a response to a critical debate concerning the *sublime* which was spurred by Boileau’s 1674 translation of Longinus’s treatise *On the Sublime*. The translation belonged to one of many literary events in the course of the *querelle* – in 1693 Boileau published a new edition of the translation which included a number of critical reflections directed against the theory of the superiority of the Moderns over the Ancients. Although an Ancient himself, Bouhours never belonged to the orthodox circle

of this side of the battle, but rather remained closer to the stylistic ideals of a previous generation, upholding the rhetorical tradition which favoured a slightly more orotund, less austere poetic style. Therefore, his position in the debate of the *sublime* is not entirely in agreement with the Ancient line.

Second, like other French critics of his day, Bouhours opposed those Italian and Spanish poets of the late Renaissance style who, with their far-fetched conceits, were the enemies of true wit. In *La Manière*, these far-fetched conceits were associated with false wit and unnaturalness by both speakers. “Italian poets are not used to be very natural” claims Eudoxe, accusing the Italian poets Guidubaldo Bonarelli and Torquato Tasso of having “too much Art,” an expression clearly related to *jeu d’esprit*, false wit: “[T]he Heart explains it self ill by a turn of Wit, and I wou’d willingly say with a Man of Good Judgment. I don’t love such a far-fetch’d beginning, above all in a violent passion in which Sprightliness has no part”⁴⁴ (*The Art of Criticism* 171). Opposing both these authors as well the proponents of the *sublime* (and by extension the ideas of the *anciennoté*), Bouhours advocates the ‘natural’ thought, that directs the reader’s mind towards the object or idea in view rather than towards the ingenuity of the writer, saying that a ‘natural thought’ has “simple Beauty, without Art”⁴⁵ (156). This claim, i.e. that something like excess of wit is possible, serves as a topic for a whole dialogue, as Philanthus, whose taste is for the ornamental and florid, begs to be enlightened on this matter.

While Bouhours does not subscribe to the ideal of the *sublime*, he does not allow his two interlocutors to dismiss it completely either. Instead, he manages to weave the concept into his own aesthetic theory which is based on many elements, thus creating a more complex texture of argument than had been represented by *Les Entretien*s. One of the central critical concepts Bouhours’s theory rests upon is *délicatesse* (delicacy). In the second dialogue Eudoxe sets out to present this concept whose position to the other elements of Bouhours’s theory is rather complicated. It also seems to be one of the vogue-words of the day, as Philanthus suggests: “Tell me I pray, [...], what is precisely Delicacy? Nothing else is talk’d off ; and I talk of it every Minute without well understanding what I say, and having a clear Notion of it”⁴⁶ (*The Art of Criticism* 110). After acknowledging the difficulty of capturing the essence of a ‘delicate Thought’, using a strategy not unlike that employed by Eugene and Ariosto in their attempts to define the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in *Les Entretien*s, Eudoxe suggests that

[w]e must in my Mind reason on the Delicacy of the Thoughts, which make Pieces of Wit, as we do of those of Nature ; the most delicate are these where Nature takes pleasure to work in little, and where the matter is almost imperceptible, makes us doubt whether she has a Mind to show or hide her Address”⁴⁷ (111).

A delicate thought is such a thought which is expressed by few well-chosen words and the sense which it contains is neither too ostentatious nor too plain. This feature brings *délicatesse* very close to the *bel esprit* in *Les Entretien*s, where Ariosto says that “[m]uch meaning is gathered into few words, everything is said that need be said an only that is said which must be said”⁴⁸ (*The Continental Model* 162). Furthermore, it must be “hid to

the end that we may look for it, and that we should guess at it, and keeps us in suspense to give us the pleasure of discovering it all at once, when we have knowledge enough”⁴⁹ (ibid.). Once again, *délicatesse* is revealed to have surprisingly similar features to wit in the requirement for a certain amount of knowledge necessary to discover it as well as the mental energy which must be invested in the act of discovering, gratified by the sensation of surprise. By giving this new critical concept *bel esprit*-like features, as well as strategically mentioning the *je-ne-sais-quoi* when explaining it, Bouhours makes it clear that *La Manière* is an expansion of the ideas proposed in *Les Entretiens*.

The implied critique of the sublime becomes overt in the conclusion of Eudoxe’s explanation of *la délicatesse* when he asserts that “[w]e may conclude that delicacy adds something to the Agreeable and Sublime”⁵⁰ (*The Art of Criticism* 111).

[T]he great and the sublime are not natural, nor they can be, for the natural carries in it somewhat low, or less elevated ; did you not tell me, interrupts *Philanthus*, that Simplicity and Grandure [sic] were not incompatible? Yes, replyd *Eudoxus*, and I say so still, but there is a certain difference between a noble Simplicity, and pure Plainness, one only excludes Ostentation, and the other Greatness it self.⁵¹ (156)

As Nicholas Cronk points out, “Bouhours outlines a critical concept (*la délicatesse*, *la naïveté*) which embodies *le sublime* but includes much else besides” (Cronk 134). Bouhours manages to include Boileau’s sublime into his own discussions, but in “a manner which divorces [it] from Boileau’s conception” (ibid.).

The role of the bel esprit in Bouhours’s theory

The task remains now to evaluate what place the *bel esprit* has in Bouhours’s theory expressed in *Les Entretiens* and *La Manière*. Both texts reveal clearly the various tensions underlying poetic theory of the 1670s and it is equally evident that Bouhours is sensitive to the dilemmas posed for poetry by a nomenclaturist theory of language. No matter if we are more inclined to accept presumptions made by Nicholas Cronk who maintains that Bouhours is articulating a full-blown aesthetic theory complete with set of critical terms or by Michael Moriarty, arguing that as a critic, Bouhours belongs to a stage of the seventeenth-century French criticism “concerned with establishing correct taste rather than formulating rules” (as opposed to the prescriptive neoclassical criticism of earlier decades), the *bel esprit* still stands before our eyes as a particle in Bouhours’s system of neoclassical aesthetic of suggestion, whose distinctive feature is the rejection of the principle of wide accessibility and clarity while holding on to the requirement for naturalness (*The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism. The Renaissance* 526). Thus in *La Manière* Bouhours “links good taste to a classical poetics, based on Latin and Greek models against Spanish and Italian, an aesthetic of naturalness, though leaving some room for the sublime conception, against the old Baroque conceit” associated with false *esprit* (ibid.).

I am more inclined to agree with Moriarty, who emphasizes the salient features of Bouhours's system of thought and the balance the critic tries to achieve. On the other hand, I believe that Cronk's attempt to present Bouhours's ideas as what he calls 'full-fledged aesthetic theory' might be slightly exaggerated (Cronk 65). Cronk later argues with regard to *Les Entretiens* that "the dialogue form helps shield what might otherwise appear as a fundamental incoherence in Bouhours's critical thought," explaining that it "helps Bouhours to deal allusively with the difficulties which he clearly perceives in contemporary poetic theory but which he feels unable to address more directly" (73). However, it seems difficult to accept that a certain type of form of Bouhours's literary output can save his ideas from being eventually labelled as fundamental incoherence. In my opinion, the dialogue form employed by the author attests more to the contemporary penchant for this type of prosaic form, as it allowed for setting an example of how a polite and entertaining, yet erudite and informative conversation should be conducted. Bouhours's confusion of the characteristic features of *esprit* and *délicatesse* which I have just pointed out contrasts in his discerning between *esprit* and what is delicate and strong. The tension between the two latter terms is mentioned more than once by Bouhours, for example during a discussion on rarity of the real *bel esprit*, where Eugene says that "qualities as contrary as vivacity and common sense, delicacy and strength, [...] are not often found together"⁵² (168). Dismissing what passes for wit in the society, Bouhours produces a definition of *bel esprit* which is centred on the individual's ability to discern objects at their proper value:

[...] true beauty of wit consists in a just and delicate discernment which those gentlemen do not have. That discernment shows things to be what they are in themselves, not stooping too soon, as do the common people who do not go below the surface, and not going too far like those refined intelligences which, through an excess of subtlety, evaporate in vain and chimerical imaginings.⁵³ (*The Continental Model* 161)

From this point of view, then, *bel esprit* in Bouhours's writings, although it does not occupy a foremost position among the critical terms he operates with, is used by the critic to represent a compromise between the two extreme positions. It is a role which will become evident in other critics' theories as well, albeit in different contexts. It is nevertheless important to acknowledge this function of wit as a conspicuous one within the framework of the early modern theories of wit.

2.1.4 Bouhours's Reception in England

Comparing the overall Bouhours's influence in England to that of one of his contemporaries, Alexander Clark writes: "It is clear that Bouhours's fame was a more fragile growth than that of Le Bossu, [...], [b]ut it must be evident [...] that whenever one discusses the origin and spread in English criticism of the idea that 'good sense', 'truth', 'nature' are at the basis of all good imaginative writing, it is at one's peril that one

neglects to reckon with Bouhours” (Clark 274). More specifically, Bouhours’s ideas on the *bel esprit* and the *je-ne-sais-quoi* received a considerable amount of attention in the Restoration England. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* was taken up by many major playwrights of the period when discussing wit or attempting to provide an elegantly evasive definition of it, employing an equal strategic by-pass to what Bouhours himself perfected in the two above discussed texts.

In general, the term enjoyed particular success in the polite conversation of Restoration in England. It constitutes one example of “the vogue for French elegance that Charles II and his courtiers brought back with them to England in 1660” (Scholar 42). The *je-ne-sais-quoi* appears for the first time in Robert Boyle’s tragedy *Tryphon* (1668) and it confirms that Bouhours in 1671 is making use of a word already in vogue. The French expression is mentioned in ‘The Prologue’ when the protagonists, Nokes and Angell, attempt to define another fashionable epithet, ‘wit’:

- NOKES. A wit is in one word – I know not what?
 ANGELL. Of that kind Title give your Poet Joy.
 A wit is then in French, A je ne scay quoi.
 A modish name.
 NOKES. Yes, Sir, that Name to gain,
 How many of our Writers crack their brain?
 (Boyle, *Prologue to Tryphon*)

“Boyle’s two elegant wits display the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a linguistic fashion item in Restoration London” (43). The ‘modish name’ stands here for an equally modish thing and it was afterwards used in a rather ironic and mocking sense in several texts, both theatre plays and essays. In Thomas Shadwell’s *The Virtuoso* (1676), for example, the coquettish Lady Gimrack seduces a young man with the modish confession: “[...] sight of you did stir in me a strange *Je ne scai quoi* towards you” (III, ii). Earl of Shaftesbury in his collection of essays *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1713) refers to, no doubt with a very polite irony, that “*je ne sais quoi* of wit, and all those graces of mind which these virtuoso-lovers delight to celebrate” (Shaftesbury 63).

Restoration comedies use the *je-ne-sais-quoi* to describe those who would pass for having wit. But, as Scholar observantly points out, one’s man wit is another man’s foppery. Congreve’s *Double Dealer* (1694) includes an English *précieuse ridicule*, Lady Froth, who is characterized as ‘a great Cocquet; pretender to Poetry, Wit, and Learning’ in the dramatic personae (Congreve 16). Lady Froth holds that the heroine’s unaffected admirer, Mellefont, lacks what she calls ‘a Manner’. The two ladies share the following exchange during which Lady Froth provides an explanation of her usage of the term:

- LADY FROTH. Some distinguishing quality, as for example, the *belle-air* or *brillant* of Mr. Brisk; the solemnity, yet complaisance of my lord, or something of his own, that should look a little *je-ne-scay-quoish*; he is too much of a mediocrity, in my mind.

CYNTHIA. He does not indeed affect either pertness, or formality; for which I like him. (II, ll. 42-7)

While Scholar reads this passage as a proof of how “the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is [...] firmly settled as the subtle artifice by which one cultivates a natural manner,” I prefer to see it as a clear sign of the demise of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* and its related set of terms including the *bel esprit* towards the close of the seventeenth century. In the comedy, Lady Froth is one of the villains, whose social pretense and inauthenticity goes hand in hand with her own admiration for the foreign forms of affectation. For that is what the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as well as the *bel esprit* finally came to be regarded as – signs of counterfeit emotions and outdated attitudes which started to fall out of the audiences’ favour towards the close of the seventeenth century.

The importance of Bouhours’s discussion of the *bel esprit* as a part of an unorthodox neoclassical aesthetic theory was recognized by Joseph Addison in the *Spectator* 62, in a passage which significantly promoted the French critic’s reputation across the channel:

Bouhours, whom I look upon to be the most penetrating of all the *French* Criticks, has taken Pains to show, that it is impossible for any Thought to be beautiful which is not just, and has not its Foundation in the Nature of things: that the Basis of all Wit is Truth; and that no Thought can be valuable, of which good sense is not the Ground-work. (*The Spectator* I 268)

Good sense, in Bouhours’s view, could sometimes operate instinctively and rapidly but with great certainty: in such cases it was the same as good taste (*The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, Vol. 4 77-8). However, while Bouhours’s stylistic strategy aimed at restricting the territory of literary and artistic appreciation that only belonged to the members of the salon culture of French society, Addison’s own concerns with style were, as we will see in the third chapter, much closer to the tastes and ideologies of the newly establishing merchant classes of the English early modern coffeehouse culture.

Some of Bouhours’s premises and opinions of *esprit* and other terms will be appearing in the following subchapter which deals with his follower – chevalier de Méré. Similarly to Bouhours, he puts forward a theory of *esprit* which cannot be regarded as an example of the official neoclassical, rhetoric-based, critical doctrine, but rather as a newly emerging aesthetics of suggestion. At the same time, however, his association of *esprit* with nature puts him close to the ideas of Nicolas Boileau, whose ideas of *esprit* are the subject of the third subchapter of this chapter. As such, Méré’s ideas provide an important connecting link between the aesthetic of suggestion and a more official doctrine of dogmatic neo-classicism.