

## “Living by Wit” and “Knight of Industry”: Some Notes on the History in Two Dead Metaphors

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This paper argues that the history of two dead metaphors, one (“living by wit”) a still current cliché, the other (“knight of industry”) a now obsolete sobriquet, is pregnant with the larger social history of the changing relative fortunes of wit and industry. In particular, it suggests that wit’s demise was due, among other factors, to a scientific suspicion of metaphor, a bourgeois, protestant distrust of cavalier wit, and an aristocratic disdain for the industrious ingenuity which drove the workshops and factories of middle-class manufacturers and engineers. Through their use of the cliché and the sobriquet respectively, two such different novels as Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and Charles Dickens’ *Little Dorrit* (1857) illuminate two moments in that history. The paper concludes that, once fossilized in literary texts, even the deadest of dead metaphors can bring aspects of history, and themselves, back to life.

Keywords: wit; metaphor; industry; *Robinson Crusoe*; *Little Dorrit*

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## “Living by Wit” y “Knight of Industry”: apuntes acerca de la historia contenida en dos metáforas muertas

Este trabajo propone que la historia de dos metáforas muertas, una (“living by wit”) un cliché aún vigente, la otra (“knight of industry”) un apodo ya obsoleto, está cargada de aspectos relacionados con la historia social de los conceptos *wit* e *industry*, de variable fortuna. En particular, se sugiere que el declive de *wit* se debió, entre otros factores, a una desconfianza científica de la metáfora, una desconfianza protestante y burguesa del caballero ingenioso, y un desdén aristocrático por el ingenio laborioso que alimentaba los talleres y fábricas de los mecánicos e ingenieros de clase media. A través del uso del cliché y del apodo, respectivamente, dos novelas tan diferentes como *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) de Daniel Defoe y *Little Dorrit* (1857)

de Charles Dickens arrojan luz sobre dos momentos en esa historia. El trabajo concluye que, una vez fosilizadas en los textos literarios, incluso las metáforas más muertas pueden restaurar a la vida aspectos de la historia en general y de la suya propia, en particular.

Palabras clave: ingenio; metáfora; industria; *Robinson Crusoe*; *Little Dorrit*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper offers some notes on the mutual history of a now obsolete sobriquet, “knight of industry,” and a still current cliché, “living by wit.” The notes are supplemented by comments on two novels, Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and Charles Dickens’s *Little Dorrit* (1857), which afford some illustration of different points in that history. The sobriquet “knight of industry” entered the English language translated from the French *chevalier d’industrie* some time in the eighteenth century. Thenceforth, it was not uncommon to apply the expression to sharpers and swindlers who lived by their wits and other people’s money. The first instance cited by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (henceforth *OED*) comes from *Rustic Rampant* (1687) by John Cleveland, who writes disparagingly of “Hacksters [= “swaggering ruffian”] Errant, of the Round Table, Knights of Industry” (*OED* s.v. “Knight” 12.c and “Hackster” 1). The *OED*’s second instance is taken from Sir George Etherege’s *She wou’d if she cou’d* (1668), where it is applied three times to the disreputable Rakehell, once in the cast list and twice by other characters, most interestingly by Sir Joslin when introducing Rakehell to Sir Oliver: “Let me commend this ingenious Gentleman to your Acquaintance; he is a Knight of Industry” ([1688] 1888, 173). It is my contention that beneath Sir Joslin’s casual association of ingenuity and industry lies a complex and fraught relationship between these two concepts, ingenuity, or wit, and industry, which reaches back beyond Etherege at least a century and forwards another two. That relationship impinges not only on literature, but more widely on the intellectual, cultural and social history of England for a period of more than three hundred years. Put crudely, that period begins with a power élite which invested mental industry in the fabrication and elucidation of ingenious or witty artistic artefacts, and ends in a society driven economically by an industrial base producing artefacts devised by the ingenuity of scientists and mechanics. By the time of *Little Dorrit*, it would have been inconceivable to speak of the “wit of scientists or mechanics,” since the term “wit” had gradually become demeaned, relegated to the province of the feckless fop or the duplicitous rakehell. That demotion is reflected in the cliché “to live by wit” which emerged roughly simultaneously with the sobriquet “knight of industry.”

It should be stated at the outset that this paper is by no means intended as a contribution to cognitive linguistics: no answers will be hazarded to questions such as “What is metaphor?” or “How does metaphor work in the mind?” Nor does it address the social anthropologist’s question “What does metaphor do in particular socio-

cultural contexts?”<sup>1</sup> Rather, it suggests ways in which two metaphors—not so much actively doing as passively being done to—may reflect changing socio-cultural realities and fall into obsolescence or become downgraded to cliché as a result of historical change, in this case shifting attitudes towards wit and industry which, taken together, are the proper subject of a paper whose main concern is with literary-historical matters. Indeed, experts in metaphor will no doubt cringe at my use of the term “dead metaphor.” While I am persuaded that dead metaphors are actually alive in so far as “what is deeply entrenched, hardly noticed, and thus effortlessly used is most active in our thought” (Kovescs 2010, xi) (if ‘most active’ is here taken to mean something like “most commonly activated,” and not “most effectual,” as in “active ingredient”), the term will be readily understood by my intended audience and is apposite in a context of gradual diachronic obsolescence. Indeed, since my discussion takes as its starting-point wit’s apogee in the European Renaissance, when it was celebrated as the prerequisite of metaphor, it is worth remembering that at that time the adjective “lively” could be applied to both wit and metaphor in relation to the strength of either’s stimulation of the mind and incentive to cognition. Though still alive, what are commonly known as dead metaphors are much less “lively” or “active” in that sense than new ones, while one of my dead metaphors, “knight of industry” is as dead as a linguistic item can be if linguistic death is equivalent to zero usage.

To turn then to “living by wit,” part of wit’s problem is that it was a signifier which, gradually overrun and overcrowded with signifieds, was virtually unable to contain them all and was thus debarred from limpidly denoting any of them (Milburn 1966, 28). Writing when the wit debate was at its height, the list of synonyms John Oldmixon provides in his *Essay on Criticism* (1728) proves the protean, slippery nature of the term: “Wit and Humour, Wit and good Sense, Wit and Wisdom, Wit and Reason, Wit and Craft; nay, Wit and Philosophy, are with us almost the same Things” ([1728] 1964, 21). Wit commenced by denoting a mental faculty, whether the seat of consciousness or thought itself, mental capacity, understanding, intellect or reason, or any of the five senses of perception (*OED* s.v. “Wit” I.1-4); also a mental quality, whether intellectual ability, genius, talent, cleverness, mental quickness, sharpness, acumen, or wisdom, good judgement, discretion or prudence (*OED* s.v. “Wit” II.5-6). For these uses the *OED* cites sources as early as *Beowulf* and Ormin. But at some point in the sixteenth century, newer, though related, uses entered the language, as wit began to denote “[q]uickness of intellect or liveliness of fancy, with capacity of apt expression; talent for saying brilliant or sparkling things” (*OED* s.v. “Wit” II.7) or “That quality of speech or writing which consists in the apt association of thought and expression, calculated to surprise and delight by its unexpectedness” (*OED* s.v. “Wit” II.8). Born in large part of humanist rhetoric, the literary turn of these two uses is evident, and the *OED* usefully points out that the latter was of particular application

<sup>1</sup> I take these questions from Kovescs (2005, xi).

in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century criticism. Significantly, the earliest sources it provides for either use are Nicholas Udall's *Apophthegmes* (1542) and John Lyly's *Euphues* (1578). Wit's subsequent detachment from mental faculties and qualities such as understanding, intellect or reason, good judgement, discretion or prudence; its gradual association with mental agility verbal facility; and its atomization into "ingenuity," "fancy," "imagination" and so on, each with its own field of semantic specialization, are a reflection of social change in the light of a whole host of historical factors, for example, increased literacy, the rising middle classes, the professionalization of literary writing, and the scientific and industrial revolutions. Wit's lexicographical vicissitudes serve as a barometer from which a great deal of English social history can be read during and beyond the long eighteenth century. This paper gestures towards such a reading as it traces wit's decline as an instrument for seeking truth and the corresponding rise of science, more particularly, science applied to industry, and of industry itself.

To an extent, this paper is a small contribution to accounting for the "dissociation of sensibility" which, according to T. S. Eliot in his essay "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921), ensued on the demise of John Donne, whom Eliot considered the last figure of note in the English "intellectual" poetry that preceded, and in Eliot's view eclipsed, the later, "reflective" kind. For his part, F. R. Leavis remarked that "a serious attempt to account for the 'dissociation of sensibility' would turn into a discussion of the great change that came over English civilization in the seventeenth century" and he went on to itemize the areas that would need exploration in the attempt to find explanation: "Social, economic, and political history, the Royal Society, Hobbes, intellectual and cultural history in general—a great and complex variety of considerations would be involved" (1964, 35-36). The "change" Leavis refers to cannot be restricted to the seventeenth-century; in fact it might better be located in the long eighteenth-century, whose competing appellations "Age of Wit" and "Age of Sensibility" are in some ways symptomatic of the intestine conflict between wit and industry that afflicted England's cultural body and dominated literary controversy throughout that period.

The debate over wit is well known and heavily documented, its broad outline familiar to all; nonetheless, there is still scope for scholars to rise to Leavis's challenge and follow Roger D. Lund's (2012) lead in studying wit outside its accustomed literary precincts. Accordingly, I take the main lines of the debate as read and, in the third section of this paper, only draw from the vast bibliography of primary and secondary sources what is most germane to a consideration of industry in relation to wit. Before that, however, the next section offers a sketch of the relative status of wit and industry in the century and a half that preceded the eruption of the wit debate around 1700. The fourth and fifth sections then show how the debate is a submerged yet problematic element in *Robinson Crusoe* and how industry's ultimate prevalence over wit is inscribed in *Little Dorrit*. The scope of the subject and the length of the period considered mean that much of what follows is prone by turns to generalization or under-representation and is written, so to speak, in capital letters;

but if it suggests new means and avenues for exploring the literature and history of the period, then, however imperfectly, its mission will have been accomplished.

## 2. “VIVITUR INGENIO”

Inasmuch as Eliot’s “dissociation of sensibility” in poetry posits the divorce of reason and emotion, of didactic utility and affective engagement, it pinpoints the fission of metaphor which, since time immemorial, had promised knowledge accompanied by pleasure. It was wit which acted as the mainspring of metaphor at both the sending and receiving ends and enabled “the art of thinking beautifully” or “the science of sensuous knowing,” as German philosopher A. G. Baumgarten (quoted in Hulse 2000, 33) put it as late as 1750; and it was metaphor that became one of the badges of the wit in the second half of the seventeenth century and beyond (Lund 2012, 19; Sitter 1991, 52-53). Metaphor’s allied cognitive and emotional yields, together with their purchase on the reader’s wit, were the prize fruits in the elder Henry Peacham’s *Garden of Eloquence* (1593): “[metaphors] obtain allowance of [the hearer’s] judgement, they move his affections, and minister a pleasure to his wit” ([1593] 1996: 22). In short, the exercise of wit generated metaphor, and metaphor allowed poetry to splice together the two ends of the Horatian binary.

Wit enjoyed its halcyon days in England in the last quarter of the sixteenth century. The publication of Edmund Spenser’s *The Shepheardes Calendar* (1579) ushered in a new age where doctrinal discrepancies over whether salvation was through works or through faith alone could be transcended by humanist conviction of the truth contained in the Latin motto “vivitur ingenio, caetera mortis erunt,” which Spenser himself chose as the emblem to bring his eclogues to a close, and which survives today in degraded form as the cliché “live by wit” in its various permutations. Spenser’s was only one of countless appropriations of the triumphal motto, whose message that posterity could be achieved through works wrought with wit infuses Shakespeare’s sonnets. The motto’s source is the anonymous elegy from the Virgilian Appendix addressed to Maecenas (Virgil?, I.I. 38), the great patron of the Augustan golden age of Latin verse, whose practitioners vouchsafed their immortality to their literary productions. The younger Henry Peacham used it to festoon the device at the centre of the frontispiece to his *Minerva Britannia* (1612), and, rather later, it might even have been displayed at the Drury Lane Theatre.<sup>2</sup> But no appropriation was more spectacular than Andreas Vesalius’ engraving in *De fabrica corporis humani* (1543). On the one hand a visual aid for the study of the human skeleton, on the other, this tremendous image of the skeleton itself contemplating a human skull is at one and the same time *memento mori* and promise of secular immortality for ingenious man.

<sup>2</sup> In his epilogue to George Farquhar’s *Love and a Bottle* (1698), Joseph Haynes seems to allude to some visible inscription of at least part of the motto: “*Vivitur ingenio*, that damn’d motto there ([s.d.] Looking up at it) / Seduced me first to be a wicked player” (Farquhar [1698] 1892, 116).

Wit's ascent to the status of a vital principle in England may have been due in part to the impact of Juan Luis Vives's teaching at Oxford between 1523 and 1528. His audiences cannot have failed to be impressed by his distinction between witty man (*homo ingeniosus*) and sluggish beast on the basis of that *ingenium* which made metaphor, and therefore both language and cognition, possible (Hidalgo-Serna 1998, xii-xiii, xxxi). In *An Apology for Poetry* (1595), Sir Philip Sidney, who had read Vives, turns wit's ascent into apotheosis: man was most like his Maker when ranging purposefully in the "zodiac of his wit," and of all men it was the poet whose wit brought him closest to divinity "when with the force of a divine breath he bringeth forth things far surpassing [Nature's] doings, with no small argument to the incredulous of that first accursed fall of Adam: since our erected wit maketh us know what perfection is, and yet our infected will keepeth us from reaching unto it" ([1595] 1973, 14). But Sidney's missionary fervour met a real-life rejoinder in the less-than-holy doings and sayings of the "university wits," and a literary one in John Lyly's character Euphues, who set out on his journey of self-betterment in 1578 as the sort of silver-tongued, purposeless wit, in thrall to his "wanton will," that, in the guise of the rake, would do so much in the following two centuries to give wit a bad name. Even at its apogee, wit hovered uncertainly between applications that either sanctified or debased. Shakespeare's sonnet 26 captures this ambivalence in its witty disavowal of the poet's wit.

This uncertainty was compounded by wit's already uneasy relations with science. Even John Redford's morality *The Marriage of Wit and Science* ([1561] 1848) can hardly be said to augur a future of marital bliss. Wit needs some pretty stern marshalling from Reason's lieutenants Diligence, Study and Instruction before forsaking the wanton charms of Idleness, doing Tediousness to death and taking Science (= knowledge), daughter of Reason and Experience, to be his wife. Where Sidney set poetry above "history and philosophy," George Puttenham's *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589) anticipates the later rift between wit and science, fledging scion of Sidney's "philosophy," when poets, whose faculties include wit, are accorded "preeminence, above all other artificers, scientific or mechanical," before identifying wit as one of the faculties of the poet ([1589] 1970, 1). In retrospect, the way Vesalius' domineering skeleton devours the reader's attention may be ominous of the death of wit as the scientific revolution encroached, with the scalpels of Vesalius himself jittering at its maw. One writer fully conversant with late sixteenth-century scientific developments and notoriously capable of recruiting scientific discourse in the service of poetry was John Donne. His younger contemporary and admirer Thomas Carew lauded Donne's "imperious wit" and proclaimed in his epitaph, "Here lies a king, that ruled as he thought fit / The universal monarchy of wit" ([1633] 1999, 558-559, ll. 49, 95-96).

But it was precisely Donne's wit and its deployment of metaphors fetched far from the domain of science which would irk John Dryden, who in his *Discourse on Satire* (1693) allowed him wit, but, scorning his affectation of "metaphysics" denied him poetry; and Samuel Johnson who, despite his awareness that wit as a concept is subject

to “changes and fashions, and at different times takes different forms,” was unable in his “Life of Cowley” to forgive Donne’s “violent yoking . . . of heterogeneous ideas” ([1779] 1952, 357-358). What Dryden and Johnson berated was the allegedly anti-Aristotelian unnaturalness—the metaphysical character—of Donne’s metaphors. What they chose to ignore was that Aristotle had nothing against far-fetched or excessively contrived metaphors so long as they were structurally coherent (Russell 1981, 139)—indeed, as they will have known, rhetoric authorized such metaphors under the name of catachresis. Though chronologically more remote from Donne than Dryden was, Johnson’s is a more renaissance humanist definition—in his own words, “a more noble and more adequate conception”—of wit than Dryden’s, regarding it as “strength of thought” instead of “the happiness of language” to which Johnson thought Alexander Pope had shrunk it (Johnson [1779] 1952, 358). *Pace* critics as generally lucid as Ian Jack, Pope’s famous aphorism in his *Essay on Criticism* (1711) that wit is “What oft was *Thought*, but ne’er so well *Exprest*” (Pope [1711] 1963, 153, l. 298. Original emphasis), would not “have won the assent of Spenser, Shakespeare and Milton” (Jack 1978, 1), for whom wit was an instrument for reconceptualising reality. Even Johnson credited metaphysical wit with the capacity to think new thought; but, finding its conceits strained, was left to wonder “by what perverseness of industry they were ever found out” ([1779] 1952, 358). What I would suggest is that Johnson’s allegation of anti-Aristotelianism is fuelled less by anxieties over mimesis than by barely articulated misgivings over the misapplication or inappositeness of ‘industry’ to poetical endeavour; and if the *sine qua non* of poetry is wit, then wit and ‘industry’ must perforce be put asunder. How wit and industry came to fall out is the subject of the next section.

### 3. WIT VERSUS INDUSTRY

Thomas Hobbes recognized two kinds of wit, judgement and fancy, the latter being more appropriate to poetry. According to Hobbes’s *Leviathan* ([1651] 1996, 45-46), judgement consisted in discriminating between apparently similar objects, fancy in discovering similarities in dissimilar objects. Robert Boyle, John Locke and Walter Charleton held similar views (Hooker 1946): Locke was adamant that only judgement led to knowledge “by a way of proceeding quite different to metaphor and allusion” ([1689] 1993, 82), and it was Charleton who in his *Brief Discourse Concerning the Different Wits of Men* (1669) ratified wit’s death sentence when he wrote that imagination or wit was the faculty by which “we conceive some certain similitude in objects really unlike, and pleasantly confound them in discourse: Which by its unexpected Fineness and allusion, surprizing [sic] the Hearer, renders him less curious of the truth of what is said” (quoted in Hooker 1946). In other words, in an age of science, notwithstanding Joseph Addison’s uncertain formulation of “true wit” (see *The Spectator* 62, 11 May 1711), wit led away from the truth, which made Robert Boyle, in 1661, associate it with atheists and “antiscrupturists” (Lund 2012, 5). Much had changed since the times

of Spenser, Sidney and Donne, for whom wit had been a means of adumbrating new truths through inference from one mental representation to another in a process of metaphorical transfer (Sell 2006, 32-38, 49-50).

Metaphor, anathema to the empiricism of scientific materialism, was rejected by Hobbes as the sixth cause of “absurd conclusions” and “in reckoning and seeking the truth . . . not to be admitted” ([1651] 1996, 31). Samuel Parker’s tirade against metaphor in his *Free and Impartial Censure of the Platonick Philosophy* (1666) is well-known: “All those Theories in Philosophy which are expressed only in metaphorical Terms, are not real Truths, but the mere products of Imagination . . . [whose] wanton and luxuriant fancies climbing up to the Bed of Reason, do not only defile it by unchaste and illegitimate Embraces, but instead of real conceptions and notices of Things, impregnate the mind with nothing but Airy and Subventaneous Phantasms” (quoted in Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 191). Despite the efforts of apologists to reinstate wit as the faculty of judgement or reason, or to concede some utility and *gravitas* to fancy and the imagination, the decades following the death of Dryden in 1700 bore testimony to the way “wit was becoming an expression of mirth or ridicule in which fancy was primarily involved; at its best wit was coupled with politeness and elegance in conversation, and at its worst with silliness and extravagance, or with indecency and impiety” (Hooker 1946). To paraphrase Pope in his *Essay on Criticism*, wit and judgement were at strife ([1711] 1963, 146, l. 82), the former’s scope for finding out truth being limited to theological speculation where, as Robert Ferguson put it in *The Interest of Reason in Religion with the Import & Use of Scripture-Metaphors* (1675), “Logicall and Metaphysicall Terms are of all others, the most inept to declare [divine mysteries] in; nor are there any so accommodated to display and unveil them, as Metaphorical expressions . . . to illustrate them by things sensible and of ocular knowledge” (quoted in McKeon 2002, 75).

Of course, matters were not so straightforward as the preceding sketch might imply or as the standard works on the subject suggest (Milburn 1996; Sitter 1991; Parker 1998; Lund 2012). But for the purposes of this paper I shall only pick out strands from the debate that have a bearing on industry. Some are to be found in Sir Richard Blackmore’s *Essay on Wit* (1716). Physician, philosophical writer and poet, Blackmore hints at several reasons for wit’s demise. Less vitriolic than his earlier *Satyr against Wit* (1700), which had blasted wit as “the enemy of virtue and religion, a form of insanity . . . and the seducer of young men,” his *Essay* seems initially disposed to give wit a fair run as “a qualification of the Mind, that raises and enlivens cold Sentiments and plain Propositions, by giving them an elegant and surprising turn” ([1716] 1946); but it gradually turns into an attack on Jonathan Swift’s *A Tale of a Tub* (1704) and the wits writing for the contemporary stage. In the process, by identifying wit with libertinism, Blackmore “contribute[s] his share to the growing, post-1688 wave of bourgeois morality,” a morality with a heavy Protestant imprint (Boys 1946). In particular he drives a wedge between gentlemen, on the one hand, and merchants and

professionals on the other. By virtue of their wit, the former—“ingenious libertines” of the ilk of Dryden, Congreve and, particularly, Rochester (Lund 2012, 62)—are tarred as “sensualist” and “atheistical” and criticized for their “want of Industry, good Sense, and regular Oeconomy” (Blackmore [1716] 1946): all sound protestant and middle-class values. The latter, meanwhile, are urged to desire for their children, not “refin’d Parts and a Genius turn’d for pleasant Conversation” of the sort dispensed by the wit, but rather “a solid understanding and a Faculty of close and clear Reasoning, these Qualifications being likely to make them good Men, and the other only good Companions” ([1716] 1946). For Blackmore, then, wit became an agent of political destabilization. As he wrote in *A Satyr against Wit* (1699): “What well-form’d Government or State can last, / When Wit has laid the Peoples Virtue Wast?” (quoted in Lund 2012, 7).

What was at risk was, among other things, the increasing ascendancy of the Protestant bourgeoisie, in defence of which Blackmore drives a wedge between the witty gentlemen on the one hand and merchants and professionals on the other, the latter characterized by the highest-rated virtue of English, entrepreneurial, protestant, middle-class society, namely, industry. During wit’s heyday, practically the only industry nobles and gentry might decorously indulge in was the exercise of their mental faculties in the production and consumption of high forms of literature. In the Preface to his translation of Vergilio Malvezzi’s *Discourses upon Cornelius Tacitus* (1642), Sir Richard Baker, a member of Donne’s circle, wrote glowingly of the complexity of Tacitus, which “is pleasing to whosoever by labouring about it, finds out the true meaning; for then he counts it an issue of his own brain . . . and he takes the like pleasure as men are wont to take from hearing metaphors, finding the meaning of him that useth them” (quoted in Patterson 1984, 63). In courtly circles labour outside the library was a dirty word, and the aristocrats reaping the increasing benefits of enclosure concealed the economic and social reality that sustained them beneath the forms and tropes of pastoral, thereby refashioning themselves as harmless shepherds who only ever toiled over a metaphor or emblem. As Thomas Smith wrote in his *De Republica Anglorum* (1583), “who can live idly and without manual labour . . . he shall be called master . . . and taken for a gentleman” (quoted in Montrose 1983, 429). What distinguished the gentlemen from the rest was their life of cultivated leisure, only interrupted by the odd embassy or skirmish abroad. In what Peter Platt (2009) has called “the culture of paradox,” these gentlemen only became industrious when using their wits to hammer out the meaning of a conceit or an impresa on the hermeneutic anvil of metaphor. Indeed, industry threatened to destabilize late sixteenth-century England in much the same way as wit would in Blackmore’s *Essay*: in the English translation (1581) of Stefano Guazzo’s *The Art of Conversation*, the character Annibal Magnocavalli observes the levelling effect of industry, associates it with “commendable employments” and notes how “poor Men’s Children become rich by their own Study and Industry; and the Rich grow poor by their Idleness and Indolence” ([1581] 1738: 141, 182, 200).

Blackmore almost echoes Guazzo's character when turning the terms of Smith's distinction on their head: "Men of finer Spirits do likewise abuse their Parts, as well as misapply their Time . . . while Wit . . . becomes a continu'd Diversion, and makes everlasting Idleness the Business of Life" ([1716] 1946). Writing from a perspective of middle-class utilitarianism, Blackmore claims that "the Labours of the meanest Persons, that conduce to the Welfare and Benefit of the Publick, are more valuable, because more useful, than the Employments of those, who apply themselves only, or principally, to divert and entertain the Fancy" ([1716] 1946). Only properly used does wit have any value as a means to "relieve the Satiety of Contemplation and Labour . . . and fit [the spirits] for the Returns of Study and Employment" ([1716] 1946). To clinch his argument that wit and industry are basically incompatible, Blackmore invites us "to reflect that generally Men of a plain Understanding and good Sense, but of great Industry and Capacity for Business, are in all Governments advanc'd to Posts of Trust and great Employments in the State, while meer Wits are regarded as Men of the lowest Merit" ([1716] 1946). Sidney would have turned in his grave.

#### 4. ROBINSON CRUSOE'S "INGENIO"

Written just three years after Blackmore's essay, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) is still somewhat mistakenly taken as enunciating, in part at least, a Protestant myth of the dignity of labour collaborating with divine providence to secure the salvation of man. But as has often been pointed out, Crusoe is not only a labourer: he may well carry logs (the parallel with *The Tempest* is enticing), but he is also a manager administering nature's resources. What is more, his shipwreck occurs while on an illegal slaving expedition and, once delivered, his financial security is guaranteed by the sizeable nest-egg accumulated on his Brazilian tobacco plantation; in other words, his ennobling insular industry is a mere parenthesis between forms of exploitation which should be less ethically acceptable to middle-class Protestantism.

The novel barely trades in metaphors, but it is noticeable how Crusoe waxes considerably more metaphorical when most engrossed in theological speculations and preoccupied with his spiritual and physical deliverance. McKeon suggests at one point that this is a symptom of Crusoe's learning to "spiritualize" natural events as "signs of God's presence"; elsewhere, that it marks Crusoe's illusory transcendence of the material (2002, 317, 323): "I look'd now upon the World as a Thing remote, which I had nothing to do with, no Expectation from, and indeed no Desires about" (Defoe [1719] 2001, 102). Once salvation and Providence are no longer an issue, metaphor drops out of the equation; alternatively, as Karl Marx suggested in *Capital* (1867), the "prayers and the like" of Crusoe's metaphorical mode were a form of "recreation" in which the castaway "takes pleasure" ([1867] 1990, 169), much as early modern aristocrats occupied their leisure time by crafting allegories, conceits, mottos and imprese.

An instance of Defoe’s eschewal of metaphor occurs early on when, putting into a creek for the night, somewhere on the north-west coast of Africa, Crusoe spends a sleepless night due to the constant howling and wallowing of some unspecified “vast great creatures” ([1719] 2001, 22). Under a metaphorical epistemology, an early modern traveller-writer would at this point turn to his wit to provide some sort of simile or metaphor in order to propitiate cognition in the reader’s mind; as it is, Defoe/Crusoe leaves us in the dark. *Robinson Crusoe* is a largely metaphor-free zone where inventiveness has taken on a practical bent for mechanical improvisations such as baskets and brewing beer ([1719] 2001, 101, 115, 133). The novel’s demotion of wit and almost total outlawing of metaphor is entirely consistent with Blackmore’s middle-class utilitarianism and the prevailing mistrust of the epistemological claims of invention, the “supplying of a Story . . . is a sort of Lying that makes a great Hole in the Heart,” as Defoe himself admitted elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> What is interesting about the metaphors Crusoe does start to employ once he is firmly established on the island and in regular communication with God is how they replicate the material conditions of the country estates which had effaced common lands and were in the ownership of generally absent nobles: hence Crusoe’s “plantations,” “palace” or “country seat,” his “enclosure in the woods” ([1719] 2001, 132). In other words, Crusoe’s use of wit here evokes the very objective correlatives the gentlemen enclosers of a century before had used wit to disguise, or render palatable, in the pastoral mode.

Furthermore, *mutatis mutandis*, Crusoe’s own experiential biography furnishes another objective correlative in his Brazilian plantation the name of which—and there can be no coincidence—is *Ingenio*. More a profiteering investor than a manual labourer or even a resource manager, Crusoe once delivered is able to live by his wit, as the pseudo-Virgilian tag is rewrought to fit early eighteenth-century capitalism. In other words, living off his Brazilian incomes, there is no need for Crusoe to be industrious and soil his hands with labour; instead his deliverance is to a gentlemanly paradise of rich pickings of the kind that Thomas Smith and the Elizabethan pastoralists could only conceive of through their wit. At the same time, Friday’s appearance on the scene provides the very objective correlative required to transform Crusoe’s key metaphor, that of mastery, into matter of fact. Thus Defoe rewrites the early modern life of gentlemen reaping the returns of their landholdings in terms of an eighteenth-century investment capitalist whose metaphors recreate an idealised past which is then made real by present exploitation. Crusoe will live happily ever after on the earnings of his investment in *Ingenio*, as industrious as decorum permitted a gentleman to be. Only if his salvation had been achieved thanks to his metaphorical intercourse with God might he be said in any worthy way to have lived by wit. Though Defoe’s novel is obviously not an intervention in the wit

<sup>3</sup> In *Serious Reflections During the Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe: With his Vision of the Angelick World* (1720) (quoted in McKeon 2002: 121).

debate, it nonetheless registers the social tensions attending the emergence of a new class of bourgeois Protestants whose aspirations to gentility exceeded the humbler pretensions of their professed work ethic, an ethic which, based on hard work and frugality, had little or no room for wit, as Blackmore laboured to point out.

##### 5. KNIGHTS OF INDUSTRY IN *LITTLE DORRIT*

In Dickens's *Little Dorrit* (1857), wit takes a greater fall. Among the *OED*'s citations for "knight of industry" (s.v. "Knight" 12.c) is Tobias Smollet's *Peregrine Pickle* (1751) one of the best-known novels by one of Dickens's favourite authors and possibly his source for the sobriquet which his character Blandois/Rigaud uses of himself in the presence of Mrs Clennam as *Little Dorrit* draws towards its climax: "I am a Knight of Industry" ([1857] 1985, 837). But the French blackmailer and wife-murderer, "whose small and plump" hands "would have been unusually white but for the prison grime" ([1857] 1986, 41)—no labourer he!—is only one of (at least) four "knights of industry" exposed by the novel. There is, of course, Dorrit himself, who lives quite ably by his wit as the maudlin sponger of the Marshalsea, before slowly losing his wits when the financial windfall ensconces him among Europe's foremost idle rich. There is, too, Henry Gowan, whose *bon disant* cynicism is symptomatic of the landed, leisured class on their free-fall from nobility to gentility: as he admits to Sparkler, he has to live by his "mother wit" ([1857] 1985, 561). Most remarkable, perhaps, is Mr Merdle, the giant fraudster who amasses extraordinary wealth and attains to the loftiest of positions quite simply by living by his wits. Never quite knowing what to do with his hands, he is always concealing them sheepishly up his sleeves—as if they bear the trace of an earlier, ungentle past of manual labour—when not taking "himself into custody by the wrists . . . as if he were his own Police Officer" ([1857] 1985, 445).<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to this quartet of sharpers, swindlers and rakes Dickens offers us the stolid figure of "the originator" ([1857] 1985, 239), Daniel Doyce.<sup>5</sup> The England of the Circumlocution Office has no room for Doycean inventiveness; refused patents, this "public offender" whose crime is his scientific engineering wit—"he has been ingenious, and he has been trying to turn his ingenuity to his country's services" ([1857] 1985, 160)—is forced to take his inventions out of the county and seek contracts and success abroad, more precisely in France, that "barbaric power," as the narrator puts it with irony ([1857] 1985, 735). Once invention, wit's erstwhile helpmeet, had been exiled to the workshops of engineers, manufacturers and petty industrialists, and once ingenuity had

<sup>4</sup> When searching France for Blandois/Rigaud's box, Meagles is also branded a "Knight of Industry" by the natives, as well as "a good-for-nothing and a thief" (Dickens [1857] 1985, 876). Blissful in his ignorance of the language of Voltaire, Meagles carries on his mission cheerfully regardless.

<sup>5</sup> That Doyce shares forename and initial letter of surname with the creator of Crusoe and the pedagogical Plornishes address Cavallo "in sentences such as were addressed by the natives to Captain Cook, or by Friday to Robinson Crusoe" (Dickens [1857] 1985, 351) suggests an occult affinity between the two novels.

rolled up its sleeves and dirtied its hands, the establishment would have little to do with them, hence the not insignificant “wit-drain” from England to the continent in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Both James Watt and Matthew Boulton had at some point to cross the Channel, as did Sir Rowland Hill, originator of the penny-post, Chief Secretary of the Post Office, and bone of contention in the spat between James FitzJames Stephen of the *Edinburgh Review* and Dickens himself (Shelston 1985, 118-123). When at the very end of the novel Meagles reports back from France that Doyce is “medalled and ribboned, and starred and crossed, and I don’t-know-what-all’d, like a born nobleman” ([1857] 1985, 891), his words hold out the possibility that Doyce has squared the industry-nobility circle—that, albeit abroad, he has been knighted for his industry, thus opening the way to civil honours for his real-life manufacturing counterparts. Feeling his own way towards the light, the novel’s hero Arthur Clennam abandons the debased mode of speculative capitalism practised by his mother (a lady of industry?) in order to keep the books for the hands-on, manufacturing enterprise of ingenious Doyce.

Doyce’s conversion into an honorary French *chevalier* thanks to his ingenuity is only one aspect of *Little Dorrit*’s involvement in the nexus of terms and concepts which concern us. And if Doyce is one of the novel’s moral victors, he is so in a discreet, unassuming way which passes almost unnoticed and largely off-stage. The routings of Blandois/Rigaud, Dorrit himself and Merdle cause a much deeper impression and are attended by a much greater clamour, while what stays longest in many readers’ memories is the reiterative stridency of Dickens’s attack on the indolent, nepotistic and corrupt powers-that-be whose self-serving political and economic relations are superintended and rubber-stamped by the *laissez-non-faire* ineffectuality of the Circumlocution Office. Even a criminal like Blandois/Rigaud is not unaware of the pernicious hold the establishment’s knights of industry have on society. As early as the opening chapter, he regales his Marseilles cell-mate Cavalletto with an autobiographical sketch which doubles as instruction in the ways of the world: “I have been treated and respected as a gentleman universally. If you try to prejudice me by making out that I have lived by my wits—how do your lawyers live—your politicians—your intriguers—your men of the Exchange” ([1857] 1985, 48). Blandois/Rigaud may well be a knight of industry of the worst sort, but so too are the shakers and movers of society who, when not toadying or being toadied to by the Circumlocution Office, shaped the future of the country in the drawing-rooms of the corrupt and made vast fortunes in the speculative frenzy which gripped the 1850s as influence shifted from “traditional structures of wealth based on the massive fixities of landed property to the ones based on the liquidities of manufacturing, commerce, speculation and credit” (Herbert 2002, 188) and as “manufacturers, merchants, factors, bankers, people on fixed incomes, retired half-pay officers, governesses, widows, trustees of orphans’ funds, shopkeepers, aristocrats and gentry, all rushed . . . to the stockbrokers to claim their stakes in the new Age of Gold” (Russell 1986, 19-20). It was a shift away from the sturdy old entrepreneurial work ethic revived by Samuel Smiles in *Self-Help* (1859) at the same decade’s close, an ethic founded on “character, conduct and perseverance” ([1859] 2002, 2) and presciently expressed in

Clennam's appraisal of Doyceas "The honest, *self-helpful*, indefatigable old man who has worked his way all through his life" (Dickens [1857] 1985, 778; my emphasis).

The industry of Doyce, who himself confesses to a prejudice "against speculation" (Dickens [1857] 1985, 736), is a far cry from that of the speculators who, like Clennam himself and Pancks, pin all on dubious get-rich quick formulas in emulation of the Merdles of this world who attain the lifestyle and kudos of the idle rich through swindling and fraud, living by their wits like card-sharpers at "play-tables," as Gowan suspects Blandois/Rigaud of doing ([1857] 1985, 542); and if the wit of Merdle, Gowan and Blandois/Rigaud is Vesalius' *ingenio* in an utterly debased form, Doyce's ingenuity is one aspect of that same faculty transformed in the alembic of history into engineering inventiveness. Middle-class, practical, grimy and laborious, the natural domain of Doyce's wit is as anathema to the upper echelons of Victorian society as shepherding was to the pastoralizing knights of early modern England. His knighthood might have been the dream of Blackmore's middle-class professionals and tradesmen, but it is founded in the purgatory of manual labour from which Crusoe was delivered by his Brazilian plantation, *Ingenio*, into the bounteous heaven of exploitative capitalism.

Early modern knights had found spiritual and ethical fulfillment—as consolatory as spurious—in the promise of immortality proffered by a life of wit; by 1857 degraded to cliché, the pseudo-Virgilian motto offers to Merdle and company the baser satisfactions of deceiving and despoiling the honest majority, the great unwashed. Subconsciously prey to his guilty conscience, Merdle significantly performs his moral ablutions in the public baths, preferring the humbler tortoiseshell penknife to the finer mother-of-pearl one. Once those ablutions are done, and the sheet and blanket pulled away for the purposes of identification, Merdle—"world-famed capitalist and merchant-prince" ([1857] 1985, 296)—lies revealed as "a heavily-made man, with an obtuse head, and coarse, mean, common features" ([1857] 1985, 771). At the news of his death his Chief Butler gives notice, declaring that his master "never was the gentlemen" and that the "ungentlemanly" form of his decease was no surprise ([1857] 1985, 774). Vesalian or Sidneyan wit had never been further from the gentlemanly class as it was in the 1850s when the game was up for the landed élites unless they deigned to dabble in the very capitalism which the ornaments of society like Mrs Merdle so hypocritically despised—"circumstances have made it Mr Merdle's accidental fortune, or misfortune, to be engaged in business transactions" ([1857] 1985, 657)—while happily displaying its glittering fruits on their bosoms.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

From the blood-stained marble of Vesalius's dissecting slab to the blood-stained marble of Merdle's suicidal bath, from Sidney's zodiac to Blandois/Rigault's prison cell in Marseille, wit's fall was great. At the risk of simplification, among the reasons for that fall were scientific distrust of metaphor, bourgeois Protestant suspicion of cavalier wit,

and aristocratic disdain for the ingenuity and invention which drove the workshops and factories of middle-class manufacturers and engineers. Put another way, wit came under fire on epistemological, ethical, moral, political and class grounds. Meanwhile, through its worrying away at figures of speech, literature can activate and comment on the historical factors which lead to the devaluing of once highly-rated cultural assets and concepts, making even the deadest of metaphors come back to life in a temporary nostalgia or an impassioned longing for another cultural dispensation. The way the relationship between wit and industry informs some of the ideological coordinates of two literary texts, *Robinson Crusoe* and *Little Dorrit*, corroborates the decline of wit, confirms Leavis's surmise that any history of wit must be a compound of intellectual, social and industrial histories, among others, and demonstrates how even the deadest of metaphors, once inscribed in a work of literature, may be quickened and transformed into a conceptual nodal point marking the confluence of manifold historical currents. Different though they are, both novels are alert to obsolescent concepts, in dialogue with current ones and, crucially, pregnant with those of the future. It might be noted that in 1869, a mere twelve years after *Little Dorrit* commenced its serialisation, the Knights of Labor was founded, which in the 1880s was to become America's largest labour organisation. For a time, nobility had been democratized beyond even Dickens's Doyce to encompass the manpower that toiled at Doyce's machines.

It is as products of their respective ages that the pressure of historical change can be read off *Robinson Crusoe* and *Little Dorrit* as from a barometer. This does not mean that historical change is a single vector travelling consistently in a single direction; nor does it mean that novelists like Defoe or Dickens are necessarily in agreement with whatever change or changes their novels necessarily if unconsciously textualise. The Victorian period was in fact markedly ambivalent towards industry, which could never be divorced from commercialism, while it has been argued that in the course of his career Dickens “turned away from the values of industrial capitalism, not to some protosocialist stance, but to join in the renovation of gentry values” (Wiener 2004, 35). If such ambivalence looks forward, through the likes of John Ruskin and Matthew Arnold, to C. P. Snow's well-known two cultures, it also looks back through the wit debate of the eighteenth century to the semantic ambivalence of wit itself and the uneasy relations between wit and science that John Redford had dramatized in 1561. What this paper hopes finally to have demonstrated is that some of history's advances and retreats, some of its new vistas and dead-ends, may be read in the changing fortunes of such humble linguistic elements as a dead metaphor and an obsolete sobriquet, half-buried fragments in the fossil record of literature.

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