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Alexander Pope and wit as meta-criticism

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3.2 Alexander Pope and Wit as Meta-criticism

This subchapter focuses on Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Criticism*, usually regarded as a masterpiece of the early Augustan criticism and – in words of Joseph Addison – an assemblage of the “most known and most received observations on the subject of literature and criticism” (*Spectator* No. 253). Even though I will refer to several other texts by Pope throughout this subchapter as well, its centre is constituted by the analysis of the *Essay*, as the poem represents a point of contrast with the following subchapter's main text – i.e. the *Spectator* papers on wit by Joseph Addison. Although it chronologically precedes the *Spectator* series on wit (May 1711), it is often considered to be the pinnacle of the early eighteenth-century English criticism and therefore should be logically concluding this chapter. My placing it before the subchapter on Addison is a choice based on several arguments, mainly concerning the interplay of wit and the development of literary criticism in the early eighteenth century which will be the key theme of this subchapter.

3.2.1 An Essay on Criticism: Critics' Enigma

The approach of the modern criticism to the *Essay* is a testament to its internal complexities and conflicts: Some critics suggest it should be primarily treated as a work of literary criticism (e.g. Phillip Smallwood in his study *Reconstructing Criticism: Pope's Essay on Criticism and the Logic of Definition*), while others (e.g. Patricia Meyer Spacks in her article ‘Imagery and Method in *An Essay on Criticism*’) emphasize the moral aspect that unites the issues of criticism and creative writing. Meyer Spacks contends that the *Essay* is first and foremost a work of poetic nature with wit having a central position in the poem: “The poetic ambition of the *Essay on Criticism* centers in its attempting to demonstrate how wit can provide a controlling power for what wit creates” (Meyer Spacks 107). Wit for Pope, she continues, is “the image-making faculty, [...], equivalent to invention, the power of poetic discovery and creativity...” (‘ibid.'). In a rather impressionistic manner, William K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks point out that “[Pope's] poem is never without the interest of a certain shimmer upon the surface through the implied dimension of criticism of criticism” (*Neoclassical Criticism* 236).

The relationship of modern literary criticism to the *Essay* has been a rather strained one. There have been several studies published in the past sixty years which are very protective of the text, but there exists another approach, rarer and more sober one. I believe that while the former approach often provides various valuable contexts without which the text could not have been understood properly, the latter approach – because it is less defensive – tends to be more revealing about the poem's significance for our present times. This more objective approach is represented, among others, by Paul D. Cannan who acknowledges the poem's many flaws and confusions. Part of his assumption relies on the contemporary criticism, provided by John Dennis's *Reflections Critical and Satyrical, Upon a Late Rhapsody, Call'd, An Essay on Criticism* (1711), which claimed that a part of the problem of the poem is that it has “a confused sense of audience: at times [it]

seems to be instructing critics how to judge writers, and elsewhere, telling writers how to placate critics” (Cannan 179).

Cannan also sums up the difficulties modern scholars have experienced acknowledging the poem’s qualities claiming that “[...] Pope scholars often seem embarrassed by the poem as a literary criticism: despite its memorable verse, the poem is highly derivative [...] and marred by ambiguous terminology and poor organization” (171). As Cannan contends, the emergence of criticism in England towards the end of the seventeenth century “was concomitant with the rise of the institution of authorship” which brought with it questions about the relationship among author, critic, and audience that remain to be analyzed even today (173). Thus, the *Essay on Criticism* represents the challenges of asserting oneself as critic, with or without simultaneously claiming the status of poet. As a virtually unknown author at the age of twenty-two, Pope had to demonstrate his right to criticize through his performance, not by means of his established respect. But he also took advantage of his anonymity in the poem: like Addison’s and Steele’s Mr. Spectator, Pope presents himself as the model critic by asserting his credentials and by setting himself in opposition to the abstract notion of the bad critic. The persona which Pope creates in the *Essay*, Cannan suggests, is hardly one of a novice: “[R]ather he carefully casts himself as the ideal critic”, the hero-critic with nearly Superman qualities (174). Accordingly, several scholars have suggested that, in the *Essay*, Pope is less interested in critical theory than in establishing himself as a poet and it certainly is an opinion that one must keep in mind while examining the poem. Ruben Quintero asserts that the “*Essay on Criticism* encapsulates [Pope’s] poetical intentions, and he wishes to prepare his most influential reader, the literary critic, for them” (21). Ripley Hotch argues that the *Essay* “is not about criticism, but about the young poet writing the poem, his situation, and his claim to merit. For the poem is, if anything, not a disquisition on criticism, but a proof of the qualifications of the author to assume his place as head of the kingdom of wit he describes” (474-5). Principally I agree with Hotch, although I would like to modify his assertion slightly. Pope is indeed very much interested in asserting himself as a respected and authoritative figure of early eighteenth century English literature, nevertheless, I would not go so far as to suggest that he does not care for the state the contemporary criticism is in – rather he is set on the position he could (and should) take in it. Thus, his concern is the establishing of the relationship between the individual *and* the (poetic) society, while using the concept of wit as the whet-stone of the process.

The *Essay* is divided into three parts: the first prescribes rules for the study of art criticism, while emphasizing the compromise of the contemporary – often conflicting – ideas on criticism in the form of a harmonious system. The second part exposes and analyzes the causes of wrong criticism, and the third part characterizes the morals of a good critic and praises the great critics of the past centuries. Thus, though the poem seems to suggest that its main concern is theory and practice of art and, specifically, literary criticism, its actual scope is much wider and the two themes – literary criticism and literary practice – are presented by Pope as two interlinked activities.

As far as the form of the poem is concerned, it is quite important to realize that while expressing ideas and recommendations about the obligations and strategies of a good

eighteenth-century literary critic, the *Essay* belongs to “the venerable, if short-lived, tradition of English verse criticism, which enjoyed a vogue in the early 1680s” (Cannan 178). Modern critics, Cannan continues, are often quick to distance Pope’s poem from this tradition because it is an essay on *criticism*, not poetry. According to Maynard Mack, “[t]he content of the poem would be quite new to its readers so far as treatment inverse was concerned, there being extant several reputable versified ‘Arts’ of poetry, including Horace’s, but nothing quite like a critical ‘Art’ (Mack, *Alexander Pope: A Life* 178). As Cannan suggests, this form must have been considered old-fashioned and Pope’s contemporaries (Addison, Dennis and others) must have made this connection. While a few examples of verse criticism appeared between 1685 and 1711, they hardly represented the cutting-edge of critical discourse, represented for example by serialized criticism in the *Spectator*. Ideologically, verse criticism was also the province of the aristocratic, gentlemanly critic and not in keeping with the current trend – again, best exemplified in the criticism of Addison and Steele, Charles Gildon’s manual for appreciating Shakespeare appended to the Rowe Shakespeare etc. This aspect of the *Essay* and the ramifications it has for the employment of wit in the poem will be explored in the latter part of the present subchapter.

Modelled after the precedents of Horace’s *Art of Poetry* and Boileau’s *L’Art Poétique* in its contents as well as structure, the *Essay* repeats the classical principles of criticism in a simple, conversational language, which occasionally borders on banter. Apart from wit, other key terms of neoclassical criticism explored in the poem are Nature, genius, taste, ancients, and rules. As I have shown in the introduction, the term wit and its function in the *Essay* received some attention from William Empson mainly because it represented an example of what he called a ‘word with a complex structure’. However, what Empson’s study overlooked was the historical and intellectual context of the poem. I will now present two studies of the poem which try to understand the poem’s central term against these backgrounds in order to set it into a proper context before I continue to discuss its connections with Dryden’s employment of the term.

3.2.2 The Contexts of *An Essay on Criticism*

The approach of Edward Niles Hooker in his article ‘Pope on Wit: *The Essay on Criticism*’ is traditional in its literary-historical framework of argument; there is no theoretical basis or theorem which is subsequently tested. Hooker poses three questions which he intends to answer: First, taking into account that Pope writes an essay devoted to the principles of criticism, what makes him dedicate so much time and attention to wit rather than taste; second, what were the literary discussions and controversies in which Pope was involved at that time and which led him to express his opinion in the *Essay*, and third, “what body of contemporary thought was available to him as he wrote, and how it illuminate[s] the direction and implications of his thinking” (185-6). The study is also motivated by wish to justify the reputation of the text in question and to clarify Pope’s intentions and achievements as a part of a more universal rehabilitation of Pope’s work suggested by Hooker (185).

E. N. Hooker sees the *Essay* as Pope's defence of the term against the attacks of moralists that became numerous towards the end of the seventeenth century. Pope, himself both an author and a critic, is interested in the cooperation between the critical and creative skills. He identifies true genius as the highest form of talent in the poet, and true taste as the highest talent in the critic and proceeds to formulate a principle that the best critics are those who excel as authors themselves: "In *Poets* as true *Genius* is but rare, / True *Taste* as seldom is the *Critick's* Share; / Both must alike from Heav'n derive their Light, / These *born* to Judge, as well as those to Write. / Let such teach others who themselves excell, / And *censure freely* who have written well" (*An Essay on Criticism* ll. 11-6).^{*} True taste and true genius also work in close proximity. The conceptual shift from genius and taste to wit which Hooker performs is rather abrupt as well as metaphorical: According to him a discussion of the art of criticism would be idle unless it expounded taste by revealing the ways and standards of genius. Or, since genius is distressingly rare, one may, like Pope, examine the ways of wit, that more inclusive thing, conceived of as literary talent or as the distinguishing element in literature, the breath of life informing the dull clay (186). Using one of John Dryden's rules on the employment of wit in the process of literary creation ("The composition of all poems is, or ought be, of wit"), Hooker describes it poetically as 'a spark', 'fire, invention,' the life-giving force and his differentiation of wit and its traditional counterpart – judgment – follows the Hobbesian and Lockean line of thought: "Sense and judgment are the solid, useful stuff with which the writer works, but wit is the magic that lifts the stuff to the plane of *belles-lettres*" (186).

During the last decade of the seventeenth century, the English society became saturated with wit for two main reasons. The first, rather complex one, was related to the changing attitude towards language and its ability to access truth and knowledge. Whereas the conceited wit of Metaphysical metaphors used to be seen as a direct link to the hidden, esoteric truth, the philosophers of the 1670s were demanding simple, clear language, untainted by similes and metaphors which were regarded now as deceitful and detrimental. Another reason was that Restoration comedy, appropriating Metaphysical wit and modifying it so that it suited its need for quick, insightful, social discourse dealt with themes often believed immoral and witty metaphors were playwrights' favourite device of conveying the tabooed truths. The new, often satiric, wit, apparently less concerned with matters of spiritual nature, became a tool with which to attack religion and subvert morality. In Hooker's opinion those moralists who attacked wit during that time in fact attacked literature *per se*, as wit in the sense of impulse for creative writing was Pope's main sense throughout the poem (187). These were the key reasons that led Pope to write the poem and to devote so much space to wit. Hooker concludes his article in an apologetic tone: "If he [Pope] was not entirely successful in conveying his meaning with utter clarity, the fault lay partly in the lack of a critical vocabulary" and a reminder that if we wish to comprehend the poet's views of the literary art, we must read the poem "with a fuller awareness of its historical setting" (204).

^{*}) All subsequent quotations from the *Essay* are taken from the Twickenham edition of *Poems of Alexander Pope*, volume I., *Pastoral Poetry and An Essay on Criticism*, p. 237-326.

As Hooker rightly observes, the *Essay* is remarkable for its emphasis on wit instead of other aesthetic categories, e.g. taste, genius, etc. It shows to what extent the term was of great concern to the early Augustan critics. This can be also proven by the acerbic critique from the pen of John Dennis landed on the original version of the *Essay* and published in his already mentioned *Reflections Critical and Satyrical*. One after the other, Dennis picks up the lines of the *Essay* concerned with wit and tears them to shreds, commenting that “[w]herever this Gentleman talks of Wit, he is sure to say something that is very foolish” (411). Dennis takes notice of the ambiguity with which Pope uses the term. Finding fault with the four lines as they appeared in the first edition of the poem: “What is this Wit that our Cares employ, / The Owner’s Wife that other Men enjoy? / The more his Trouble as the more admir’d, / Where wanted scorn’d, and envy’d where acquir’d” (Dennis, *Reflections Critical and Satyrical* 411) he says: “[...] what does he mean by acquir’d Wit? Does he mean Genius by the word Wit, or Conceit and Point?” (411). If by wit Pope means Genius, it cannot be, as Genius is never acquired, if he uses the term to mean conceit, point, it does not make sense at all, as “those are things that ought never to be in Poetry, unless by chance sometimes in the Epigram, or in Comedy, where it is proper to the Character and the Occasion; and ev’n in Comedy it ought always to give place to Humour” (411). Dennis’s conclusion is marked with scathing criticism of both the poem and its author:

He dictates perpetually, and pretends to give Law without any thing of the Simplicity or Majesty of a Legislator, and pronounces Sentence without any thing of the Plainness or Clearness, or Gravity of a Judge. Instead of Simplicity we have little Conceit and Epigram, and Affectation. Instead of Majesty we have something that is very mean, and instead of Gravity we have something that is very boyish. And instead of Perspicuity and lucid Order, we have but too often Obscurity and Confusion. (ibid.)

I believe that Arthur Fenner is right in suggesting that another layer of historical context should be taken into account when reading the poem when he says “Pope’s contribution to a rather bitter warfare then raging between the “wits” and their critics, a warfare which had included the Ancients and Moderns controversy, Collier’s *Short View* and the many replies to it, Blackmore’s *Satyr Against Wit*, and several *Spectator* essays” (238).

For Fenner, the *Essay* is first and foremost “a defense [sic] of poets against foolish and hostile critics in tones that shift gradually from banter to a passionate plea” (ibid.). The banter is clearly discernible in the opening lines:

‘Tis hard to say, if greater Want of Skill
Appear in *Writing* or in *Judging* ill;
But, of the two, less dangerous is th’Offense,
To tire our *Patience*, than mis-lead our *Sense*:
Some few in *that*, but Numbers err in *this*,
Ten Censure wrong for one who Writes amiss;

A Fool might once *himself* alone expose,
 Now *One* in *Verse* makes many more in *Prose*.”
 (*An Essay on Criticism*, ll.1-8)

Fenner contends that these lines should be read to mean that it is “hard to say which is a worse bungler, but surely a bad poet is less dangerous to us than a bad critic, and in recent years bad critics have become ten times more numerous” (238) and recall the “critical wars” raging during the time the poem was written.

In Emile Audra’s and Aubrey Williams’s introduction to the Twickenham edition of the *Essay* the term is approached both from the point of view of the immediate context of the poem and – in a broader context – as a key item in the vocabulary of the Augustan literary criticism. Audra and Williams also explain why Pope chose the term as the poem’s central theme and what function it had on the contemporary literary scene. They claim that Pope’s poem dealing with the nature of poetic art both from the point of view of the poet and the critic is an uncompromising synthesis of all the moods and strains current in the neoclassical literary criticism. The fact which has been bothering many modern literary critics and readers alike – the poem’s apparent obscurity and loose and contradictory usage of such central terms as ‘nature’ and ‘wit’ – is interpreted as Pope’s deliberate attempt at formulating the principles of the neoclassical criticism. The poem is a result of Pope’s preference to maintain the complications issuing from the highly eclectic set of values at work during the period rather than succumbing to the simplifications of artistic truth. The *Essay*’s antithetical reality is not obscured but emphasized intentionally by Pope whose main goal is to harmonize the opposing attitudes of several critical schools (Audra and Williams 213).

If it appears then that Pope uses his key word of choice as a part of often contradictory assertions, we should understand that he does so for a reason. Audra and Williams proceed to give an account of the word’s usage story from roughly 1650 to 1710. Similarly to Spingarn’s approach, they follow the wit-versus-judgement line of the development. These two notions in fact symbolize two opposing forces in the evolution of the ideas concerning literary art and its (in)capability to access truth. In association with poetry, wit – which till the Renaissance had been itself very closely connected to rhetoric – is opposed to rational reasoning whose popularity was growing stronger as the seventeenth century advanced towards its end. The French logician Peter Ramus reassigned the “anciently established five parts of the art of rhetoric” (i.e. invention, arrangement, memory, expression (style) and delivery) so that it included only expression and style, while the three other parts were now included in dialectic (215). This division reduced the function of rhetoric to a concern with mere ornamentation of truths that logic was happy enough to discover.

An important consequence of this division was the tendency to associate wit with the merely pleasing, ornamental, fanciful, impetuous, and insubstantial. According to Audra and Williams, this means that “[t]he ultimate effect of such a line of thought as this would be the trivialization of poetry itself: the faculty of wit and the figurative language it inspires are seen as unrelated to truth and real knowledge, to ‘things as they are’”

because the “figurative language is of the essence of poetry, the denial of its ability to express truth is the denial of the value and dignity of poetry” (217).

Compared to Dryden’s usage of wit throughout his literary career, Pope’s employment of the term is similarly diffuse in the space of a single poem. Pope, for whom the main sense of wit in the poem seems to be synonymous with invention or creative impulse, could not agree with this concept of wit-as-ornament and therefore attempts to blur the distinctions between wit and judgement. However, there are many couplets in the poem which still cause disagreement among the modern critics. The common argument of the period that wit needs to be controlled by judgment is recounted by Pope in the lines that “There are whom Heav’n has blest with store of Wit / Yet want as much again to manage it” (ll. 80-1, 212). Audra and Williams suggest that the apparent paradox of this couplet was however no confused ambiguity, as is often believed, but a very clear authorial intention as some thirty years later, Pope revised the lines and preserved its equivocal character: “Some of whom Heav’n in Wit has been profuse, / Want as much more, to turn it to its use” (213). On the other hand, William Warburton prefers to think that in the original version of the poem where these two lines read: “There are whom Heav’n blest with store of Wit, / Yet want as much again to manage it” (*The Works of Alexander Pope* 326), in the first line wit is used, in the modern sense to mean the effort of imagination; in the second line it is used, in the ancient sense, for the result of judgment. Warburton asserts that Pope wanted to give the reader a hard time puzzling over these lines, which in the first version draw too much attention to the semantic shift (from the ‘lower’ kind of wit, i.e. imagination to the higher kind of wit, i.e. judgment or reason) and he endeavoured to keep this shift out of sight by altering the lines into the final version: “Some, to whom Heav’n in wit has been profuse, / Want as much more, to turn it to its use” (p. 327). My understanding of the two lines is that the change in phrasing actually heightens the sense of paradox, thus reaching the effect of meta-wit discussed in the first chapter.

3.2.3 From ‘Wild Heap’ to ‘Nature to Advantage Dress’d’: Pope’s Dual Conception of Wit

As has been suggested by the above mentioned critics, Pope’s conception of wit in the *Essay* is an uncompromising synthesis of roughly dual structure. I would like to test this assumption by closely analyzing the *Essay on Criticism* as well as Pope’s other texts. In a letter to William Wycherley Pope agrees with the playwright that

[...] whatever lesser Wits have risen since his [Dryden’s] Death are but like Stars appearing when the Sun is set, that twinkle only in his absence and with the Rays they have borrowed from him. Our Wit (as you call it) is but Reflection or Imitation, therefore scarce to be call’d ours. True wit, [...], may be defin’d as a Justness of Thought and a Facility of Expression; or [...] a perfect Conception with an easy Delivery. (*The Correspondence of Alexander Pope* 2)

Three years later, boldly opposing the older playwright's suggestion that "sprightliness of wit despises method," Pope says:

This is true enough, if by *Wit* you mean no more than *Fancy* or *Conceit*; but in the better notion of *Wit*, consider'd as propriety, surely *Method* is not only necessary for Perspicuity and Harmony of parts, but gives beauty even to the minute and particular thoughts, which receive an additional advantage from those which precede or follow in their due place:" (34)

'The better notion of wit' is clearly a nod in the direction of the neoclassical efforts to dignify the term which will be the main mission of Joseph Addison's and Richard Steele's *Spectator*. There are other lines of the *Essay* as well as Pope's other texts that testify approval to this shift: "But true *Expression*, like th'unchanging *Sun*, / *Clears* and *improves* whate'er it shines upon" (*An Essay on Criticism*, ll. 315-6). The idea of wit's timelessness is of course a revamped line "True Wit is everlasting like the Sun" borrowed from the *Essay on Poetry* (1682) whose author, John Buckingham, Earl of Mulgrave, was a great friend and patron of Pope's. In another instance Pope describes with almost Drydenian imagery the ill preferences of older times: "Some to *Conceit* alone their Taste confine, / And glitt'ring Thoughts struck out at ev'ry line / Pleas'd with a Work where nothing's just or fit; / One *glaring Chaos* and *wild Heap of Wit*" (ll. 289-91). And, like Dryden himself, Pope is perfectly capable of straying from his own theoretical precept to composing an example that defies it as these line of his 'Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady' testify:

Most souls, 'tis true, but peep out once an age,
Dull sullen pris'ners in the body's cage:
Dim lights of life, that burn a length of years
Useless, unseen, as lamps in sepulchres;
Like eastern kings a lazy state they keep,
And close confin'd to their own palace, sleep.
(*The Rape of the Lock and Other Poems* 341, ll. 17-22)

Being sometimes called 'Elegy on the Death of an Unfortunate Lady', the poem clearly recalls lines of Dryden's *To the Duchess of Ormond* ("imprison'd in so sweet a cage, / A soul might well be pleas'd to pass an age"), and Donne's *The Second Anniversary* ("She, whose faire body no such prison was, / But that a soule might well be pleas'd to passe / An age in her") respectively, thus propelling the Metaphysical penchant for "glittering thoughts" Pope refuses to consider valuable. In 1706 Pope writes in a letter to Wycherley that "Donne had definitely more Wit than he wanted Versification: for the great dealers in Wit, like those in Trade, take least Pains to set off their Goods; while the Haberdashers of small Wit, spare for no Decorations or Ornaments" (quot. in Meyer Spacks 127). Here, Pope struggles with the overwhelming tradition of the Metaphysical poets. On the one hand, he regards them unworthy of following because of their lack of discipline, on the other he is clearly susceptible of the creative energy of their genius – this dilemma

makes it difficult for him to arrive to a negative final judgment of (all of) them. And Pope also comments on wit in the notes to his translation of Homer's *Iliad*: "There cannot be a truer kind of wit, than what is shewn in apt Comparisons" (107). Gradually, however, Pope finds that wit must be understood and employed in all its complexity to be of any use or, as Meyer Spacks puts it, "[w]it's function as ordering power is as important as its creative force" (113). The imagery of the *Essay* testifies to this fragile balance.

The "pro-creation" aspect of wit in the *Essay* can be to a certain extent attributed to Dryden's influence on the poem, which is usually felt to be quite substantial but difficult to locate. I agree with John Sitter that it is most visible in Pope's consistent adoption of the "pleasure principle" ("*gen'rous Pleasure* to be charm'd with Wit" (l. 238)) Dryden takes for granted and in the *Essay*'s broad insistence, which also follows "of necessity," that wit is nothing if not good writing. What must be understood by good writing is the act of poetic creation, production – in short – work. Here, wit's materiality – as opposed to the neoclassical attempts to ennoble it with abstraction – becomes very conspicuous. Pope reminds his readers that "[p]oetry is always a physical labor and pleasure" (Sitter 86). The charm of wit referred to in line 238 can be only apprehended by the readers if they are fully aware of the physical labour the poet puts into the production of the poem. I suggest expanding Sitter's observation by adding that the pleasure of creation of poetic texts may even be linked to sexual pleasure that wit becomes associated with in the *Essay*.

The sexual metaphors are pervasive throughout the *Essay* – failure in the attempt at wit is equivalent to sexual failure in "But *Dulness* with *Obscenity* must prove / As shameful sure as *Impotence* in *Love*" (ll. 532-3). When Pope dramatically poses the basic question: "What is this Wit, which must our cares employ?" (l. 500), he immediately answers himself: "The *Owner's Wife*, that *other Men* enjoy" (l. 501), and, in perhaps the most crucial – and certainly most often quoted – couplet of the poem wit and judgment are paired in a most difficult yet fundamental relationship – that of matrimony: "For *Wit* and *Judgment* often are at strife, / Tho' meant each other's *Aid*, like *Man* and *Wife*" (ll. 82-3). The ideal of total complementarity and sufficiency is almost utopian and the poem keeps stressing the near-impossibility of reaching this harmony.

In discussing wit or conceits, Pope argues that true wit exists in the harmonious relationship among idea, image, and expression, thus effectively imposing upon the rebellious faculty of wit a standard of propriety and justness. The "pro-discipline" aspect stresses the power of wit as a clarifying, thus an order-bringing element – and in association with Sun ("true *Expression*, like th'unchanging Sun, / *Clears* and *improves* whate'er it shines upon") it is transfigured into divinity. Wit concerns itself with "The *naked Nature* and the *living Grace*," thus being equivalent to the vast energy of divine and graceful nature (l. 294). The mysterious creative energy of the first aspect of wit becomes the "to Advantage drest" Nature of the latter aspect – "True Wit is [...] ; / What oft was *Thought*, but ne'er so well *Exprest*" (ll. 297-8) in another, hugely popular, yet often slated couplet in the first part of the poem. The tension between what is thought and what is expressed reminds us of the material nature of wit, and at the same time opens a new track of Pope's agenda which has already been announced in the first part of this subchapter – that of

the poet-critic as a hero. Pope's idea of ideal critic and wit's role in it will be the topic of the concluding part of this subchapter, in which I will show how to read the intricate relationship between the individual artist, his guild and wit. As we will see, this relationship shares certain points of interest with Addison's understanding of wit a means to moderate wit's first aspect with morality, but still maintains a unique point of view.

3.2.4 Pope and Addison I: Pride, Vanity and Wit

Addison reviewed Pope's *Essay* extensively in the *Spectator* No. 253 of 20 December 1711. He gave the poem high praise, asserting that the poetry and the expression were admirable though the sentiments, excusably, were not new. The passages to which Addison took exception were those which reflected upon Dennis's critical tantrums and he also hinted at a possible streak of envy and malevolence of Pope's character when he claimed: "I am very sorry to find that an Author, who is very justly esteemed among the best Judges, has admitted some strokes of this Nature [envy and detraction] into a very fine Poem [...] which [...] is a Masterpiece in its kind" (*The Spectator* 482). The somewhat pontifical air of the paper was precisely what was needed to wound and enrage the abnormally sensitive younger poet and this minor criticism adumbrates the falling out of the two authors that was to follow in a few years' time. More significantly though, Addison's jab at Pope introduces us to the conjunction of aesthetic and ethics. More specifically, it zooms in on the questions of the relation of moral qualities of a poet or a critic which is closely intertwined with the poem's discussion of wit.

The correlation between moral and aesthetic obligations becomes the central topic of the last part of the *Essay*, even though we can see hints scattered throughout the whole poem. For example, early in the first part, Pope refers to "a Critick's noble name!" (l. 47). This phrase suggests a possibility (which later in the poem will become necessity) of close connection between the artistic and the ethical in a critic. In this aspect Pope follows Boileau who expresses a similar necessity in the fourth part of his *L'Art Poétique*. Here, I believe Patricia Sparks is wrong when she asserts that Pope and Boileau disagree about this matter. She contends that in his poem the French critic implies a possible antithesis between good man and good poet-critic, supporting her claim with the following lines from Boileau's poem (she quotes them in French only, without providing the English translation): "Que les vers ne soient pas votre éternel employ. / Cultivez vos amis, soyez homme de foi. / C'est peu d'être agréable et charmant dans un livre, / Il faut savoir encore et converser et vivre" (Spacks, 'Imagery and Method in *An Essay on Criticism*' 117). She suggests that these lines demonstrate that in Boileau's conception of the artist one can be agreeable or even charming in a book without being so in life; to devote oneself to the eternal occupation of verse is to neglect the responsibilities of personal morality. I believe that Spacks misreads Boileau's lines. Compare her interpretation with the English adaptation of these lines by Soames and Dryden: "Let not your only business be to write; / be virtuous, just, and in your friends delight. / 'Tis not enough your poems be admired; / bur strive your conversation be desired" (*The Continental Model*, 263). In

my opinion these lines emphasize the need to ‘live beyond book’ – a good writer needs to cultivate his or her own personal relationships, for it is not enough to be charming in a book, virtuosity is the main goal of every artist. For Pope – as for Boileau, for that matter – no such dissociation which Spacks seems to be implying is possible: the identity between good critic and the good man is simply necessary, not just possible.*

The third part of the poem constantly emphasizes the association of criticism and good manners. When Pope urges that one should not “let the Man be lost” in the critic, he adds, “*Good-Nature and Good-Sense must ever join; / To Err is Humane; to Forgive, Divine*” (ll. 524-5), he is urging the fellow-critics to partake of divinity through high morality. The message – the conduct of the good critic is that of the good man – is clear even though occasionally Pope swerves to a more general advice, for example “As Men of Breeding, sometimes Men of Wit, / T’avoid *great Errors*, must the *less* commit” (ll. 259-60). Here Meyer Spacks insightfully comments: “Commitment to the realm of wit, [...] requires self-discipline, self-knowledge, relinquishment of lesser ideals” (120).

Good breeding and, consequently, good taste, is also contrasted to artifice and vanity of false wit – both in conduct and in artistic preferences. The ideal critic, Pope asserts, is “well-bred” though learned and “sincere” though well-bred as well as “blest with a *Taste* exact, yet unconfin’d” (ll. 635, 639). He also must possess “*knowledge* both of *Books* and *Humankind*” because “‘Tis not enough, Taste, Judgment, Learning, join” (l. 640, 562). Therefore, the good critic should “let Truth and Candour shine” in his judgment and perhaps most significantly has to have “a *Soul* exempt from *Pride*” (l. 563, 641).

As Arthur Fenner points out, the idea of pride is lurking behind every other line of the poem. For Augustans pride was the super-category in which most sins could be included, because any violation of God’s law is a “refusal to take one’s proper (subordinate) place in the Chain of Being He has created. To try to be something one is not – as does bumpkin in regal purple, or an ape dressed like our grandsires (l. 321, 332) – is to disrupt the hierarchy of Nature” (Fenner 237). A good poet and critic must follow Nature (l. 68), and not only where she has set standards for poetry, but where she has “fix’d the Limits fit” to a critic’s mental powers, “And wisely curb’d proud Man’s pretending Wit” (ll. 52-3). Modern critics, the second part of the *Essay* suggests several times, have not followed Nature, but have left their proper places in her hierarchy: “Poets, a *Race* long unconfin’d and free, / Still fond and proud of *Savage Liberty*, / Receiv’d his [Aristotle’s] Laws, and stood convinc’d ‘twas fit / Who conquer’d *Nature*, shou’d preside o’er *Wit*” (649-52). False learning and wit has turned some into “coxcombs Nature meant but fools” who “in search of wit lost their common sense” (ll. 27-8); others are not even a species at all – unsuccessful poets turned critics, unnatural and deformed things which can pass for neither: “Some have at first for *Wits*, then *Poets* past, / Turn’d *Criticks* next,

*) My reading of the passage is also consistent with that of the editor of Boileau’s work, D. Nichol Smith, who comments on these lines says that “Boileau carried out his own instructions to the letter. He cultivated the friendship of the leading writers of the time, and in particular of Racine, Molière, and La Fontaine ; and he was a decided force in a conversation.” For more details on Boileau’s relationships with other French authors, see Boileau, *L’Art Poétique* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1915), p. 93.

and prov'd plain *Fools* at last; / Some neither can for *Wits* nor *Criticks* pass, / As heavy Mules are neither *Horse* nor *Ass*" (36-9).

For Pope, then, wit is the perfect balance between the raw energy of the poetic creation (represented by 'Liberties of Wit') on the one hand and the structuring faculty that channels this energy (represented by 'Wit's Fundamental Laws') (l. 717, 722) on the other. A poet who is capable of achieving this harmony, can become a critic who "Supream in Judgment, as in Wit, / Might boldly censure, as he boldly writ" (657-8). A critic, who is not a poet himself, must nevertheless possess the same faculty: "A perfect Judge will *read* each Work of Wit / With the same Spirit that its Author *writ*" (233-4).

As we have seen, Pope's poem and the ideas on wit expressed in it are consistent, but often obscure and difficult to disentangle. The poet puts forward an authoritative theory or set of rules which – if followed – will provide for establishment of a new discipline of literary criticism. Therefore, I cannot agree with David B. Morris who contends that the *Essay on Criticism* "reclaims the legacy of John Dryden for English critics, endorsing his principles, backing his often speculative and exploratory spirit of inquiry, and providing a secure, compact, flexible *theory* of criticism to stabilize the practice of his English successors" (34). I believe that Pope's treatment of the topic is much more authoritative and prescriptive than Dryden's. Also, while continuing to expand some of those themes Dryden concerned himself with, Pope is much more aware of the wide scope of wit's meaning, utilising it in a significantly more creative and sophisticated manner than the older poet. In the following subchapter I will explore to what extent Pope's conception of the term differed from that of Joseph Addison, the father of the early modern journalistic style.

3.3 Joseph Addison and the Aesthetics of Neoclassical Wit

As has been mentioned in the introduction, the *Spectator* scholarship has been rather scarce. Only one major study has been published in the last two decades – Brian McCrea's *Addison and Steele Are Dead: The English Department, its Canon, and the Professionalization of Literary Criticism*. McCrea's central interest lies in identifying and analyzing the strategies Addison and Steele employ to secure as large readership as possible for their paper, assuming that their main motivation was popularity. To be read by as many people as possible, the paper must be written in a clear language, hence any sort of ambiguity or tendency towards metaphorical mode of expression is an unwelcome, detrimental even, feature of the discourse of the journal. McCrea devotes a whole chapter to this simple claim, quoting various passages from the *Spectator* and elsewhere, focusing on Addison's attack of puns and false wit. After my analysis of wit in Addison's texts, I will come back to some of McCrea's claims in order to contrast them with my own reading of the issues raised by him in regard to wit. I will conclude this subchapter by comparing Addison's and Pope's usage of the term in a larger context of their artistic agendas and styles.