"Philosophy, Ideology and Rhetoric: Discursive Strategies in the <u>Wealth of Nations</u>"

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"The Progress, indeed, we have made is not very great. The Duke is acquainted with no french man whatever. I cannot cultivate the acquaintance of the few with whom I am acquainted, as I cannot bring them to our house and am not always at liberty to go to theirs. The Life which I led at Glasgow was a pleasurable, dissipated life in comparison of that which I lead here at Present. I have begun to write a book in order to pass away the time."[1]

Thus wrote Adam Smith to David Hume in July of 1764. Smith was with the Duke of Buccleugh in Toulouse, clearly not enjoying himself. Hume was in Paris. The book referred to was to help Smith pass away a great deal of time. By the time Smith was in a position to write to Hume that he expected to send his book to Press at the end of the month, the date would be 9 May 1775[2]. The book would not in fact be published for ten more months. It was An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations. Its gestation period was lengthy and, it appears, stressful for Smith. In 1772 he wrote to William Pulteney that he had intended to publish WN by the start of that year, but "interruptions occasioned partly by bad health arising from want of amusement and from thinking too much upon one thing" would delay its publication "for a few months longer".[3]

Those who are familiar with the protagonists will not be surprised to know that David Hume took an active interest in Smith's labours on WN. The bantering

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[1] Mossner, E. C., & I. S. Ross (eds.), Correspondence of Adam Smith, in The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith, OUP 1977, 5 July 1764, #82, pp. 101-2.
[2] Correspondence, #146, pp. 181-2.
[3] Correspondence, #132, p. 164, Kirkaldy, 3 September 1772.

tone that so enlivens their correspondence is evident in a letter from Edinburgh to

Smith at Kirkaldy in 1769:

> I want to know what you have been doing, and propose to exact a
> rigorous Account of the method, in which you have employed
> yourself during your Retreat. I am positive you are in the wrong in
> many of your Speculations, especially where you have the Misfortune
> to differ from me. All these are Reasons for our meeting, and I wish
> you would make me some reasonable Proposal for the Purpose. There
> is no Habitation on the Island of Inch-Keith; otherwise I shoud [sic]
> challenge you to meet me on that Spot, and neither [of] us ever to
> leave the Place, till we were fully agreed on all points of
> Controversy."[4]

Hume was, of course, unfailingly amiable in his letters to Smith, but he always

spoke the unvarnished truth. Though he was almost constantly aggrieved at

Smith's failure to write or visit more often, it was an unhappiness born of mutual

respect and affection. He was genuinely interested in Smith's method of working,

both in the sense of Smith's 'work habits' as we would now say, and his method of

intellectual inquiry. Smith and Hume had differed sharply though amiably, about

the idea of 'sympathy', which Hume described as "the Hinge of [Smith's] System"

in The Theory of Moral Sentiments[5]. Hume's reception of WN when at last it

appeared tells us much about how he approached the work. "Euge! Belle!, he

exclaimed.

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[4] Correspondence, #121, pp. 155-6, 20 August 1769.
[5] Correspondence, #36, Hume to Smith, 28 July 1759, p. 43. Smith answered in a letter to Gilbert Elliott (#40, 10
October 1759, at p. 49, that he had written a response to Hume's objection in the course of preparing revisions for
the 2d edition of TMS: "I think I have entirely discomfitted him."

"Dear Mr Smith: I am much pleas'd with your Performance, and the Perusal of it has taken me from a State of great Anxiety. It was a Work of so much Expectation, by yourself, by your Friends, and by the Public, that I trembled for its Appearance; but am now much relieved."[6]

Hume saw WN as a complex and sophisticated work, too demanding to gratify immediately the average reader: "… the Reading of it necessarily requires so much Attention, and the Public is disposed to give so little, that I shall still doubt for some time of its being at first very popular." But he applauded the work's "Depth and Solidity and Acuteness", and asserted that the "curious Facts" by which it was 'so much illustrated" would help it to "take the public Attention". I read these remarks as indicating that Hume saw WN's most important contribution as residing in its overall method and direction of inquiry. He did not refer to the facts marshalled in it as "proofs" of as "evidence". He saw them as illustrations, and as '"curious". And indeed they were. Smith had followed Montesquieu, Quesnay and others in drawing extensively on travel documents and stories to provide a fascinating array of comparisons to enliven his social, political and economic arguments. States, individuals and systems ancient and modern, from China and India to the Bank of Amsterdam, were woven entertainingly into the fabric of Smith's narration. WN reads not so much as a cumulative series of causes and effects, proofs and demonstrations, as a series of vignettes and parables. It abounds

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[6] <u>Correspondence</u>, #150, 1 April 1776, p. 186.

in anecdotal evidence, conjectural histories and character sketches. It needed –

needs – to be read 'with great attention" because its principles (some of which

Hume said he would 'dispute' were Smith there at his 'Fireside') are not laid out in

inexorable quasi-mathematical rationalist chains, but elaborated in the course of an

unique and multi-faceted narration. It is the goal of this paper to clarify the

strategies and techniques Smith brought to the construction of the extraordinary

narrative that is WN.

As a philosopher David Hume applauded WN's 'Depth and Solidity and

Acuteness", acknowledged the complex and demanding nature (and structure) of

its arguments, and disputed some of its principles. Hugh Blair, appointed Regius

Professor of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres at Edinburgh in 1762, whose own work on

that subject is said to have drawn upon Smith's[7], wrote to Smith just two days after

Hume. Smith had read parts of WN to him 'some years' before. The work

exceeded even his high expectations: "One writer after another on these Subjects

did nothing but puzzle me. I despaired of ever arriving at clear Ideas. You have

given me full and Compleat Satisfaction and my Faith is fixed." As a teacher of

rhetoric, Blair seems to have been sensitive to the persuasive strategy of WN. We

shall see that the method of inquiry self-consciously adopted - constructed - by

Smith aimed precisely to give 'satisfaction' and to 'fix the faith' of the reader by

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[7] See Correspondence, #151, Blair to Smith, 3 April [1776], p. 187-8, fn. 1

the clarity of its ideas and its imagery. Blair felt that Smith had driven the self-interested and confusing 'sophistry' of merchants from the field, illuminating the 'whole Subject of Commerce' by providing new, enlarged and 'rectified' ideas. He anticipated that WN would become "in some degree … the Commercial Code of Nations".

> I am Convinced that since Montesquieu's *Esprit des Loix*, Europe has not received any Publication which tends so much to Rectify and Enlarge the ideas of mankind.

Blair specifically applauded the style and structure of the work:

> Your Arrangement is excellent. One chapter paves the way for another; *and your System gradually erects itself [my emph.].*Nothing was ever better suited than your Style is to the Subject; clear and distinct to the last degree, full without being too much so, and as tercly as the Subject could admit. Dry as some of the subjects Are, It carries me along.[8]

Blair was concerned that Smith's chapters on the Universities[9] and on the Church[10] would arouse troublesome hostility, and in the area of the politics of religion he found Smith's views 'too favourable by much to Presbytery'.[11] But the chief 'fault' he had to find was with the overall presentation of the work. He called for the inclusion in future editions of a 'Syllabus of the whole', a guide to the 'great variety of subjects' through which Smith travels in WN. It would be 'expressed in

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[8] Ibid, p. 188.
[9] See <u>An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations</u> (hereinafter WN), ed. R. H. Campbell & A. S. Skinner, textual editor W. B. Todd, Glasgow Edition OUP 1976, V.i.f: "Of the Expence of the Institutions for the Education of Youth".
[10] See WN, V.i.g: "Of the Expence of the Institutions for the Instruction of People of all Ages."
[11] <u>Corr</u>., #151, p. 189.

short independent Propositions, like the Syllabus's we are in use to give of our

College Lectures; with references under each, to the pages in which these

propositions are handle and proved."

> The Benefit of this would not only be that it would lead us to any part of the work we wanted to Consult, but (which would be a much higher advantage) *it would Exhibit a Scientifical View of the whole system; it would impress your Principles on our Memory; it would show us how they hang upon one another, and give mutual Support and Con[s]istency to the Fabrick; it would gather together the Scatter'd Ideas which many of your Readers will form, and give them something like real improvement."* [my emph.][12]

In the event Smith did, of course, add an index to his great work. But he never

added the kind of "Syllabus" for which Blair called. Blair's veiled criticism ought

to give us pause: something was needed, he was saying, to tighten up the "Fabrick"

of Smith's system, to make it easier for readers to see it whole, so that they would

not take only 'scattered ideas' away from their reading. As we shall see, a concern

with the unity and clarity of Smith's 'system' and his 'principles' is at or just

below the surface of most of the constructively critical comments which the record

of Smith's correspondence makes available to us.

Smith's literary executor Joseph Black, a Professor of Medicine and

Chemistry at Edinburgh, and a man greatly respected by Smith for his sensible

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[12] Ibid.

nature[13], saw the comprehensiveness of the 'system' laid out in WN as its most

challenging aspect:

> … I have no doubt that the Views you have given of many parts of
> your Subject will be found by experience to be as just as they are new
> and interesting and although it be admired immediately by discerning
> and impartial Judges[,] It will require some time before other who are
> not so quick sighted and whose minds are warped by Prejudice or
> Interest can understand and relish *such a comprehensive System*
> *composed with such just and liberal sentiments[14]* [my emph.]

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 William Robertson, principal of Edinburgh University from 1762 and Moderator

of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland from 1763[15], was said to have

"borrowed the first volume of his History of Charles V. from [Smith's lectures on

jurisprudence] as every student could testify."[16] He wrote to Smith that

> You have formed into a regular and consistent system one of the most
> intricate and important parts of political science, and if the English be
> capable of extending their ideas beyond the narrow and illiberal
> arrangements introduced by the mercantile supporters of Revolution
> principles, and countenanced by Locke and some of their favourite
> writers, I should think your Book will occasion a total change in
> several important articles both in police and finance.

He went on to indicate that should he and Smith have the opportunity to do so, he

would, in a spirit of 'meekness' and affection, 'venture to discuss some articles of

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[13] Corr., p. 23, fn. 9.
[14] Corr., #152, [Apr. 1776], p. 190.
[15] See Corr., p. 35, fn. 18.
[16] See Corr., #153, Robertson to Smith, 8 Apr. 1776, p. 192,fn. 2.

your Creed, and to dispute others. Like Blair, he called for an index and 'side [marginal] notes' to 'facilitate the consulting or referring to it'[17].

These letters were soon followed by one from Adam Ferguson [18 April 1776]. "I have been for some time so busy reading you," he wrote, 'and recommending and quoting you, to my students, that I have not had leisure to trouble you with letters. Ferguson had clearly been well informed as to the emerging shape and content of the work in the preceding years. His reaction to the published version of WN was that

> … on further acquaintance with your work my esteem is not a little
> increased. You are surely to reign alone on these subjects, to form the
> opinions, and I hope to govern at least the coming generations. I see
> no addition your work can receive except such little matters as may
> occur to yourself in subsequent editions. You are not to expect the run
> of a novel, *nor even of a true history* [my emph]; but you may
> [expect] a steady and continual sale, as long as people wish for
> information on these subjects.

Ferguson's distinction between Smith's use of 'philosophical' or 'conjectural' history' in WN (as he had done in his lectures on jurisprudence and his essay on 'the History of Astronomy') and 'true history' is noteworthy as an indication that contemporaries were aware of the novelty, and of the strategic and rhetorical nature, of Smith's way of deploying the 'system' which Ferguson found so perfectly deployed in the new publication. Ferguson supported Smith against the

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[17] Ibid, p. 193.

universities, against the Church and against the [English] merchants, and he opposed his preference for standing armies over militias. But like so many others, he saw in WN both a fount of information on subjects of current importance and a complete and innovative system of ideas and asrguments.

Both Dugald Stewart and the editors of WN, however, seem to disagree with this view. Campbell and Skinner cite Stewart as 'probably having the right of it' when he asserted that

> After all, perhaps the merit of such a work as Mr Smith's is to be estimated less from the novelty of the principles it contains, than from the reasonings employed to support these principles, and from the scientific manner in which they are unfolded in their proper order and connection[18]

Campbell and Skinner concur with Stewart in acknowledging but down-playing Smith's original contribution(s) to the subject of WN. They see WN, like TMS, as 'a great synthetical performance', providing a 'systematical' view of elements of Political Economy already developed by the Physiocrats.[19]

Campbell and Skinner thus argue that the content of WN is largely derivative, and that Smith's contribution to political economy lies largely in the reasonings he provided in support of principles that were already known from other sources. They endorse Stewart's judgment that the "scientific manner in which they are unfolded in their proper order and connection" is the work's

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[18] Stewart, Dugald, Works, IV, p. 26, Edinburgh, 1856. Cited in eds' intro to WN at p. 23.
[19] Ibid. They refer to Samuel Hollander's The Economics of Adam Smith (U. of Toronto Press, 1973) as the most comprehensive modern account of the content of Smith's work'.

strongest point. But Smith's friends and contemporaries found precisely this manner of unfolding sufficiently difficult to follow that they called for more supporting scholarly apparati to be added to subsequent editions. They may well have felt that this as merely a matter of making the packaging of the work do justice to its substance. But that is precisely the point: they were to a man impressed by the 'system' and the 'principles' they found in WN, even where they begged to differ with them. Unless we are to assume that their applause for WN was entirely for its form, for its arrangement of previously known principles and systemic elements, there seems to be something of a gap between their consensual judgment and the impression given by Campbell, Skinner and Stewart.

In the present paper I take a different tack from the one suggested by the editors of WN. I argue that there is indeed a 'system' and a set of 'principles' at the core of WN, and that this system and these principles are both substantively and formally novel. I take this to be the case at least partly because I do not think that form and substance are easily separable in Smith's work. As I see it, the form of his arguments and the structure of his text reflect a strategy of inquiry that unifies all of Smith's work – his entire oeuvre.

At the root of the strategy of inquiry that shapes Smith's **Inquiry** into to Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations is his philosophical naturalism. He is not a philosophical rationalist, bent on the establishment of facts and proofs of

pseudo-mathematical irrefutability. His goal is not to define what is true in some metaphysically privileging or rationalist sense, but to articulate the natural. The 'Author of Nature' and 'nature' itself are everywhere in his work. It needs no detailed investigation to see how our nature is the entire grounding of the Theory of Moral Sentiments. The same is true of the account given of societies, states and laws in the Lectures on Jurisprudence, and especially of the account of astronomical systems and systems of ancient metaphysics in Smith's essay on "The Principles which Lead and Direct Philosophical Enquiries"[20]. Skinner and Campbell themselves seem to acknowledge the presence in Smith's works of a comprehensive and substantively novel system of thought of which his economic writings constitute an integral part. And they recognize it as a system based on naturalistic assumptions. They identify certain 'readily apparent 'common features of all three[21] of Smith's major works:

1) "in each case Smith sought to explain complex problems in terms of a small number of basic principles, and each conforms to the requirements of the Newtonian method in the broad sense of that term";

2) all three make use of the typical hypothesis that the principles of human nature can be taken as constant, and

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[20] In Essays on Philosophical Subjects, in the Glasgow edition of the works and correspondence.
[21] The Theory of Moral Sentiments, Lectures on Jurisprudence, and WN. I consider the essay on astronomy to be just as important as any of these three as a contribution to Smith's system of inquiry.

3) all employ the doctrine of 'unintended social outcomes' – the thesis that man, in following the prompting of his nature, unconsciously gives substantial expression to some parts of the [Divine?] Plan."[22]

Point 1) suggests that Smith's was a neo-Newtonian system of explanation. Point 2) suggests that it was a system of description and classification of human attributes and behaviours based on naturalistic assumptions held as first principles. Point 3) suggests a very different kind of system – a Divine or Natural "Plan" reflected in Smith's observations and presumably in his principles.

Elsewhere Campbell and Skinner reinforce the plausibility of the naturalistic thesis by observing that Smith held that "the purpose of philosophy is to explain the coherence of nature"[23]. The view espoused in this paper is that Smith's entire body of work constitutes a philosophical system in this sense. It was this system that was developed and revealed in WN in ways that so impressed Smith's colleagues and friends. They were, of course, not surprised by the principles or the basic thrust of this system. They knew these things well, having seen them applied previously in TMS and in the Lectures on Jurisprudence. To treat this system, as manifested in WN, as bringing forth nothing more than a new arrangement of old Physiocratic knowledge is to understate both its novelty and its substantiveness.

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[22] WN, eds' intro ["General Introdcution"], p. 4.
[23] WN, "General Introduction", p. 2.

In my view the most important subdivision within Smith's philosophical system was not the division between morals and political economy or between those two and jurisprudence. Indeed, for my purposes those three areas constitute not distinct sub-systems within Smith's thought, but simply distinct applications of it. The essential subdivision is between Smith's system in its assertive and its interrogative voices: the distinction between philosophical *inquiry* and philosophical *discourse*[24]. The principles of Smith's system of philosophical inquiry were beautifully – strikingly – laid out in his essay on "The Principles which Lead and Direct Philosophical Inquiry, as illustrated by the History of Astronomy". That work reviewed four successive systems of astronomy with a view to identifying the features (roughly and incompletely summarized in point 1) above) of an effective scientific or philosophical system. Notice that the "Astronomy" actually provided separate elucidations of the two kinds of philosophical systems I have just distinguished. Its title referred to the principles which direct **inquiry**. But it also compared and criticized a series of 'assertive' subsystems, so to speak – systems of astronomy which abandoned the interrogative voice. Inquiry, Smith argued, is generated by the sentiments of surprise, wonder and admiration we experience we experience in the course of our life experiences. More specifically:

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[24] See J. C. Bryce (ed.), <u>Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres</u>, Glasgow Edition, OUP, 1983, lecture 8 at p. 40, and the discussion which follows below.

'Nature, after the largest experience that common observation can acquire, seems to abound with events which appear solitary and incoherent with all that go before them, which therefore disturb the easy movement of the imagination; which make its ideas succeed one another ... by irregular starts and sallies; and thus tend, in some measure, to introduce ... confusions and distractions ...

Philosophy, by representing the invisible chains which bind together all these disjointed objects, endeavours to introduce order into this chaos... to allay this tumult of the imagination, and to restore it, when it surveys the great revolutions of the universe, to that tone of tranquillity and composure, which is both most agreeable in itself, and most suitable to its nature.'[25]

Smith's 'essay on the history of Astronomy' is the intellectual centre-piece of his 'theory of inquiry'. It explains what stimulates philosphical inquiry, identifies the essential features of the process, and outlines its goals. Since Smith describes philosophy itself as a 'science', and groups philosophy and science together among the 'arts which address themselves to the imagination'[26], it should be clear that the model of inquiry portrayed in this essay is meant to have the broadest possible application to the human exploration of nature and experience. The three essays printed in Essays on Philosophical Subjects (EPS) examine Astronomy, Physics, Logic and Metaphysics. There is no reason to refrain from applying the same model to inquiry in the fields of morals and political economy. Indeed, my contention is precisely that Smith's method of inquiry was of the same nature in all fields.

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[25]Smith, 'History of Astronomy', in Essays on Philosophical Subjects, pp. 45-6.

[26]'Astronomy' II.12 in EPS 45-6. Cited above at fn. 7.

How does inquiry work on Smith's account of it? What gives rise to it? What are its goals? The passage just cited gives the flavour of Smith's answers to these questions. Inquiry begins and ends in 'nature'. It begins with the interaction between the natural environment and the human imagination. The chaotic discontinuity and 'incoherence' of natural events is recurrent and incorrigible. It can generate a range of human responses: positive 'admiration', a mixed and ambiguous sense of 'wonder' or the disorientation which often accompanies 'surprise'.[27] Smith is not Francis Bacon: his 'Inquiry' does not aspire to conquer nature or to put an end to its chaos. For Smith, 'Inquiry' is not the pursuit of authoritative, empowering truth. The order which inquiry introduces into nature's chaos is semantic, not epistemic. The process of inquiry ends with the human imagination 'restored' to 'that tone of tranquillity and composure, which is both most agreeable in itself, and most suitable to its nature.' Smith makes reference at one point to the question of the 'absurdity or probability [of systems of nature], their agreement or inconsistency with truth and reality', but neither in this Essay nor anywhere else in his writings does he argue that anything more than Humean probability can be predicated of human systems of thought. What he wants to establish in his review of systems of astronomical science is 'how far each of them was fitted to sooth the

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[27]'It is the design of this Essay to consider particularly the nature and causes of these sentiments, whose influence is of far wider extent than we should be apt upon a careless view to imagine.' Astronomy', Introduction, para. 7; in EPS, 34.

imagination, and to render the theatre of nature a more coherent, and therefore a more magnificent spectacle, than otherwise it would have appeared to be.'[28] If there is a conception of truth here, it clearly uses the criterion of coherence not of correspondence. But in this passage and elsewhere Smith places a strong emphasis on the linkage between coherence or plausibility and beauty - here 'magnificence'. What 'sooths' the imagination, what restores it to 'composure' and tranquillity' is not the hard truth of reality, but 'theatre', 'spectacle' and 'appearance'. 'Systems', whether they be historic systems of natural philosophy or 'the obvious and simple system of natural liberty' postulated in Smith's Wealth of Nations[29], are flights of the imagination, not transparent and 'value-free' descriptions of reality. The "Astronomy' reviewed four such systems. The seventh Book of TMS alone discussed seven different *types* of moral systems. The Lectures on Jurisprudence were structured around a series of four systems of society and government. The analytical index of TMS lists discussions in that volume of systems of government and of laws, and discussions of society and of the universe *as* systems. Systems abound in Smith's work – systems alongside others, in conflict with others, complementary to others, inside others.

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[28]'Astronomy', II.12; in EPS, 46.

[29]See R. H. Campbell & A. S. Skinner (General Editors) and W. B. Todd (Textual Editor), An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations, Indianapolis, Liberty Classics, 1981 (reproduction of 1979 Glasgow edition), Vol. II, Bk. IV, Ch. ix, para. 51, p. 687.

'Systems in many respects resemble machines. A machine is a little system, created to perform, as well as to connect together, in reality, those different movements which the artist has occasion for. A system is an imaginary machine invented to connect together in the fancy those different movements and effects which are already in reality performed.'[30]

What we experience as 'reality' shows us 'different movements and effects' - sometimes, as we have seen, discontinuous and seemingly incoherent ones. Systems revolve around 'connecting principles'. The more sophisticated the system, Smith says, the fewer and more general the connecting principles[31]. Systems do not alter reality: they simply alter our articulation of it. They gain and lose in plausibility, beauty and utility while 'reality' remains as inaccessible as ever to our senses and our language. Thus Smith views with dry humour the idea that philosophical systems can be perfected:

'Let us endeavour to trace [philosophy], from its first origin, up to that summit of perfection to which it is at present supposed to have arrived, and to which, indeed, it has equally been supposed to have arrived in almost all former times.'[32]

Smith thought that his own time was unlike all 'former times' in at least one important respect. The enhanced security, wealth and leisure available to citizens of commercial society combined to intensify individuals' interest in philosophical inquiry:

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[30]'Astronomy', IV.19; in <u>EPS</u>, 66.

[31]Ibid.

[32]'Astronomy', II.12; in <u>EPS</u>, 46.

'...when law has established order and security, and subsistence ceases to be precarious, the curiosity of mankind is increased, and their fears are diminished. The leisure which they then enjoy renders them more attentive to the appearances of nature, more observant of her smallest irregularities, and more desirous to know what is the chain which links them all together.'

Smith asserts that the citizens of commercial society are 'necessarily led to conceive' that **all** of nature's 'seemingly disjointed phaenomena' are connected by some such chain. Moreover, the confidence and the sense of strength which such moderns derive from their material circumstances 'renders them less disposed to employ, for this connecting chain, those invisible beings whom the fear and ignorance of their rude forefathers had engendered.'[33] Thus superstition is functionally replaced by 'Philosophy ... that science which pretends to lay open the concealed connections that unite the various appearances of nature.'[34]

In a section of the Wealth of Nations which clearly echoes the arguments of his early essays on philosophical inquiry, Smith distinguishes between superstitious and philosophical explanations of phaenomena by saying that philosophy accounted for nature's 'wonderful appearances'... 'from more familiar causes, or from such as mankind were better acquainted with, than the agency of the Gods'.[35] 'Familiarity' of the causes referred to in establishing connecting chains

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[33]'Astronomy', III.3; in EPS, 50.

[34]Ibid, p. 51.

[35]Wealth of Nations, Vol. II, Book V, Chap. 1, section f, para. 24, p.767.

among nature's appearances was one of five criteria established by Smith for the assessment of the merits of the systems of thought generated by inquiry. The five are succinctly summarized by Lindgren as 1) comprehensiveness, 2) coherence, 3) familiarity, 4) beauty and 5) in the case of questions of moral, social or political inquiry, propriety.[36]

The discourse of political can thus be seen as figurative discourse, aimed at the evocation of images of the individual (the 'impartial spectator') and the socio-economic order of commercial society (the 'obvious and simple system of natural liberty', the 'invisible hand') which are intended to enhance the community's sense of confidence that political order can be maintained. The most helpful images will be the most comprehensive and coherent, those which draw on the most 'familiar' component ideas or impressions, those which achieve the greatest 'beauty' by their elegance and complexity of form, and those deemed by societal consensus to exhibit the greatest 'propriety'. These are qualities one would associate with political rhetoric, not philosophical demonstration, but Smith's point is surely that systems of moral and political thought are precisely systems of rhetoric: the experience of inquiring into our social and natural environment is most honestly and evocatively conveyed in rhetorical terms - in the language of vision, not of proof.

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[36]See Lindgren, 'Smith's Theory of Inquiry', pp. 902, 905, 913.

Smith is not an ideologue. His principles and policy recommendations in

politics and economics stem from his assumptions about human nature and human

behaviour, and these assumptions are largely crystallized in a collection of vivid

metaphors which includes the ones I have just listed. His ideas on 'police' - on

jurisprudence and policy-making - are the pragmatic correlatives of his systematic

philosophical inquiry into the presuppositions of political order. The nature of that

inquiry simply cannot be understood if Smith's early writings on language,

discourse and the nature of inquiry are ignored, as they have largely been by

twentieth-century political scientists and economists committed to methods of

inquiry substantially different from what Smith either recommended or practiced.

Smith took great pride in an essay he published in 1761 entitled

'Considerations Concerning the First Formation of Languages, and the Different

Genius of Original and Compounded Languages'. This was what Dugald Stewart

famously described as a 'conjectural history' of language:

> 'In the absence of direct evidence, "when we are unable to ascertain how
> men have actually conducted themselves upon particular occasions", we
> must consider "in what manner they are likely to have proceeded, from the
> principles of their nature and the circumstances of their external situation."'[37]

Stewart acutely observed in his Life of Smith that this essay, at first glance an

apparently orthodox and conventional work, was actually, by virtue of its

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[37]Ibid, eds' intro., p. 24, citing Stewart's Life of Smith, for which see fn. 10 below.

application of this new historiographical approach, extraordinarily ingenious: 'a specimen of a particular sort of inquiry, which, so far as I know, is entirely of modern origin'. He also noted, quite correctly, that 'something very similar to it may be traced in all his different works, whether moral, political, or literary; and on all these subjects he has exemplified it with the happiest success.'[38]

This distinctively modern form of inquiry, 'conjectural history', involved the imaginative postulation of events and patterns of human development according to aesthetic and linguistic criteria derived from the author's own culture. It was not even ostensibly a history of what 'really happened', but rather a construction (**not** a 'reconstruction') of an appropriate past in view of some present concern. It was, as Stewart and Smith both knew, simply inappropriate to ask of such a history whether it was 'true'. Its function was to be evocative - to present to the reader's imagination plausible images of past and present life such as to enhance the reader's sense of coherence and meaning in the flow of events. The method of 'conjectural' or 'philosophical history' developed in the Lectures on Jurisprudence (and noticed by Smith's friends, especially the rhetorician Hugh Blair, in the context of WN) was a natural complement of the systematic method of inquiry articulated in the 'Astronomy'. Indeed, the line between the two subsystems I have

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[38]"Dugald Stewart: Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith, LL.D.", Section II, para. 44; in <u>EPS</u> at p. 292.

distinguished within Smith's system as a whole, the subsystems of inquiry and of

discourse, is easily blurred. Where does inquiry end in the 'Astronomy' and

authoritative discourse in the assertive voice begin? Are the Lectures on

Jurisprudence exercises in inquiry or in assertion. The obvious answer is 'both'.

There is , in the final analysis, one Smithian system of philosophical discourse, and

to complete our picture of its distinctive character and provenance we now turn to

a source heretofore little examined by readers of WN – Smith's <u>Lectures on

Rhetoric and Belles Lettres</u>.

The LRBL lectures make it clear that in all of his works Smith was operating

within the clearly understood boundaries and according to the principles of a

systematic theory of rhetoric. I do not say that Smith was writing within 'the

tradition' of rhetoric, because it is clear that he transformed that tradition more

than he actually followed it. In his extremely useful and suggestive editor's

introduction to LRBL, J. C. Bryce asserts that Smith's lectures 'exerted a profound

and revolutionary influence which has still not been properly investigated, on

Hugh Blair, Kames, William Richardson, George Campbell, and those they in turn

taught. So sharp was Smith's break from the stilted and artificial rhetorical voice

he found in authors such as Lord Shaftesbury[39] that Bryce is moved to describe the

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[39] There are many references, all of them critical, to Shaftesbury in the LRBL. As an example, lecture 5,p. 22:
"Lord Shaftesbury may serve as an example of the pompous and grand stile."

lectures as offering an 'anti-rhetoric'[40]. Smith's revolution in rhetoric stemmed

from his rejection of an Aristotlelian approach which led to an endless proliferation

of principles, and his adoption of a Newtonian method entailing an economy of

principles and an explanatory principle of 'enchainment':

> … in Nat<ural> Phil<osophy> or any other science of that Sort
> we may either like Aristotle go over the Different branches in the
> order they happen to cast up to us, giving a principle commonly a new
> one for every phaenomenon; or in the manner of Sir Isaac Newton we
> may lay down certain principles known or proved in the beginning
> from whence we account for the severall Phenomena, connecting all
> together by the same Chain.

Smith found the Newtonian method to be more , philosophical' and 'in every

science … vastly more ingenious and for that reason more engaging than the

other'. Ingenuity and engagingness, not truth content, were the criteria of

superiority in this context:

> We need <not> be surprised then that the Cartesian Philosophy tho it
> does not perhaps contain a word of truth, and to us who live in a more
> enlighten'd age and have more enquired into these matters it appears
> very Dubious, should nevertheless have been so universally received
> by all the Learned in Europe at that time.

Smith suggested another reason for the universal acceptance among the learned of

its day of a system of philosophy Smith regarded as "one of the most entertaining

Romances that has ever been wrote." It was a reason that was to loom large in his

friends' reception of WN:

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[40] LRBL, ed's intro, p. 36.

> The Didacticall method tho undoubtedly the best in all matters of Science, is hardly ever applicable to Rhetoricall discourses. The People, to which they are ordinarily directed, have no pleasure in these abstruse deductions; their interest, and the practicability and honourableness of the thing recommended is what alone will sway with them, and is seldom to be shown in a long deduction of arguments.[41]

Clearly in WN Smith was torn between the adoption of a post-Cartesian form of 'Didacticall' discourse and an effective "Rhetoricall" appeal to the reading public's sense of interest, practicability and honour. The successful presentation of his system depended upon the selection of precisely the right mode of rhetoric. "[T]he thoughts of most men of genius in this country", he told his students, "have of late <inclined> to abstract and Speculative reasonings which perhaps tend very little to the bettering of our practice. {Even the Practicall Sciences of Politicks and Morality or Ethicks have of late been treated too much in a speculative manner}.[42]" Evidently, Smith saw an opportunity to bring to the sciences of politics and ethics a new discursive approach more suited to the practicalities of the day, yet faithful to the philosophical method of inquiry he had laboured to create and refine throughout his career. In his lectures on rhetoric he provided substantial indications of what that approach should look like. The three 'things that are requisite to make a good writer', according to the LRBL note-taker, are

> "1st – That he have a complete knowledge of his Subjects;

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[41] LRBL, Lecture 24, ii.134, at p. 146, parag. 135.
[42] LRBL, Lecture 8, i.102, p. 41.

2dly That he should arrange all the parts of his Subject in their proper order;

3dly That he paint <or> describe the Ideas he has of these severall in the

most proper and expressive manner; this is the art of painting or imitation".[43]

 Hugh Blair's observation that in WN "your arrangement is excellent. One chapter

paves the way for another; and your System gradually erects itself. Nothing was

ever better suited than your Style is to the Subject"… must have been music to

Smith's ears. It was confirmation that his years of painstaking research into his

subject, the trouble he had taken to order the work, and the 'painting' of his ideas

had all contributed to the effectiveness of WN.

"Every discourse", Smith asserted in Lecture 12 of LRBL, "proposes either

barely to relate some fact, or to prove some proposition." The relating of facts is

the task of 'narrative' discourse. The proving of propositions is the province of two

sorts of Discourse: the Didactick and the Rhetoricall". The 'curious facts' whose

abundance in WN was noted by David Hume were matters of mere narration. The

system of ideas in which the true greatness of the work lay was a discursive

construct blending elements, in the terms of Smith's classification here, of didactic

and rhetorical discourse:

> "Persuasion which is the primary design in the Rhetoricall is but the
> secondary design in the Didactick.It endeavours to persuade us only
> so far as the strength of the arguments is convincing, instruction is the
> main end. In the other Persuasion is the main design and Instruction is

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[43] LRBL, Lecture 8, i.104/5 at p. 42.

considered only so far as it is subservient to Perswasion, and no farther."[44]

Smith's contemporaries and colleagues saw Smith's 'obvious and simple system of natural liberty'[45] as an idea which was of enormous ideological value in the battles then being waged against partisans of the mercantile system of political economy.

> Everyman, as long as he does not violate the laws of justice, is left perfectly free to pursue his own interest his own way, and to bring both his industry and capital into competition with any other man, or order of men. The sovereign is completely discharged from a duty, in the attempting to perform which he must always be exposed to innumerable delusions, and for the proper performance of which no human wisdom or knowledge could ever be sufficient: the duty of superintending the industry of private people, and of directing it towards the employments most suitable to the interests of society."

At the core of Smith's 'system of natural liberty', as Campbell and Skinner argue, is an act of faith:

> The belief in the natural progress of opulence, almost in its inevitability, is so strong throughout the WN that, when dealing with a contemporary problem, Smith's main objective is to isolate those barriers which lay in the path of natural progress as he saw it, and to advocate their speedy removal. Hence on contemporary issues his writing verges on propaganda, he uses evidence in ways that are not wholly convincing to those not committed to his system, and he pressed interpretations of contemporary events to more extreme conclusions than may well be warranted."[46]

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[44] LRBL, i.149/50, p. 62.
[45] WN, IV.ix, para. 51, p687: "All systems either of preference or of restraint, therefore, beingthus completely taken away, the obvious and simple system of natural liberty establishes itself of its own accord."
[46] WN, "General Introduction", p. 59.

"You have given me full and Compleat Satisfaction", the rhetorician Hugh Blair, Smith's student, had said. So was Smith's. The editors of WN describe a discursive strategy in WN that is not, by Smith's own criteria, narrative in intent, nor even didactic, but "rhetoricall". Yet Smith was neither a mere propagandist nor a 'marketer' of derivative ideas. When we consider together the subtle and sophisticated methodology of inquiry laid out in the essay on astronomy and the radically innovative principles of persuasive discourse deployed in the LRBL, we have but to grasp the fact WN *was* both an inquiry of a very special and carefully considered sort and a manifesto of unmatched clarity and consistency of focus. Smith's 'system' blended formal creativity and iconoclasm so seamlessly together with substantive commitments and recommendations that its full richness and greatness cannot be comprehended without a proper appreciation of both aspects of his epochal project.

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