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JOHNSON ON WIT AND METAPHYSICAL POETRY

By David Perkins

Johnson's discussion of " wit " in the *Life of Cowley* is the first real attempt to provide a critical basis for understanding the " metaphysical " poets and evaluating their achievement; and " he analyzed them," as Harry Levin has said, " with clearer penetration than most of their later apologists have shown."[1] In the revival of interest in " metaphysical " poetry during the 1920's, Johnson's pioneer analysis again became prominent, and even some of his actual terms were taken over and developed. But it was viewed largely as an attack based on a " neo-classic " preference for a rhetorical " poetry of statement." More recently it has been stressed that Johnson's attitude toward " metaphysical " poetry cannot be so quickly pigeon-holed,[2] and that the views expressed in the *Life of Cowley* cannot be interpreted with justice unless they are carefully studied in the context of Johnson's general approach to poetic style. The purpose here is not to deal with this large problem as a whole. Assuming the more obvious classical side of Johnson's attitude, and his reservations about " metaphysical " poetry, the present discussion is concerned instead

[1] Preface, *Perspectives of Criticism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1950), p. xii.

[2] Particularly in W. B. C. Watkins, *Johnson and English Poetry Before 1660* (Princeton, 1936), pp. 79-82, and " Dr. Johnson and the Imagination: a Note," *R. E. S.*, XII (1946), 131-134. W. R. Keast, in " Johnson's Criticism of the Metaphysical Poets," *ELH*, XVII (1950), 59-70, emphasizes the complexity of the problem by discussing the background of what might be called the " classical " side of Johnson's stand and the reasons for his reservations. W. J. Bate (*Criticism: the Major Texts* [1952], pp. 203-204), following Watkins, stresses the attraction that certain qualities of the " metaphysical " style held for Johnson, and mentions the relation of this to Johnson's dislike of " stock devices." He then suggests that Johnson's criticism is not an " attack " but an attempt to set up criteria that would apply specifically to the " metaphysical " poets. Allen Tate, in " Johnson on the Metaphysicals," *Kenyon Review*, XI (1949), 379-394, seems to follow the nineteenth-century view that the school of Dryden and Pope represented Johnson's ideal of poetry. He therefore regards the *Life of Cowley* as an unfavorable verdict, based on a mistakenly " static " conception of the relation of the mind to the object, and thinks Johnson's " philosophical powers . . . not impressive " compared with those of Coleridge.

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with trying to fill out the other side: that is, the background of Johnson's *favorable* approach to qualities—such as "wit" and "novelty" in the use of imagery and language—that are now commonly associated with the "metaphysical" style, and to carry further some of the suggestions first made by W. B. C. Watkins. Certainly, if this background can be clarified, it may suggest additional reasons for reinterpreting not only Johnson's view of the "metaphysical" poets, but perhaps the values he applied to English poetic style generally.

The nineteenth century regarded Johnson as an apologist for neo-classic ideals. This view of him is adequate only if it is remembered that the spectrum of English neo-classic ideals could cover a broad range. Also, we need to recall that neo-classic ideals, like any others, can vary enormously in their meaning according to how broadly or how narrowly they are interpreted. The most obvious illustration would be the neo-classic injunction to "follow nature," which completely depends, for any meaning it has, on what one considers "nature" to be. Johnson's idea of "general nature" was different from that of Rymer and Voltaire, and, as is well known, he could on that basis reject some of the common neo-classic rules of the drama. We can argue that in approaching the language of poetry his attitude is similar. He certainly takes for granted what we think of as neo-classic ideals of style, such as elegance, "naturalness," clarity, and propriety. But they have a more spacious meaning for him. The writing of any work "may be varied a thousand ways with equal propriety." [3] Also, these ideals are important only if they accompany still greater classical virtues, of which the most important is "strength of thought." By themselves, "re-echoed without meaning," as he said, by most writers of his time, the qualities implied by such words as "elegance" and "naturalness" have no great value. For instance, we find Johnson admitting that Latin, compared with much of Greek literature, consciously cultivated the elegance that eighteenth-century writers often took as a model. However, we can hardly wonder, he adds, that the Latin writers "excelled so much in the *graces* of diction, when we consider

[3] *Rambler*, No. 23.

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how rarely they were employed in search of new thoughts."[4] If "naturalness" of expression is also desirable, yet "mere *obvious* nature may be exhibited with very *little power of mind.*"[5] In the model of Augustan "correctness," Addison, both the simple elegance and the naturalness are almost unequalled: he commonly "thinks justly; but he *thinks faintly.*"[6] To a surprizing extent, this charge keeps reverberating throughout Johnson's incisive and sensitive criticism of the poetry of the eighteenth century. Even in the hands of Pope, pastorals, "by exhibiting only the simple operation of unmingled passions, admit no *subtle reasoning or deep inquiry.*" Despite its occasional splendor, the diction of Thomson may sometimes be charged with "filling the ear more than the *mind.*" Edward Young, in his *Love of Fame*, "never *penetrates the recesses of the mind*, and therefore the whole power of his poetry is *exhausted by a single perusal.*" The verse of William Hamilton has absolutely "no power of *thinking.*"[7] In the poems of John Ogilvie, Johnson "could find no *thinking*":

> BOSWELL. "Is there not imagination in them, Sir?" JOHNSON. "Why, Sir, there is in them what *was* imagination, but it is no more imagination in *him*, than sound is sound in the echo. . . . We have long ago seen *white-robed innocence* and *flower-bespangled meads.*"[8]

Remarks like this quickly indicate the value Johnson placed on intellectual activity in the language of poetry. They also suggest that the quality he missed in much of the poetry of his own century is the quality of "wit," a quality he himself defined in the *Dictionary* as "the *powers of the mind,*" "imagination," "sentiments produced by quickness of fancy," or, in the *Rambler* (No. 194), as

> the unexpected copulation of ideas, the discovery of some occult 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.

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[4] *Ibid.*, No. 121.

[5] Boswell, *Life of Johnson* (ed. Hill, Oxford, 1887), II, 91.

[6] *Lives of the Engl'sh Poets* (ed. Hill, Oxford, 1905), II, 127.

[7] *Ibid.*, III, 224; III, 300; III, 394; *Life of Johnson*, III, 150.

[8] *Life of Johnson*, I, 421.

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Johnson's later and fuller discussion of "wit" in the *Life of Cowley* is entirely consistent with his esteem for intellectual energy in the language of poetry. Of the three different conceptions of wit that he mentions, the first, it will be recalled, is the one most commonly associated with the Augustan movement toward "refinement" and "correctness" of language, as in Dryden's definition of wit as "a propriety of thoughts and words," or in Pope's line, which Johnson quotes, "What oft was thought, but ne'er so well express'd." Yet it is exactly this conception of wit that Johnson at once rejects. For it depresses wit "below its natural dignity, and reduces it from *strength of thought* to happiness of language." [9]

By substituting "a more noble and more adequate conception" of wit as that "which is at once natural and new," Johnson is plainly trying to restore the term to its original dignity. It was, he rightly says, about the time of Cowley himself that "Wit, which had been till then used for *Intellection*, in contradistinction to *Will*, took the meaning whatever it be which it now bears." [10] To adopt Eliot's phrase and reapply it somewhat differently to "wit" itself, we can suggest that a "dissociation" of wit had taken place during the Restoration. Previously, of course, the word had implied the discovery and expression of something true or real (nature) in a vital, active, and therefore "new" manner. That is, it had implied both the "natural and new." By 1700 it far more often implied *either* the "natural" or the "new." The emphasis on the latter continues the idea of activity of mind connoted by the original conception—an activity that consists, says Locke, in the "assemblage" of ideas and images, as distinct from "judgment," or the analytic noting of differences. Locke's separation of "wit" and "judgment" into a virtual antithesis continues throughout the first half of the eighteenth century. "Wit," considered separate from "judgment," takes on even more the qualities of "quickness," "novelty," and "surprize." It is this use of the term, of course, that finally prevails, and leads to the nineteenth-century association of the word largely with the comic and unexpected. On the other hand, there is

[9] *Lives*, I, 19.

[10] *Ibid.*, I, 36.

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also the very different tendency, during the Restoration and first part of the eighteenth century, to emphasize the element of " naturalness " and " propriety " in wit; and it is this connotation that we associate with the Augustan ideal of " refining " and " correcting " wit. Here we may think of the typicality of Hobbes. Wit, for Hobbes, consists of both " judgment " and " fancy "—both " celerity of imagining " and " steddy direction to some approved end." But of the two, it is " judgment " or " discretion " that Hobbes most stresses. In fact, " Judgment without Fancy is [still] Wit, but Fancy without Judgment not." [11] Perhaps the fullest discussion of wit in the Restoration defines the word comprehensively as " either a senceful discourse, word, or a skilful Action. . . . Wherever you shall meet with *Sence* in discourse, &c. Dexterity and Skill in Actions, there and nowhere else you shall meet with *Wit*." [12] That is, the ideal is a wit directly based on " nature," and therefore governed by " propriety " or " decorum." This is Dryden's position in defining wit as " propriety of thoughts and words." For " Propriety of thought," he goes on to say, " is that fancy which arises *naturally* from the subject . . . Propriety of words is the clothing of those thoughts with such expressions as are *naturally* proper to them . . ." If this is an adequate definition, it was complained, then " Euclid was the greatest wit that ever set pen to paper." [13]

2

The sort of " wit " Johnson desires, then, is not the " corrected " and cautiously " natural " wit to which Hobbes and Dryden point. Instead, he has a real dissatisfaction with it which should not be overlooked or minimized but be fully

[11] *Leviathan* (ed. Waller, Cambridge, 1904), pp. 42-44. For other characteristic assertions that follow or agree with Hobbes, see R. L. Sharp, *From Donne to Dryden: the Revolt Against Metaphysical Poetry* (1940), pp. 130-131, 161.

[12] David Abercromby, *Discourse of Wit* (1685), p. 7. Accordingly, " obscurity " in writing is the reverse of wit (pp. 94 ff.); wit is indeed a clear, level-headed function, and " our Passions are great obstacles to the exercise " of it (p. 167). *cf.* Addison (*Spectator*, No. 253): " wit and fine writing doth not consist so much in advancing things that are new, as in giving things that are known.an agreeable turn."

[13] Dryden, *Essays* (ed. Ker, Oxford, 1926), I, 270; Addison, *Spectator*, No. 62; William Jackson, *The Four Ages* (1798), pp. 121 ff. [pp. 221 ff.].

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recognized for what it is. Also, it should be recognized that among writers of his own century Johnson is almost alone in his way of reacting. It is true that, since the beginning of the eighteenth century in England, there had always been some dissatisfaction with the closer, more literal ideal of " propriety " in the language of poetry, and it had become quite strong, of course, by the time of Johnson. In the reaction against the more fixed canons of neo-classic style, the ideal if not the practice certainly included wider variety and probably more emotional vigor. But it did not also include an equally demanding sense of form. To Johnson, therefore, the newer poetry could hardly seem a hopeful alternative. In fact, one of Johnson's great virtues as a critic is a sense of balance that prevents him from being swept away, while reacting from one form of literature, and being led to embrace something else only because it happens to offer a change. We can therefore come still closer to what Johnson valued in the language of poetry by reconsidering his attitude toward the sort of eighteenth-century verse that is often regarded as " romantic " or else as anticipating many of the characteristics of romantic style, such as the poetry of Collins and Gray or the blank verse of Joseph and Thomas Warton. Johnson's lack of enthusiasm for this poetry is still thought of as having been based merely on Augustan standards of decorum and " correctness." But we can argue instead that it rested, at least partly, on the same misgivings he had about much neo-classic poetry, and that he may even have regarded both of them as sharing some of the same limitations.

With the high value he placed both on active " thinking " and on variety of imagery and expression, we may naturally suppose that the principal object of Johnson's dislike in poetic style would be any sort of reliance on what we may call " stock devices," especially an unthinking, narrowly imitative use of them. That is not to say, of course, that Johnson, in reacting against stock devices, is swept towards the opposite extreme of wanting novelty or complexity in language for their own sakes any more than his dissatisfaction with stiff and " chill " heroic plays swung him over to sentimental comedy. He could

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still hold a classical belief in the immediate communicability of art, and the use of the familiar—if and when the familiar is important. But this can be quite different from accepting the use of forms of expression and of images which "time has tarnished," and which are available for use to anyone who can read. This certainly is the basis of Johnson's constantly expressed dislike of the eighteenth-century use of mythological allusions—of the "puerilities" of mythology. The implication is always that it has become a stock prop, an easy way out—"a ready and puerile expedient," as in Pope's way of using the transformation of Lodona in *Windsor Forest*: "nothing is easier than to tell how a flower was once a blooming virgin, or a rock an obdurate tyrant." By the "help of such easy fictions" a poem of any length can be "easily written on any subject," without ability in "art" or acquaintance with "life."[14] What Johnson says about routine use of mythology also seems to apply to the reliance on other devices which are not only derivative and easy but which appeal mostly to mere "memory" and the sort of associations that rise when memory is stirred. This is his charge against open "imitations" of past authors. They presuppose, he says, "an *accidental* or artificial state of mind. An Imitation of Spenser is nothing to a reader, however acute, by whom Spenser has never been perused." That is, they "appeal not to *reason or passion*, but to memory."[15]

This last statement especially illuminates Johnson's opposition to the easier stock devices in poetic style. For it is exactly the active functioning of "reason or passion" that is wanted in the reader, preferably both. It is something very like "wit"; and what is contrasted with this ideal is the mere awakening of "memory" by "a transient allusion, or slight illustration," and the stirring by this means of either private or "accidental" associations. It is probably this attitude more than any other that governs Johnson's reaction to the sort of poetry that was then supplanting Augustan verse, not simply an automatic prejudice based on a rigid sense of "correctness." The process of breaking away from one sort of stereotype could become just

[14] *Lives*, III, 225; II, 204, 283. [15] *Ibid.*, III, 332-333.

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as routine as anything else, just as Joseph Warton, he said, was " an enthusiast by *rule*." We are therefore probably justified in arguing that, for Johnson, any shift that was going on in English poetry was partly a shift from one group of stock devices to another. One of the newer varieties would be the fashionable use of archaic language in order to give " atmosphere," as in Gay, Shenstone, and later Collins, Thomas Warton, and Chatterton. It is always "easy to sprinkle [a poem] with gleanings of antiquity," and create a mixed, loosely suggestive style that was " never spoken nor written in any age or in any place." [16] Another temptation is to rely on rhetorical mannerisms, like the Miltonic inversions in Thomas Warton: " *Gray evening* is common enough; but *evening gray* he'd think very fine." [17] Collins also put his words " out of the common order, seeming to think, with some later candidates for fame, that not to write prose is certainly to write poetry." [18] Gray openly believed that his language was " more poetical as it was more remote from common use "; [19] and Johnson's analysis of Gray's style is largely an attack on looseness in the use of metaphors and imagery. We ought also to interpret Johnson's remarks on blank verse in this light instead of viewing them in the conventional, superficial way. He is almost always thinking of the numerous minor poets who rely on Miltonic mannerisms. His criticism is consistent: in order to be "poetical," the blank verse writer of his own day often " recalls old phrases " or twists his lines with " inversions "; Somerville's blank verse gives us only "*familiar* images in *laboured* language"; and Young joins "the turgid and familiar." [20] Goldsmith, in a discussion cited by Sir Herbert Grierson, is certainly echoing Johnson when he complains of the poetic style of his own time that it relies on " bloated and compound epithet." Images and allusions, he says, float before the reader's " imagination like the figures in a dream; but

[16] *Rambler*, No. 121; *Lives*, II, 269.

[17] *Life of Johnson*, III, 158-159; *cf.* Bate, *Criticism*, p. 203, for the suggestion that Johnson's attitude here closely anticipates that of Eliot.

[18] *Lives*, III, 341.

[19] *Ibid.*, III, 435.

[20] *Ibid.*, III, 417-418; II, 319-320; III, 398.

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curiosity, induction, reason, and the whole train of affections are fast asleep." [21]

3

If Johnson, then, feels the inadequacy of the Augustan conception of wit as "propriety," his reaction certainly does not sway him into advocating the newer style of poetry in which the element of wit has almost completely vanished. Instead, he by-passes the strict conception of "corrected" wit in favor of a more comprehensive definition of it that will not reduce it from "strength of thought to happiness of language." Measured against Johnson's "more noble and more adequate conception of wit," which includes "novelty" and "strength of thought" as well as "naturalness," the "metaphysical" poets, as he regarded them, are almost the reverse of the Augustan—they are more notable for novelty and strength of thought than for "propriety" or "natural" appropriateness of expression. The former are probably more necessary than the latter. But a combination of these qualities, flexibly conceived, would be even better; and Johnson, rightly or wrongly, does not think the "metaphysical" poets possess this combination very fully. In other words, they do not, for Johnson, represent the highest ideal of poetry. It is not at all mere ironic understatement to say this. Instead, it is an important consideration to bear in mind in reading Johnson or indeed many other classical critics. What T. S. Eliot has called "the highest uses of poetry" are a very real concern in Johnson's critical thought. It is simply taken for granted that *genres* and styles should be valued in the light of it, and seen proportionately to it. Poetry can be intimately known and liked, even admired, and yet, weighed in such a scale, be found somewhat wanting. This balanced, sane classical procedure seemed very difficult to understand in the nineteenth century. It is not always clearly understood in the twentieth. Therefore, Johnson's judgments, if they have not been whole-hearted eulogy, have sometimes been hastily attributed to "prejudice" and even ignorance. We can be grateful that it is no longer

[21] *Citizen of the World,* Letter XCVI; *cf.* Grierson, *Milton and Wordsworth* (1937), pp. 1-2.

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necessary to prove Johnson's extraordinary knowledge and admiration of Shakespeare. However, his misgivings about *Paradise Lost* are still recalled instead of his incisive analysis of it, and his belief that it was the greatest of all epics after Homer, largely because it is the most "original." His light treatment of Milton's sonnets is always remembered; but how many of their admirers have felt them enough to know them by heart? Johnson, in his judgment of them, in all probability went astray—probably as far as he ever went. He was anything but insensitive to them, though. "We were puzzled," said Dr. John Sharp, describing Johnson's visit to Cambridge,

> about one of [Milton's] sonnets, which we thought was not to be found in Newton's edition, and differed from all the printed ones. But Johnson cried, "No, no!" repeated the whole sonnet, *memoriter*, and shewed it us in Newton's book. After which, he learnedly harangued on sonnet-writing, and its different numbers.[22]

Among critics who disapprovingly cite Johnson's "contempt" for ballads, one wonders how many could quote them as readily as he could, although he could also assert that such a poem as *Chevy Chase* could "not fill a mind capable of thinking strongly." [23] He was even "immoderately fond of reading romances of chivalry," according to Bishop Percy, although he believed almost anyone could write "extravagant fictions" of this sort without any real invention or knowledge. He could also be moved to tears by the *Dies irae, Dies illa,* and yet "inveigh against devotional poetry," as Mrs. Thrale said, and protest that most religious verse was "cold and feeble." [24] Johnson, indeed, often disparaged what emotionally moved him if he did not feel that it was genuinely worthy. It is his constant thinking in terms of the highest function and kinds of poetry, not prejudiced indifference, that made him dislike hasty and exaggerated praise.

We can take the same standpoint with even more justice in approaching Johnson's criticism of the "metaphysical" poets. Since W. B. C. Watkins published the number of citations that

[22] Letter of March, 1765, *Life of Johnson*, I, 517 (Appendix C).

[23] *Letters* (ed. Hill, 1892), II, 440.

[24] *Life of Johnson*, I, 49; Piozzi, *Anecdotes, Johnsonian Miscellanies* (ed. Hill, Oxford, 1897), I, 284.

4

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appear under certain letters, it has been generally known that the *Dictionary* contains many quotations from the "metaphysical" poets. The *Dictionary*, it should be remembered, had deliberately concentrated, as Johnson said, on examples from "the writers before the restoration, whose works I regard as *the wells of English undefiled*"; and it is "the accession of Elizabeth," he believed, "from which we date the golden age of our language."[25] Actually, his citations from the "metaphysical" poets number more than a thousand—1036, to be precise, from the following poets (Johnson did not cite Vaughan):

Donne	408[26]
Cowley	290
Cleveland	125
Crashaw	103
Herbert	78
Carew	32
	1036

Moreover, the range of Johnson's citations is enormous. It covers most of the works of these poets, especially in the case of Donne. Such an imposing number of citations becomes even more impressive when we remember, as Sir James Murray emphasized long ago, how many of Johnson's quotations came from his own capacious memory. In fact, the *Dictionary* could never have been completed so rapidly if Johnson had not been able to rely heavily on memory. The sort of verbal slip that illustrates Johnson's reliance on memory is particularly apparent, as Watkins noticed, in the use of Donne. We also ought to remember how conscious Johnson was of just what writers he was putting in and why, and how he was especially concerned with illustrating the different shades of meaning for particular words and even providing, as he said, "a kind of intellectual history." We are perhaps justified in feeling, then,

[25] *Plan of an English Dictionary* and *Preface to the English Dictionary, Works* (ed. Murphy, 1820), II, 25, 52.

[26] The edition used here is that of 1773. Mr. Watkins also mentions a number for the total citations from Donne (439) in his "Dr. Johnson on the Imagination: a Note," *R. E. S.*, XXII (1946), 133 n. He does not state the edition, but refers to it as "a two-volume edition (revised)." I can only assume he is referring to one of the editions published after 1773.

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that, of the critics of the past thirty years who have quickly dismissed Johnson's discussion of the "metaphysical" poets, there are probably not many who could match his *verbatim* knowledge of their writings, even though the "metaphysical" poets have now been edited, commented on, taught in academic institutions, and are otherwise easily available for sympathetic interpretation. There are perhaps even fewer who, if they had written at a time when the "metaphysical" poets were little known, would have acquired anything like a comparable knowledge of them and have also evolved by themselves an analytic and critical method for judging them. At least few, under such circumstances, would have done so without having become so identified that they might have lost their appreciative grasp of other kinds of poetry, particularly the entire body of classical poetry that Johnson knew so well.

Yet at a time when the "metaphysical" poets were little known, and unaided by hints from contemporaneous critics, Johnson felt an obvious attraction to them, and, just as obviously, was closely acquainted with their works. Accordingly, he tried to find a third definition of "wit" in the *Life of Cowley* that would be particularly applicable to "metaphysical" poetry. This is the famous *discordia concors* definition—the "combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things unlike." He probably returned to Dryden's forgotten distinction between "wit written" and "wit writing."[27] This is a distinction between wit, as far as the finished product of the poem is concerned, and wit as the active mind of the poet in writing. To interpret it in this way would at least explain Johnson's introducing his third definition by saying: "But wit, abstracted from its effects upon the hearer, may be more rigorously and philosophically [as a function of mind] considered as a kind of *discordia concors* . . ." If wit that fulfills this definition can sometimes lack the "natural," it should not be forgotten that, for Johnson, it at least appears preferable to the strict Augustan ideal that reduces wit "from strength of thought to happiness of language." Nor is it far from the definition he had advanced over twenty-five years earlier in the *Rambler*. Remembering the

[27] Bate, *Criticism,* p. 218 n.

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high premium Johnson placed on " thinking " and activity of " mind " in poetry, one can at once see the source of attraction that the " metaphysical " poets held for him; and some of the well-known phrases in the *Life of Cowley* take on a stronger significance:

> nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions; their learning instructs, and their subtility surprises . . . To write on their plan it was at least *necessary to read and think.* No man could be . . . a metaphysical poet . . . by descriptions copied from descriptions . . . by traditional imagery and hereditary similes . . . the *mind* is exercised either by *recollection or inquiry* . . . the powers of reflection and comparison are employed . . . Upon every subject [Cowley] thought for himself, and such was his copiousness of knowledge that something at once remote and applicable rushed into his mind . . .[28]

" It was at least necessary to read and think ": this refreshing quality is the exact opposite of that of John Ogilvie, for example, whose poems offer " no *thinking* " but only " white-robed innocence " and " flower-bespangled meads." It is also a sign of Johnson's unusual interest that he thought the *Life of Cowley*, because of its discussion of wit and " metaphysical " poetry, the best of the entire *Lives of the Poets.* We may certainly agree with Watkins that, for Johnson, the " metaphysical " poets " fascinate as much as they repel him," but feel that he does not go far enough in stating that Johnson " grudingly feels it necessary to leave for them a small opening to greatness *on his own terms.*" [29] The opening is not small; he is giving large praise. He is openly advocating some of their qualities—up to a point. This leads him, not to grudging acceptance, but to virtually resurrecting them and finding for them a significant place. Southey was probably nearer the truth in saying that " Justly as Johnson condemned the metaphysical poets, he saw how superior they were to those who were trained up in the school of Dryden." [30] Indeed, according to Boswell, he once went so far as to say, speaking of Pope's power of condensation: " There is more sense in a line of

[28] *Lives*, I, 20-22, 56.
[29] " Dr. Johnson on the Imagination," p. 133.
[30] Robert Southey, *Cowper* (1839), II, 20.

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Cowley than in a page (or a sentence, or ten lines,—I am not quite certain of the phrase) of Pope." [31]

4

Johnson's theoretical approach to the language of poetry, especially to the use of simile, metaphor, and imagery, supplements his criticism of particular writers in showing the value he found in qualities which are associated with "metaphysical" wit but which had somewhat evaporated in the Augustan pursuit of "correctness." Probably no neo-classic critic was ever so mindful of the importance of the image in the language of poetry. If Johnson believes in the "grandeur of generality," the generality is certainly not an abstraction but a truth or meaningful pattern that operates through concrete, particularized actuality. He is also, for a neo-classic critic, unusual in prizing an aroused, energetic participation by the reader's own mind, and in believing that this could be obtained only through effective imagery, as distinct from mere rhetorical statement, however resounding. Therefore, despite his general admiration of Dryden, he felt compelled to point out the "false magnificence" in his dramas. Johnson's diagnosis is characteristic. The "mind," he emphasizes, the "mind can be captivated only by *recollection and curiosity*; by reviving natural sentiments or *impressing new appearances of things*." But in Dryden's plays, "*sentences* were readier at his call than *images*"; and the style therefore tends more to "fill the ear" than to "awaken . . . ideas." [32] The phrase, "new appearances of things," is also characteristic in indicating the value Johnson placed in the ability to arouse the mind. As long as "originality" and "novelty" were not advocated as ends in themselves, he prized them as few critics have. Remarks that illustrate this occur repeatedly: "The highest praise of genius is *original* invention," demanding "vigour and amplitude of mind"; "the uncommon merit of an *original* design"; "entitled to *one* praise of the highest kind: his mode of thinking and of expressing his thoughts is *original*"; "the honour which is always due to

[31] *Life of Johnson*, V, 345, (*Tour to the Hebrides*, Oct. 23, 1773).
[32] *Lives*, I, 458-459.

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an *original* author." [33] In fact, any conception of "propriety" that stifles originality should be at once suspect, and belongs with such cant phrases as "Taste and Grace, Purity and Delicacy, Manners and Unities, sounds which having been once uttered by those who understood them, have since been re-echoed without meaning." For "in every work of imagination, the disposition of parts . . . may be varied a thousand ways with *equal propriety*." [34] By definition, an imaginative work that consists of parts is open to novelty and variety in the selection and arrangement of the parts used. The complaint that desirable elements are exhausted is undercut by the alterations "time is always making in the modes of life"; it is a cant excuse of "ignorance or idleness, by which some discourage others and some themselves." [35] Indeed, Johnson went so far, according to Boswell, as to project a work which would prove "how small a quantity of Real Fiction there is in the world; and that the same images, with very little variation," form the staple of most writing.[36] The note of weary exasperation that we sense in this half-burlesque "project" highlights his conviction that there are always "qualities in the products of nature yet undiscovered, and combinations in the powers of art *yet untried*." [37]

The word "combination" indicates a characteristic of poetic style that is closely related to Johnson's view of "wit" and "metaphysical" poetry. For it is particularly through the different ways in which ideas and images can be *combined* that variety and range of meaning can be obtained. In Shenstone's elegies, for example, the "thoughts are pure and simple, but wanting *combination* they want variety." [38] We also should notice that variety and novelty of combination comprize the one common quality implied in all Johnson's remarks on "wit": wit discloses resemblances "in objects dissimilar to common eyes, or by mixing *heterogeneous* notions" (*Rambler*, No. 141); "the *unexpected* copulation of ideas . . . notions, which the imagination may cull out to compose *new* assem-

[33] *Ibid.*, I, 194; I, 316-317; III, 278; *Adventurer*, No. 92.
[34] *Rambler*, No. 23.
[35] *Adventurer*, No. 95.
[36] *Life of Johnson*, IV, 236.
[37] *Rambler*, No. 129.
[38] *Lives*, III, 355.

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blages " (*Rambler*, No. 194); or the second and third definitions in the *Life of Cowley*—the " natural and *new*," and the *discordia concors* definitions. But variety and novelty in combination depend on range—not only in the number and difference of materials and images used, but also in the distance of the radius between the object and the comparison that figurative language implies. As in the *Rambler*, No. 194, definition, later reapplied to the " metaphysical " poets, wit is described as " the discovery of some *occult* relation between images in appearance *remote* from each other." Johnson requires only that it be in some sense a " discovery," not a purely subjective fancy. Here he certainly goes beyond most eighteenth-century critics. He is especially far from the emaciated " correctness " and " propriety " typified by Granville's *Essay upon Unnatural Flights in Poetry* (1701), one of the writers he thought notably lacking in " the merit of original thought." Moreover, Johnson values the quality of distance in comparison not merely for the sake of variety but also for the sake of the intellectual activity latent in the resulting tension. His conception of the function of the simile gives another instance of this. In the *Life of Pope*, speaking of Virgil, " the ship-race," he says, " compared with the chariot-race, is neither illustrated nor aggrandized; land and water make all the difference "; and when Apollo chasing Daphne is " likened to a greyhound chasing a hare, there is nothing gained; the ideas of pursuit and flight are too plain to be made plainer. . . ." [39] For this reason, Addison's famous sustained simile about Marlborough in the *Campaign* (" So when an angel . . ."), which was so much admired in the eighteenth century, leaves Johnson unmoved. It is not even a simile at all, he says, but only an " exemplification "; for it gives " almost the same images a second time ":

> A poetical simile is the discovery of likeness between two actions, in their general nature *dissimilar*, or of causes terminating by *different* operations in some resemblance of effect. . . . A simile may be compared to lines converging at a point *and is more excellent as the lines approach from greater distance*: an exemplifi-

[39] *Ibid.*, III, 329-330.

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cation may be considered as two parallel lines . . . never far separated, and never joined.[40]

Certainly the strict " exemplification " in " parallel lines " was often a result of the cautious Augustan ideal of " correct " propriety in using figurative language.

Johnson's own strong imagination was not, we know, a source of much comfort to him. Both as a matter of principle and for personal motivations, he held to an ideal of decorum (in language as in everything else) as not only desirable but vitally necessary. Despite his delight in " vigour and amplitude of mind " (his greatest happiness, said Boswell, was in the exercise of his reason), he could never have turned against the principle of decorum, but only against unduly narrow applications of it in practice. Even here we must be alert to read between the lines. He felt freer in noting the lack of " thinking " in the newer poetry that was supplanting the Augustan. It was in the great writing before the Restoration, in what he called the " golden age of our language," that he could find the energetic exercise of both " reason " and " passion " that he valued most in the language of poetry. Almost, in his view of it, he set the precedent for the common critical attitude of today. He certainly was not partisan about it, however. He could find this quality abundantly in Shakespeare. In a different form, it was present in the active strength of Milton's " mighty genius ": " The *thoughts*," he says ". . . are such as could only be produced by an imagination in the highest degree *active and fervid*, to which materials were supplied by *incessant study and unlimited curiosity*. The *heat* of Milton's mind might be said to *sublimate his learning* . . ." He could find the same " active and fervid " power in Browne. In a little-known passage cited by Watkins as one of Johnson's " flashes of heightened perception which amount to genius, over-riding his disapproval of Browne's lack of decorum," the qualities Johnson values, even some of the terms he uses, anticipate the *Life of Cowley* written more than twenty years later:

His style is, indeed, a tissue of many languages: *a mixture of heterogeneous words, brought together from distant regions*, with

[40] *Ibid.*, II, 129-130.

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terms originally appropriated to one art, and *drawn by violence* into service of another. . . . [I]n defence of his uncommon words and expressions, we must consider, that he had uncommon sentiments . . . But his innovations are sometimes pleasing, and his *temerities happy*: he has many *verba ardentia*, forcible expressions, which he would never have found, but by *venturing to the utmost verge of propriety*; and flights which would never have been reached, but by one who had very little fear of the shame of falling.[41]

Among other writers before Dryden, Johnson could also find some of the qualities he desired in the " metaphysical " poets, though they, more than Browne, ventured " to the utmost verge of propriety." To be sure, his admiration was not complete. It was strong enough, however, to make him the first critic to analyze and define them—in a sense, even to resurrect and justify them critically. It is an ironic accident of literary history that, in the revival of interest in " metaphysical " poetry after World War I, Johnson's resurrecting and pioneer placing of them should have been regarded as an attack only because the same balanced judgment that made him disregard the fashionable stereotype of his own time, and to try to enlarge the prevailing conception of " wit " and make a place for the " metaphysical " poets, also led him to value other qualities and kinds of poetry. He would have been equally able to disregard any other kind of fashionable and exclusive stereotype, including a " metaphysical " one. The critic whom the nineteenth century thought perhaps the most " prejudiced " was really one of the least. This is what partly makes him, as T. S. Eliot says, " a very dangerous person to disagree with." He was able to recognize and admire " vigour and amplitude of mind " in many forms, partly because he himself possessed so much of it.

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[41] *Life of Sir Thomas Browne, Works*, XII, 303. Cf. Watkins, " Dr. Johnson . . . a Note," p. 134.

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