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English metaphysical poetry, from Donne to Marvell, is conspicuously witty. A. J. Smith seeks the reason for the central importance of wit in the thinking of the metaphysical poets, and argues that metaphysical wit is essentially different from other modes of wit current in Renaissance Europe. Formal theories and rhetorics of wit are considered for both their theoretical import and their appraisals of wit in practice. Prevailing fashions of witty invention are scrutinised in Italian, French and Spanish writings, so as to bring out the nature and effect of various forms of wit: conceited, hieroglyphic, transformational, and others from which the metaphysical mode is distinguished. He locates the basis of Renaissance wit in the received conception of the created order and a theory of literary innovation inherent in Humanist belief, which led to novel couplings of time and eternity, body and soul, man and God. Yet he finds that metaphysical wit distinctively works to discover a spiritual presence in sensible events; and he traces its demise in the 1660s to changes in the understanding of the natural world associated with the rise of empirical science.

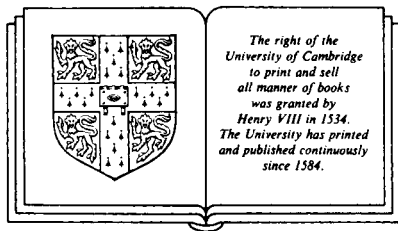
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To Gwyneth, and the memory of Sergio Baldi
Conosco i segni dell'antica fiamma

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PREFACE

This essay concludes the study of a metaphysical sentience in Renaissance poetry which I carried forward in two earlier books, *Literary Love*, 1983, and *The Metaphysics of Love*, 1985. Wit focuses an interest in the rendering of our ambiguous state when sensation and idea interfuse in the language itself, opening an absolute consequence in the momentary encounter and registering the shock of metaphysical predicaments posed in the play of the senses.

Versions of poetic wit evolved in Europe from the fifteenth century on. To ask how these versions bear upon the wit of the English metaphysical poets is to seek the qualities which distinguish that mode of wit. The enquiry is of more than literary concern. Wit followed out divergent expectations of the created order, as of poetry. When metaphysical wit simply ceased to have point in the later seventeenth century, an entire way of thinking had changed.

A few expositors of English metaphysical poetry have allowed that the poems owe their general character to a distinctive metaphysical apprehension. The argument that follows engages with the discussions which serve to further it, notably those by James Smith, S. L. Bethell, W. J. Ong and Robert Ellrodt. In contesting an issue with these savants I implicitly acknowledge a debt and a shared – if unfashionable – concern.

I have modernised the spelling of poems in English but otherwise followed the form of my source-texts. Translations of poems in French, Italian and Spanish aim to bring out the wit rather than render the elegance of the original.

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Permission to reproduce the hieroglyphs and imprese in chapter 4 has been granted as follows: 'How they denote a Watchful Person' and 'How an Amulet' from *The Hieroglyphics of Horapollo Nilous*, translated by A. T. Cory, 1839 (Cambridge University Library); *Impresa* of the Porcupine from Paolo Giovio, *Dialogo dell'imprese militari*, Lyons 1574 (British Library).