

Renata Jermolowicz
Technical University of Białystok

**REMARKS ON ADAM SMITH'S LECTURES
ON RHETORIC AND BELLES LETTRES**

*A lawyer without history or literature is a mechanic,
a mere working mason; if he possesses some knowledge
of these, he may venture to call himself an architect...*

Sir Walter Scott

*Teach you children poetry; it opens the mind, lends
grace to wisdom and makes the heroic virtues heredi-
tary...*

Sir Walter Scott

Until recently the fame of Adam Smith rested mainly upon his revolutionary work entitled *The Wealth of Nations*. Published in 1776, the year of the American Revolution, it remains one of the classical textbooks of the history of economics where Smith establishes economics as an autonomous subject and introduces the doctrine of free enterprise. Though today the figure of Adam Smith is primarily associated with the history of economics, it is also important to realize that he was not merely an economist.¹ It should be remembered that *The Wealth of Nations* was the embodiment of Smith's wide interests, embracing not only economics, ethics, political philosophy, and jurisprudence, but also history of science, psychology, and literature. A quite recent discovery of students' notes on Dr Smith's lectures on rhetoric and belle lettres reveal not only his genuine ease with literature (both ancient and modern) and the art of writing but also his role in the transition from the earlier, well-established tradition of formal rhetoric at the Scottish universities.

¹ Smith himself regarded his *Wealth of Nations* only as a partial exposition of a much larger work where he hoped to display general principles of law and government and different revolutions they have undergone in the course of history. Unfortunately, Smith never completed it in his lifetime.

In 1958 the remnants of the village library of Whitehaugh were displayed on auction in Aberdeen. Professor John M. Lothian was lucky to be among the purchasers. The library contained many valuable volumes among which there happened to be the first editions of Thomas Hobbes, Thomas Reid and Adam Smith.² Among the numerous manuscripts displayed at the Aberdeen sales there were two sets of notes taken by students. One of them was a course on Jurisprudence delivered by Adam Smith. The second set was entitled “Dr Smith’s notes on Rhetorick Lectures” and also appeared to be a complete set of notes taken on part of Smith’s lectures on Moral Philosophy in Edinburgh. Professor Lothian purchased the notes and edited them in 1958. W. R. Scott, a devoted bibliographer of Adam Smith, comments on the lectures: “There is a certain amount of mystery about the circumstances and the subject-matter of the lectures which Adam Smith delivered at Edinburgh during the three years 1748–1751.”³ Professor Lothian, who wrote the introduction to the *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belle Lettres*, took the pain of discovering the circumstances of the Edinburgh lectures. He claims that after his return to Edinburgh in 1746 Smith was in need of a post which would ensure him permanent financial benefits. Apparently it was due to Smith’s friends (among whom there were Lord Kames, James Oswald, and Robert Craigie) that Smith could earn some money by lecturing.⁴ They came up with the idea of lectures on rhetoric and belles lettres which would be delivered by Smith and which would be completely different from any available at the time.

While discussing the circumstances of the Edinburgh lectures on rhetoric and belle lettres it is necessary to remember that Smith’s lectures coincided with a great intellectual awakening in Scotland. Literature and rhetoric had become a fashionable hobby among the noblemen who hired tutors to give lectures on literature and taste at their homes. Numerous intellectual clubs and societies had been organised. The members of those clubs and societies aimed at propagating literature and the arts of speaking and writing. They held various competitions to encourage both professionals and amateurs to submit essays on a given subject. The best essays were read and discussed at the societies’ meetings. Smith was a member of the famous Select Society whose goal was “philosophical inquiry, and the

² J. M. Lothian (ed.), *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres delivered in the University of Glasgow by Adam Smith reported by a student in 1762–63*, Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, Toronto and New York, 1963, p. XII.

³ W. R. Scott, *Adam Smith as Student and Professor*, Glasgow, 1973, p. 46.

⁴ J. M. Lothian, *op. cit.*, p. XIII.

improvement of the members in the art of speaking.”⁵ In 1755 The Select Society announced a competition for the best essay on Taste.⁶ The interest in writing provoked a quick development of newspapers and periodicals – “Scots Magazine”, “Tatler”, “Rambler” and “Edinburgh Review” – which were a popular way to encourage the understanding of literature and philosophy. Smith spoke highly of the Scottish periodicals and even wrote a few articles which he contributed anonymously to “Edinburgh Review”.⁷

Therefore, it was in the atmosphere of public interest in literary topics that Smith grasped at the prospect of delivering novel lectures on rhetoric and belle lettres. Indeed, he was well-equipped to introduce a spirit of novelty to the dull classical school of rhetoric which he regarded as “a very silly set of books not at all instructive”.⁸ At Oxford Smith himself enjoyed a thorough studies of Greek and Latin literature, history and philosophy. According to his contemporaries, Smith’s knowledge of Greek and Latin literature was uncommonly accurate and extensive.⁹ He was also known for his remarkable ability to call to mind long passages of Latin and Greek authors. His students were amused with his eloquence: “Those who receives instruction from Dr Smith will recollect with much satisfaction many of those incidental and digressive illustrations and discussions, not only in morality but in criticism, which were delivered by him with animated and extemporaneous eloquence as they were suggested in the course of question and answer.”¹⁰ Smith adored literature – especially he liked Swift, Dryden, Pope and Gray whose style of writing he regarded as clear and precise. Moreover, he was at ease with English, French and Italian writers and often translated passages from French and Italian in order to improve his style. He used translation as a part of the lectures encouraging his students to translate passages of their favourite writers in order to analyse and compare the niceties of grammar.¹¹ Certainly, Smith, with his love for literature, was the right person to launch a new attitude towards lectures on rhetoric. The lectures brought him a great success: his reputation as a professor was

⁵ J. M. Lothian, *op. cit.*, p. XXIV.

⁶ David Hume acted as a member of the jury. The jury chose the best essay which was written by Professor Gerard – a famous figure in Aberdeen.

⁷ One of his best articles was the analysis of Johnson’s Dictionary of the English Language.

⁸ A. Smith, in J. M. Lothian (ed.), *op. cit.*, *Lecture 6*.

⁹ J. Rae, *Life of Adam Smith*, London, 1985, p. 23.

¹⁰ J. Rae, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

¹¹ Smith regarded translation as an art; he often criticized a word-by-word literary translation which, according to him, becomes ambiguous and loses the very essence of the author’s intention.

very high, and in a short time a multitude of students from far away moved to Edinburgh to participate in the lectures given by Dr Smith.

Thus, the students were presented with a quite different content of lectures on rhetoric enriched with the analysis of belle lettres and the art of writing. John Millar, one of the most beloved students of Smith, commented on the content of the lectures: “he (Dr Smith) saw the necessity of departing widely from the plan that had been followed by his predecessors, and of directing the attention of his pupils to the studies of a more interesting and useful nature than the logic and metaphysics of the schools”.¹² Smith saw the opportunity to conduct his students towards the power of reasoning through stimulating their feelings and aesthetic sense: “The best method of explaining and illustrating the various powers of the human mind, the most useful part of metaphysics, arises from an examination of the several ways of communicating our thoughts by speech, and from an attention to the principles of those literary compositions which contribute to persuasions or entertainment. By these arts, everything that we perceive and feel, every operation of our minds, is expressed in such a manner, that it may be clearly distinguished and remembered. There is, at the same time, no branch of literature more suited to youth at their first entrance upon philosophy than this, which lays hold of their taste and their feelings”.¹³

Therefore, during the thirty lectures on rhetoric and belle letters students were taught to analyse literary works in order to understand the principles of good composition with the emphasis on narrative and descriptive prose. Smith began by discussing the origins of language; he compared the language to a primitive machine which gained its complexity as it developed throughout the centuries.¹⁴ Since the rules governing the spoken and written language had undergone transformation, Smith intended to analyse the evolution of the written and spoken word with the emphasis on different manners of describing events, characters and scenery in historical, narrative and judicial writing. The ideal was to lead students towards perfection of style which, in his opinion, consisted in “expressing in the most concise, proper, and precise manner the thought of the author, and that is in the manner which best conveys the sentiment, passion, or affection with which it affects – or he pretends it does affect – him, and which he designs to communicate to his reader. This, you’ll say, is no more than common sense:

¹² D. Stewart (ed.), A. Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, London, 1983, p. XVI.

¹³ D. Stewart, *op. cit.*, p. XVI.

¹⁴ A. Smith, in J. M. Lothian (ed.), *op. cit.*, *Lecture 3*.

and indeed it is no more.”¹⁵ Interesting is the fact that the appeal to write in a simple, clear style appears almost in every lecture.

Before Smith's students proceeded to a more practical part of the lectures that is writing, they enjoyed a thorough comparison and analyses of various styles and manners – the styles of Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, Polybius, Livy, Machiavelli, and, of course, Smith's favourite Swift were tackled. With the help of numerous literary and historical examples students were taught how to select the right events to include and how to treat their causes, both proximate and remote. Smith's ease with the history and historians allowed his students to follow the evolution of historical descriptions. From historical writing Smith proceeded to expository writing. At that stage students were taught to differentiate between the elements contributing to variety, unity and decorum of the writing text. Here Aristotelian didactic discourses and Cicerian deliberative orations were discussed. At the next stage of the lectures Smith discussed the nature of judicial oratory of Greece and Rome and contrasted it with the English school of oratory. Again, Smith emphasized the importance of “a natural order of expression, free of parentheses and superfluous words.”¹⁶ Finally, students were challenged to put their knowledge of good composition in practice and write an elaboration on a given subject. Thus, Smith's attitude towards the content of the lectures had much of a practical nature – his primary goal was to teach them to write in a simple and direct style without much decorum. Here and there Smith warns against the abuse of metaphors, allegories, similies, metonymies, and hyperboles which, when overused, may lead to ambiguity.¹⁷

While discussing the phenomenon of Smith's lectures it is impossible to undergrade his personal qualities. His strong, analytical mind mixed with his passion for literature created the atmosphere of creative scientific research and students could hardly be bored on his lectures. John Millar commented on Smith's manner: “In delivering his lectures, he trusted almost entirely to extemporary elocution. His manner, though not graceful, was plain and affected; and, as he seemed to be always interested in the subject, he never failed to interest his hearers. [...] even the small peculiarities in his pronunciation or manner of speaking became frequently the objects of imitation.”¹⁸ It was the persona of Dr Smith that attracted the gentlemen whose reputa-

¹⁵ A. Smith, in J. M. Lothian (ed.), *op. cit.*, *Lecture 11*.

¹⁶ A. Smith, in J. M. Lothian (ed.), *op. cit.*, *Lecture 2*.

¹⁷ A. Smith, in J. M. Lothian (ed.), *op. cit.*, *Lecture 2*.

¹⁸ http://www.electricscotland.com/history/other/smith_adam.htm

tion was already established – James Bowswell, Professor George Jardine, Henry Herbert, Lord Porchester, and Hugh Blair were devoted participants in Smith’s classes.

Undoubtedly, Smith’s lectures on rhetoric and belle letters delivered in Edinburgh marked a clear transition from the earlier, well-established academic tradition of formal rhetoric. They were the first of the kind not only at the Edinburgh University but also in Great Britain giving the way to a more practical and creative attitude towards rhetoric. Smith’s lectures showed that rhetoric was not merely a dull system of “silly books” but it was a critical study of literature and language aiming at the natural precision and simplicity of both spoken and written word. He departed from the stereotype of the lecturer who was merely a linguist and grammarian becoming also a literary critic, historian, stylist, writer, and orator. The direct consequence of the interest showed in the lectures was the creation of the Regius Chair of Rhetoric and Belle Lettres at the Edinburgh University which gave a continuity to Smith’s ideas after his departure to Glasgow. The indirect and perhaps most important consequence of the lectures was the creation in Scotland of “an interested and informed audience for both what was creative and critical in literature”.¹⁹ Therefore, even though Dr Smith’s lectures remain in the shadow of *The Wealth of Nations*, they have also done a great deal in shaping the Scottish intellectual mind.

¹⁹ J. M. Lothian, *op. cit.*, p. XXIII.