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Joseph Addison and the aesthetics of neoclassical wit

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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.

3.3.1 The *Spectator* and the Neoclassical Criticism

The *Spectator* was a daily periodical founded by Joseph Addison and Richard Steele who were the journal's main contributors. Each 'paper' was approximately two thousand words long, and the original run consisted of more than five hundred numbers which were collected into seven volumes. After a short hiatus the paper was revived without the involvement of Steele in 1714, appearing three times in a week for six months. These papers were then collected to form the eighth volume. The goal of the *Spectator* – as stated in its tenth issue – was “to enliven Morality with Wit, and to temper Wit with Morality” and to bring “Philosophy out of Closets and Libraries, Schools and Colleges, to dwell in Clubs and Assemblies, at Tea-Tables and Coffee-Houses” (*The Spectator* I 44). One of its functions was to provide readers with educated, topical talking points, and advice in how to carry on conversations and social interactions in a polite manner. In keeping with the values of Enlightenment philosophies of their time, the authors of the *Spectator* promoted family, marriage, and courtesy. George Saintsbury suggests that Addison supervised the overall scope of the paper, which was “written on a deliberate system, and divisible into three groups” – the first group consisting of the early papers on true and false wit (Nos. 58-63), and of essays on the stage, the second focusing on the elaborate criticism of Milton's *Paradise Lost* (Nos. 267-86), and the third containing the series on the pleasures of the imagination (Nos. 411-18) (Saintsbury 173).

What unites these three groups of papers and in fact runs as a red thread through Addison's whole work is the concern with language and its role in the educating and civilizing process of the early modern reader. In this subchapter, I will attempt to trace this red thread of language and especially its relationship to verbal wit – a topic to which Addison devoted much attention. Apart from the *Spectator* papers, I will also look at some of his much less known texts, mainly *Notes on Some of the Foregoing Stories in Ovid's Metamorphoses* (1697) and *Dialogues Upon the Usefulness of Ancient Medals* (1721).

3.3.2 The *Spectator* Series on Wit

Michael G. Ketcham identifies four methods for defining wit in the *Spectator* series (i.e. series on criticism and taste): (1) analytical method consisting in separating what Addison calls “false”, “true” and “mixed” wit; (2) historical method by tracing the history of wit from classical through Gothic and modern times; (3) applying the conventional categories of neoclassical criticism – in wit “the first Race of Authors, who were the great Heroes in Writing, were destitute of all Rules and Arts of Criticism; and for that Reason, though they excel later Writers in Greatness and Genius, they fall short of them in Accuracy and Correctness” (No. 61); and (4) the method of searching for the psychological explanations – Addison contrasts his own definitions with Dryden's definition of wit as “a Propriety of Words and Thoughts applied to the Subject” (No. 62) (Ketcham 71).

In the first essay on wit (No. 58 of May 7 1711), Addison's main motive is to “establish [...] a Taste for polite Writing” and he proceeds to set out a plan to trace out “the

History of false Wit and distinguish the several Kinds of it as they have prevailed in different Ages of the World” (*The Spectator* I 245). He is motivated by fear of revival of “those antiquated Modes of Wit that have been long exploded out of the Commonwealth of Letters” because lately there have been “several Satyrs and Panegyricks handed about in Agrostick, by which Means some of the most arrant undisputed Blockheads about the Town began to entertain ambitious Thoughts, and to set up for Polite Authors” (*The Spectator* I 245). In this single sentence, Addison identifies several important things: One of the poetic forms of false wit (*acrostic*, i.e. a poem in which the first letter, syllable or word of each line spells out a word or a message), association of false wit with the genre of satire and panegyric, and more significantly still his true motivation for tracing out the history of false wit. False wit is closely associated with those who try to set up for [polite] authors, i.e. the would-be writers or artists in general. Addison’s real goal is not aesthetic (to establish a standard of taste in writing) or literary-historical (to summarize the changing poetic styles), but ideological – to defend himself and his profession against those who may wish to infiltrate the guild and impose upon those whose sensibilities are not as highly trained as to distinguish between what is a good piece of writing and what is not. In the “Art of false Wit”, Addison continues, “[...] a Writer does not shew himself a Man of a beautiful Genius, but of great Industry” (I 246). He goes on to identify *picture-poems* (favoured by the Metaphysical poets and often dubbed *acrosticks*) as another type of false wit and criticizes them for their derogative attitude towards poetic art: author of such a poem had to first “draw the Out-line of the Subject which he intended to write upon, and afterwards conform the Description to the Figure of his Subject” (I 247). During this creative process, poetry is treated in an impermissible manner: it is to “contract or dilate itself according to the Mould in which it [is] cast” (*ibid.*). Addison quotes Dryden’s *Mac Flecknoe* to support his own position.

In the second essay on wit (No. 59 of May 8, 1711) Addison points out for the first time the social appeal of a wit when he says: “there is nothing more certain than that every Man would be a Wit if he could”, thus hinting at the increasing social attractiveness of the status of writer in the early modern European culture (I 249). Those would-be wits (i.e. authors) are characteristic for the inappropriately painful and futile attempts at establishing this status: “[W]ere one to gain [the title of wit] by those Elaborate Trifles [...], a Man had better be a Gally-Slave than a Wit” (*ibid.*). He goes on to identify some more forms of false wit: *lipogram* (a poem in which a certain letter is omitted), *rebus* (a poem in which a whole word is omitted and replaced by an image) and *echo-poem* (e.g. George Herbert’s *Heaven* (1633)). He quotes a part of Samuel Butler’s mock heroic *Hudibras* (1664). Addison also associates the origin of these forms of what he calls false wit with the ancient Greek authors but his criticism is directed at the Metaphysical poets who revived these poetic methods “purely for the sake of being Witty”(I 251). The ancient authors (or rulers respectively), practised this kind of wit for some actual purpose (e.g. the rebus-coin of Caesar, who placed the figure of elephant on the reverse side of the coins. The word Caesar meant “elephant” in Punic and it was against laws to place a private man’s image on the coin).

The Christian monks are identified as the main culprits of this vogue of false wit in the beginning of the third essay on wit (No. 60 of May 9, 1711). The monks as the masters of learning in the early Christian period took up to this kind of wit which required time and industry, but not genius and capacity. They not only restored the ancient techniques of false wit, but also “enriched the World With Inventions of their own” – e.g. *anagram*, “which is nothing else but a Transmutation of one Word into another, or the turning of the same Set of Letters into different Words; which may change Night into Day, or Black into White, if Chance [...] shall so direct” (I 254). Here, Addison alludes to the central danger of language employed in creative way – manipulation and deformation of reality. Also, he adds another feature of false wit: it is not guided by necessity (artistic or any other), but by mere chance. Again, he emphasizes the disproportional quantity of time invested into the creation of this kind of writing – he recounts a story of a man who, trying to come up with an anagram for his mistress’s name, “shut himself up for half a Year” before finally coming up with one (I 255). Other types of false wit include *chronogram* (favoured by the Germans) and *bouts rimes* (favoured by the French).

In the fourth paper on wit (No. 61 of May 10, 1711) Addison mostly attacks punning and discusses the battle between the Ancients and the Moderns before mentioning the distinction between false and true wit for the first time. Punning, Addison asserts at the outset of the essay, is the most frequent kind of false wit:

The Seeds of Punning are in the Minds of all Men, and tho’ they may be subdued by Reason, Reflection and good Sense, they will be very apt to shoot up in the greatest Genius, that is not broken and cultivated by the Rules of Art. Imitation is natural to us, and when it does not raise the Mind to Poetry, Painting, Musick, or other more noble Arts, it often breaks out in Puns and Quibbles. (I 259)

He quotes Aristotle (*Rhetoric*, Chapter 11) who ranks *paragram* as a proof of good writing. According to Addison, the age that was most pun-prone was the reign of James I (1566 –1625), i.e. the time of Baroque poetry, marinism, gongorism, Metaphysical poetry etc. During this time, pun “was delivered with great Gravity from the Pulpit, or pronounced in the most solemn manner at the Council-Table” (I 260). Pun infected the everyday speech, and – by extension – the reality, it ceased to respect the borders of its designated area of influence, as Addison observes: “The Sermons of Bishop *Andrews*, and the Tragedies of *Shakespeare*, are full of [Puns]” (ibid.). Thus, the religious practice was undermined by the subversive wit and the same rhetoric was used by a sinner to make repentance in the church as by an actor during a soliloquy on the stage. Addison is sarcastic about “a famous University of this Land”, which was lately “Infested With Puns” and suggests ironically that the reason might be the nearby fens and marches (I 261).

Defending the ancient authors who used puns, Addison says they did not know any better – they “were destitute of all Rules and Arts of Criticism, and for that Reason, though they excel later Writers in Greatness of Genius, they fall short of them in Accuracy and Correctness” (ibid.). To distinguish several kinds of wit produced by the first

race of the writers (i.e. the Ancients) was the task of the second race of authors, and they did so upon the criterion of their being founded in truth. Ancient authors (apart from Quintilian and Longinus) did not know how to separate false and true wit, because the distinction was not settled yet. The dichotomy of false and true wit lay at the core of the establishment of Augustan art criticism. He then continues to locate the revival of false wit: “[it] happen’d about the time of the Revival of Letters [i.e. Renaissance], but as soon as it was once detected, it immediately vanish’d and disappear’d” (I 262). Addison also predicts that it will one day be yet again revived “in some distant Period of time, as Pedantry and Ignorance will prevail upon Wit and Sense” (ibid.). Here, “wit” is of course the right kind of wit i.e. the true wit.

Finally, Addison defines pun as “a Conceit arising from the use of two Words that agree in the Sound, but differ in the Sense” (I 262-3). If “a Piece of Wit” is true, it needs to stand the test of translation: if “it bears the Test, you may pronounce it true; but if it vanishes in the Experiment, you may conclude it to have been a Punn” (I 263). He then likens false wit to “*vox et praeterea nihil*” (i.e. sounds without sense) and contrasts it to true wit whose essence lies in the metaphorical “*Induitur, formosa est: Exuitur, ipsa forma est*” (let her be dressed or undressed, all is one, she is excellent still) (ibid.).

The penultimate essay on wit (*Spectator* no. 62 of May 11, 1711) starts by Addison quoting from Locke’s *Essay* on the difference between Wit and Judgment: “[...] Wit lying most in the Assemblage of Ideas, and putting those together with Quickness and Variety, herein can be found any Resemblance or Congruity thereby to make up pleasant Pictures and agreeable Visions in the Fancy” (I 263-4). On the other hand, judgment “lies [...] in separating carefully one from another, Ideas wherein can be found the least Difference, thereby to avoid being misled by Similitude and by Affinity to take one thing for another” (I 264). In Locke’s account, metaphor is associated with pleasantries of wit and fancy and opposed to judgment and reason. Addison approves of this definition of wit and adds that not every resemblance of Ideas is what we call wit, “unless it be such an one that gives *Delight* and *Surprize* to the Reader: These two Properties seem essential to Wit, more particularly the last of them. The ideas should not lie too near one another in the Nature of things, for where the Likeness is obvious, it gives no *Surprize*” (I 264). Apart from the obvious resemblance, some further congruity must be discovered in the two ideas that is capable of giving the reader some surprise.

Addison then defines true wit as resemblance of ideas while false wit as resemblance of single letters (as in *anagrams*, *chronograms*, *lipograms*, *acrostics*), sometimes of syllables (*echo-poems*, *doggerel rhymes*), sometimes of words (*puns*, *quibbles*), and sometimes of whole sentences or poems (*picture-poems*), and proceeds to introduce a third type of wit: “mixt Wit” – consisting partly in the resemblance of ideas and partly in the resemblance of words. This kind of wit abounds in Cowley, Waller, “the Italians”, occasionally Dryden, while Milton, Spencer, Boileau, most of the ancient Greeks, are above it. Mixt wit has “innumerable branches”, and it is the composition of puns and true wit. Addison disagrees with Dryden’s famous definition of true wit as “Propriety of Words and Thoughts adapted to the Subject” (I 267). This definition, Addison contends, is applicable to good writing in general. As George Williamson points out, Addison misquotes Dryden here,

but the misquoting emphasizes the opposition between Addison's position and earlier perceptions of wit. For Dryden, according to Addison's misreading, wit can be tested by looking at the work itself, by assessing the proportions between words and thoughts. For himself, Addison turns to Locke's definition of wit as "lying most in the assemblage of ideas, and putting those together with quickness and variety wherein can be found any resemblance or congruity, thereby to make up pleasant pictures in the fancy" (quoted in No. 62). Addison modifies his definition, as well, in order to further emphasize an affective psychology: "every Resemblance of Ideas is not that which we call Wit, unless it be such an one that gives Delight and Surprize to the Reader" (No. 62). Addison "appeals beyond the formal qualities of the work to the mechanisms of the mind" (Ketcham 72). I will devote a part of the following section to the element of surprise and its significance in Addison's aesthetic theory.

Addison agrees with Dominique Bouhours that no thought can be beautiful that is not just and does not have its foundation in the nature of things: "[...] the Basis of all Wit is Truth; and [...] no Thought can be valuable, of which good Sense is not the Ground-work" (I 268). Boileau is also a supporter of this principle which is "the natural Way of writing, that beautiful Simplicity, which we so admire in the Compositions of the Ancients" (ibid.). This ability stems from the strength of genius. Those who lack in it, try to compensate for it with "foreign Ornaments" (ibid.). Addison compares these authors to "Goths in Poetry", who, like those in architecture, try to supply "beautiful Simplicity" with "all the Extravagancies of an irregular Fancy" (ibid.).

Doubting the taste of "English Poets as well as Readers" and calling it "extremely *Gothick*", he quotes Dryden, who in turn quotes Jean Regnaud de Segrais who distinguishes the readers of poetry according to the capacity of judging into three classes (I 269). Addison only quotes the first, lowest class of the readers: "the Rabble of Readers" in other words "*Les Petits Esprits* [who] "prefer a Quibble, a Conceit, an Epigram, before solid Sense and elegant Expression: These are Mob-Readers" (I 269). In the very last paragraph Addison returns to Locke's definition of wit and expands it by suggesting that "not only the *Resemblance* but the *Opposition* of Ideas does very often produce Wit" (I 270). However, he does not provide details of this suggestion nor does he give any examples, stating only that he "may possibly enlarge upon [this topic] in some future Speculation" (ibid.).

In the last essay on wit (*Spectator* no. 63 of May 12, 1711) Addison recounts his last night's allegorical dream of several schemes of wit: In his dream, he enters Region of false wit, governed by Goddess of Falsehood. Nothing in this land appears natural – trees blossom in leaf-gold, produce bone-lace and precious stones. The fountains bubble in opera tunes, are filled with stags, wild-boars, and mermaids, dolphins and fish play on banks and meadows. The birds have human voices; the winds are filled with sighs and messages of distant lovers. Addison ventures upon a 'gothic' building in a dark forest – it turns out to be a heathen temple of the God of Dullness. The god is surrounded by his worshippers: Industry and Caprice. There is an altar covered in offerings of axes, wings, cut in paper and inscribed with verses (*picture-poems*). The votaries present include 'Regiment of Anagrams,' 'Body of *Acrosticks*,' 'files of *Chronograms*,' 'Phantom of *Tryphiodorus*

the *Lipo-grammatist*,’ all engaging in pastime like Rebus, Crambo, and Double Rhymes (I 271-2). Outside the temple, Addison passes by ‘a Party of Punns,’ and on his way out of the region, he meets Goddess of Truth, whose arrival is signalled by “a very shining Light”(I 273). On her right side, “there marched a Male Deity, who bore several Quivers on his shoulders, and grasped several Arrows in his hand. His name was Wit” (I 273). The frontiers of ‘the Enchanted Region’ were inhabited by “the Species of MIXED WIT, who made a very odd Appearance when they were mustered together in an Army” (ibid.). He goes on to describe the members of the species as follows: “There were Men whose Bodies were stuck full of Darts, and Women whose Eyes were burning Glasses: Men that had Hearts of Fire, and Women that had Breasts of Snow” (ibid.). This big group divided up into two parts, “one half throwing themselves behind the Banners of TRUTH, and the others behind those of FALSEHOOD” (ibid.).

The brightness of Truth makes Falsehood fade away and with her the whole army “shrunk into Nothing,” the temple sinks, the fountains recover their murmurs, birds their voices, the trees their leaves, “and the whole Face of Nature its true and genuine Appearance”(I 274). Then Addison inspects the army of true wit: there is the ‘Genius of Heroic Poetry,’ ‘Tragedy,’ ‘Satyr,’ ‘Rhetorick,’ ‘Comedy,’ and ‘Epigram,’ who “marched up at the Rear” and “who had been posted thereat the Beginning of the Expedition, that he might not revolt to the Enemy, whom he was suspected to favour in his Heart”(ibid.). Addison is “very much awed and delighted With the Appearance of the God of Wit,” for “there was something so amiable and yet so piercing in his Looks” that he feels himself inspired “with Love and Terrou” (ibid.). The God offers his quiver of arrows as a present to Addison who, reaching his hand to accept it knocks it against the chair and wakes up.

3.3.3 Ambiguity and Surprise: Addison’s Aesthetics of Neoclassical Wit

The ideas on different types and quality of wit expressed in the six *Spectator* essays on wit are usually believed to have appeared for the first time in this series. In fact, Addison voiced most of them some fourteen years prior to the publication of the wit series and, to my knowledge at least, this fact has so far gone unnoticed. In 1959 Bonamy Dobrée observed that “[t]he odd truth is that Addison ceased to develop, to change in any way, after [...] 1698. Everything he has to say is implicit in the notes to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* of 1697, and his essay on Virgil’s *Georgics*” (113) but he never gave the specifics of Addison’s arrested development. It is therefore worth devoting some space to these early expressions of Addison. As early as 1697 Addison, commenting on Fable V in his ‘Notes on Some of the Foregoing Stories in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*’, criticizes ‘playing on words’ in Latin authors.

[...] as true wit is nothing else but a similitude in ideas, so is false wit the similitude in words, whether it lies in the likeness of letters only, as in anagram and acrostic; [...] or whole words,

as puns, echoes, and the like. Beside these two kinds of false and true wit, there is another of a middle nature, that has something of both in it. When in two ideas that have some resemblance with each other, and are both expressed by the same word, we make use of the ambiguity of the word to speak that of one idea included under it, which is proper to the other. [...] most languages have hit on the word, which properly signifies fire, to express love by, (and therefore we may be sure there is some resemblance in the ideas mankind have of them;) from hence the witty poets of all languages, when they have once called love a fire, consider it no longer a passion, but speak of it under the notion of a real fire, and, as the turn of wit requires, make the same word in the same sentence stand for either of the ideas that is annexed to it. (*The Works of Joseph Addison* I 150-1)

He then goes on to criticize the middle kind of wit, which he likens to “ambiguity”, notably harshly:

Ovid [...] is the greatest admirer of this mixed wit of all the ancients, as our Cowley is among the moderns. Homer, Virgil, Horace, and the greatest poets scorned it, as indeed it is only fit for epigram and little copies of verses; one would wonder therefore how so sublime a genius as Milton could sometimes fall into it, in such a work as an epic poem. But we must attribute it to his humouring the vicious state of the age he lived in, and the false judgment of our unlearned English readers in general [...]. (*The Works of Joseph Addison* I 151)

These excerpts from *The Notes* constitute not only an attack on punning but also an attack upon ambiguity, even upon metaphors. Only “weak” poets will rely upon comparisons of the sort illustrated by the metaphor of fire and love. Great poets may stoop to “this mixt wit” but only as they submit to the “vicious taste” and “false judgment” of “unlearned [...] Readers” (151).

Brian McCrea suggests that “[b]oth Addison and Steele, throughout their writings, criticize punning,” suggesting the motives are of ethical nature: “[...] Steele opposes the off-color *double entendre* of Restoration comedy for moral reasons” (McCrea 38). But, as he contends, the authors opposed the usage of puns and “‘forced conceits’ for epistemological as well as for ethical reasons. Insofar as a pun depends upon one word bearing at least two possible meanings, Addison and Steele feel that puns are confusing, destructive of clarity” (38). McCrea believes that “Addison naively (by the standards of modernism and postmodernism) assumes that words can refer to one idea, and to one idea only. The striking metaphor, the surprising conceit, [...] are to be avoided indeed, any kind of verbal wit is taboo” (39).

As I will show, these assumptions are correct only to a certain extent. For now, however, let us pursue McCrea’s line of argument further. He writes that “[t]he uses that Addison and Steele find for verbal ambiguity (puns, and wit) allegory, repetition, and *personae* all reveal how their quest for popularity led them to seek clarity” and quotes Samuel Johnson who “rightly observed in his *Life of Addison* that, “His purpose was to infuse literary curiosity by gentle and unsuspected conveyance into the gay, the idle, and the wealthy; he therefore presented knowledge in the most alluring form, not lofty and

austere, but accessible and familiar” (37). McCrea further asserts that it is important to observe Addison’s relentless attempt to limit ‘double meanings’ as expressed in his ‘Dialogues upon the Usefulness of Ancient Medals, especially in Relation to the Latin and Greek Poets’ written probably in 1703-05:

The[...] learned medallists [...] tell us [that], the rabbit, [...] may signify either the great multitude of these animals [...] or, perhaps the several mines that are wrought within the bowels of that country, the Latin word Cuniculus signifying either rabbit or a mine. But these gentlemen do not consider, that it is not the word but the figure that appears on the Medal. Cuniculus may stand for a rabbit or a mine, but the picture of a rabbit is not the picture of a mine. A pun can be no more engraven than it can be translated. When the word is construed into its idea, the double meaning vanishes. The figure [...] before us means a real rabbit, which is there found in vast multitudes. (*The Works of Joseph Addison* I 325)

For Addison, McCrea suggests, meanings of this type are nothing more than ‘puns’ and they must be vanquished in order for the act of interpretation to be valid – i.e. if an interpreter wishes to successfully ‘construe’ the ‘idea’ upon which the work of art is based: “These ideas, of course, can be represented by figures; the woman on the medal can stand for Spain. But the correspondence must be exact and one-to-one. The woman is Spain; the rabbit is a rabbit. The rabbit cannot represent both rabbits and mines” (McCrea 40). Addison attacks punning and any kind of verbal wit because double meanings destroy the clarity that he believes is necessary to both build and affect a large audience. Thus, McCrea believes “[i]n the terms of Jacques Derrida, Addison and Steele willingly subordinate ‘writing to the rank of an instrument enslaved to a full and originarily [sic] spoken language’” (quot. in McCrea 42). Such a view of language also stands against Terry Eagleton’s assertion in his *Literary Theory: An Introduction* that “[t]he hallmark of the linguistic revolution of the twentieth century, from Saussure and Wittgenstein to contemporary literary theory is the recognition that meaning is not simply something “expressed” or “reflected” in language: it is actually *produced* by it” (ibid.) McCrea therefore concludes that “[t]his view of language dominates postmodern literary criticism and theory and makes Addison and Steele largely irrelevant to the discipline and its professors” (ibid.).

We may find many of McCrea’s assumptions perceptive, even true. I wish to take issue with him, however, with regard to his statement that “[a]mbiguity is a low kind of wit because in the ‘nature of things’ one ‘image’ should express one ‘idea’; one ‘verb’ should have one ‘sense’. Literature thus should not ‘surprize’ the reader, but rather should make ‘sense’ in a natural, which here becomes a simple and direct, way” (65). Against this assumption (i.e. that literature, or generally, art should not surprise the receiver) many objections could be raised. First of all, there is Addison himself who says regarding the mixed type of wit in the *Notes* that “[t]his way of mixing two different ideas together in one image, as it is a great *surprize* to the reader, is a great beauty in poetry, if there be sufficient ground for it in the nature of the thing that is described” (*The Works of Joseph Addison* I 147).

I believe that what Addison really suggests is that under certain conditions mixed wit can be of a considerable aesthetic value. The key means of achieving this value is surprise. The element of surprise and novelty are in fact the key features of Addison's aesthetics which he develops in some of the later issues of the *Spectator* journal. However, it is another issue, adumbrated in his earlier work (in this case his *Georgics* essays published in 1693), which proves McCrea's claim dubious at the very least. There is one clear hint in the *Essay on the Georgics* that tells us what direction Addison's later criticism is to take. After quoting a passage from the second *Georgics*, he writes:

Here we see the poet considered all the effects on this union between trees of different kinds and took notice of that effect which had the most surprise and, by consequence, the most delight in it, to express the capacity that was in them of being thus united. [...] This is wonderfully diverting to the understanding, [...]. For here the mind, which is always delighted with its own discoveries, only takes the hint from the poet, and seems to work out the rest by the strength of her own faculties. (*The Works of Joseph Addison* I 156-7)

The stress on the element of surprise, as William H. Youngren rightly observes, "was later to be canonized, under the name of novelty, along with greatness and beauty, as one of the three great sources of the 'Pleasures of the Imagination'" (Youngren 273).

To claim that Addison believes that literature, or art as such, should not provide surprise to its consumer is therefore to seriously misread his ideas on literary art and, consequently, to misunderstand his aesthetics in general. I believe that McCrea – not unlike C. S. Lewis – overlooks the distinction between the sphere of everyday communication, in which ambiguity can be a source of serious and potentially harmful misunderstandings, and the sphere of literature, in which it is welcome as a source of artistic value. I believe that his emphasis on the motives of Addison and Steele's striving at clarity of speech is important but perhaps needs to be slightly modified. It is true, of course, that the two authors had a wide accessibility on their minds when producing the texts of the *Spectator*. However, given the nature of the paper, its genre and purpose, as they were stated at the beginning of this subchapter, I suggest we see this choice of style as a *proto-journalistic*, not purely *literary* strategy. In this respect Addison's text differs from Pope's significantly – unlike the latter poet Addison writes *about* wit, but does not demonstrate it at the same time.

3.4 Wit and Esprit: Points of Accord and Dissonance

This subchapter offers comparative reading of the theories and ideas on wit and *esprit* as they appeared in the texts analyzed in the two previous chapters. As I already pointed out in the Introduction, my primary concern is to stress what is different in the authors' opinions rather than to stress presumably obvious similarities. My hypothesis was that the image of wit and *esprit* will be – despite the fact that the two words have similarly