1 Theoretical and Historical Prolegomena

Les lois de nos désirs sont des dés sans loisir.
R. Desnos, *Corps et biens* (1930)

1.1 Wit Theorized: Summary of Twentieth-Century Approaches

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, wit has become the subject of several studies of literary history and theory. It has been approached from a number of different perspectives and has also been subject to various methods of theoretical examination, usually in the vein of the current stream of literary theory. This chapter presents the key literary studies dealing with wit which were published during the last century or so in order to summarize the achievement of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries' literary scholarship in relation to the term. It is organized chronologically, concentrating on those studies which reflected a contemporary literary critical approach to the term, starting with historical and positivist, linguistic, to formalist, post-structuralist and psychoanalytical perspective in order to present the term's interaction with the major literary theories of the past century.

1.1.1 Beginnings of Critical Interest in Wit: Courthope, Spingarn, Eliot

Throughout the history of English literature wit has primarily been associated with Metaphysical poetry and Restoration comedy. During the first three decades of the twentieth century, the discussions involving the term were exclusively related to the former as Restoration comedy had to wait for its critical re-assessment till the second half of the century.

The first major mention of wit appears in J. W. Courthope's *History of English Poetry* in 1903. In the third volume entitled *The Intellectual Conflict of the Seventeenth Century. Decadent Influence of the Feudal Monarchy. Growth of the National Genius* Courthope uses the term to characterize the historical development of English poetry of the above said period. 'Poetical "wit"' branches into three distinctive 'schools' under the reign of Elizabeth and James I. – that of 'theological wit', 'Metaphysical wit' and 'court wit' (Chapters VII-XI) and schools of theological and court wit under the reign of Charles I (Chapter X). Before describing the poetry of these periods in detail, he attempts to define and

characterize 'poetical wit'. He does so mainly on positivist and historical grounds, positing Johnson's definition of wit in his *Life of Cowley* as the best one so far. However, Courthope also notes that the great biographer never attempted to explain the nature and evolutionary circumstances of the term and so he takes upon himself to correct this omission. He begins by discussing the social and historical background of the Renaissance, questioning the view that explains wit's "appearance in European literature on purely aesthetic principle" (Courthope, *History of English Poetry* 104). Dismissing theories about the gradual spreading of wit, which claim that the popularity of the term first started in Spain, and travelled through Italy and France to England, Courthope suggests that a greater cause had to be at work, as the term became "to be fashionable in almost every European country" at the same time, retaining "the identity of essence" while exhibiting "great variety of form" (*History of English Poetry* 105). Locating this pan-European outbreak of 'poetical wit' after the Council of Trent (1545-1563), he holds that "the [...] causes of these phenomena are to be found in the decay of the scholastic philosophy and of the feudal system, [...], and in the revival, [...] of the civic standards of antiquity operating on the genius of many rising nations and languages" (*History of English Poetry* 105-6).

He then proceeds to define the leading features of wit with regard to the Metaphysical poets. He finds them in paradox, hyperbole, and excess of metaphor which he calls the signs of "the efflorescence of decay" (Courthope, *History of English Poetry* 106). Connecting the use of hyperbole with *concetti* (conceits) in sonnets and chivalric and troubadour poetry, Courthope contends that the original "warlike" incentive of the knights to panegyrize the lady was gradually replaced by the poets' efforts "to outdo each other in mere ingenuity" (Courthope, *History of English Poetry* 110). This creative impulse was then taken *ad absurdum* by John Donne and other Metaphysical poets. Their liking for excessive metaphor is accounted for by "the decay of allegory as a natural mode of poetic expression" (ibid.). Unlike Dante, whose use of innovative metaphors sprang out of necessity, the Spanish and Italian baroque poets, like Luis de Góngora and Giambattista Marino, used "allegorical language merely to disguise the essential commonplace of [their] subject-matter" and out of "desire for novelty in expression" (Courthope, *History of English Poetry* 112). Agreeing with Johnson, Courthope regards wit in the hands of the Metaphysical poets as a means to exercise their imagination and "unrestrained liberty", not to express things of "vital importance" [...] such as "the nature of the unseen world", as it is with Dante (*History of English Poetry* 116, 112).

As outdated as Courthope's approach appears today, it must be acknowledged that it managed to hint at a significant feature of wit that will be continually re-appearing in all its forms and stages of development that will be traced in this chapter – the craving after novelty and intellectual pleasure of creating brand new images. On the whole, however, Courthope's assessment of wit does appear anachronistic even in comparison with its contemporary study by J. E. Spingarn in his magisterial three-volume collection *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century* (1908-9). Offering no systematic analysis of wit's significance for the period, Spingarn does use the term to contextualize the interests and interactions of the contemporary literary critical scene. The starting point for the

discussion of wit for him is the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes. Wit is a significant element of the philosopher's mechanical theory of poetry, as laid out in his correspondence with William Davenant: "Time and Education [...] begets experience; Experience begets memory; Memory begets Judgement and fancy; Judgement begets the strength and structure, and fancy begets the ornaments of a Poem" (Spingarn, *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century* I xxviii). Fancy, a seventeenth-century synonym for wit, is in this description opposed to judgment and Hobbes is credited by Spingarn with the clearest formulation of this antithesis which had been recognized by the French and the Italians in the sixteenth century (*Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century* I xxviii).

Spingarn provides brief semantic background of the term in the Renaissance but he does not explore the circumstances of the semantic shift from thought to witty thought. Wit is "the English equivalent for the French *esprit*, which in its turn owed its connotation to the Italian *ingegno* and the Spanish *ingenio*. In the Elizabethan age 'wit' denoted the intellect in general, in opposition to 'will', the faculty of volition" (xxx). Phrases as 'ingenious and conceited', 'sharpness of ingenuity' occur incessantly in the literature of the day, and are the Elizabethan equivalents of the Italian *bell ingegno*. Gradually, even before the waning of the Italian influence, the native word 'wit' had been acquiring the signification of 'ingenuity' (xxx). From this time on wit was associated "with the imaginative or rather fanciful element in poetry, and more or less important as this element was more or less valued by succeeding schools" (xxx). Discussion of Hobbes and Davenant was initiated by the latter's dedication of the lengthy preface of the epic poem *Gondibert* (1650) to the influential philosopher. The preface and Hobbes's riposte *Answer to Davenant* (1650) mark a crucial point in the history of English literary criticism, anticipating the themes and forms of the many theoretical debates whose sum creates the bulk of the early modern literary criticism. One of these topics was the opposition of wit and judgment which became the testing ground of most significant philosophers, writers and critics of the period. Spingarn does not analyze the texts in great detail but rather notes the context in which they were produced and received:

> Hobbes [...] clearly distinguished wit from judgement, and what is more, insisted on the necessity of both in poetry. Davenant's preface and Hobbes's answer were written in Paris, and both learnt in France that *jugement* is as essential to poetry as *esprit*. As early as 1650 there are signs that wit is under suspicion. So strong became the feeling that by itself it was insufficient form of poetic creation, that gradually its original imaginative signification became subordinate, and Dennis employs it to denote 'a just mixture of Reason and Extravagance, that is such a mixture as reason may always be sure to predominate'. (xxx)

Spingarn goes on to adumbrate the gradual mutations of the term's denotation, naming rationalism as the main source of the pressure. His concluding statement is acknowledged even by the modern literary historians of wit: "These variations in the meaning of a single term parallel the general changes of literary taste in the nation. Each succeeding school of poetry gives its own content to the critical terms which it inherits no less than to those it invents" (xxxi).

T. S. Eliot was the first among the 20th century literary critics whose interest in wit was motivated by personal ideological agenda. As his opinion on literature and matters of spirituality and religion gradually changed and radicalized, his appreciation of wit became more and more dismissive. Anonymously reviewing H. J. C. Grierson's anthology of Metaphysical poems in the 1921 issue of *Times Literary Supplement*, Eliot identifies two main features of the Metaphysical poets (Smith, *John Donne*: *The Critical Heritage* 442). They are the agile management of figures of speech, "especially those figures which call for the rapid association of unlike objects" and the other is "the peculiarly close association, if not actual fusion, of feeling and thought, sensuous experience and intelligence, sensation and idea" (quot. in Smith, *Metaphysical Wit* 4). This favourable view is revised in the article 'Note sur Mallarmé et Poe' in *Nouvelle revue française* five years later, where, not dissimilarly to Courthope, witty metaphors of Donne are differentiated from the philosophically bolstered wit of Dante and consequently disregarded (*Metaphysical Wit* 6). In his series of lectures on the conceit in Donne and Crashaw (1926 and 1936) Eliot again tries to come to terms with his own ambivalent fascination with Metaphysical poetry. Donne is "an indisputable master of certain secondary modes, he is a mind of the *trecento* in disorder, mind in chaos, not in order" (*The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*: *The Clark Lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge, 1926, and the Turnbull Lectures at the Johns Hopkins University, 1933* 133).

It is important to keep in mind that even if Eliot's mentions of wit appear to be made *en passant* only, they are now considered crucial for the revival of the interest of literary critics in the term (and more broadly speaking in Metaphysical poetry) that arrived in the second half of the twentieth century. Eliot very astutely observes that "[w]hen we speak of the wit of Donne, the wit of Dryden, the wit of Swift, and our own precious wit, we are not speaking of the same thing, and we are not speaking of different things, but of a gradual development and different stages of the same thing", shrewdly hinting at that particular quality of the term that will become the reason for interest of William Empson, J. C. Ransom, C. S. Lewis and other critics from the 1960s onwards (25).

1.1.2 Formalist and Linguistic Approach: Empson and Lewis

The years after the hiatus of academic writing caused by World War II saw a remarkable growth of interest in wit as a part of the general boom of literary studies. The first post-war decade spawned at least four important studies related to wit: three of them specifically dealing with Alexander Pope's *Essay on Criticism*, regarded as one of the most crucial works of the early Augustan literary criticism. William Empson's article 'Wit in the *Essay on Criticism*' in the influential *The Hudson Review* (1950) represents a landmark in the critical approach not only to the word but to a historical text as well. Empson's close reading of Alexander Pope's poem focuses on the complexity of its key word's meanings, emphasising the prominence of what Empson calls "almost a slang word" which the term acquired after the Restoration. He connects this prominence to the current meaning of the word – i.e. "power to make ingenious (and critical) jokes",

claiming this meaning was already the most prominent one in the early Augustan period ('Wit in the *Essay on Criticism'* 84-5). The word's complexity and multi-layered nature did not pose a threat of confusion to Pope's (educated enough) contemporaries; "the performance inside the word [...] was intended to be quite obvious and in the sunlight" but for a modern reader the word is opaque and the poem is dull (85).

A riposte to William Empson's 1950 article came in the form of C. S. Lewis's account of wit in his *Studies in Words* (1960). The study is not confined to a single author or a literary text and there is clearly no interest on the part of the author in setting the word in the contemporary literary-historical context. Lewis starts with a thorough overview of the word's etymological history and development of its semantics, identifying three senses of wit: *old sense of wit*, *wit-ingenium* and what he terms the *dangerous sense of wit*. In the Old and Middle English *old sense* of wit designated "mind, reason, intelligence" (Lewis, *The Studies in Words* 86). For example, in *Beowulf* the hero warns his adversary Unferth against "þæs þu in helle scealt werhðo dreogan / þeah þin wit duge" – in Michael Alexander's versification: "you're a clever man, Unferth / but you'll endure hell's damnation for that" (Alexander, *Beowulf* 23). The second, *wit-ingenium* sense, developed from the first sense when different kinds of wit started to be distinguished: "Each man's wit has its own cast bent, or temper; one quick and another plodding, one solid and another showy, one ingenious to invent and another accurate to retain.[...] Thus in Chaucer we have 'For tender wittes wenen al be wyle / Theras they can pleynly understande' people of 'tender' mind" (Lewis, *The Studies in Words* 88) or in John Lyly's *Euphues* the eponymous hero is described as someone whose "witte [is] lyke waxe apte to receiuve any impression" (*The Complete Works of John Lyly* 185). This change, as Lewis correctly observes, was crucial for the future development of the word. Wit became to be distinguished in terms of its quality and consequently used as an evaluative term. This kind of wit exercised its power in the art of verbal expression, i.e. rhetoric, and was associated with the ability of imaginative thinking. As such, it is no longer a term of cognitive psychology and philosophy but operates in a different sphere – that of artistic creation and criticism.

The reason why Lewis devised the third, *dangerous* sense of wit is that the word's various senses did not come and go, so that we could safely say that during the Renaissance period the word no longer held its original sense, but only the second, more appreciative one, while in the Restoration texts we only encounter wit in its further sense. Instead, it retained all its senses and thus could be used in all the three of them within one utterance. Hence Dryden can say of Achitophel that "He sought the Storms; but for a Calm unfit, / Would Steer too nigh the Sands, to boast his Wit. / Great Wits are sure to Madness near ally'd;" (*The Works of John Dryden* II 10). Wit of the second line means natural intelligence; 'great wits' of the third line means men of genius, a superior intellectual capacity.

The nature of the shift between these two usages – i.e. from a descriptive to an evaluative term – is something C.S. Lewis seems rather uneasy about. For him, the pure evaluative character of words means that they have actually become "useless synonyms for *good* and *bad*" (*Studies in Words* 7-8). This displeasure at the devaluation of words is very much present in his treatment of the 'dangerous sense' of wit which is defined by

Lewis rather obscurely as "that sort of mental agility or gymnastic which uses language as the principal equipment of its gymnasium" (*Studies in Words* 97). Dangerous sense is usually the current sense of the word, one which we reach for when trying to figure out what the word means in an unfamiliar – usually old – context. If the current sense seems to work in the unfamiliar context, we are very likely to be deceived and "lured into misreading" because the "now dangerous sense may have existed then but it may not yet have been at all dominant" (13). Therefore Lewis advises caution: "If we once allow more familiar, though not necessarily later, meanings to colour our reading of the word wit wherever the neoclassical writers use it, we shall get into hopeless confusion" (92-3). That is why Empson was wrong in his analysis of wit claiming that "there is not a single use of the word in the whole poem in which the idea of a joke is quite of sight" (quot. in Lewis 93). Lewis on the other hand finds "plenty of passages where it is simply *wit-ingenium* with no idea of a joke, however far in the background" (93). This can be so thanks to the insulating power of the context which protects the word wit (or in general any word) from *ambiguity*, a concept which was important in both Empson's and New Critics' literary theories. However, I believe that Lewis's argument is built on a misapprehension of Empson's claims. When he disagrees with *literary* theories of Empson, Lewis is not primarily concerned with *literature* and the specific way in which it employs words and meanings, but with the *everyday communication* we conduct in order to make ourselves understood and convey our thoughts: "If ambiguity (in Professor Empson's sense) were not balanced by [the power of context], communication would become almost impossible. [...] What seems to me certain is that in ordinary language the sense of a word is governed by the context and this sense normally excludes all others from the mind" (*Studies in Words* 11).

Lewis then tries to come up with a method to designate what the word meant in the time of its Restoration boom but encounters another obstacle – the contemporary definitions: "It is the greatest simplicity in the world to suppose that when, say, Dryden defines *wit* or Arnold defines *poetry*, we can use their definition as evidence of what the word really meant when they wrote. The fact that they define it at all is itself a ground for scepticism" (18). We do not feel the need to define a word, unless we tend to deflect from its regular sense. This is specially the case of negative definitions. Once we feel the need to emphasize that *deprecate* does not mean *depreciate,* it is a sign that the word is beginning to mean exactly that. Lewis admits that by doing this we in fact resist "the growth of a new sense" but immediately produces a reason for justifying this strategy: "We may be quite right to do so, for it may be one [sense] that will make English a less useful means of communication" (18). Consequently, the many definitions the Restoration authors and critics attempted are for Lewis mere *tactical definitions*, weapons in "war of positions", in which the sides are fighting for a potent word. The critic's motivation is to appropriate an attractive word: "The pretty word has to be narrowed *ad hoc* so as to exclude something he dislikes. The ugly word has to be extended *ad hoc* [...], so as to bespatter some enemy" (19).

Lewis's account does not pretend to a literary study – its concern is clearly with the semantics of the word and not its specific usages at specific times. Conceived thus, I see

a crucial problem in using contemporary literary texts – essays, prefaces, prologues etc. – for purposes of non-literary analysis. This method may work with other words analyzed in the book but becomes rather problematic in the case of wit. Lewis's approach stands in a strict contrast to that of Formalism and New Criticism – the word itself is mistrusted while the context is given the power to stabilize its potential for semantic ambiguity. With a word as volatile as wit, Lewis can only be satisfied with the present situation, where "the happy ending" involves the word's stripping of the layers of meaning and settling to one useful meaning. This "happy condition" is most clearly realized when the word is used safely in non-literary contexts, e.g. in the surviving saying 'God give you *wit*' (*Studies in Words* 110).

These idealizing and mythifying tendencies on Lewis's part are criticized by John Sitter in his study *The Arguments of Augustan Wit* (1991). He rebuffs Lewis's effort to dignify wit by means of abstracting it from actual expression and the attempt to identify one "foremost" meaning of the word (essential gift of the poet, his creativity) which begins to be threatened by the "dangerous" sense of jocularity and witty language growing stronger in the Restoration and early eighteenth century (John Sitter, *The Arguments of Augustan Wit* 85). According to Sitter, Lewis charts the transformation of the word as a narrative of heretical deviation and nearly tragic loss of the original, pure meaning while those meanings most strongly objected to are "those that put him unquestionably in the social and material world of language: jokes and witty remarks as well as Dryden's "propriety of thoughts and words"" (*The Arguments of Augustan Wit* 85). However, as Sitter asserts, Dryden's definition, albeit tentative and unstable (in Dryden, just as in Pope and others, "wit" sometimes meant mind, ingenuity or imagination), perpetuates wit as closely related to conversation and firmly linked to the material and the living.

1.1.3 Structuralist, Post-structuralist and Psychoanalytic Angle: Culler, Sitter, Kroll

As has been mentioned above, the formalist literary criticism helped to revive interest in wit during the first decades of the twentieth century. The successive streams of literary theory have appropriated the term in ways and contexts which will be the topic of this section and the following subchapter. Given the scope of this work, it is impossible for me to present all of the studies, books and articles published on wit in its various contexts and meanings during the last sixty years. I am confined to mention briefly a number of these that in my opinion stand out and I chose to give a more detailed account of three that I find most pertaining to my purpose of this chapter.

Although wit is not a central notion of Jonathan Culler's *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*, it is significant to follow the ways in which the term becomes part of his post-structuralist discourse. According to Culler, pun, which can be seen in its extreme as "a sin against reason", tends to accentuate the signifier – the linguistic sign which arrests our gaze and by interposing its material form it affects

or infects the thought. To minimize the truth-endangering powers of the pun, the signifier must be suppressed by displacing into the realm of joke. In philosophy, the rejection of signifier equals the rejection of writing. In literature of the Restoration period, the rejection of pun took form of the rejection of levity which was associated especially with comedy. More importantly however, it manifested itself as rejection of the imaginative forces which lie at the basis of metaphor, which is in turn regarded by many scholars to be the cornerstone of literature (Culler, *Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* 91). Here, pun represents all kinds of verbal creativity and novelty which, as we will see in the subsequent chapters, was associated with the so called 'false' wit. Culler contends that in pun, the "accidental" or "external relationship between signifiers is treated as a conceptual relationship, identifying "history" as "his story" or connecting meaning (*sens*) and absence (*sans*)" (*Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* 91-2). In order not to "infect thought," verbal wit has to be treated as a joke.

Developing Culler's exposition further, I propose to contrast false wit's external relationship between signifiers with 'true' wit as consisting in the conceptual relationship between the signified. To make this claim, I am turning to Aristotle's theory of wit as expressed in his *Rhetoric*. Aristotle associated wit with the ability to make apt comparisons between different categories of being, thus making it the fundamental principle behind the type of metaphor, which was termed the conceptual (cognitive) by the twentieth-century linguistics. In *Organon* Aristotle identified ten basic categories of being: substance, quantity, quality, relation, place, date, posture, possession, action and passion. Although they have been since rejected by the modern day philosophy, the concept as such is still helpful. The conceptual metaphor is based on the understanding of one idea in terms of another, for example, understanding quantity in terms of action (e.g. "gold prices are soaring"). Thus, according to Aristotle, wit is based on comparison between ideas of two different categories, and not merely on physical similarities of their verbal representations. As we will see, this type of wit was hailed as the valuable one during the Restoration period, as it did not depend on the instability of language.

Another study which must be presented in a greater detail here the already mentioned John Sitter's study *The Arguments of Augustan Wit* (1991). I would like to present it as a relatively unique example of a well-informed, insightful and unorthodox piece of critical writing on wit that enriches both our knowledge of the literature it deals with (late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century English poetry) as well as of ways of employing wit of this literature in thinking about contemporary literary theory. As Sitter himself claims, he wishes to approach the subject of wit from various angles in order to bring "Augustan works to bear on contemporary literary theory" (*The Arguments of Augustan Wit* 2). Although his attention focuses on the major poets of the period – John Dryden, John Gay, Alexander Pope, Matthew Prior, Lord Rochester – he devotes some space to the theories of John Locke and the analysis of Swift's *Gulliver Travels*. In the second chapter Sitter presents his principal three-step argument of the materiality of the Augustan writing as opposed to the abstraction which has dominated the literary discourse since Romanticism. The argument is based on the study of Locke's epistemological troubles

with language and its access to truth and knowledge in general and relates to the subject of wit in an original and compelling fashion.

Starting from the philosopher's notorious elevation of judgment above wit as propounded in the *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, Sitter refutes Locke's distrustful disregard of language as a transmitter of truth in the sense of "things as they are". In Locke's scheme of ideas wit is a harmful thing, leading our attention astray mainly because of its association with rhetoric. Locke's linguistic scepticism and his aversion to the "arts of fallacy" are contrasted with the attitudes of Joseph Addison and Matthew Prior. In his *Dialogue between Mr. John Locke and Seigneur de Montaigne* Prior attacks Locke's naivety about language as being suitable and useful means of reaching Truth (affined with reason, knowledge and judgment) only if cleansed of the hampering figurativeness of rhetoric. While acquiescing in Locke's core argument that judgment is essentially an analytic faculty while wit a synthetic one, Prior questions the possibility of separating the mental acts of making similitudes and making distinctions as the process of differentiating is always already dependant on the pre-act of comparing and vice versa (*The Arguments of Augustan Wit* 70). Similarly, one of Addison's *Spectator* essays on wit (No. 62, to be precise) demolishes Locke's anxious opposition of wit and judgment by simple, common sense-based arguments. Addison makes alterations in Locke's definition of wit by stating that not only resemblance but the opposition of ideas produces wit. Therefore, if wit discerns differences as well as similarities, the dichotomy between the two collapses. As Sitter suggests, "common sense [...] houses with Locke one moment and with Prior's [argument] the next" and goes on to observe that the real problem "dividing Locke from Addison and Prior can be seen as a question with particular pertinence to our own era and criticism: does it make more sense to think of "things as they are" as represented (perhaps badly) by language or as constituted by language?" (70) Not wishing to present either of the former writers as "proto-Nietschean or proto-Derridean rhetoricians of contradiction", Sitter nevertheless stresses their counter-position to Locke's "nostalgia for things and ideas untouched by words or for truths too tacit to enter the shared figures and allusions of language" (70).

To make the untenability of the Lockean hostile view of wit (as the proxy of the figurative mode of language) even more obvious, Sitter parallels the philosopher's judgement-wit opposition with the famous opposition of metaphor and metonymy of Roman Jakobson. While admitting the opposition is "neither exact nor proportional", Sitter nevertheless proposes that it is useful by suggesting it can make a revealing statement "about the inconclusiveness of the Augustan argument and about historical continuity" (71). Based on Jakobson's opposition of metaphor (created through process of selection or substitution) and metonymy (process of combination or contexture), Sitter approximately associates wit with metaphor and similarity principle on the one hand and judgement, metonymy and contiguity principle on the other. For Jakobson, the poetic function of language draws on both selective (i.e. metaphoric) and combinative (i.e. metonymic) modes as a means for the promotion of equivalence. In the post-Romanticism poetry-centred literary discourse the supremacy of metaphor (as opposed to the metonymically based realistic novels) has been widely acknowledged just as – according

to critics like Jonathan Culler and Paul de Man – it has become common to regard it as the "revelation of essences and imaginative truth" (Culler, *Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* 198). Culler's provocative account of metaphor suggests that "[t]o maintain the primacy of metaphor is to treat language as a device for the expression of thoughts, perceptions, truth. To posit the dependence of metaphor on metonymy is to treat what language expresses as the effect of contingent conventional relations and a system of mechanical processes. Metaphor and metonymy thus become in turn not only figures for figurality but figures for language in general" (*Pursuit of Signs* 201-2). However, according to Sitter, Jakobson's account favours metonymy over metaphor, the former mode being based not on "contingency" but contiguity. Culler's ascribing "contingent" relations to metonymy means seeing its relations as accidental rather than essential, superficial rather than profound and so is not equivalent with Jakobson's "contiguity" which "includes things that are next to each other" not only in linguistic but also existential terms (Sitter 75). Sitter believes that in this respect "Jakobson's opposition shares the important common feature with Locke's of providing a claim on "things as they are that is otherwise difficult to make" by recognizing the general correspondence between Locke's characterization of wit as the assertion of likeness and Jakobson's location of poetry in the realm of equivalences (76).

As with the first analogy, Sitter warns against too literal juxtaposition of Locke's and Jakobson's dichotomy. Instead he suggests that the basic oppositions are the most instructive ones: "for Locke primarily operations of mind and for Jakobson primarily the operations of language: Locke's discrimination (or "discerning") and assemblage ("putting together") and Jakobson's selection and combination" (ibid.). The tension between the two operations is not characteristic only of the two main literary modes "but also in different "personalities" or "personal predilections", where we can discern "the strong desire to make characterological if not moral diagnoses" (ibid.). This brings Sitter back to what he calls the "local debate over the status of wit" and it allows him to explain that although the significance of such discussion seems lost to us in the centuries of changing literary paradigms, it could "cause excitement" for the Augustans. Moreover, the tropes of literary criticism may not be as far-apart as it is often suggested by literary historians. Comparing lines of Alexander Pope's (in his *Essay in Criticism* of 1711) to those of A. R. Ammons's (in *Essay on Poetics* of 1972), Sitter proposes affinity of poetical concerns spanning over two centuries of English criticism: "'Tis hard to say, if greater Want of Skill / Appear in Writing or in Judging ill ..." ... "it's hard to say whether the distinguishers or the resemblancers are sillier".

Pope's opening couplet juxtaposing "writing" – creative activity governed by wit – and criticism (intellectual activity governed by judgment) introduces us to the third and final step of Sitter's argument in his attempt to reconnect the subject of wit with the issues of contemporary literary theory. Reminding us that the Augustan quarrel over the province of wit is in part one transformation of the longer battle between "philosophy" and "rhetoric" alluded to in the earlier stage of the argument, Sitter attacks the view of wit as dematerialized, abstracted entity of the literary poetics. Dryden's first definition of wit appears in *Annus Mirabilis* (1667) and is based on a similar dichotomy. Unlike Pope,

he is able to merge the twofold transformation into a threefold description of "imagination":

> The composition of all poems is, or ought to be, of wit, and wit in the poet, or wit writing, [...] is no other than the faculty of imagination in the writer, which, like a nimble spaniel, beats over and ranges through the field of memory, till it springs the quarry it hunted after; or, without metaphor, which searches over all the memory for the species or ideas which it designs to represent. Wit written is that which is well defined the happy result of thought, or product of that imagination. (Dryden *Of Dramatic Poesy and Other Critical Essays* I. 97-8)

Using the implied analogy of *natura naturans*, Sitter contends that here, wit writing is the active process, "wit witting", while the final product – *wit written* – might be considered as "wit witted" analogous to *natura naturata* (Sitter, *The Arguments of Augustan Wit* 79). Wit written is the wit of most of Dryden's discussions, where it becomes "propriety of thoughts and words", wit which is not epigram, antithesis, or pun but the "delightful imaging of persons, actions, or things ... some lively and apt description, dressed in such colours of speech that it sets before your eyes the absent object as perfectly and more delightfully than nature." As Dryden's argument unfolds, *wit written* moves toward *wit writing*:

> So then, the first happiness of the poet's imagination is properly invention, or finding of the thought; the second is fancy or the variation, driving or moulding of that thought, as the judgement represents it proper to the subject; the third is elocution, or that art of clothing and adorning that thought so found and varied, in apt, significant, and sounding words: the quickness of the imagination is seen in the invention, the fertility in the fancy, and the accuracy in the expression. (Dryden *Of Dramatic Poesy and Other Critical Essays* I 98)

By appropriating judgment to imagination Dryden manages to transcend the Lockean opposition: judgment seems to be so simultaneous with "fancy" it becomes its synonym. But this rescue action also nearly transcends language, separating expression in words from the intellectual discovery and construction, relegating it to the last place in time as well as in importance. Sitter notes that most of the late seventeenth- and eighteenth century attempts to ennoble wit involve a move similar to Dryden's and lead to the same problem: judgment is appropriated to wit, which is then implicitly redefined in broader terms as "imagination" or "genius," but which in its loftier identity finally has no visible connections with the process of writing itself (Sitter, *The Arguments of Augustan Wit* 81). These difficulties were propelled by the vastly influential definition of wit expressed in Johnson's *Life of Cowley* (1779):

> If wit be well described by Pope, as being "that which has been often thought, but was never before so well expressed," they certainly never attained, nor ever sought it; for they endeavoured to be singular in their thoughts, and were careless of their diction. But Pope's account of wit is undoubtedly erroneous; he depresses it below its natural dignity, and reduces it from strength of thought to happiness of language.

> If by a more noble and more adequate conception, that be considered as wit which is at once natural and new, that which, [...] is, upon its first production, acknowledged to be just; if it be that which he that never found it, wonders how he missed; to wit of this kind the Metaphysical poets have seldom risen. Their thoughts are often new, but seldom natural; [...].
> But wit, abstracted from its effects upon the hearer, may be more rigorously and philosophically considered as a kind of *discordia concors*; a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike. Of wit, thus defined, they have more than enough. The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions; their learning instructs, and their subtlety surprises; but the reader commonly thinks his improvement dearly bought, and though he sometimes admires, is seldom pleased. (83)

As the twentieth-century criticism came first to appreciate Metaphysical poetry, most of its attention (from John Courthope, T. S. Eliot etc.) was focused on the third paragraph with the term of *discordia concors* allowing either reprobation or appreciation. In the two preceding – and far less quoted – paragraphs, Johnson's alliance with the Augustan discussion is much clearer. Johnson's own preference seems to be for the "more adequate" definition of wit as "that which is at once natural and new," and "not obvious is [...] acknowledged to be just". Still, Johnson seems to be suggesting that Pope's account of wit is wrong as he "depresses it below its natural dignity, and reduces it from strength of thought to happiness of language" – in other words isolates expression from thinking.

Sitter's explanation is that Pope describes wit from the reader's perspective: the poet's "happiness of language" occasions the reader's "strength of thought". In Johnson's first two paragraphs we can detect the assertion that the "natural dignity" of wit requires it abstracting it "from its effects upon the hearer" (Sitter, *The Arguments of Augustan Wit* 83). This effort to dignify wit by means of abstracting it from actual expression resonates in some of the twentieth-century criticism, namely C. S. Lewis's previously mentioned account of wit in his *Studies in Words*. Its idealizing and mythifying tendencies are manifested in Lewis's attempt to identify one "foremost" meaning of the word (essential gift of the poet, his creativity) which begins to be threatened by the "dangerous" sense of jocularity and witty language growing stronger in the Restoration and early eighteenth century (Sitter, *The Arguments of Augustan Wit* 83-4). Lewis charts the transformation of the word as a narrative of heretical deviation and nearly tragic loss of the original, pure meaning. Those meanings most strongly objected to by Lewis are "those that put him unquestionably in the social and material world of language: jokes and witty remarks as well as Dryden's "propriety of thoughts and words"" (*The Arguments of Augustan Wit* 85).

This particular quality of wit is explored in Richard W. F. Kroll's article 'Discourse and Power in *The Way of the World*' as well. Analyzing the most famous play of William Congreve, Kroll billuminates the intricate relations between language, and the social and political realities in which it is used. Wit is "not only [...] a feature of discourse but [...] a judgment of discourse that signals apt judgments about the world and entails a proper

view of language in relation to persons, things, events, and ideas" (Kroll, 'Discourse and Power in *The Way of the World*' 728). Kroll thus rejects attempts of previous critics (e.g. T. H. Fujimura's classification of characters based on whether they belong to the class of 'Truewit', 'Witwoud' or 'Witless') and suggests that "'character' is itself constituted as a feature of discourse" ('Discourse and Power in *The Way of the World*' 728).

Kroll identifies three planes of discourse in the play: natural, legal and social. These realms of interpretation must be controlled by the characters of the play in order to be successful in achieving their respective goals. The purely natural realm "includes the hidden drive for love, money, or power, which we cannot hope to purge but must at all events socialize" ('Discourse and Power in *The Way of the World*' 738). This is the fundamental level of human communication and there is zero possibility of manipulation of language. The legal discourse is a level of contractual realm, where certain words and expressions are bound by a general social agreement and therefore can be trusted. The final level of discourse is the social one, in which only the most verbally skilled, creative, and at the same time self-disciplined characters can operate successfully. This level of discourse allows to bargain for the matters of love (finding a lover, starting a family) and power (inheritance settlement, pre-nuptial agreement, marriage etc.) using a language that is not only acceptable by the society but even admired by it.

Associating each of the three levels of discourse with a certain group of the play's characters, Kroll shows that the most despicable and ultimately defeated characters are those who cannot operate beyond the levels of the natural or legal discourse. Meanwhile, the heroine and hero of the play are represented as the victorious couple who achieve all they wished (and worked hard) for: mutual love, marriage, as well as a large dowry. Their ability to manipulate language and to navigate it through the murky waters of the Restoration milieu of epistemological scepticism is unmatched and highly appreciated. Kroll proposes to view wit as an ability to creatively manipulate language (through metaphors, comparisons, quick repartees and other means), and through it the social reality in which our lives are set.

1.2 Wit as Aesthetic Concept

1.2.1 The Problem of Definition: 'Wit' in Dictionaries

While most of the definitions of wit found in the dictionaries of literary and critical terms are bent on providing an extensive account of the term's complicated historical development, and/or stressing the changes it went through during the process (Beckson's and Ganz's *Reader's Guide to Literary Terms*, *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*), others attempt to formulate a general principle of wit's function and to evaluate its position in the contemporary literary production and criticism. For example, Babette Deutsch's 1965 *Poetry Handbook* claims that wit is the "faculty that makes for metaphor by the perception of likeness in unlike things" (169). Quoting T. S. Eliot's definition of