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Source: *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, Spring, 1948, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Spring, 1948), pp. 182-190

Published by: Institute of General Semantics

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/42580815>

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EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY SEMANTICS OF WIT

ALEX ARONSON*

THERE EXISTS a good deal of confusion regarding the use of the term *Wit* in the eighteenth century. Some take it to be a synonym for Reason or Intellect; others see in it a specific behavior pattern vaguely related to the civilization of the Augustan age; others again limit its meaning to a purely literary context, stressing the identity between *Wit* and some ideal perfection of form—'Nature to advantage dress'd'; and there are also those who define *Wit* as a thought process peculiar to the upperclasses and the aristocracy of eighteenth-century Europe, a kind of defense mechanism directed against the growing 'enthusiasm,' religious, political and otherwise, of the common people. The confusion is due, not so much to the large number of definitions available, as to the fact that in some of them *Wit* is considered to be an 'idea' or a 'concept,' in others an attitude leading to a particular system of values. The reasons for this semantic confusion lie, however, not only with contemporary scholarship, but, to a considerable degree, with eighteenth-century writers themselves.

Dr. Johnson in his *Dictionary*, for instance, provides us with nine different

and apparently contradictory interpretations of *Wit*, in some of which it is considered to be an abstract concept, in some others a form of behavior. According to him *Wit* is a 'mental faculty,' 'sense' or 'judgment,' or a 'sound mind'; on the other hand, it is also 'imagination' or 'quickness of fancy'; and 'sentiments' produced by 'genius'; and, lastly, it may also mean a 'contrivance, stratagem, power of expedients, invention, and ingenuity.' The way in which *Wit* comes into being, its origin and effect on the human mind, are defined by him in the *Rambler* (194); *Wit* is 'the unexpected copulation of ideas, the discovery of some occult (sic) relation between images in appearance remote from each other; an effusion of *Wit*, therefore, presupposes an accumulation of Knowledge; a memory stored with notions, which the imagination may cull out to compose new assemblages.' This clearly implies that *Wit* works with the help of imagination. A few years later Dr. Johnson actually defines imagination as 'selecting ideas from the treasures of remembrance' and producing 'novelties only by varied combination' (*Idler*, 44, 1759), a definition which could equally well be applied to *Wit*. If Judgment, Imagination, and Novelty are the natural foundations of *Wit*, they are equally constituents of Genius; for according to Johnson, Genius is 'that quality which collects, combines, ampli-

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ties, and animates'; and Genius consists of 'Invention by which new trains of events are formed and new scenes of imagery displayed' and 'Imagination,' which enables the poet 'to convey to the reader the various forms of nature, incidents of life, and energies of passion,' and lastly Judgment, 'which selects from life or nature what the present purpose requires.' (*Lives of the Poets*, 1781).

It is obvious from these quotations that Wit and Genius were not only similarly defined, but constituted one and the same form of mental activity: they both employed Judgment and Imagination in 'selecting' the relevant and rejecting the irrelevant; they 'invented' new combinations of images and ideas leading to 'novelty.' Dr. Johnson calls such a process 'a kind of *discordia concors*; a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike'—and he accuses the metaphysical poets of having had 'more than enough' of it, and adds that such a 'confusion of images' which is, properly speaking, the effect of Wit 'can stand its ground against Truth only a little while.' Wit and Truth, therefore, seem to exclude each other, the former being largely concerned with form or expression, while the latter is, or rather should be, the very quintessence of Thought itself. A 'witty truth,' we may assume, would have been a contradiction of terms, while a 'truthful wit' would be truthful only in so far as 'Imagination,' 'Invention,' 'Judgment,' and 'Genius' would permit it. The truthfulness which comes from 'Knowledge,' 'Wisdom,' or 'Humility,' was indeed a quality rarely appreciated by 'a wit.' The contrast between Truth and Wit, therefore, implied an evaluation. And it almost seems as though Johnson, despite his explicit admiration for Wit as an abstraction, had

no great liking for the 'man of wit,' the attitudes of mind or the behavior patterns that go to the making of an *homme d'esprit*. And similarly, although Genius seems to him a most desirable 'quality' of mind, his common-sense and urbanity revolt against what people were beginning to call 'a man of genius.'

Johnson is by no means alone in his preference for abstract ideas as opposed to the rather more concrete phenomena of intellectual or social life. Long before him, philosophers and writers had defined Wit in unmistakably abstract language, stressing the functional importance of Wit as a mental 'quality' rather than the attitudes underlying it or the system of values resulting from it. Locke's definition, for instance, singularly resembles that of Johnson's:

For wit 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, and agreeable visions of the fancy.¹

Wit, according to Locke, is (like imagination) a quality of the mind which selects and combines, while Judgment, on the contrary, distinguishes, separates, and analyses. To most writers before Johnson, Wit is either a new combination of ideas and images, or urbanity and elegance of expression. Addison's distinction between true, false, and mixed Wit only elaborates what Locke before him and Johnson after him said; true Wit, according to him, 'consists in the resemblance of ideas.' And both Dryden and Pope stress the essentially urbane character of Wit, the question of Truth arising only insofar as truthful and natural were taken to be identical terms. According to Dryden, Wit is 'a property of Thoughts and

¹ *Human Understanding*, II, xi, 2.

Words; or in other terms, Thoughts and Words elegantly expressed' (1677), while Pope defines Wit as a 'justness of Thought, and a facility of expression' (1704).

To the student of social history a discrepancy between the abstraction and the attitude, between meaning and evaluation, signifies a gradually changing social structure: as long as Wit was limited to the upper classes and the aristocracy such a discrepancy did not exist, because the attitudes underlying the concept and the human situations that created it were taken for granted. Indeed, there was no one to question either the validity of Wit or the nobleman's privilege to cultivate such standards of behavior as were considered to be becoming a 'man of quality.' Once, however, the concept was taken up by the middle classes, the split between the abstract 'meaning' of Wit and the very real attitudes of 'men of wit' became increasingly obvious. To the middle classes Truth was indeed more important than Wit, and while the concept of Wit became gradually associated with un-Truth, it was reserved to the Genius only to attain Truth.

The word Wit, however, continued to be used in the sense of Humour without implying thereby any particular social ambivalence. It is this change of perspective which made definitions necessary. Rarely were wornout concepts and attitudes subjected to a closer scrutiny than in the Augustan age. Values which had for a long time past been taken for granted were questioned and new ones substituted for the old. If we do not find this evolution clearly reflected in the creative literature of the age, it is because literature frequently lags a step behind social history, and aristocracy was still too close to permit any doubts being expressed which might disturb the *status*

quo and introduce elements of unrest into the essentially stable meaning-structure of the age.

Journalists, however, were more outspoken; they catered for the new reading public, largely recruited from the middle classes, and it was their business to supply satisfactory 'definitions' which would appeal to new qualities of mind, to new patterns of behavior, and indeed, to a new moral outlook. It is in the periodical press of the age that the *status quo* began first to be questioned.

II

The journalist could very well dispense with abstract definitions of Wit. For him Wit was a form of conduct the effect of which could easily be measured by the response of people of good breeding and cultivation. Those who were most strongly attached to behavior patterns handed down to the middle classes by the aristocracy could not but bestow praise upon Wit; but they did so using a terminology which singularly contrasted with that used by Locke, Chesterfield, Dryden, and Pope. According to one of them, Wit 'is a Beauty of the Soul . . . it triumphs over time, and every day affords new charms to a sensible heart.'² The insistence on 'soul' and 'sensitivity' clearly shows the new trend. Wit is no longer

²*Gentleman's Magazine*, February 1736, Vol. VI, 70: 'Mr. Lively's Speech in Praise of Wit.'—A similar emphasis on the soothing quality of Wit and its direct appeal to the heart can be found in the following quotation: 'The great use and advantage of Wit is to render the owner agreeable, by making him instrumental to the happiness of others. When such a person appears among his friends, an air of pleasure and satisfaction diffuses itself over every face. Wit, so used, is an instrument of the sweetest music in the hands of the artist, commanding, soothing and modulating the passions into harmony and peace.' (*Weekly Register*, July 22, 1732, No. 119: 'Of Wit').

merely a intellectual quality; already in the first half of the eighteenth century it had become essentially humanized, and from being a philosophical abstraction (in some way related to Judgment, Good-Sense, and Discernment), it is now a 'quality of the heart'—or, indeed, as in the case of some writers, who wanted to appear particularly up-to-date,³ a quality of the 'length, size, or situation of a fibre' or the 'ferment in the composition'⁴ that determines the difference between a Wit and a half-wit. But, to all practical purposes, Wit as defined in the periodical press of the time, has ceased to be the appendage of a ruling class to be admired for its social connotations; indeed, the 'pure' Wit, the one who is nothing but a Wit, seems to the middle class journalists a pretty poor specimen of humanity:

Wit is certainly in a good degree dependent on the constitution, and is seldom acquired by Study or Art, any more than Genius or Beauty: volatile or mercurial Minds abound with it most, and *tho' 'tis always an Excellence in the Abstract* it sometimes arises from the Defect of the Mind, as well as from its strength and capacity. This is evident in those who are Wits only, without the Power of being grave or wise; the Imagination in them is purblind, it sees but bits and scraps of the Object before it, or else it squints and multiplies it into confusion. Just, solid, and lasting Wit is the Result of fine Imagination, finish'd study and happy temper of Body.⁵

³ *I.e.*, materialistic.

⁴ *Daily Courant*, Nov. 16, 1731: 'Of Wit, Humour, Madness, and Folly'; In *Gentleman's Magazine*, Nov., 1731, Vol. I, 490

⁵ *The Champion*, Sept. 14, 1742, No. 441: 'On Wit.' In *Gentleman's Magazine*, Sept. 1742, Vol. XII, 479 (*italics mine*).

This writer evidently realizes the intellectual 'excellency' of the abstract concept, but has his doubts as regards the attitude underlying it. His parallel between Wit and Genius, and his preoccupation with 'just, solid, and lasting' Wit (this seems almost a contradiction in terms) and with a 'fine' imagination, are significant. They once more show the shift of the stress from abstract intellectual perfection to real human achievement, the shift from 'Wit' as a form of urbanity to 'Truth' as the essence of all creative and critical effort, from the ideal of 'conversation' to the ideal of 'imagination' and 'sensibility.'

A comparison between definitions of Wit and those of Genius, in eighteenth-century periodical literature, will reveal a similar emphasis laid on imagination in both of them alike. In the early years of the eighteenth century we still find Genius opposed to Wit as transgressing reason and leading towards mental chaos.

Genius, says one writer, is necessary for Wit, 'but (as Lord Shaftesbury observes) an English author would be all genius; which may be the reason why they are such bad wits; the desire of fame hurries us beyond our reason; and we lose ourselves before we are aware.'⁶ It is only after 1750 that affinities will be found to exist between Wit and Genius and that, as in the case of Dr. Johnson, the definitions provided for either of them will be almost interchangeable. And while the attitudes underlying Wit and Genius are still far apart, the concepts of Wit and Genius derive a similar ambiguity of meaning from a 'quality' they have both in common, namely Imagination.

In a book review dealing with an

⁶ *Grub Street Journal*, Nov. 2, 1732, No. 149: 'On the Itch of Writing.' In *Gentleman's Magazine*, Nov., 1732, Vol. II, 1043.

'Essay on Original Genius; and its Various Modes of Exertion in Philosophy and the Fine Arts, particularly in Poetry' (1767), we read that 'genius is a *quality* compounded of *ingredients*,' namely, Imagination, Judgment, and Taste. As regards imagination, the author of this essay defines it as follows: '... a faculty that assembles the various ideas received by sensation, and retained by memory; that compounds or disjoins them at pleasure, and by new associations, produces creations of its own, and exhibits objects and scenes which never existed in nature.'⁷

In a later passage in the same book review we are informed that although imagination is an 'ingredient' of genius, genius is also its 'child'; furthermore imagination has two more 'children,' namely Wit and Humour. And the essay concludes with the remarkable statement that 'genius, wit and humour, are really three children, and not one.' In the opinion of another writer, a few years earlier, genius is '*a tall faculty of the intellect* (if I may be pardoned the expression) which looks around on every side, finds out all that has any native relation to the object we contemplate, perceives relations which are not obvious to others, and from their connexions can infer certain truths and distant conclusions.'⁸ It therefore seems that Wit and Genius are the result of a 'quality' which makes them look for new combinations and relations in the visible universe or in their own memory, and makes them create altogether new ideas and images 'which never existed in nature'; this quality evidently is Imagination.

⁷ *Gentleman's Magazine*, 1767, Vol. xxxvii, 309.

⁸ *Daily Gazeteer*, June 19, 1753, 'Character of Lord Bolingbroke'; *Gentleman's Magazine*, July, 1753, Vol. xxiii, 330.

III

Every age seems to be characterized by the formation of ideals and utopias which represent best of all the aspirations of countless individuals. *L'homme d'esprit*, the man of cultivation and arts, of good-breeding and urbanity, was undoubtedly for some time the ideal put before the middle classes in England during the eighteenth century. It is also true to say that this ideal, like so many others before and after, had been imported from France, where, at the court of Louis XIV, specific thought, speech, and behavior patterns had developed which were characteristic of a small upper class in close alliance with the monarchy and, to a considerable degree, dissociated from the people. Perhaps the most genuine, and certainly the most 'classical' expression, of *esprit* can be found in the plays of Corneille, Racine, or Moliere.

In the eighteenth century we are confronted by a newly created middle class eagerly aspiring towards that ideal and yet vaguely aware of the fact that it had first been formulated in a very specific social context which no longer applied to them at all. Their various definitions, therefore, attempted a broadening of the concept of wit by relating it to such thought patterns as were common to them, Sense and Genius, the Soul and Imagination. But the moment they related it to their own social preoccupations, their easy-going humanitarianism, their benevolence or 'cheerfulness,' their moral seriousness in matters of religion or literature or philosophy, they quite naturally failed to appreciate the social values of Wit. It did not fit in with their system of values. They were eager enough to understand and to accumulate knowledge, but Wit seemed to them a destructive rather than a creative force.

And as out of every ideal there arises a counter-ideal, when the social structure changes, so also the middle classes in the eighteenth century were not slow in creating their own counter ideal: Wisdom.

Wisdom is, according to them, a combination of 'Learning,' 'Judgment,' and 'Good-sense'; and the attitude underlying it is 'Humility' as opposed to the impertinent all-knowingness of Wit. As an ideal it lacked all the sprightliness of Wit; but it was 'useful' and of infinitely greater social potentiality than Wit. Wit was, at best, an individual accomplishment; it had ceased to have that social significance which it undoubtedly possessed when applied to noblemen at the court of an absolute monarch. And middle class journalists were the first to realize it. Here is a startlingly relevant comment:

Wisdom is the making proper use of proper means to obtain a proper end . . . What we generally call parts, I take to be a quick conception and a happy delivery. . . . *This* being a power to assemble ideas, a capacity to distinguish them; *that* a lively representation of ideas variously assembled. . . . I am ready to submit to the just domination of Wit, but cannot patiently suffer it to exercise our understanding, and make every other quality its tributary. Wisdom, though a less glaring perfection, is certainly a more useful one. . . . I am determined, for the future, to endeavour rather to be *sensible* rather than *witty*, comforted with this reflection, that if *sense was not wit, it was something much better.*⁹

⁹ *Common Sense*, Sept. 23, 1738, No. 86: 'Wit, Wisdom, Cunning, Parts, Judgment, defined and illustrated'; *Gentleman's Magazine*, Sept., 1738, Vol. viii, 478 (italics mine).

Wit, to writers of this kind, could not but seem a sign of immaturity and lack of moral seriousness; and they revolted against those very limitations of Wit which at one time were considered to be its greatest merit, conciseness and precision of thought, correctness and elegance of expression. The mood of meditation and reflection, and the tendency towards brooding melancholy, so characteristic of later eighteenth-century literature, were in their very essence opposed to Wit and required a counter-ideal to justify their existence. The disillusionment in some cases was profound:

In search of Wisdom, far from Wit I fly;

Wit is a harlot, beauteous to the eye,
In whose bewitching arms our early time

We waste, and vigour of our youthful prime:

But when reflection comes with riper years,

And manhood with a thoughtful brow appears;

We cast the mistress off to take a wife,
And, wed to Wisdom, lead a happy life.¹⁰

Disillusionment and frustration are likely to lead to cynicism, especially in the case of writers whose sympathy was all with Wit, but who, on the other hand, were also intensely and, indeed, painfully aware of the 'usefulness' of Wisdom. Some, and probably the most sensitive among them, felt that they did not 'belong' somehow to either of the two parties, that neither the flimsiness of Wit nor the rather pompous seriousness of Wisdom could appeal to them for long. And they escaped into irony and sarcasm, identifying Wisdom with dull-

¹⁰ Ambrose Philips; quoted in *The Guardian*, Aug. 22, 1731, No. 141.

ness and Wit with folly, and thereby implicitly advocating some golden mean of human conduct which would neither be too 'witty' nor too 'wise':

Dullness is always grave, solemn, majestic, so that, having all the outwards marks of wisdom, is often mistaken for it. Nay, it is the opinion of some philosophers, that they are near akin, and as wit is ally'd to madness, according to the poet, so is dullness to wisdom. . . .¹¹

IV

At times the irony almost disappears and the counter-ideal becomes inverted: dullness is praised for its own sake, as a preserving and stabilizing quality. The following passage from the *Grub Street Journal* deserves to be quoted in full, for it is an admirable instance of the journalist's appeal to the reader's sense of respectability and good-breeding, rather than to his intelligence and sense of discrimination:

It is no small Recommendation of Dullness that it is a Thing of an uniform, fix'd Nature; not subject to Uncertainty and Change; not whimsical and fantastical; not ebbing and flowing; not rising and setting; not turning with every wind and tossed and blown about like a feather . . . it is harmless and inoffensive. . . . A wit is the most fickle, inconstant creature in the world; now remitting, and then intending; now all brightness and then all clouds and darkness; sometimes all noise, and sometimes all silence; sometimes everything and sometimes nothing. . . . Wit, in short, at the highest pitch of it, is but a sort of madness

¹¹ *The Craftsman*, February 21, 1735. No. 451; *Gentleman's Magazine*, February, 1735, Vol. V, 83.

. . . and they who possess most of this detestable quality, are, notwithstanding all their frequent gaiety and freedom, fit for nothing but chains and darkness. Dear, amiable Dullness! Thou art of a quite contrary nature, formed to promote the great ends of society, to cause a reciprocal discharge of all the offices of humanity and benevolence.¹²

Dullness having been defined in terms of 'good-nature' and 'benevolence,' we are left to assume that Wit lacks just those social qualities which were foremost in the minds of eighteenth-century writers, especially the quality of good-breeding which Addison defined as 'affability, complaisance and easiness of temper reduced into an art.' Wit, when let loose, just as Imagination and Genius, is found to be increasingly ill-mannered. The only solution was a compromise, a new combination of Wit and 'cheerfulness,' something which would be neither quite Wit nor quite Dullness, neither quite Wisdom nor quite Imagination, in short, that form of conduct, for which again Addison has coined the significant expression 'artificial humanity.' Wit itself had to be 'reduced into an art'; for 'natural' Wit was dangerous to the equilibrium of the mind and to positive human values; it was, in addition, essentially anti-social.

Addison actually provides us with the explicit formula as regards the proposed relationship between 'benevolence' and 'wit':

Good-nature is more agreeable in conversation than Wit, and gives a certain air to the countenance which is more amiable than beauty. . . . It is almost grown into a maxim, that good-natured men are not always men of the most wit. This observation, in my opin-

¹² *Grub Street Journal*, Aug. 19, 1737, No. 347: 'Wit and Dullness defined'; *Gentleman's Magazine*, August, 1737, Vol. vi, 460.

ion, has no foundation in nature. The greatest Wits I have conversed with are men eminent for their humanity. I take, therefore, this remark to have been occasioned by two reasons. First, because ill-nature among ordinary observers passes for wit . . . (and) because he (a good-natured man) is apt to be moved with compassion for those misfortunes and infirmities, which another would turn into ridicule, and by that means gains the reputation of a Wit.¹³

The attitude of Wit and the system of values connected with it are clearly defined by middle class writers and journalists: the emphasis was invariably laid upon benevolence, good-breeding, and cheerfulness, when considered as part of commonly accepted behaviour patterns; on Imagination, Genius, and Wisdom, when considered as an idea or an abstract concept. And perhaps the most significant thing about all these definitions is that they emanate from middle-class people, while the upper classes or the aristocracy hardly ever troubled themselves about the exact 'meaning' of Wit. It may also be well to remember that Wit, apart from being an eminently useful social quality (provided it was properly used), had acquired a new economic significance.

Wit as a marketable commodity was indeed a discovery of the middle classes. Those who 'owned' Wit could improve not only their social, but also their economic status; the Earl of Chesterfield is rather condescendingly amused by it:

. . . Besides, my Lords, we ought in all points to be tender of property. Wit is the *property* of those possessed of it, and very often the *only property* they have. Thank God, my Lords, this is

¹³ *The Spectator*, No. 169, Sept., 1731, 1711.

not our case; we are otherwise provided for.¹⁴

Thus, we need not be unduly surprised when we hear journalists at that time complain of the cynical indifference of 'men of quality' towards Wit: 'Few people of distinction trouble themselves about the name of wit, fewer understand it, and hardly any have honoured it with their example.'¹⁵ The middle classes had not only to define and re-define what they had so painfully acquired, they had also to defend it against the indifference and lack of good-breeding among the aristocracy. Wit was too precious an acquisition to be treated altogether with contempt. And only after having fitted it into their essentially stable and positive culture, could they afford despising the noblemen who had indeed 'lost their wits' and were 'otherwise provided for.' The moneyed upstart, the political opportunist, the empty-headed landowner, the oily courtier, they all were from now on outside the pale of Wit. And the middle classes, proud of their progress and their *savoir-vivre* 'reduced into an art,' proud also of their discovery that nature can be perfected, adapted Wit to their own ends, and finally, identified it with 'Wisdom' and 'Benevolence,' 'Cheerfulness' and 'Good-breeding.'

There is no doubt that the Augustan age was an age of Wit. But it was Wit modified and conditioned by the new social perspective, and although the word remains the same the evaluation changed. A new form of cultural stability required new and more solid foundations. A new system of values demanded a new interpretation. The significance of an eighteenth-century anatomy of Wit,

¹⁴ *Gentleman's Magazine*, July, 1737, Vol. vii, 411.

¹⁵ *Weekly Register*, July, 1732, No. 119. In *Gentleman's Magazine*, Vol. ii, 861.

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such as the one attempted here, lies in the fact that it constitutes a relevant part of the foundations upon which Augustan literature was built. It provided literature with that stability and urbanity which are the most characteristic features of the age. It trained intelligence and independ-

ent thinking. It defined the social functions of the individual in a stable and progressive society. It disciplined conduct and made for saner relations among individuals and groups. It is, probably, the purest expression we have of the belief of the age in the perfectibility of man.

'Are words, then, so important and enduring?'

'Why, Manuel, I am surprised at you! In what else, pray, does man differ from the other animals except in that he is used by words?'

'Now I would have said that words are used by men.'

'There is give and take, of course, but in the main man is more subservient to words than they to him. Why, do you but think of such terrible words as religion and duty and love, and patriotism and art, and honor and common-sense, and of what these tyrannizing words do to and make of people!'

'No, that is chop-logic: for words are only transitory noises, whereas man is the child of God, and has an immortal spirit.'

'Yes, yes, my dearest, I know you believe that, and I think it is delightfully quaint and sweet of you. . . .'

JAMES BRANCH CABELL, *Figures of Earth*