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Nicolas Boileau-Déspreaux and the ideal of neoclassical esprit

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together they inhabit a pastoral-like ‘patrie lointaine’ far away from the false truths and artifices of the fashionable salons– a society which only the most perfect *honnêtes hommes* are permitted to enter .

According to Benay, this interpretation of Méré’s theory of *esprit* is confirmed by the critic’s growing aversion to the city, its pretentious and over-cultivated way of life, professing sympathy for the simplicity of country: “Do not believe that I am enchanted by Paris or by the Court. It seems to me that I am a citizen of the world, not unlike Socrates; and yet from time to time I turn my eyes towards my home town in the country, and perhaps it is with same tenderness which Cato felt for his homeland”⁸³ (31). Thus, Méré reappraises and reappropriates *esprit*, taking it out of the fashionable *précieuse* salons into the company of those unaffected by the entanglements of *jeux d’esprit*-riddled conversation, discarding along the way both the *précieuse* ideal of delicate artifice as well as the dogmatic neoclassical doctrines. Of course, this radical move on Méré’s part has to be seen in the light of his incoherent and slightly contradictory theories – his aversion to the Court expressed bluntly in the above quotation can be contradicted by his equally keen appraisal of the new Court expressed in the *Discours*. At the same time, the vehement tone of what is clearly more personal piece of writing must be acknowledged as unique within the context of the early modern French ideas on *esprit* and his ideas represent an important body of thought and aesthetic and ideological stance which throws much-needed light on the development of the terms in question. Before exploring theories of wit which were formed on the English side of the channel, I will now look into the ideas on *esprit* of the last proponent of the French literature of the latter part of the seventeenth century, the defender of neoclassical theory, Nicolas Boileau- Despreaux.

2.3 Nicolas Boileau-Despreaux and the Ideal of Neoclassical Esprit

This subchapter further examines the role of *esprit* in the “conspiracy to protect the ineffable,” the element of allusiveness, tentativeness, almost secretiveness, and a feature which can be said to characterize the birth of the French aesthetic thought of the latter part of the seventeenth century (Borgerhoff ix). This feature is shared by *esprit* with the *je-ne-sais-quoi* of Bouhours’s theory of cultural exclusiveness as well as with the *sublime* which is one of the central literary-critical terms of the poetic theory of Nicolas Boileau. I will first introduce Boileau’s critical precepts and then concentrate on his two key works: *Le Traité du sublime*, his translation of the treatise *On the Sublime* by the Greek rhetorician Longinus, and his own critical masterpiece, *L’Art poétique*.*

Le Traité du sublime and *L’Art poétique* were both published in 1674 as a part of Boileau’s two-volume *Œuvres diverses*. They were conceived by the poet as a critical diptych and it is clear that they should be interpreted thus. I will therefore first look into the ways

*) For the sake of simplicity, I will henceforth refer to ‘Longinus’ or Pseudo-Longinus as Longinus.

in which Boileau employed *esprit* in his translation of Longinus and his own poem on poetry and criticism. Next, I will provide a comparative analysis of the French text of the poem and its 1680 English translation. Boileau's interest in the *sublime* in *L'Art poétique* seems to be an extension of the ideas he mediated in the translation of Longinus's treatise. The basic premise is that *nature* and *art* are not opposed, but rather subsumed in 'the perfect manner of sublime'; and *raison* is not the instrument of logic it is usually taken to be, but a means of insight and a principle of control for the creative writer. Thus *esprit* describes innate potential, but also creative power: it is both an inherited gift and an act of judgment. It is significant that Boileau uses both *esprit* and *nature* to translate the Greek φύσις. Other contexts of *esprit* will also be discussed, in particular with regard to the moral issues connected to literary criticism and production which Alexander Pope will draw from in *An Essay on Criticism* – his own attempt to formulate the current state of the English criticism and the rules which (ought to) guide those taking part in it.

2.3.1 Boileau as a Critic

The appreciation of Boileau as an individual critic and the consequent significance ascribed to the critical principles that he formulated has been contested at various points of the literary history. While he was perceived as a writer of low lampoons and less-than-elegant panegyrics by his own contemporaries and as a model of poetic elegance and critical perception by the eighteenth-century critics, he has dwindled to the status of a minor and rather obscure writer representing an outdated version of stilted unreality by the mid-twentieth century. Traditionally regarded as the patron saint of the French neoclassicism by its supporters, and at the same time seen as a pedant who had cramped and tethered French poetry in the shackles of rules and dry clinging to rationalism by those disavouring the literary style, he has until recently been labelled a prosaic and pompous versifier. In either case, this old-fashioned notion of Boileau as the archpriest of a rationalist cult of rules has still not been entirely superseded or discredited.

For the purpose of my analysis of the use of the term *esprit* in Boileau's criticism, I wish to adopt the viewpoint of the recent literary history, which has done a considerable amount of work reevaluating the critic's status. In particular I share a thesis of Jules Brody whose research is directed at Boileau's critical theories from the point of view of his ideas on the *sublime*, and who stresses the intuitive nature of critical perception and the neoclassical notion of reason in general, and the way in which for Boileau this intuition is linked with 'knowledge' in the widest sense – not so much factual knowledge as experience, wisdom, and mental vigour. The importance of reason and the rational is usually regarded as one of the key premises of the neoclassicism. Reason must be however understood in an impersonal, idealized way, as it is closely connected to the principles of *vraisemblance* and *bienséance* and is virtually included in them. It does not imply the willingness to follow a logical argument wherever it leads but rather the belief that reasoning is the instrument by which critics can establish the significance of these fundamental concepts and so lay down rules for creative writing. All this suggests that

the neoclassical doctrine can hardly be regarded as binding or monolithic as was frequently supposed.

In keeping with this statement, I wish to propose that Boileau, not unlike Dominique Bouhours, bases many of his theoretical assumptions on art of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* without necessarily attempting to reduce the *sublime* to it. For example in the *Preface* to the 1701 edition of his collected works, Boileau directly relates the term to the cause of aesthetic pleasure: “[i]f I am asked to say what charm or salt is, my reply will be that it is a *je-ne-sais-quoi* that one is able to feel much better than to express”⁸⁴ (*Œuvres poétiques* 4). Here, Boileau emphasizes the vagueness of his conception, but immediately explains that aesthetic pleasure is brought about by the first expression of a thought that everyone has had. The origin of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* here is not wrapped in mystery: it is universally acknowledged truth and, plausibly, an equally accessible ability. Boileau, then, does not follow Bouhours in his unyielding isolation of the term from the undistinguished majority, but instead displaces the aristocratic, elitist values of a minority good taste by the universal values of a ‘public’ culture. His position on the ‘nescioquiddity game’ seems to be rather negative as he chooses to adopt an ideologically unbiased pose in his criticism.

As I have already demonstrated in my analysis of Bouhours’s employment of *esprit* in the theories of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* and *la délicatesse*, there was enough space in the neoclassical doctrine to accommodate matters which had little to do with jejune rules or sober rationalism. It becomes more and more conspicuous that the intuitive and indefinable played a significant role in the French theories of poetic creation and appreciation of the latter part of the seventeenth century. My analysis of Boileau’s conception of *esprit* and its relation to reason and the *sublime* will hopefully expand this hypothesis.

2.3.2 Esprit in Boileau’s Translation of *Le Traité du sublime*

Throughout the *Traité du sublime* Boileau uses *esprit* interchangeably with *nature* to render φύσις, Longinus’s word for “natural endowment”. But that is hardly its total meaning here. *Esprit* denotes native gift, as well as a capacity for awareness and restraint. Longinus wrote that “the first and most important source of sublimity” is “the power of forming great conceptions” which in Boileau’s translation became ‘certain elevation of mind which makes us think fortuitously of various things’. From here on, Boileau developed the suggestion that the mental quality basic to great writing though “certain” to exist is of an “uncertain” essence. In the ninth chapter of the treatise the burden of what Boileau was trying to make the ancient author say becomes clearer: “Elsewhere I have written as follows: ‘Sublimity is the echo of a great soul.’ Hence also a bare idea, by itself and without a spoken word, sometimes excites admiration just because of the greatness of soul implied”⁸⁵ (IX 2). The step from ‘certain’ to the *je-ne-sais-quoi* was natural for Boileau. The note of tentativeness which Boileau strikes both in the *Traité* and in discussions that grew up around it seems to characterize an inability to explain as well as genuine willingness to welcome and live with the inexplicable. Further on, dur-

ing discussion of Homer, the Ancient poet possess ‘loftiest mind’ (‘élévation d’esprit’): “Hence sublime thoughts belong properly to the loftiest minds” and is associated with the sublime proportions: “The distance between heaven and earth – a measure, one might say, not less appropriate to Homer’s genius than to the stature of his discord”⁸⁶ (IX 4). In this context, the ‘élévation d’esprit’ is used to characterize the poetic achievement of Homer’s prime, the *Iliad*, with its impressive battle scenes, and heroic portraits of gods and men. This poem, filled with action and dramatic tension, was, in Longinus’s view, the fruit of the poet’s maturity, while the *Odyssey* with its emphasis on narrative and the marvelous the work of the old age. Boileau turned this proposition into an ever so slightly judgmental statement: “When we turn to the *Odyssey* we find occasion to observe that a great poetical genius in the decline of power which comes with old age naturally leans towards the fabulous”⁸⁷ (IX 12). The idea of weakness which Boileau inserts here for no apparent reason, undergoes a rather elaborate extension as his rendering of the judgment on the *Odyssey* develops. Boileau seems to be suggesting that something has happened to Homer’s *esprit*:

[...] comme Homère composé son Iliade durant que son esprit était en sa plus grande vigueur, tout le corps de son ouvrage est dramatique et plain d’action ; au lieu que la meilleure partie de l’Odysée se passe en narrations, qui est le génie de la vieillesse.

[...] les génies naturellement les plus élevés tombent quelquefois dans la badinerie, quand la force de leur esprit vient à s’éteindre.

[...] les grands poètes et les écrivains célèbres, quand leur esprit manque de vigueur pour le pathétique, s’amusent ordinairement à peindre les mœurs. (IX 13-15)

In each of these three passages Boileau chooses to explain the aging poet’s decline by the loss of an inner strength which had stayed up the intense productions of his vigorous maturity. Between the erratic conduct of an aging, failing poet and the controlled, relentless carriage of Homer’s prime all the difference lies in the flagging of what Boileau calls *esprit*.

If Homer strays from the path of intensity, Boileau seems to be suggesting, it is because with the decline of his *esprit* he was also deprived of his principle of control. By *esprit* Boileau seems to mean here, as in fact he often does in the *Art poétique*, not merely an innate potential, but an effective creative power, having as much to do with judgment as with talent or gift. This acceptation, moreover, was frequent in the seventeenth-century French cultural context. The word brought together the ideas of innate ability, taste, intellect and judgment; as Jules Brody points out, many French authors and moralists employed the term in this particular way:

Bossuet, like Descartes, used *esprit* for the ‘mind’ : ‘nous n’avons point de mot plus propre pour expliquer celui de νοῦς et de mens.’ La Fontaine opposes *esprit* to *savoir* as ‘intelligence’ or ‘taste’ to ‘learning.’ In the same way La Bruyère speaks of women and courtiers as having

‘beaucoup d’esprit sans erudition.’ Like La Rochefoucauld he equates it also with ‘judgement’; elsewhere he considers it a creative faculty more comprehensive than talent: ‘Entre l’esprit et le talent il y a la proportion du tout à sa partie.’ Mme de Sévigné was pleased to hear Louis Bourdaloue preach on frequent communion ‘si adroitement et avec tant d’esprit.’ (Brody 59)

In making the unflinching gait of Homer’s prime a function of his *esprit* Boileau seems to be suggesting that deep within the creative mind he saw a complex connivance of the natural and the intellectual, vitality and restraint. He will continue to interpret *esprit* in his own attempt to express principles of good writing and correct appreciation of poetry. Before analyzing the term’s role in the text of *L’Art poétique*, I will briefly introduce the poem in its broader context, focusing mainly on the preliminary issues of the translation as well as composition.

2.3.3 L’Art poétique: The Text and the Context

L’Art poétique (1674) is a prescriptive treatise written in a highly polished, witty couplet verse. Often hailed as a modern version of Horace’s *Ars Poetica*, it resembles its model in form and mood as well as in the contents. The first and last of the four cantos deal with general principles of poetry and criticism and offer general advice to authors and critics; the first one including a history of the ‘Parnasse français’. The middle two cantos outline the principles of good writing in the various genres, including some (for example, sonnet, rondeau, madrigal) not known to Horace. William K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks describe *L’Art poétique* as an “amusing expansion of Aristotle and Horace to encompass the several genres [...] which were countenanced by the French classicism. The poem exhibits a certain interesting Gallic bias, as of classicism nationalized, and a nicely reasonable wit” (*Literary Criticism* 235).

L’Art poétique was translated into English as *The Art of Poetry* by William Soames in 1680 and revised by John Dryden two years later.* Dryden replaced the examples from French literature with examples from English literature in order to make the text more accessible for his readers.** The adaptation is an attempt to find a similar pattern in English literature between approximately 1660s to 1680s similar to the pattern found by Boileau in French literature of the same period. The intention on the part of the translators to produce an English ‘poetic’ is also shown by the omission of passages irreverent to English literary conditions, such as verses 21 to 26 of Canto I, where hiatus, enjambment etc., are discussed. An interesting divergence from the spirit of the original can be found in the passage relating to burlesque poetry, where Boileau’s point is either missed, or – far more probably – purposefully distorted. Where Boileau recommends to his fellow-poets “Imitons de Marot

*) In my subsequent analysis of the text, I will use the 1683 edition of the translation as it appeared in *The Continental Model. Selected French Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century*, edited by Scott Elledge and Donald Schier, pp. 208-69.

**) In doing so, Dryden followed the practice initiated by George Etherege, Lord Buckingham, and John Oldham, all of whom chose to find English analogues to various French culture-specific references.

l'élégant badinage, / Et laissons le burlesque aux plaisants du Pont Neuf" Dryden has "But learn from Butler the buffooning grace, / And let burlesque in ballads be employed". While more or less authentic willingness to add the last refinements to English verse was one of the features of the English criticism of the 1680s, the tradition of satiric mode of writing, which excludes the idea of *decorum* and nobility of style as well as admiration towards satirists (in this case Samuel Butler's *Hudibras*), was too strong to be subdued by the neoclassical doctrine. The two codes were irreconcilable and the French point of view had to yield to the English one. Similar liberties were taken by the translators when dealing with *l'esprit* and *wit* as I will show in the next section of this subchapter.

Drawing attention to the generic tension characteristic for works of verse criticism, Gordon Pocock makes an interesting point when he argues that while the poem's title could suggest it is meant as a systematic treatise setting out neo-classical doctrine, the poem itself can be read as a dramatic event (83). It is a known fact that Boileau gave readings from *L'Art poétique* in various salons from 1672 onwards. The poem was meant to be read aloud in the fashionable environment of the Parisian aristocratic and artistic circles. While the element of dramatic recitation was always of a great concern to Boileau, in this poem it is crucially important. At the outset of the text, Boileau seems to be insisting that to write well the poet must possess not only "native poetic potential (*génie*), which is not entirely rare," but some other ability, which is considerably more difficult to find: "a secret source of poetic effectiveness which is extremely rare." Much of *L'Art Poétique* revolves around this indefinable centre, which is felt for the first time in the proposition in lines 3-5, between 'influence secrète' and 'génie': "If at the Birth the Stars that rul'd thy Sence / Shone not with a Poetic Influence : / In thy strait Genius thou wilt still be bound" ⁸⁸ (ll. 3-5).

Another significant issue concerning the composition of *L'Art poétique* is the question of the interplay of the intellectual with the moral. The stress on the guiding power of reason (*la raison, le bon sens*) and its necessary dominance over the poetic devices (*la rime*) is put forward by the poet very early in the Canto I: "What-e're you write of Pleasant or Sublime, / Always let sense accompany your Rhyme ; / Falsely they seem each other to oppose ; / Rhyme must be made with Reason's Laws to close / And when to conquer her you bend your force, / The Mind will Triumph in the Noble Course" (ll. 27-32). Reason for Boileau and his contemporaries was not a calculating attitude of mind, nor yet the analytical and critical, generalizing and abstracting reason of philosophers, but rather the Cartesian reason which directs the human soul and distinguishes true from false. This is the meaning of the term which Boileau uses to culminate this passage in, creating what has since his times become practically proverbial couplet in French:

To Reason's yoke she [rhyme] quickly will incline,
Which, far from hurting, renders her Divine:
But, if neglected, will as easily stray,
And Master Reason, which she should obey.
Love Reason then : and let what e're you Write
Borrow from her its Beauty, Force, and Light.⁸⁹
(ll. 33-8)

This mapping out of the power relations allows Boileau to smoothly connect the intellect-ruled poetic abilities and the ethical imperative. Further on in the Canto I, the lack of sense or knowledge of the proper way of writing, is discussed in the language of ethics: “Observe the Language well in all you Write, / And swerve not from it in your loftiest flight. / The smoothest Verse, and the exactest Sence / Displease us, if ill English give offence : / A barb’rous Phrase no Reader can approve”⁹⁰ (ll. 155-9). A clumsily composed phrase is ‘vicieux’ and the list of the offences continues with adjectives like ‘orgueilleux’ (proud) and ‘méchant’ (evil) for a bad writer (ll. 160-2). Literary faults are moral errors, the result of lack of self-knowledge: “But Authors that themselves too much esteem, / Lose their own Genius, and mistake their Theme”⁹¹ (ll.19-20). The moral quality of intellectual clarity comes out most forcefully in lines 147-54 of Canto I, with their attack on those who cannot think straight. The clinching line is celebrated: “What we conceive, with ease we can express”⁹² (l. 153). The appeal for moral self-scrutiny and call for self-knowledge does not involve an author exclusively, but is presented as a communal activity: “[...] find you faithful Friends that will reprove, / That on your Works may look with careful Eyes, / And of your Faults be zealous Enemies : / Lay by an Author’s Pride and Vanity, / And from a Friend a Flatterer descry”⁹³ (ll. 186-90).

2.3.4 Use of Esprit in *L’Art poétique*

As I have already mentioned, the English translation of the poem was rather loose in its replacement of the French authors with the English ones. Scott Elledge and Donald Schier even suggest that it is more appropriate to call it an adaptation rather than a translation (*The Continental Model* 385). From the point of view of the term which lies at the centre of my interest and the way it was handled by the translators the term adaptation is certainly much more appropriate as a very non-orthodox approach was employed by Soames and Dryden with regard to its translation.

The term *esprit* appears thirty eight times in *L’Art poétique* while there are only twenty four occurrences of ‘wit’ in the English translation. *Esprit* is in fact more often translated as ‘mind’ (six times) than as ‘wit’ (five times). For example “L’esprit rassasié le rejette à l’instant” is “The Mind once satisfi’d, is quickly cloy’d” (l. 62); “L’esprit à la trouver aisément s’habitué” is “The Minds will Triumph in the Noble Course” (l. 32); “Sans rien dire à l’esprit, étourdir les oreilles” is “Confound my Ears, and not instruct my Mind” (l. 36); “L’esprit n’est point ému de ce qu’il ne croit pas” (l. 50) is “The mind’s not mov’d, if your Discourse be vain” (l. 51); “L’esprit ne se sent point plus vivement frappe” (l. 57) becomes “The mind is most agreeably surprised” (l. 55); and “Tout prend un corps, une ame, un esprit, un visage” (l. 64) is “All must assume a Body, Mind, and Face” (l. 163). There are often instances where *esprit* or its modifications are transformed into various expressions; for example *bel esprit* becomes ‘charming Poetry’ (l. 8); *esprit* is ‘Weight’ (l. 12), ‘Authors’ (l. 19), ‘Writer’ (l. 147), ‘Reader’ (l. 159), ‘l’esprit phlegmatique’ (l. 72) is ‘cold Rhyme’ (l. 73).

As James H. Jensen points out, Dryden uses ‘wit’ in his translation to express several things. First, to describe an inventive man with a copious fancy – such a person’s abilities can make him anyone from an urbane, polite conversationalist to a great poet. In this sense, he uses ‘wit’ or ‘wits’ as the translation for *poète, auteur*, ‘les plus savants auteurs’, ‘un sublime écrivain’, ‘noble esprit’, and ‘comic wit’ (poet) for ‘le comique’. In the sense of invention, fancy, and expression, fused with judgment, as for example perceived in a finished work, it is the faculty which controls or orders. In *The Art of Poetry* ‘la noble hardiessesse’ (“la noble hardiessesse des plus beaux vers”) as well as the expression ‘rêveries’ become ‘wit’. Also, “l’agréable et le fin” is translated as ‘wit’ and the sentence “Horace a cette aigreur mêla son enjoyment” (l. 152) is “Horace his pleasing wit to this did add” (l. 147) (*A Glossary of John Dryden’s Critical Terms*, 5).

In the poem, Boileau clearly employs *esprit* in multiple senses which often contradict each other and contrast intuitive creative power with judgement and restraint. In fact, similarly wide scope of *esprit*’s meaning characterizes Boileau’s own creative writing. Susan W. Tieffenbrun drew attention to the highly expressive way in which the author renders the complex duality of the term in the ninth of the twelve poems which constitute *Les Satires*, a collection of twelve highly topical satirical poems. The two aspects of the creative mind are actually severed and personified in order to engage in a dialogue which strikingly resembles the classical Freudian patterns of ego and superego interaction. In it the restraining superego of a satirist suffers in his awareness of his own sterile power as a poet and a social critic is confronted by the rash and intuitive *esprit*-ego. The courageous and swift *esprit*-ego is finally won over and silenced by the super-ego’s cautious pleading, but only after the pragmatic super-ego turns the discussion to the subject of the King, with whom the *Satires* began in the form of the *Discours au Roy*. Representing the ultimate, divine authority, “Louis incarnates for the *esprit*-ego the sole truly legitimate subject to which he can in good conscience address his verse, since the King, unlike the rest of the audience, is certain to comprehend and appreciate his work in the spirit in which it was created” (Tieffenbrun 683).

In my analysis, I was able to locate four different meanings of *esprit* in the poem. The two meanings identified by Tieffenbrun in *Les Satires* relate to the author’s mind: the first, the *esprit*-as-ego is the one which instigates the poetic action; it is creative but often without restraint and rational judgment while the other, the *esprit*-as-superego is rational and keeps the ego in place while depending on its creative energy. In fact, although Tieffenbrun does not make it explicit, it is clear that they depend on each other and only together can they produce poetry. Thus the super-ego is invoked by Boileau at the outset of the poem where some ground rules are laid down for potential poets: “Ni prendre pour genie un amour de rimer :/ Craignez d’un vain plaisir les trompeuses amorces, / Et consultez longtemps votre esprit et vos forces” (Do not mistake for genius the desire to rhyme: / Fear the deceitful baits of vain pleasures, / And consult well your wit and abilities”) (ll.10-2). In the very next line there is an example of the *esprit*-as-ego, serving as a warning to those authors who fall under the spell of their own ego and vain pride: “Mais souvent un esprit qui se flatte et qui s’aime, / Méconnaît son génie et s’ignore soi-même” (But often a wit who flatters himself and who himself loves / Misjudges his

genius and does not know his own self”) (ll.19-20). Here, once again, the artistic failures are closely linked to the social and ethical ones. The stress on reason and sense can be identified in the following lines as well, where they are needed to supervise the creative powers “[q]ue toujours le bon sens s’accorde avec le rime; / L’un l’autre vainement ils semblent se haïr; / La rime est une esclave, et ne doit qu’obéir. / Lorsqu’à la bien chercher d’abord on s’évertue, / L’esprit à la trouver aisément s’habitue” (“so that good sense always agrees with rhyme; / They seem to hate each other only, / Rhyme is a slave, and should but obey. / While one strives hard searching for it, / The mind will learn to find it easily”) (ll. 28-32). Unchecked by reason and good sense, the *esprit*-as-ego succumbs to the false beauties of verbal creativity.

However, *esprit* should be present not only in the author, but is equally important in a reader. Here too, it can assume the form of a restrained and restraining appreciative ability with taste for balance and the rational or of an exuberant and shallow mind favouring the excessive and frivolous. As Boileau continues to explore the theme of interconnectedness of the aesthetical and ethical requirements in author, he condemns the ‘barren superfluity’⁹⁴ of the *précieux* (ll. 49-60). Such writing is not welcome as “[l]’esprit rassasié le rejette à l’instant” (The mind once satisfied quickly rejects it”) (l. 62). Still, the formal aspect of poetry cannot be ignored either. Stressing the regularity of rhyme and mellifluous vocabulary, the critic also exhorts that the author “[f]uyez des mauvais sons le concours odieux : / Le vers le mieux rempli, la plus noble pensée / Ne peut plaire à l’esprit quand l’oreille est blessée” (Avoid odious noise of the unpleasant sound: / The verse can be infused with most noble ideas, but still will not please the mind, if it hurts the ear”) (ll. 110-2). Without having to make it more obvious, the readers (or Boileau’s audiences) understood that the *esprit* here is of the kind which can appreciate the balanced poetic creation in which lies the basis of true wit. A similar image of confounded ears and neglected mind can be found in Canto III where Boileau describes how a badly-written play (“a mass of ill-joined miracles”) “says nothing to the mind, and deafens the ears” (l. 36).

Apart from these meanings *esprit* can also stand for simply ‘mind’ in the sense a seat of mental activity. It is the only meaning of the term in Boileau which does not seem to have any – positive or negative – connotations. This ‘neutral’ sense of *esprit* is appears several times in the poem, for example in Canto III where Boileau describes the rules for composing a perfect piece of heroic poetry: “Là pour nous enchanter tout est mis en usage; / Tout prend un corps, une âme, un esprit, un visage” (ll. 163-4). In this case, Dryden’s translation is fairly accurate: “Here fiction must employ its utmost grace, / All must assume a body, mind, and face” (ll. 162-3). Similarly, the lines “[l]’Évangile à l’esprit n’offre de tous côtés” (l. 201) is translated as “The Gospel offers nothing to our thoughts,” (l. 200) is more or less accurate, with *esprit* having a neutral charge as “thoughts.” A few lines later, a similar phrase “[l]a fable offre à l’esprit mille agréments divers” meaning ‘the fable offers to the mind thousands diverse pleasures’ (l. 237) is translated as “In fable we a thousand pleasures see” (l. 236). Occasionally *esprit* can mean the mental activity itself, as for example in the line 340: “Aux accès insolence d’une bouffonne joie, / La sagesse, l’esprit, l’honneur, furent en proie” – here the term can

assume a meaning ranging from mental activity as such to the appreciative term signifying an exceptional quality of the activity.

Commenting on character delineation in comedy in Canto III Boileau writes: “La nature, féconde en bizzares portraits, / Dans chaque âme est marquée à de différents traits; / Un geste la découvre, un rien la fait paroître. / Mais tout esprit n’a pas des yeux pour la connoître” (ll. 369-72). Here, *esprit* is a part of a commonplace metaphor typical for the seventeenth century. The idea that mind had eyes in fact served thinkers from Plato onward and it denoted a privileged, suprasensual “vision,” which was implicit all along in Boileau’s injunction to “open eyes” to Reason’s light. Reason as a kind of intellectual sense examines things through the eye of the mind. Involved in the last quoted lines, then, is a sensitivity to nuance, a flair for rightness, which is nothing else than Reason.

Esprit can also signify a person or, by extension, a certain social status. At the beginning of Canto I Boileau identifies his target audience and their aspirations with an early warning: “O vous donc qui, brûlant d’une ardeur périlleuse, / Courez du bel esprit la carrièr épiénuse” (ll. 7-8). By Dryden and Soames this is translated as “You, then, that burn with a desire to try / The dangerous course of charming poetry.” However, a less loose translation of the lines would be “You who, burning with a dangerous desire, / Embark on the thorny journey of a true wit,” making the warning for all those who want to take part in the salon life of the French high society much more obvious: You are about to enter a world which, although glittering and full of easy glamour on the surface, is in reality filled with hidden obstacles for those who want to conquer it.

The meanings of *esprit* employed by Boileau I identified in the poem demonstrate that the term covered an extensive scope of conceptual nuances, ranging from neutral descriptive one to both positive and negative denotations of abilities of appreciation and composition of poetry. While Boileau does not make *esprit* the central critical term of his text, it nevertheless constitutes an indispensable critical platform on which he can build his main aesthetic theory of good versus bad taste both in authors and readership and audience.

2.3.5 Boileau’s Reception in England

In terms of general impact of Boileau’s *œuvre magistrale*, the poem spurred a series of similar efforts within a few years after the publication of the Soames-Dryden adaptation. The first wave was represented by three most notable texts: Rochester’s *Allusion to the Tenth Satire of Horace* (1680), the *Essay upon Poetry* by John Sheffield, Earl of Mulgrave (1682), and translation of Horace’s *Ars poetica* by Wentworth Dillon, Earl of Roscommon as well as his *Essay on Translated Verse* (1684); the second wave included *Epistle to a Friend* (1700) by Samuel Wensley, and *Essay on Unnatural Flights in Poetry* (1701) by George Granville, and of course *Essay on Criticism* (1711) by Alexander Pope. I will deal with the comparison of Boileau’s and Pope’s theories of *esprit* and wit respectively later; as far as

the above-mentioned attempts are concerned, it will suffice to say that, unlike Pope who stood apart from the tradition and the crowd, they are all full of commonplaces, of the authors themselves as well as of others.

In this chapter, texts of three French critics – Dominique Bouhours, chevalier de Méré and Nicolas Boileau were analyzed in order to demonstrate how these authors employed the term *esprit*. I demonstrated that in all of the three authors' theories, the concept has variety of usages beyond the boundaries of verbal or literary sphere of culture. Unlike Bouhours and Méré, who merge the literary and the social contexts of *esprit*, Boileau sees the two as necessary and equally valuable ingredients in an outstanding work of literary art which possesses the quality.

Presenting *esprit* as one of elements of the French aesthetical theories, I also wished to explore how the term interacts with other critical concepts, in particular the *sublime* and the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. Here, the *je-ne-sais-quoi* should be seen as the object of competing discourses: in the mouth of Méré, it serves for instance to register judgments of social incongruity (the pretensions of a scholar to *honnêteté*); Boileau uses it to denote the particular quality of literary work that satisfies 'the general taste of mankind', a quality he interprets as the expression of an idea that everyone must have had, in a form that seizes their attention. On the other hand, the extensive discussion in Bouhours's *Entretiens d'Ariste et d'Eugene* emphasizes the omnipresence of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* – in nature, art, and even divine grace – and seems to be aimed at preserving mystery as a means to sustaining the ideal of harmonious conversation. I will now continue my reading of the early modern ideas on wit by looking at the theories of three selected English critics of the latter half of the seventeenth century and analyzing their works in order to determinate the significance and specific uses they ascribed to *wit*.

