Pope's Essay on Criticism; advancing a laudable tradition of wit.

Stephen J. Szilagyi
POPE'S ESSAY ON CRITICISM:
ADVANCING A LAUDABLE TRADITION
OF WIT

by
Stephen J. Szilagyi

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[Signature]

Professor in Charge

[Signature]

Chairman of Department
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POPE'S ESSAY ON CRITICISM:
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by Stephen J. Szilagyi

ABSTRACT

Wit is a dominant issue in Alexander Pope's An Essay on Criticism; indeed, ever since the poem's publication, critics have recognized that wit is one of Pope's central concerns, but they have been hard put to reconcile Pope's apparently arbitrary use of the word wit and his obvious regard for the concept of wit. Actually, the critical confusion dissolves when one realizes that Pope is insisting that a laudable tradition of wit exists and that wit is essential for the creation of poetry. He says wit has been and always will be inseparable from metaphor, because it is thinking in metaphor, the poet's divine power to partake of "Unerring Nature['s] . . . Universal Light." In positing wit's fundamental importance, Pope is, of course, reacting against contemporary mistrust of wit, indeed of all literature. More importantly, however, for his defense of wit and our understanding of his use of the word, he announces in the Essay by developing conceits that he is consciously continuing the tradition of true wit descending from John Donne; indeed, a close reading of the poem reveals that his use of the word is far from arbitrary; rather wit is itself a vehicle in an elaborate metaphor, a conceit, for the mysterious power to create moral art.
Introduction

Pope's use of the word wit in *An Essay on Criticism* is profuse, inconsistent, and confusing. Within a few lines, the term is used to typify a scholar, to characterize a fool, and to distinguish a genius. Because the apparent meaning of the word appears arbitrary, critics have had difficulty in understanding Pope's usage of it.

In 1711 John Dennis railed, "Whenever this gentleman [Pope] talks of wit, he is sure to say something that is very foolish . . . ." 1 Recently critics have been more generous, but they nonetheless underscore the confusion resulting from Pope's contradictory uses of the word. E. N. Hooker concludes that "if he was not entirely successful in conveying his meaning with utter clarity, the fault lay partly in the lack of a critical vocabulary." 2 Similarly, William Empson thinks Pope is

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playing a game with the word to remind critics "that all a critic can do is to suggest a hierarchy with inadequate language." I do not believe that Pope suffered from a deficient critical vocabulary. He does, however, emphasize that wit defies simple definition.

Much of the confusion arising from Pope's complex treatment of wit in the Essay is resolved if we realize that Pope is insisting on two points. The first is that in the history of poetry there is a legitimate and valuable tradition of wit, which recent corrupt practices have vitiated. The second is that the tradition of wit endures because wit is essential to the creative process.

Although Pope concludes the Essay with a panorama of both ancient and contemporary wits, he is particularly concerned with differentiating between proper and improper wit in the tradition descending from John Donne. It was important to do so since, as E. N. Hooker has convincingly established, the unrestrained imagination, obscenity, and irreligion associated with this tradition of wit had fostered philosophic and moral suspicion of all wit, "which denied the worth of all literature itself."


4 Hooker, p. 177.
In the Essay, Pope's insistence on a tradition of laudable wit is intended to disarm any attack on the value of literature that is based on the notion that all wit is worthless or untrue. He is also discouraging a complete rejection of metaphysical wit. He is, after all, as F. R. Leavis has noted, "as much the last poet of the seventeenth century as the first of the eighteenth."5 Pope's affinity to the Metaphysicals is evident throughout the Essay in his use of witty conceits, which closely resemble the best metaphysical conceits that develop a dialectic in their correspondences to advance arguments or to provide illustrations.6 He, nevertheless, rejects the corruptions associated with the metaphysical tradition, excessive surface wit, those verbal embellishments that exist merely to display a poet's ingenuity rather than to extend or reinforce meaning.

Pope's use of conceits suggests not only his metaphysical heritage but also his commitment to figurative language, since the conceit is poetry's most ambitious

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figurative device. Failure to recognize the fundamentally metaphorlic nature of Pope's Essay has added to the critical confusion arising from Pope's use of the word wit in the poem. Even though contemporary mistrust of literature was predicated on a mistrust of wit, Pope in no way attempts to separate wit and the production of poetry. Instead, he distinguishes between true and false wit, while asserting that wit is absolutely essential to the creation of poetry; thus, Pope metaphorically expresses the interrelationship of wit and poetry as he plays upon the word. Ultimately, wit emerges as a vehicle in an elaborate metaphor, the tenor of which is the condition of the poetic mind, and interaction of knowledge, judgment, and morality that creates "Something, whose Truth convinced at Sight we find,/That gives us back the Image of our Mind."  

Samuel Johnson prefaces his discussion of wit in the *Life of Cowley* with a reference to Pope's famous couplet in *An Essay on Criticism*, "True Wit is Nature to Advantage drest,/What oft was Thought, but ne'er so well Expresst" (ll. 297-298). Johnson, assuming that the couplet is Pope's ultimate definition of wit, concludes that "Pope's account of wit is undoubtedly erroneous" since wit is not mere "happiness of language." If Pope were simply defining wit as a certain mode of expression, Johnson would be correct. Pope, however, does not equate wit with "happiness of language"; indeed, he eventually develops important distinctions between wit and the language of the poetic artifact, suggesting that they are interdependent but significantly different aspects of poetry. Furthermore, the famous couplet on wit refers specifically to the function of true wit in the specific context of a conceit.

In Part II of the Essay, Pope makes explicit pronouncements on the relationship of true wit to conceit, diction, and prosody. He argues consistently that, although the reader should have "the generous Pleasure to be charm'd with Wit" (l. 238), wit is not idly ornamental, but is found only in poetry in which all aspects of expression function to extend and to clarify meaning.

Pope first examines the relationship between wit and conceit, observing that poets who are preoccupied with crowding their conceits with unrelated but "glitt'ring" thoughts create great confusion:

Some to Conceit alone their Taste confine,  
And glitt'ring Thoughts struck out at ev'ry Line;  
Pleas'd with a Work where nothing's just or fit;  
One glaring Chaos and wild Heap of Wit:  
(11. 289-292)

The "Thoughts struck out at ev'ry Line" of a poem's conceit are figurative expressions, which, when unrelated, render a conceit a "wild Heap of Wit." Pope does not deny that conceits exhibit wit, but he observes they often display too much wit, so many metaphoric expressions of thought that no meaningful, unified, coherent statement is discernible. His tone here is highly satiric, and he uses "Wit" ironically, suggesting that in writing conceits
in which "nothing's just or fit," poets mistakenly equate wit with attractive but, nonetheless, purely ornamental metaphor.

When Pope turns to his discussion of "True Wit," he is subtly differentiating between metaphor and wit:

True Wit is Nature to Advantage drest,
What oft was Thought, but ne'er so well Exprest,
Something, whose Truth convinc'd at Sight we find,
That gives us back the Image of our Mind:
(ll. 297-300)

As Reuben Brower has observed, "the Image of our Mind" is a metaphor of metaphor, describing what metaphor does: it does not give us an original experience, but one we recognize as true because it is like those we have known before. Pope is, therefore, asserting that "True Wit" is essentially metaphoric, but it is not merely metaphor. Turning out metaphors to pile up "glitt'ring Thoughts" is not "True Wit" but a "wild Heap of Wit," which is repugnant because it does not make a statement that can be followed by a rational mind. "True Wit" is more accurately "Something" that "oft was Thought, but ne'er so well Exprest" metaphorically.

Pope's pronouncements on "True Wit," however, embody the antitheses of all that he decries in improper conceits,

thus suggesting the correct use of conceits. In contrast to the "wild Heap of Wit," Pope describes "True Wit" as clarity of thought: "What oft was Thought, but ne'er so well Exprest." Unlike the improper conceit's "glaring Chaos" of "glitt'ring Thoughts," Pope believes that "True Wit" presents "Nature to Advantage drest," which means, as Brower says, "to bring out what is inherently beautiful in things, to bring out the order and grace" rather than chaos.\footnote{Brower, p. 203.} Pope allows that since true wit is something that manifests itself in metaphor, a conceit need not be a "wild Heap of Wit," but can be a manifestation of true wit, if it employs its many metaphors to create meaning by relating "Thoughts" in an order that is reasonably "just or fit."

Pope substantiates his belief in a conceit's potential true wit even while making it, since throughout his discussion of conceit and diction, Pope is elaborating an analogy between poetic expression and dress, which he extends to incorporate different analogies and manipulates to advance and to illustrate his arguments. In short, he develops a conceit. Conceit's original meaning of image,\footnote{M. H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1957), pp. 15-16.} upon which Pope puns to emphasize the visual sense of
"glitt'ring Thoughts" and "glaring Chaos," informs his own conceit. The parallel between "glitt'ring Thoughts" and "Gold and Jewels" is the first of many analogies between poetic expression and dress:

Poets like Painters, thus, unskill'd to trace  
The naked Nature and the living Grace,  
With Gold and Jewels cover ev'ry Part,  
And hide with Ornaments their Want of Art.  
(11. 293-296)

Pope contends that poets and painters are analogous, since their arts aspire to communicate the essential vitality of nature. Inept artists, incapable of reproducing the fundamental form of nature, must rely on ornaments, creating formlessness, just as incompetent poets rely on "glitt'ring Thoughts," creating "glaring Chaos." Pope denies their productions the status of art; instead, he designates them deceptions. Pope believes that in painting the image must be like life. and that in poetry the metaphoric image must conform to the mind's previous experience with truth, the mental equivalent of "naked Nature":

True Wit is Nature to Advantage drest,  
What oft was Thought, but ne'er so well Exprest,  
Something, whose Truth convinc'd at Sight we find,  
That gives us back the Image of our Mind:  
(11. 297-300)

Although he admits that a conceit may function to enhance, like dress in painting, Pope insists that the conceit's
wit functions primarily to convince the reader of the truth of the thought behind the poetic image. Pope concludes that the conceit is more effective when it is focused on a few thoughts and when the primary analogy is occasionally relaxed. Accordingly, he varies his conceit, citing the elementary technique of lighting in painting and introducing a different analogy for wit:

As Shades more sweetly recommend the Light,
So modest Plainness sets off sprightly Wit:
For Works may have more Wit than does 'em good,
As Bodies perish through Excess of Blood.
(11. 301-304)

In the next stanza, Pope resumes his analogy between poetic expression and dress, now paralleling diction and dress. As discussed above, he varies the primary analogy, qualifying and restating it from the perspective of similar analogies:

Others for Language all their Care express,
And value Books, as Women Men, for Dress:
Their Praise is still—The Stile is excellent:
The Sense, they humbly take upon Content.
Words are like Leaves; and where they most abound,
Much Fruit of Sense beneath is rarely found.
False Eloquence, like the Prismatic Glass,
Its gawdy Colours spreads on ev'ry place;
The Face of Nature we no more Survey,
All glares alike, without Distinction gay:
But true Expression, like th' unchanging Sun,
Clears, and improves whate'er it shines upon,
It gilds all Objects, but it alters none.
(11. 305-317)
Pope decries the preoccupation with elevated diction, which he likens to the superficial regard of women for a man's physical appearance. He insists that excessive ornamental diction invites deceit, "False Eloquence," since elevated diction tends to put the best face upon everything, whereas nature is characterized by variety. Pope's initial parallel of dress and poetic style encourages the reader to relate diction to the previous remarks on the conceit and to equate excessive stylized diction, in which "all glares alike," with the "Want of Art" in the "glaring Chaos" of overly embellished conceits. Variety is the true appearance of nature, and embellishments in language must allow for clear distinctions in a poem; otherwise, the real condition of nature is misrepresented:

But true Expression, like th' unchanging Sun,
Clears, and improves whate'er it shines upon,
It gilds all Objects, but it alters none.
(ll. 315-317)

The triplet on "true Expression" begins a turn upon Pope's previous lines on the conceit and "True Wit" (ll. 295-300), expanding the thought that poetic ornaments should facilitate an acceptance of a poem's truth. Of course, stylized diction "improves" a poem, but both diction and conceit are merely part of the total expres-
sion. Pope maintains that the object of true expression is to clarify the meaning. He warns that, just as "Gold and Jewels" may conceal a painter's lack of skill, language that "gilds all Objects" may betray a poet's lack of sense, if the diction is inappropriate to the subject:

Expression is the Dress of Thought, and still Appears more decent as more suitable; (ll. 318-319)

By defining poetic diction as "the Dress of Thought," Pope completes the turn, restating the concept that "True Wit is Nature to Advantage drest,/What oft was Thought, but ne'er so well Exprest." The turn specifically amplifies the phrase "to Advantage drest," repeating that expression must complement the thought in a poem and suggesting that the "suitable" expression of thought requires wit.

In discussing "the Dress of Thought," Pope is returning to his basic analogy of dress and expression, whereas, in the preceding lines, he had generalized the similitude to parallel appearances and expression. Adhering to his own pronouncement on the proper conceit, Pope has provided the "shade" or relaxation of the conceit to set off the "sprightly Wit" that follows:
A vile Conceit in pompous Words exprest,
Is like a Clown in regal Purple drest;
For diff'rent Styles with diff'rent Subjects sort,
As several Garbs with Country, Town, and Court.
(11. 320-323)

Pope scoffs at an inept conceit, elevated by heroic dict-
tion, likening it to the coronation of nonsense. The
appropriate "Dress of Thought" is dictated by the subject
or genre, either pastoral, comedic, or epic. 12

Pope also notes a special problem in poetic diction,
the use of archaic language in contemporary poetry:

Some by Old Words to Fame have made Pretence;
Ancients in Phrase, meer Moderns in their Sense!
Such labour'd Nothings, in so strange a Style,
Amaze th'unlearn'd, and make the Learned Smile.
Unlucky, as Fungoso in the Play,
These Sparks with awkward Vanity display
What the Fine Gentleman wore Yesterday!
(11. 324-330)

Pope remarks that the use of archaic diction is meant to
display the poet's learning, but ironically the ridicu-
loous conglomeration of language and thought reveals only
the poet's sham, his "Want of Art." Pope's "suitable"
analogy is the wearing of antique clothing.

The mixture of old language and new sense is not true
wit, but rather a display of language in which the thought

12 E. Audra and Aubrey Williams, eds., Pastoral Poetry
and An Essay on Criticism, Vol. I of The Poems of Alexan-
der Pope (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1961), p. 275,
n. 322.
is made absurd by inappropriate dress. Just as wit functions to balance embellishment and thought in conceit and in poetic diction, Pope implies that wit must also decide when "the Dress of Thought" is either too old or too new:

    And but so mimick ancient Wits at best,  
    As Apes our Grandsires in their Doublets drest. 
    In Words, as Fashions, the same Rule will hold; 
    Alike Fantastick, if too New, or Old; 
    Be not the first by whom the New are try'd, 
    Nor yet the last to lay the Old aside. 
    (ll. 331-336)

Some critics might not consider Pope's analogy between dress and expression a conceit, since Pope's lines on the "wild Heap of Wit" are usually interpreted as a reflection of the neoclassical tendency to reject all conceits. The editors of the Twickenham edition have accordingly annotated those lines with the letters between Pope and William Walsh, disparaging the use of conceits. A more fundamental objection might be that the surprise frequently associated with a conceit's yoking of dissimilar ideas is lost, since the analogy of ornamentation in poetry and dress in painting was commonplace. Pope's attack on the "glaring Chaos," however, applies

13 Audra and Williams, p. 271, n. 289.
14 Audra and Williams, p. 272, n. 293.
only to improper conceits, extended analogies that ignore or misrepresent meaning. His conceit is intended to function like his lines on prosody in the Essay, which criticize the improper while illustrating the proper use of numbers. Pope's development of a conceit from a commonplace analogy is also a result of his didactic method. In maintaining that true wit is found in "what oft was Thought, but ne'er so well Exprest," he demonstrates how wit can transform a traditional simile into a meaningful conceit.

In the stanza on "Numbers," Pope complains that an all consuming passion for smooth, flowing verse reduces poetry to senseless melody:

In the bright Muse tho' thousand Charms conspire,
Her Voice is all these tuneful Fools admire,
Who haunt Parnassus but to please their Ear,
Not mend their Minds; as some to Church repair,
Not for the Doctrine, but the Musick there.
(11. 339-343)

By comparing Parnassus and the church, Pope equates the disembodied fools that "haunt" the mountain with soulless churchgoers, saying both are without substance or thought. The image that emerges in his mocking imitation of poetry devoted to smooth numbers depicts the mind lulled into unconsciousness: "the open vowels tire" (1. 345), "low Words oft creep in one dull Line" (1. 347), "the same
unvary'd Chimes" (l. 348), "sure Returns of still ex-
pected Rhymes" (l. 349), and "the Reader's threaten'd
(not in vain) with Sleep" (l. 353).

Just as the indiscriminate use of elevated diction
makes everything "without Distinction gay," consistent
smoothness in numbers renders everything melodic and
superficial. In either case, "the Face of Nature" is
distorted, as the variety of nature is lost. When poetry
is content "to please the ear," thought becomes a secon-
dary concern and poetry becomes meaningless:

Then, at the last, and only Couplet fraught
With some unmeaning Thing they call a Thought,
(11. 354-355)

Pope insists that prosody must enhance the sense of a poem,
and the numbers, whether harsh or smooth, must be appro-
priate to the subject of a line. In making his point,
Pope is, of course, simultaneously illustrating how "the
Sound must seem an Eccho to the Sense" by demonstrating
the proper use of alliteration, assonance, and metrical
substitution to adapt the flow and sound of the line to
the subject.

'Tis not enough no Harshness gives Offence,
The Sound must seem an Eccho to the Sense.
Soft is the Strain when Zephyr gently blows,
And the smooth Stream in smoother Numbers flows;
But when loud Surges lash the sounding Shore,
The hoarse, rough Verse shou'd like the Torrent
roar.

(11. 364-369)
In the stanzas on language and prosody, specific references to wit are remarkable by their absence, whereas, in other stanzas of the Essay, Pope is eager to use wit as a synonym for a variety of intellectual and aesthetic terms. But in the context of the mechanics of poetry, Pope is careful to avoid confusing wit with a single poetic style or with any particular craft of technique for using language. Indeed, he believes wit even transcends language itself.

Pope shared with his contemporaries a disturbing awareness of the impermanence of the English language, realizing that as the language of one generation became unintelligible to future generations, the poetry of the earlier generation would also become meaningless:

Short is the Date, alas, of Modern Rhymes;  
And 'tis but just to let 'em live betimes.  
(11. 476-477)

Our Sons their Fathers' failing Language see,  
And such as Chaucer is, Shall Dryden be.  
(11. 482-483)

Pope will not allow, however, that wit is subject to change, and he predicates his distinction between wit and any single poem on wit's immutable universality. He maintains that wit, like faith, transcends all time and all

15 Audra and Williams, p. 293, n. 480.
boundaries, and he rejects any criticism that imposes temporal limitations on wit:

Some foreign Writers, some our own despise; The Ancients only, or the Moderns prize: (Thus Wit, like Faith, by each Man is apply'd To one small Sect, and All are damn'd beside.) Meanly they seek the Blessing to confine, And force that Sun but on a Part to Shine; Which not alone the Southern Wit sublimes, But ripens Spirits in cold Northern Climes; Which from the first has shone on Ages past, Enlightens the present, and shall warm the last: (ll. 394-403)

Wit, like the sun, shines continuously, providing constant warmth and light. In contrast, Pope likens a poem to a painting, which is subject to an inevitable process of perfection and decline, brightening and then fading into nothing:

When mellowing Years their full Perfection give, And each Bold Figure just begins to Live; The treach'rous Colours the fair Art betray, And all the bright Creation fades away! (ll. 490-493)

Unlike a poem, Pope suggests that wit is only subject to fluctuations in brightness, seeing "now clearer and now darker Days" (l. 405), but always enduring like the sun. Wit can, therefore, be neither old nor new. The only meaningful criterion for judging wit is the truth of its "Image of our Mind":

19
Regard not then if Wit be Old or New,
But blame the False, and value still the True.
(11. 406-407)

Pope's emphasis on the contrast between the impermanence of language and the timelessness of wit reflects upon his discussion of conceit, diction, and prosody. As mentioned above, Pope never uses the word wit in the stanzas on diction or prosody. Although he speaks of "true Expression" and "true Ease in Writing," "True Wit" is used only in conjunction with the conceit. He implies, of course, since wit promotes the clarity of thought in a conceit, that wit is responsible for the diction becoming "the Dress of Thought" and for prosody seeming the "Eccho to the Sense." But there is nothing immutable in diction, which becomes like "what Fine Gentlemen wore Yesterday" (l. 330), or in prosody. When Pope illustrates the use of the Alexandrine - "Not so, when swift Camilla scours the Plain,/Flies o'er th' unbending Corn, and skims along the Main" (ll. 372-373) - he is compressing two couplets of Dryden's into one, changing the diction and the prosody just as Dryden had transformed Virgil's lines. For Pope, the constant element in his couplet is the metaphoric

16 Audra and Williams, pp. 282-283, n. 272.
image of flight. In "Ages past" the image "shone" in Virgil's poem, and it "enlights the present" translation. Pope does not hesitate to associate true wit with metaphor, which can still "give us back the Image of our Mind" long after "the Dress of Thought" is antique and the "Eccho to the Sense" is silent.

Pope believes that wit is a special activity of the mind that has always expressed itself metaphorically. His stanza on the catholicity of wit (ll. 394-407) substantiates his belief, employing a comprehensive range of figurative language to associate wit's universality with metaphor. After introducing the simile for wit and faith, "Thus Wit, like Faith, by each Man is apply'd" (l. 396), Pope immediately transforms the similitude into metaphor by characterizing wit, the "prize" that "some" critics unjustly confer, as "the Blessing": "Meanly they seek the Blessing to confine" (l. 398). Since Pope has the metaphor derive from a simile, the tenor of the metaphor is potentially complex, both wit and faith. Pope dexterously exploits that potential when he metaphorically refers to wit as "that Sun," creating a pun upon the Son of God. The sun with its attributes, therefore, becomes the vehicle for both wit and faith in the ensuing lines:
And force that Sun but on a Part to Shine;
Which not alone the Southern Wit sublimes,
But ripens Spirits in cold Northern Climes;
(ll. 399-401)

The double tenor of the metaphor allows Pope to speak of "Southern Wit" and mean a religious sect, as well as wit. The word "sublimes," similarly, confers a religious sense of exhaltation upon wit,\textsuperscript{17} and "Spirits" signifies both souls and authors. The simile of wit and faith represents a limited analogy between the factions in both art and religion, which the metaphoric use of "Blessing" extends only slightly. The pun, however, forces wit and faith into complete correspondence, so that the meaning of both expands with each line. Pope is extolling the universal presence of wit in a conceit. The profusion and complexity of metaphor in the stanza is deliberately pronounced, in effect juxtaposing figurative language and some of Pope's most fundamental sentiments on wit. Especially in view of his previous association of true wit and the conceit, Pope is indirectly asserting that wit and metaphor are inseparable.

As Maynard Mack has remarked, when Pope uses puns that "open out like peacock's tails" (like "that Sun" in the

\textsuperscript{17} Audra and Williams, p. 286, n. 400.
stanza above), he creates a metaphysical conceit. The inclusion of a metaphysical conceit in a stanza enjoining critics to "Regard not then if Wit be Old or New,/ But blame the False, and value still the True" (ll. 406-407), was intentional. Although Pope argues that figurative language in general has always been essential for expressing wit, he wants to stress the legitimacy of the metaphysical conceit. Of course, to attribute the term metaphysical to Pope is anachronistic, but he is concerned throughout the Essay with the tradition of wit descending from John Donne, which is characterized by the use of conceit. The condition of the recent English tradition of wit is the focus of Pope's discourse on the proper expression of wit. He discusses at length the conceit, elevated diction, and the heroic couplet's "Equal Syllables," which were the distinctive features in the evolution of poetry throughout the preceding century. A maximum of attention is, however, given to the conceit.

Although Pope lampoons conceits that are "one glaring Chaos and wild Heap of Wit," he is quick to assert in the same stanza that true wit may be manifested as conceit, even while he is developing a conceit to illustrate his

assertion. Pope divides his discussion of the relationship of wit to poetry into three stanzas, one focusing on conceit, one on diction, and one on prosody. He then asserts that wit shares a certain universality with metaphor, implying they are inseparable. But his association of wit and metaphor, first in "True Wit is . . . Something . . . that gives us back the Image of our Mind" (ll. 297-300) and then in the stanza on "Wit, like Faith" (ll. 394-407), also places explicit and implicit emphasis on the association of wit and conceit. Throughout the portions of the Essay treating the aesthetics of wit, Pope intentionally uses the conceit to represent all figurative language.

Pope was keenly aware of the philosophical and moral objections that were challenging the worth of all wit, and he realized that "underneath lay an impulse more sinister, more dangerous which denied the worth of literature itself." As E. N. Hooker suggests, the basis for the attack on wit derived from the abuse of conceit by libertine poets like Wycherley, who were preoccupied with exploiting the conceit for the sake of "a novel simile, a brilliant metaphor, a dazzling paradox, or a smart aphorism." The conceit had become a means for display-

19 Hooker, p. 177.
20 Hooker, p. 182.
ing a poet's ingenuity to surprise or startle the reader. As Alexander Ward Allison has concisely described the "latter disciples of Donne,"

[They] give the impression of remembering that poets should be witty but of having forgotten why. Neither truly playful nor in proper earnest, they devoted themselves to recording as many correspondences as they could, of whatever kind or relevance. 21

Wit's detractors perceived the superficial purpose of the similitudes, the "glitt'ring Thoughts struck out at ev'ry Line," in poets such as Wycherley, and associated the conceit, which compounds similitudes, with the irrational temper of the mind, "confounding truth and deceiving men." 22 Wit and the highly imaginative conceit were inseparable for the general literary public, and the abuse of conceit made all wit in poetry vulnerable. Pope, conscious of the basis and fearful of the implications of the attacks on wit, was obliged to defend wit by justifying the conceit. He denounces, therefore, the excesses of frivolous conceits that produce "one glaring Chaos and wild Heap of Wit," even while demonstrating in his own serious use of conceit that extended figurative analogies can function to enhance meaning.

22 Hooker, pp. 177-178.
Pope's motives in defending the conceit were, none-theless, personal as well as tactical. He sensed the similarity between the sophisticated interplay of thought and image in the best metaphysical poetry and his own intellectually demanding verse. Although his standards for poetic forms differed from those of the Metaphysicals, metaphysical wit, as F. R. Leavis observes, "was as the same time congenial to him," since "the 'heterogeneous ideas' that are 'yoked together' involve (on an adequate reading) a play of mind and a flexibility of attitude." When Pope describes the universality of wit with a conceit (ll. 394-407), he alludes to the metaphysical tradition of wit and implies that it is essentially a tradition of true wit, which he is consciously continuing.

Pope's true wit and the wit of the best Metaphysicals give "us back the Image of our Mind" metaphorically. Their conceits reflect a process of logical thought that accepts the similarity of experiences and ideas, but searches for precise meaning. Thus Pope, while maintaining that nature, the "Universal Light" (l. 71), and poetry are luminous, forms a distinction between proper and improper diction by distinguishing between different types of light:

23 Leavis, p. 5.
False eloquence is refracted light that radiates colors rather than brightness. Such light conceals "the Face of Nature," blinding the viewer with its garish display in which nothing is seen distinctly. But true expression is focused light, brightening and encouraging vision. Whether true or false, expression is a form of light, but the true "shines," while the false "glares." The true is as invulnerable and as natural as sunshine, while the false is as fragile and as manufactured as glass. In the final line's antithesis, Pope contrasts the "gawdy Colours" of the prism to the golden light associated with sunshine, saying the golden light of true expression enriches without coloring.

The ability to make precise distinctions within the context of a conceit's extended analogy is the "play of mind" that Leavis believes Pope shared with the Metaphysicals. In "The Autumnal," Donne's manipulation of

24 Leavis, p. 5.
the analogy of his conceit is similar to Pope's. Donne is extolling a middle-aged woman's capacity for love, denying that loves dies in older women:

Call not these wrinkles, graves; if graves they were,  
They were Love's graves; for else he is no where.  
Yet lies not Love dead here, but here doth sit  
Vowed to this trench, like an anachorit.  
And here, till hers, which must be his death, come,  
He doth not dig a grave, but build a tomb.  
Here dwells he, though he sojourn everywhere,  
In progress, yet his standing house is here.25

Donne argues that the wrinkled lines of age are not like graves, which are evidence of love's demise, but are proof of the woman's devotion to love, as a cave is associated with a religious hermit's devotion. The woman's capacity for love will die with her, but until she dies, the signs of age are a monument to her love, as a tomb is monumental in contrast to a grave. Love is transient in other women, with whom one may "sojourn," but this autumnal woman is a monument to fidelity. She is a "standing house," a home, where one finds rest and comfort.

In both Pope's and Donne's conceits, the poet establishes a basic analogy and then discriminates between the true and false extensions of the analogy. Pope

says expression is like light, but not all kinds of light represent good art. Donne suggests that wrinkles are like the graves of past love affairs, but they do not signify the passing of an older woman's capacity to love. Motivating both poets is a concern for an accurate, precise expression of their thoughts. Metaphor—defining, transferring, extending, and revealing meaning—is the movement of their thoughts. In the Essay, Pope affirms that wit is thinking in metaphor and calls attention to the similarity between his wit and metaphysical wit by using conceit.

A contrast frequently drawn between neoclassical and metaphysical poetry is that neoclassical metaphor deemphasizes the vehicle and that metaphysical metaphor accentuates the vehicle. Pope's use of metaphor in the Essay on Criticism appears, according to the usual distinction, decidedly unneoclassical.

Those half-learn'd Witlings, num'rous in our Isle,  
As half-form'd Insects on the Banks of Nile;  
(11. 40-41)

For as in Bodies, thus in Souls, we find  
What wants in Blood and Spirits, swell'd with Wind;  
Pride, where Wit fails, steps in to our Defence,  
And fills up all the mighty Void of Sense!  
(11. 207-210)

26 Miner, p. 73.  
27 Miner, p. 72.
The images in Pope's vehicles are vivid, announcing the presence of metaphor. The metaphors above have, of course, a satiric intent, which is partially responsible for the heightening of the images, but the marked presence of metaphor is characteristic of the Essay as a whole.

There is often neither irony nor satire to account for the extensive, metaphoric passages that punctuate the Essay, and it is impossible to deny that those elaborate metaphors are like metaphysical conceits. Earl Miner has observed that the ideas in a metaphysical conceit are set in motion by an initial metaphoric definition. Furthermore, the definitions may develop "not singly or even in isolated and therefore static parallels - but in sequence and therefore in kinetic fashion," producing a dialectic ordering of the ideas to advance an argument, a demonstration, or a proof. Miner's description of the metaphysical use of conceit applies to Pope's manipulation of extended metaphor in the Essay. His deification of ancient authors is an outstanding example:

28 Miner, p. 49.
29 Miner, pp. 56-64.
Still green with Bays each ancient Altar stands,
Above the reach of Sacrilegious Hands,
Secure from Flames, from Envy's fiercer Rage,
Destructive War, and all-involving Age.
See, from each Clime the Learn'd their Incense bring;
Hear, in all Tongues consenting Pæans ring!
In Praise so just, let ev'ry Voice be join'd,
And fill the Gen'ral Chorus of Mankind!
(ll. 181-188)

Initially, Pope equates ancient poetry with pagan
altars, strewn with green offerings of laurel. He em-
phasizes the great height of the monuments, which are
impervious to "the reach" of "Sacrilegious Hands," a
synechoche for all critics who would topple the sacred
edifice of ancient poetry. Pope associates the profane
critics with ignorant, narrow-minded barbarians, as the
zeugma resulting from "secure" associates the burning of
the great ancient libraries, the burning envy of Zoilus,
the Vandal's onslaught, and medieval superstition with
"Flames."30 "Flames" become a metaphor for ignorance,
and, Pope argues, they are ineffective on an altar "still
green with Bays," which like incense and Pæans represent
the universal devotion of the "Learn'd." The ancient
works have survived for millenia, in spite of ignorance.
In contrast to the "Sacrilegious Hands," "the Learn'd"
are the pagan priest who have maintained the altars. In
the remainder of the stanza, Pope elevates the ancient
authors to the status of pagan gods:

30 Audra and Williams, p. 262, n. 184.
Hail Bards Triumphant! born in happier Days;
Immortal Heirs of Universal Praise!
Whose Honours with Increase of Ages grow,
As Streams roll down, enlarging as they flow!
Nations unborn your mighty Names shall sound,
And Worlds applaud that must not yet be found!
Oh may some Spark of your Celestial Fire
The last, the meanest of your Sons inspire,
(That on weak Wings, from far, pursues your Flights;
Glow while he reads, but trembles as he writes)
To teach vain Wits a Science little known,
T'admire Superior Sense, and doubt their own!
(ll. 189-200)

Pope apostrophizes the ancient "Bards," arguing that
"Universal Praise" has immortalized them and that it will
"with Increase of Ages grow." Pope reasons that since
the sacrifice and praise of the "Learn'd" has preserved
and immortalized the works of the ancients, the prospect
of an expanding realm of universal praise constitutes
nothing less than an apotheosis of the ancient writers.
"Sacrilegious Hands" will disappear, as "Worlds applaud"
their "mighty Names." "Celestial Fire" will replace the
"Flames" of ignorance. The ancient authors will be god-
like progenitors, inspiring their sons with "some Spark,"
inviting imitation and commanding awe. Pope has moved
dialectically from a metaphoric definition of ancient
poetry to a figurative expression of his veneration of the
ancient writers.

The elevation of subject matter through an association
with classical references and allusions is unusual in
metaphysical poems, although it is a common technique in
neoclassical poetry. The classical references in Pope's conceit do not, however, diminish its affinity to the metaphysical conceits. The philosophical and moral mistrust of all metaphoric thought is manifest in the neoclassical, deemphasized vehicles. But some poets imposed even greater limitations on metaphor. Regarding it as primarily an expedient for elevating the subject and the tone of a line or passage, they frequently rendered metaphor "essentially ornamental,"\(^{31}\) For Pope, the neoclassical, restricted use of metaphor runs counter to the tradition of true wit as surely as the excessive metaphoric embellishments in a "glaring Chaos." Pope believes that embellishment is an important function of metaphor; however, he emphasizes that the process of metaphoric embellishment is like the elevation of diction: It "clears, and improves whate'er it shines upon" (l. 316). The elevation must simultaneously enlarge meaning.

Pope's stanza on "each ancient Altar" reveals a dialectic use of metaphor for the purpose of elevation that is alien to Edmund Waller's neoclassical use of mythological allusions:\(^{32}\)


\(^{32}\) Allison, pp. 51-59.
Where'er thy navy spreads her canvas wings,
Homage to thee, and peace to all she brings;
The French and Spaniard, when thy flags appear,
Forget their hatred, and consent to fear.
So Jove from Ida did both hosts survey,
And when he pleased to thunder part the fray. 33

As Alexander Ward Allison has observed, the "simile is recorded as afterthought," 34 casually added to suggest a parallel between King Charles and Jove. Charles is not, however, metaphorically defined as Jove but associated with the Olympian to embellish the occasion of the poem, a formal panegyric. The subject, "the French and Spaniard" fleets, are literally and not figuratively expressed. Waller draws the classical allusion for the sake of elevation, but does not investigate the analogy to discover more specific relationships between Charles and Jove. His tenors are not explored through the extension of parallel analogies derived from the vehicle; instead, his vehicles function within strict limits to embellish the tenor, as in "So Jove," and in "spreads her canvas wings."

John Denham's use of metaphor in "On Mr. Abraham Cowley" is similarly employed to embellish:


34 Allison, p. 52.
Old Chaucer, like the morning Star,
To us discovers day from far,
His light those Mists and Clouds dissolv'd,
Which our dark Nation long involv'd;
But he descending to the shades,
Darkness again the Age invades.
Next (like Aurora) Spencer rose,
Whose purple blush the day foreshows; 35

Denham's similes extend somewhat farther than Waller's, but they continue to function primarily to elevate the tone of his elegy on Cowley. The similes are cut short. Denham's forays into the investigation of his vehicles are tentative and restricted to the immediate sense of the original analogy, the rising and setting of "the morning Star" and the dawning of "Aurora."

Unlike Waller's and Denham's similes, Pope's often establish analogies for elevation that then burgeon into extended metaphors which his mind, playing upon the ramifications of the metaphors, expands into conceits. Thus, the simile, "Wit, like Faith" (1. 396), becomes a discussion of the catholicity of wit. Pope's use of simile to establish an initial metaphoric definition that elevates his subject and precipitates the development of a conceit has metaphysical parallels.

Donne's conceits frequently develop from a simile which, like Pope's simile of wit and faith, quickly elevates the tone and initiates the movement of ideas:

As streams are, power is; those blessed flowers that dwell
At the rough stream's calm head, thrive and prove well,
But having left their roots, and themselves given
to the stream's tyrannous rage, alas are driven
Through mills, and rocks, and woods, and at last,
almost
Consumed in going, in the sea are lost:
So perish souls, which more choose men's unjust
Power from God claimed, than God himself to trust. 36

Having introduced the initial parallel of streams and power, Donne reflects that all power derives from the divine "calm head" where "blessed flowers" dwell, transforming "stream" into a metaphor for the abuse of power, the movement away from God. Donne has enlarged the scope of his imagery, setting in motion a dialectic that proceeds metaphorically to affirm that man's primary duty is to God.

Pope's simile of wit and faith also has affinity with Andrew Marvell's lines on Cromwell:

Like the vain Curlings of the Watry maze,
Which in smooth Streams a sinking Weight dos raise;
So Man, declining always, disappears
In the weak Circles of increasing Years;
And his short Tumults of themselves Compose,
While flowing Time above his Head does close.
Cromwell alone with greater Vigour runs,
(Sun-like) the Stages of succeeding Suns:
And still the Day which he doth next restore,
Is the just Wonder of the Day before. 37


Marvell's intricate simile, revealing the general futility of man's tumultuous activities in the context of undulating time, allows for the elevation of Cromwell in an antithetical, but parallel, simile of the rising and setting of the sun. The movement of mind in Marvell's conceit, as in Pope's and Donne's conceits examined above, is towards a specific resolution or application of the initial analogy. The complexity of Marvell's simile underscores its function as metaphoric thought, rather than as mere embellishment.

Marvell's manipulation of simile to suggest parallel similes invites comparison with Pope's lines on envy and merit in the Essay:

*Envoy will Merit as its Shade pursue,*  
*But like a Shadow, proves the Substance true;*  
*For envy'd Wit, like Sol Eclips'd, makes known Th' opposing Body's Grossness, not its own.*  
*When first that Sun too powerful Beams displays,*  
*It draws up Vapours which obscure its Rays;*  
*But ev'n those Clouds at last adorn its Way,*  
*Reflect new Glories, and augment the Day.*  
*(11. 466-473)*

Pope does not employ antithesis in paralleling his simile, but he is thinking in similes. He states that envy is like a "Shade," which is a pun signifying both an agent in the obstruction of light and the shadow cast by that obstruction. Pope then explores the metaphoric implications of the pun, remarking that like a shadow, envy is proof of
"the Substance." He transforms envy into a metaphor for the obstruction of light with "envy'd Wit," which is likened to a solar eclipse. The new simile justifies Pope's description of envy as "th' opposing Body's Grossness," and wit is metaphorically discussed as "that Sun." Pope elevates the importance of wit, while figuratively expressing that all things of intrinsic merit are subject to envy. The vehicles in his similes and metaphors are not deemphasized, but rather his thoughts are expressed through the extension of and redefinition of his vehicles. As in the stanzas on "Nature to Advantage drest," the universality of wit, and the veneration of the ancient authors, his treatment of "envy'd Wit" reveals his close affinity to the metaphysical habit of thinking metaphorically.

Pope, realizing his affinity to the Metaphysicals, calls attention to it in the Essay to emphasize his conviction that the traditional association of wit and conceit remains valid. He is aware, however, that the figurative elaboration of a conceit can yield a "wild Heap of Wit," but he suggests that a proper conceit is the antithesis of a "glaring Chaos." A conceit that manipulates heterogeneous ideas to arrive at what is "just and fit" and to offer us "Nature to Advantage drest" is reproducing an image of "Unerring Nature" (ll. 70ff.),

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the source of order and meaning. Pope views all simile and metaphor as an indispensible means for ordering and dignifying thought by discerning appropriate analogies, but he believes the conceit is most valuable because it is able to assimilate more ideas into a coherent whole. As illustrated above in the discussion of some representative passages from the Essay, Pope deals with many of his most complex ideas in conceits. It is not surprising, therefore, that in attempting to answer the question, "What is this Wit which must our Cares employ?" (l. 500), with which he perplexes the reader throughout the Essay, Pope relies on extended metaphor. Pope's "play of mind" upon the various meanings behind his uses of the word "wit" comprise a dialectic of ideas, which develops like a conceit. Pope chooses to disclose his high opinion of wit in metaphor because he believes that wit and metaphor are inseparable and that wit, like faith, is a mystery that is best discussed figuratively.

38 Brower, p. 203.
39 Audra and Williams, p. 221.
Pope's use of the word wit in the Essay is at no point arbitrary. It is, on the contrary, always justifiable as an extension of wit's initial metaphorical definition as a light derived from heaven:

In Poets as true Genius is but rare,  
True Taste as seldom is the Critick's Share;  
Both must alike from Heav'n derive their Light,  
These born to Judge, as well as those to Write.  
Let such teach others who themselves excell,  
And censure freely who have written well.  
Authors are partial to their Wit, 'tis true,  
But are not Criticks to their Judgment too?  
(11. 11-18)

Both the poet's "Genius" and the critic's "Taste" are the same in that they are a divine power to illuminate, even though a poet calls his power "Wit" and a critic prefers the term "Judgment." This power, like God, is therefore an absolute that can be parcelled out to men, often in unequal shares, but remains unadulterated. Whether in a poet or a critic, "the Seeds of Judgment," "at least a glimm'ring Light" of this natural power, is present in the mind (11. 20-21): this power to eludicate is a mental capacity. If an individual is dim-witted, possessing only
a glimmer of enlightenment, nature plainly meant that individual to be a fool (l. 27). On the basis of his metaphoric definition, Pope satirically notes that, unfortunately, some individuals of "glimm'ring Light," of weak poetical and critical capacity, try to aggrandize their allotment of divine power through study, erroneously thinking that learning alone will make them successful poets, and in the process they obscure what little sense nature gave them in common with other men:

Some are bewilder'd in the Maze of Schools,  
And some made Coxcombs Nature meant but Fools.  
In search of Wit these lose their common Sense,  
And then turn Criticks in their own Defence.  
(ll. 26-29)

Of course, having lost their common sense, the light that combines both judgment and wit, they cannot hope to become proper critics. Through the syllepsis in the following couplet, Pope brings home his satiric thrust by translating his metaphor of wit as light into wit as heat, so that he simultaneously extends his initial metaphor and scourges fools turned "Criticks in their own Defence":

Each burns alike, who can, or cannot write,  
Or with a Rival's or an Eunuch's spite.  
(ll. 30-31)

Since all men have "at least a glimm'ring Light" in their minds, all men to some extent burn with a divine creative
Ironically, however, men of little power who defensively and indiscriminately burn poets "who can, or cannot write" with vindictive criticisms are themselves aflame with a jealousy arising from their own lack of innate creative fire. Pope satirizes such critics by playing upon his basic metaphor of wit as a heavenly light. Having expanded his metaphor to include heat, he elevates his new analogy by referring to Apollo, the sun god and patron of the arts, in this section's closing couplet:

If Mævius Scribble in Apollo's spight,
There are, who judge still worse than he can write.
(11. 34-35)

The wits turned "Criticks in their own Defence" do not get burned because they wrote bad poetry like Mævius, which would be understandable considering their meager allotment of Apollonian light. For Pope, their scourging offense is judging out of "spight," unable to accept with equanimity their particular portion of light. Essentially, they refuse to accept the limits nature imposes upon man's intellect, which suggests to Pope the direct

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40 Brower, p. 199.

analogy between the mind in general and the poet's divine capacity to write well:

Nature to all things fix'd the Limits fit,
And wisely curb'd proud Man's pretending Wit:
(11. 52-53)

To illustrate the effect of a mind unaware of its natural limits, Pope expands his sunlight metaphor:

Where Beams of warm *Imagination* play,
The *Memory*'s soft Figures melt away.
(11. 58-59)

If the mind exceeds its reach through excessive fancy or speculation, it may very easily lose touch with what is real, what is definitely known by experience, and Icarus-like destroy itself because of an overheated wit. Through balance and rhyme, Pope then cements his analogy between the mind and wit, saying that the individual's portion of wit can never comprehend all art, just as a man's total intellectual capacity can never encompass all knowledge:

One *Science* only will one *Genius* fit;
So *vast* is Art, so *narrow* Human Wit;
(11. 60-61)

Pope, therefore, reasons from the analogy between wit and mind and from nature's role in fixing the limits of both that nature is no less than equivalent to the light
of heaven, which manifests itself in the mind as wit and judgment:

Unerring Nature, still divinely bright,
One clear, unchang'd, and Universal Light,
Life, Force, and Beauty, must to all impart,
(11. 70-72)

More clearly than ever, wit and judgment are indistinguishable in the mind, since nature sets the limits of the mind, and they are nature's "just Supply" of "Universal Light" (1. 74). Furthermore, since he established wit as analogous to the mind, "Man's pretending Wit," Pope is justified at this point in using a paradox to account for the existence of bad art:

Some, to whom Heav'n in Wit has been profuse,
Want as much more, to turn it to its use;
(11. 80-81)

Those whom heaven has blessed with broad intellectual reach may, nevertheless, be unaware of the natural limits inherent in every human mind and in every wit, and thus, as poets, they may commit excesses. Since such poets are profuse in wit (both intellect and the power to write poetry), but still produce bad art, Pope must conclude that something "as much more" is missing: the operation of judgment. Pope is not deliberately distinguishing between the two, but is instead pursuing the paradoxical
logic of his metaphors, which had equated wit with the tendency to intellectually overreach and which now must allow that judgment aids in restraining wit, imposing nature's "just Standard," imposing light upon light. Nature is, after all, paradoxically "the Source, and End, and Test of Art" (1. 72).

Corollary to his evolving metaphoric discussion of the concept of wit at this point is Pope's differentiation between wits and critics. To allow, however, for a primary focus on what Pope means by wit, I will not consistently explicate his passages on wits and critics. In positing the proper relationship between wits and critics, Pope is developing a conceit based on an initial definition of a poet as Pegasus, "the Muse's Steed" (1. 84) and of the critic as rider, guiding and spurring the "winged Courser" (ll. 84-87). He had ironically introduced this conceit with "Some neither can for wits nor critics pass/ As heavy Mules are neither Horse nor Ass" (ll. 38-39). Pursuing this metaphor would require an extensive analysis of long passages of the Essay, including even the famous extended simile on climbing the Alps (ll. 215-232) and would further substantiate Pope's ability and willingness to develop conceits. I believe, however, that it is

42 Audra and Williams, pp. 212-218.
sufficient in explaining my present focus to note that the Pegasus metaphor is derived from and justified by Pope's primary figurative definition of wit as heavenly light, which is therefore like the sun, to which the "Muse's Steed" soars to "snatch a Grace beyond the Reach of Art" (l. 155).

In the references to wit in his extension of the Pegasus metaphor and in his concluding stanza deifying the ancient authors, Pope advances the central metaphor of wit as divine light, but particularly in the sense of fire:

The gen'rous Critick fan'd the Poet's Fire,  
And taught the World, with Reason to Admire.  
(11. 100-101)

Oh may some Spark of your Coelestial Fire  
The last, the meanest of your Sons inspire,  
(11. 195-196)

For Pope, fire is the most precise metaphor for wit because it most exactly expresses the essence of wit as divine light. Wit is a "Coelestial Fire" at work in the mind, whose limits like those of the mind itself are fixed by nature, parcelled out in sparks. Nevertheless, wit is traditionally characterized by a tendency to overreach itself and "the common Track," rising above the "vulgar Bounds" of ordinary intelligence and the rules of art to "snatch a Grace beyond the Reach of Art" (11. 151-
Wit does not merely glow or radiate like light; it flares, sparks, spreads out, and consumes, sometimes even burning or melting itself. Fire or heat is also the most appropriate metaphor for wit as divine light since it allows Pope to elevate his subject suitably, associating wit with the sun, with Apollo, and with a great classical tradition of poetry. In Part I of the Essay, Pope relies on extended metaphor to not only establish the central importance of wit in poetry, but to investigate the logical extensions of his metaphor and then appropriately and precisely qualify his initial figurative statement. By the end of Part I, Pope has established that he views wit as a special God-given intellectual power that has always and will always manifest itself in poetry.

In Part II of the Essay, as my previous discussion suggests, Pope demonstrates how wit manifests itself in poetry and distinguishes between true and false wit. The true poetry of wit is thinking in metaphor to arrive at a precise meaning; it does not randomly establish similitudes so that isolated thoughts are "struck out at ev'ry Line" to create a meaningless poem "where nothing's just or fit" (ll. 290-291). He is, however, pursuing his discussion of wit by extending his initial metaphoric definition of wit as a divine power to illuminate.
At the outset of Part II, he presents pride as an agent of blindness:

Of all the Causes which conspire to blind Man's erring Judgment, and misguide the Mind, What the weak Head with strongest Byass rules, Is Pride, the never-failing Vice of Fools. (ll. 200-204)

Pride hinders the mind's vision; indeed, pride is fundamentally a mental deficiency, an absence of light, and is, therefore, through application of his central metaphor, a deficiency in wit:

Pride, where Wit fails, steps in to our Defence, And fills up all the mighty Void of Sense! (ll. 209-210)

Wit in this metaphoric extension becomes synonymous to sense or intelligence, which is man's innate capacity to reason. As reason, wit can overcome pride, because wit is the intellectual power to dispose of deceptions, which obstruct the universal light of truth:

If once right Reason drives that Cloud away, Truth breaks upon us with resistless Day; (ll. 211-212)

Wit is not merely the power to write poetry; it is in a sensible, reasonable mind the power to elucidate "Truth." In commencing the section of his Essay which is intended refute all contemporary arguments against the ability of
wit to present truth in poetry, Pope defiantly argues through metaphor that wit no less than reason can arrive at truth.

Pope is, however, ready to admit that a poetic expression of truth, a "Work of Wit," is never perfect:

Whoever thinks a faultless Piece to see,
Thinks what ne'er was, nor is, nor e'er shall be. (11. 253-254)

Nevertheless, one of the special powers wit's divine light shares with nature's "Universal Light" is the capacity to incite the mind to overlook slight faults by overwhelming "th' admiring Eyes" with a sense of the whole:

Survey the Whole, nor seek slight Faults to find,
Where Nature moves, and Rapture warms the Mind: (11. 235-236)

Pope has now extended his fire metaphor to include not only the light of reason but also the heat of emotions, "Rapture" and "the gen'rous Pleasure to be charm'd with Wit" (l. 238), since the light of nature and of wit are analogous and nature surely elicits emotional as well as intellectual responses:

In Wit, as Nature, what affects our Hearts
Is not th' Exactness of peculiar Parts; (11. 243-244)
Having argued through the extension of his metaphor for a "Work of Wit's" truth despite its slight imperfections, Pope is prepared to defend wit's relationship to metaphor. By realizing that Pope is himself arguing by extending his metaphor, we can see that his discussion of conceit is clearly a more serious metapoetic statement than a mere satire on the excesses of conceit:

And glitt'ring Thoughts struck out at ev'ry Line;
Pleas'd with a Work where nothing's just or fit;
One glaring Chaos and wild Heap of Wit:
Poets like Painters, thus, unskill'd to trace
The naked Nature and the living Grace,
With Gold and Jewels cover ev'ry Part,
And hide with Ornaments their Want of Art.
True Wit is Nature to Advantage drest,
What oft was Thought, but ne'er so well Exprest,
Something, whose Truth convinc'd at Sight we find,
That gives us back the Image of our Mind:
(11. 290-300)

Since Pope has defined wit as analogous to the mind, to sense, to reason, as well as to poetic power, he is justified in saying that wit is the thought in poetry, as evidenced even in ineffectual conceits, where the "glitt'ring Thoughts" are a manifestation of wit, albeit a mere "glimm'ring Light" of wit. The trouble with a bad conceit is not that it lacks wit, but that it has too much weak wit; the poet feverishly burns himself up by exceeding his poetic capacity. More precisely, Pope believes that such a conceit is a "glaring Chaos" of wit, "glaring"
because the light of wit is present, but chaotic because the thoughts do not come together to form a whole, to make a meaningful statement. In short, wit, the divine light, does not make a conceit bad poetry; on the contrary, it allows us to still recognize that "wild Heap" as poetic. Since wit is an intellectual strength, analogous to the mind, and therefore, to thought and since all thoughts in poetry are struck out figuratively, wit also becomes analogous to metaphor; indeed, Pope satirizes the worst metaphysical poetry as a chaotic heap of metaphor upon metaphor. When Pope then speaks of "True Wit," he is not referring to the actual light in the mind, but to an image of that divine light in the mind, a figurative expression, which is an accurate, precise translation into figurative language of the thought in the mind, much as an accurate portrait is a faithful likeness of the painter's subject. In effect, Pope says wit is to poetry what thought is to words.

In arguing for wit's eternal, indispensible role in the creation of poetry, Pope had extended his central metaphor of wit as heavenly light to draw analogies between wit and mind, and nature, and truth. He crowns his defense of wit by positing wit's analogy to faith, which is a logical extension of his previous analogy between "Unerring Nature's" light and the light of the "informing
Soul" (l. 76). The divine light of the poet is eternally manifest in the production of poetry, as surely as the divine light in a man's soul is revealed in acts of faith. Both acts of wit and faith are, therefore, justified, even sanctified, from heaven:

(Thus Wit, like Faith, by each Man is apply'd To one small Sect, and All are damn'd beside.) Meanly they seek the Blessing to confine, And force that Sun but on a Part to Shine; Which not alone the Southern Wit sublimes, But ripens Spirits in cold Northern Climes; Which from the first has shone on Ages past, Enlightens the present, and shall warm the last; (11. 396-403)

As I have said, Pope is here arguing for the catholicity of wit, for the capacity of true poetry to transcend time and geographical taste. But in dwelling upon the simile of wit and faith, Pope is intimating that he recognizes a congruity more fundamental than what they suffer as a result of style or taste. Pope is metaphorically stating that wit, the creation of poetry, is at bottom something of a mystery, akin to the often irrational adherence to faith. He inextricably yokes the two in his pun on "that Sun," which is as much "the Source, and End, and Test" of man's existence in the universe as it is of poetry's. Creating poetry is ultimately not sufficiently described in terms of common sense or right reason, even

43 Audra and Williams, p. 221.
though it is analogous to the workings of the rational mind and can often be reduced to "those RULES of old discover'd, not devis'd" (l. 88). Pope realizes that even "Nature Methodiz'd" inevitably proves inadequate in reproducing "Unerring Nature" - "Life, Force, and Beauty" - and that ultimately all "those RULES" would never recreate the great wit necessary to

... snatch a Grace beyond the Reach of Art,  
Which, without passing thro' the Judgment, gains  
The Heart, and all its End at once attains.  
(11. 155-157)

Even his ironic thrust at "Schismatics" insists on the similitude of wit and faith; he is willing to use the words interchangeably:

So Schismatics the plain Believers quit,  
And are but damn'd for having too much Wit.  
(11. 428-429)

And similarly, he readily transfers the fashion analogy used to illustrate the relationship of wit and poetic style to faith:

If Faith it self has diff'rent Dresses worn,  
What wonder Modes in Wit shou'd take their Turn?  
(11. 446-447)

Indeed, when Pope remarks that "Parties in Wit" exist, he is referring to wit ironically as a secular creed, the
profane counterpart of an article of faith. Men who mistakenly reduce wit to a political consideration cannot possibly comprehend that wit like faith is an unqualified divine blessing, an inviolable, unquestionable gift, because their minds are hopelessly self-centered:

Some valuing those of their own Side, or Mind,
Still make themselves the measure of Mankind;
Fondly we think we honour Merit then,
When we but praise Our selves in Other Men.
Parties in Wit attend on those of State,
And publick Faction doubles private Hate.
(ll. 452-457)

In returning again to wit as "that Sun," a source of divine light, in contrast to which selfish "Envy" is an "opposing Body's Grossness," Pope is clearly positing an antithesis. Like the rays of the sun and like an act of faith, wit is essentially a gloriously selfless act, devoid of pride, "that Cloud," "the never-failing Vice of Fools" (ll. 204-212). Poetry, like a blessing, has be given freely by great wits like Dryden and Homer before him, and the petty, self-serving criticisms of jealous men have only proved the selflessness of wit:

Pride, Malice, Folly, against Dryden rose,
. . . .
Nay shou'd great Homer lift his awful Head,
Ziolus again would start up from the Dead.

Envy will Merit as its Shade pursue,
But like a Shadow, proves the Substance true;
For envy'd Wit, like Sol Eclips'd, makes known
Th' opposing Body's Grossness, not its own.
When first that Sun too powerful Beams displays,  
It draws up Vapours which obscure its Rays;  
But ev'n those Clouds at last adorn its Way,  
Reflect new Glories, and augment the Day,  
(11. 458-473)

Since wit is, like faith, a selfless giving of heavenly light, Pope can conclude that wit is analogous to an act of creation, which in turn is analogous to Genesis:

No longer now that Golden Age appears,  
When Patriarch-Wits surviv'd a thousand Years;  
Now Length of Fame (our second Life) is lost,  
And bare Threescore is all ev'n That can boast:  
Our Sons their Fathers' failing Language see,  
And such as Chaucer is, shall Dryden be.  
So when the faithful Pencil has design'd  
Some bright Idea of the Master's Mind,  
Where a new World leaps out at his command,  
And ready Nature waits upon his Hand;  
When the ripe Colours soften and unite,  
And sweetly melt into just Shade and Light,  
When mellowing Years their full Perfection give,  
And each Bold Figure just begins to Live;  
The treach'rous Colours the fair Art betray,  
And all the bright Creation fades away!  
(11. 478-493)

The generations of man can be traced back to Biblical patriarchs and so can the generations of creative geniuses, wits. A man's lifetime, God's creation, has degenerated, as has the life of a work of wit, the poet's creation; however, "the Lines, tho' touch'd but faintly, are drawn right." Both God and the poet's power to create remains unimpared, even though both acts of creation inevitably fade away. The pencil of the artist, whether poet or
painter, still strives to reproduce nature faithfully because it is, like faith, a manifestation of divine light, of truth, of nature. Wit, the "bright Idea" in a poet's mind, is analogous to the divine light that radiates from the original "Master's Mind," which provided the archetype of all creations, nature. Now that same "bright Idea" that first created nature glows in the artist's mind, sprightly creating a "new World" by reproducing nature in art, "giving the universal new currency in each age" in an image "confirmed by the archetype it brings to expression." 44

Pope knows "what is this wit which must our Cares employ." It is ultimately that mysterious "Cælestial" spark in the human mind that drives men to selflessly impart a divine "gen'rous Pleasure" to often thankless men. "Unhappy Wit" is like "the Owner's Wife, that other Men enjoy." It is no less that the mature artist's irresistible, divine capacity to see with the light of truth, 45 which allows him to continually rediscover and offer up the beauty of nature's fair flowers, whether in painting or in metaphor:


45 Audra and Williams, p. 214.
Unhappy wit, like most mistaken Things,
Attunes not for that Envy which it brings.
In Youth alone its empty Praise we boast,
But soon the Short-liv'd Vanity is lost!
Like some fair Flow'r the early Spring supplies,
That gaily Blooms, but ev'n in blooming Dies.
What is this Wit which must our Cares employ?
The Owner's Wife, that other Men enjoy,
Then most our Trouble still when most admir'd,
And still the more we give, the more requir'd;
Whose Fame with Pains we guard, but lose with Ease,
Sure some to vex, but never all to please;
'Tis what the Vicious fear, the Virtuous shun;
By Fools 'tis hated, and by Knaves undone!
(ll. 494-507)

Pope declares, however, that wit is especially misunderstood and denigrated by the men who "make themselves the Measure of Mankind" because it must remain incomprehensible to men benighted by their own self-absorption. Wit is fundamentally opposed to deceitful pride, the cloudy "Void of Sense," because it is, like faith, a self-effacing commitment to and manifestation of "Unerring Nature." In sharing truth, the artist is committed to an endless process of self-sacrifice that intensifies as an artist's wit is publicly lauded and he becomes more self-conscious, but is nonetheless compelled to give, to create. In addition, Pope realizes that true wit is not self-serving because the artistic creation "ev'n in blooming Dies" and is ultimately only a transient testament to a creative power. Furthermore, a successful, "admir'd" wit becomes so only because he has subordinated
himself to nature, has recognized that no matter how great his individual power, nature, as "the Source, and End, and Test of Art," demands that the "Image of our Mind" represent a universal truth, rather than a personal speculation; portraying "Nature to Advantage drest," rather than the artist's learning and technical ingenuity. A wit must work "without Show" or else be "damm'd for having too much Wit." Such perpetual self-effacement must forever remain incomprehensible to foolishly and ignorantly, as well as morally and immorally, self-absorbed men. Indeed, wit can never "atone" for envious pride because wit is like virtue, forever actively at odds with "the never-failing Vice of Fools."

Pope argues for wit's indispensible role in the creation of poetry by extension of wit's initial analogy to light. In the course of his argument, he discovers such intrinsic similarities between wit, mind, nature, and faith that the word wit itself becomes the most suitable aesthetic term for designating the power to create art informed by truth, and therefore, dedicated to resisting ignorance and vice. In the Essay, the word wit itself emerges through metaphoric analogy and transfer of associations as a metaphor for moral art, which, in the hands of Horace, "charms with graceful Negligence,/And

46 Price, p. xiv.
without Method talks us into Sense" (ll. 653-654). To Alexander Pope, however, we can see that wit means the poet's inescapable mission, as well as his power, to combat ignorance and pride: "To teach vain Wits a Science little known,/T'admire Superior Sense, and doubt their own!" (ll. 199-200). For Pope, wit is a virtue setting poets apart from ordinary men; it is a capacity to partake of "Unerring Nature's" light and is the unique strength of mind necessary to impart that light to other men with the precision and compression of metaphor.

In the Essay, Pope makes it clear to his contemporaries that he considers himself in the tradition of English poetry characterized by the conceit, because the strength of mind in the poetry of the best Metaphysicals is manifest, as in his poetry, in extending, transferring, and revealing meaning in complex and sustained metaphors. His conscious continuation of that tradition is boldly announced in his metaphoric play of mind upon the word most readily ascribed to and frequently abused by that tradition, wit.

47 Fenner, pp. 226-228.
Bibliography


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Vita

Stephen John Szilagyi was born May 26, 1952 in Easton, Pennsylvania. He is the son of Stephen and Lois Szilagyi. After graduating from Stroudsburg High School in 1970, he attended Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts. In August, 1974 he received his A.B. from Clark after completing a major in English and History. He entered Lehigh University in January, 1976 as a graduate student in English and is currently a teaching assistant at Lehigh, working towards his doctorate. He is a member of Sigma Tau Delta.

While attending Clark University, he met Linda Anne MacQueen of Villanova, Pennsylvania, and they were married June 4, 1977.