Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth, eds. *The Wit of Seventeenth-Century Poetry*. Columbia & London: University of Missouri Press, 1995. Pp. xii, 222.

"What is it then," asks Abraham Cowley in his "Ode: Of Wit," "which like the *Power Divine* / We only can by *Negatives* define?" The term remains elusive in our time, and the question is not resolved by the essays collected in *The Wit of Seventeenth-Century Poetry*, the most recent volume to emerge from the distinguished biennial Renaissance conference hosted by the University of Michigan-Dearborn since 1974. In their introductory essay, the editors describe the book's contents thus: "All the essays are historically grounded and critically based, but they vary widely in their historical perspectives and critical techniques and in their scope and focus" (p. 3). One might surmise that their motto was derived from another couplet of Cowley's ode: "In a true piece of *Wit* all things must be, / Yet all things there *agree*."

Not surprisingly, the essays come closer to encompassing "all things" than to attaining agreement. Interpretive consensus is hardly the highest virtue of literary criticism and scholarship; however, these essays evince not only a diversity of "historical perspectives and critical techniques," but also an apparent lack of common understanding about the nature of scholarly discourse and the appropriate means of engaging critical problems. Indeed, some of the essays seem divided against themselves, interpreting poetry in a way that is incompatible with the theoretical presuppositions implicit in the dominant tone and vocabulary. The tentative, inconsistent quality both of some of the essays and of the book as a whole is probably less a reflection of the intentions of the editors and individual authors than of the current unsettled state of academic literary study.

Summers and Pebworth divide the collection into two parts. The first four essays deal with particular applications or styles of wit in seventeenth-century poetry, the last eight with the wit of particular poets. The first two essays get the collection off to a good start with explorations of the role of wit not just as a superficial ornament, but as an element of poetic structure. In "'No More Wit Than a Christian'? The Case of Devotional Poetry," Helen Wilcox shows how devotional poets as diverse as George Herbert and Eldred Revett, "have in common this element of wit as conception, not necessarily as full-blown 'conceit' but as the kernel of an intellectual structure" (p. 19). Wit is in fact necessary to devotional poetry precisely because of the discrepancy between our spiritual aspirations and our human capacities: "Paradoxically, knowledge of the hopelessness of the task to find words for the Logos highlights just how far words can go" (p. 16).

In a similar vein, P. G. Stanwood and Lee M. Johnson investigate the intellectual significance of wit in poetry in "The Structure of Wit: 'Is all good structure in a winding stair'?" This essay contrasts the integral nature of Herbert's wit with the ornamental wittiness of cruciform poems by Optatian and Hrabanus Maurus and then proceeds to demonstrate the often overlooked importance of wit in the conception of several passages in *Paradise Lost*. "The Structure of Wit," like the Wilcox piece that precedes,

is very fine, although the arguments of both essays might have been enhanced by taking into account seventeenth-century theories of wit from the Continent as expounded by scholars like Mazzeo and Warnke.

The next two general essays are less successful. "Women's Wit," by Erna Kelly, manifests more interest in women than wit. Although Kelly calls attention to women writers of the seventeenth century who may well have been unjustly neglected, she devotes more energy to showing how their work is "subversive" of "male poetic convention" than to illustrating the specifically poetic quality of their own wit. In "The Wit of Circumcision, the Circumcision of Wit," Jim Ellis argues that Christ's Circumcision, a familiar poetic theme in the seventeenth century, carried political as well as religious implications. Ellis provides strong readings not only of specific poems, but also of the general figurative implications of circumcision; however, the postmodernist tone of his language and assumptions seems curiously inconsistent with his basically formal method of interpretation.

The eight essays on specific poets offer a wide range of style, approach, and achievement. For my part, the gems of this section are Lorraine Roberts' "The 'Truewit' of Crashaw's Poetry" and Katherine M. Quinsey's "*Religio Laici*? Dryden's Men of Wit and the Printed Word." The first of these essays could constitute a specific illustration for the general arguments presented by Wilcox and by Stanwood and Johnson at the beginning of the volume, insofar as Roberts successfully demonstrates that the wit of Crashaw's poetry bespeaks not just extravagant verbal display, but a high level of constructive intelligence. Quinsey's essay is an admirably thoughtful exposition of the intellectual context of *Religio Laici* and of the unresolved tensions within the poem's argument.

Sharon Cadman Seilig, W. A. Sessions, and Roger Rollin, as one might expect from three such redoubtable critics, all provide fine specific insights on the poets they treat. Each of these essays, however, seems flawed in its overall conception. In "My Curious Hand or Eye: The Wit of Richard Lovelace," Seilig's discussion of the "dominant male figure" in the poems is confused by a failure to define the role of persona adequately or consistently. Sessions' treatment of "Marvell's Mower" concludes with a number of shrewd observations about the Mower poems, but fully half the essay is devoted to a theoretical discussion that seems inconclusive in itself and is not assimilated to the discussion of Marvell. Roger Rollin argues that Herrick's *Hesperides* is "not a book meant for browsing" but is rather a long, continuous work that is "Witty by design." This is a provocative thesis, but Rollin at times loses the thread of it, and, in any case, it seems too complex an argument to execute in a brief essay.

Of the three remaining essays, Robert C. Evans' "Wit and the Power of Jonson's *Epigrammes*" is the most engaging. Although Evans' discussion of the wit of the *Epigrammes* and of the influence of Quintilian on Jonson's notion of wit are probably less innovative than he suggests, he does provide some workmanlike readings of these splendid though often neglected poems. M. C. Allen, in "George Herbert's Pastoral Wit," is certainly justified in arguing for a more assured and public character to

Herbert's poetry than is now usually acknowledged; nevertheless, the term "pastoral wit" ("pastoral" as pertaining to the minister of a parish, not to literary shepherds) is not sufficiently distinguished as a critical term to make the case. To say, for example, "Herbert's pastoral wit is no less ingenious than Donne's scholastic wit" (p. 133) does not articulate a usefully clear distinction. Catherine Gemelli Martin's "Pygmalion's Progress in the Garden of Love, or The Wit's Work is Never Donne," is so stylistically challenged that it is difficult to specify its thesis. Evidently, Thomas Docherty is invoked to defend Donne against accusations of political incorrectness by Jonathan Goldberg — a proposition that disables comment in a short review. This essay also manifests an uncharacteristic lapse in the exacting editorial standards of Summers and Peabworth, who permit Martin to refer repeatedly (and confusingly) to "Going to bed" and "Natures lay Ideot" as "Elegy 15" and "Elegy 13," taking Shawcross's numeration of all the poems in his edition of Donne as a numeration of the Elegies.

The Wit of Seventeenth-Century Poetry is certainly not one of the best collections to be derived from the Dearborn conferences, but that is a very eminent series and sets a high standard. At least four of the essays are very good indeed, and most of the others furnish passages of critical reflection that reward the persistent reader. Apart from its not inconsiderable intrinsic merit, the volume is further interesting as an example of the tensions and problems that pervade academic literary study in our time.

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Jules-César Scaliger. *Poetices libri septem: Criticus*, traduit et annoté par Jacques Chomarat. Genève, Droz, 1995.

Pièce maîtresse de la théorie littéraire de la Renaissance, les *Poetices libri septem* de Jules-César Scaliger sont demeurés jusqu'à ce jour d'un accès difficile. En effet, si les exemplaires des éditions anciennes abondent, le texte intégral n'a fait l'objet au vingtième siècle que d'une seule reproduction, parue en 1964 chez Friedrich Frommann. Une traduction anglaise mise en chantier au début des années quatre-vingts ne paraît pas avoir été menée à terme; le projet d'une traduction française, conçu il y a plus d'une décennie comme le fruit et l'indispensable complément des travaux qui avaient souligné le 500^e anniversaire de la naissance de Scaliger, n'a pas encore abouti. On accueille donc avec plaisir la traduction annotée du *Criticus*, cinquième livre des *Poetices libri septem*, que publie Jacques Chomarat, latiniste et seiziémiste de renom, dans les "Travaux d'Humanisme et Renaissance" de l'éditeur Droz.

Les quatre premiers livres des *Poetices libri septem* mettent en place un cadre théorique impressionnant et, du point de vue de Scaliger lui-même, complet; les livres V et VI, consacrés à la question de l'imitation, tentent d'éclairer au moyen de ces