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ROBERT WATSON'S LECTURES AT ST ANDREWS: LOGIC, RHETORIC & METAPHYSICS¹

Rosaleen Greene-Smith Keefe

The contributions to rhetoric of Robert Watson (1730?-1781), Professor of Logic, Rhetoric, and Metaphysics at the University of St Andrews from 1756-1778, and Principal from 1778-1781, are not nearly as well-known as those of his contemporaries Adam Smith, Hugh Blair, or George Campbell.² However, lecture notes from Watson's courses survive, and they are important for at least two reasons. First, their content demonstrates the philosophic diversity in rhetorical theory at this time, showing significant differences among the Scottish literati on such issues as epistemology of language and the origin of grammar. Second, seeing how the Scottish rhetoric of belles-lettres was taught in the 1760s and 1770s suggests some fascinating contrasts and connections with Scottish literature and literary scholarship in the following generation. Robert Fergusson, the literary predecessor to Robert Burns in writing poetry in vernacular Scots, was one of Watson's students of belles-lettres.

Born in St Andrews, Watson had attended the university from 1744-1748, receiving his MA in May of his final year. After graduating, he spent time in Glasgow and Edinburgh, presumably attending lectures and socializing with the eminent intellects of the day. That he came from St Andrews and later became himself one of the Literati place him in direct

¹ Support for this research on the Watson notebooks was provided by a J.D. Fleeman Fellowship, Department of English, University of St Andrews; I also wish to acknowledge the help during my work in Special Collections of Dr. Rachel Hart, Keeper of Manuscripts and Muniments, University of St Andrews Library.

² For accounts of Watson's career, see Robert Crawford, ed., *Launch-Site for English Studies* (St Andrews: Verse, 1997), esp. Crawford, "Introduction," 1-22 (9-11), and Neil Rhodes, "Shakespeare at St Andrews," 29-54 (33-37); Jeffrey Smitten, "Watson, Robert (1730?-1781)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004, rev. 2006): <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/28861>.

proximity to the initial development of the Scottish belles-lettres tradition. Robert Crawford points out that in 1720 the St Andrews faculty had voted down a proposed separate Chair of Eloquence, suggesting that because St Andrews kept rhetoric linked to philosophy it was poised for what became a distinctively Scottish use of belles-lettres in rhetorical teaching and theorizing.³ The French belles-lettrists' focus on modern educated vernacular discourse and vernacular literature was of keen interest to Scots educators, as aiding social and geographic mobility, and similar considerations were at work in the Scottish rhetoricians' influence in American colleges.⁴ The socio-political implications of how English studies developed in Scotland are well documented, but of equal importance is the Scottish philosophers' innovative theory of language as it was applied within the rhetoric classrooms. Adam Smith, in particular, had altered rhetorical theory and teaching significantly by synthesizing within it, along with the new logic of Locke and Hume, the moral sentiments tradition he inherited from his own teacher, Francis Hutcheson. By the Enlightenment period in Scotland, rhetoric had expanded beyond the study of techniques for persuasion and eloquence; it was now the disciplinary home of moral philosophy, metaphysics, pneumatics, as well as grammar, oratory, and logic.⁵

Smith had an important, if indirect, role in how Watson approached his rhetoric teaching at St Andrews. Smith's career trajectory got its start when

³ Crawford, *Launch-Site*, 6.

⁴ On Scottish rhetoric, the origins of English studies, and Scottish rhetoric's American impact, see, e.g., William Charvat, *The Origins of American Critical Thought, 1810-1830* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1936); W.S. Howell, *Eighteenth Century British Logic and Rhetoric* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971); Douglas Sloan, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the American College Ideal* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1971); Andrew Hook, *Scotland and America, 1750-1835* (Glasgow: Blackie, 1975), esp. Ch. IV; Robert Crawford, *Devolving English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Franklin Court, *Institutionalizing English Literature: the Culture and Politics of English Studies, 1750-1900* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992); Winifred Bryan Horner, *Nineteenth-Century Scottish Rhetoric: the American Connection* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993); Barbara Warnick, *The Sixth Canon: Belletristic and Rhetorical Theory and its French Antecedents* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993); Thomas P. Miller, *The Formation of College English: Rhetoric and Belles Lettres in the British Cultural Provinces* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997); Crawford, *The Scottish Invention of English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Court, *The Scottish Connection: the Rise of English Literary Study in Early America* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001).

⁵ Alexander Broadie, "Introduction," in *Thomas Reid On Logic, Rhetoric, and the Fine Arts* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2005), xv.

Henry Home, Lord Kames, persuaded him to offer public lectures in Rhetoric and Belles Lettres in Edinburgh during the winters of 1748 and 1749. Robert Watson had a pivotal role in subsequent developments, for when Smith took his professorship at Glasgow Kames turned next to Watson to continue the Edinburgh lectures. From this beginning, Watson gained the reputation needed to secure a professorship in 1756 at his own alma mater of St Andrews. It was Watson's cousin, Hugh Blair, who took over the Edinburgh lectures and became the first holder of Edinburgh's Regius Chair of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres.⁶ In published form, Blair's lectures became a widely-used text, especially in antebellum American colleges, because his approach to criticism was more readily adapted to textbook presentation and varied teaching practices.⁷

Watson is commonly listed amongst the "Moderate literati" of the Scottish Enlightenment, and he is best known for his two histories of the Spanish monarchy. His first, *The History of the Reign of Philip the Second, King of Spain* (1777), was popular enough to require six editions. In James Boswell's account of visiting the University of St Andrews with Dr. Johnson in 1773, he reported that they "talked of composition, ... a favourite topick of Dr. Watson's, who first distinguished himself by lectures on rhetoric."⁸ Watson himself did not publish his thoughts on his favorite topic, for which we must rely on the notes from his lectures.

In comparison with other Moderates, Watson has attracted relatively little subsequent scholarly interest. In addition to Jeffrey Smitten's ODNB entry, Paul Bator published two notable essays on Watson as rhetorician, both in 1994, one in *Rhetorica*, discussing the lecture notes, and the other in Michael Moran's volume on *Eighteenth-Century British and American Rhetorics and Rhetoricians*.⁹ Bator argued that Watson should be included alongside such better-known rhetorical notables as Smith, Kames, Blair, and

⁶ Richard B. Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Moderate Literati of Edinburgh* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 25.

⁷ See note 4 above, esp. Miller, and also the section on Hugh Blair, in Patricia Bizzell, Bruce Hertzberg, and Robin Reames, eds, *The Rhetorical Tradition: A Reader*, (Boston: Bedford Books, 2020), 841-842, 1025-1028.

⁸ James Boswell, *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* (London: Henry Baldwin, 1785), 64; noted by Crawford, *Launch-Site*, 37, and Smitten, in *ODNB*.

⁹ Paul G. Bator, "The Unpublished Rhetoric Lectures of Robert Watson, Professor of Logic, Rhetoric, and Metaphysics at the University of St Andrews, 1756-1778," *Rhetorica*, 12.1 (1994): 67-113; Bator, "Robert Watson," in Michael Moran, ed., *Eighteenth-Century British and American Rhetorics and Rhetoricians*, ed. Michael Moran (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 245-259.

Campbell, but nonetheless judges him an “unoriginal” thinker and downplays the lecture notes as only making a “general contribution” to understanding of how rhetoric fitted into 18th century Scottish universities.¹⁰ Bator may be right in judging Watson as more of a practitioner than an original *philosophe* of the Scottish Enlightenment, but his pedagogical practice is sufficiently original, especially when considered in the context of the better known work of Smith and Blair, to merit our continuing interest.

Watson’s lecture notes exist in over 700 hundred pages of handwritten dictated manuscript, housed among the Individual Manuscripts and Small Collections of the Archives of the University of St Andrews Library. The manuscripts are in three different volumes, in two different student hands, covering the courses Watson taught during his years before becoming the principal of the United College of St. Salvator and St. Leonard. The first manuscript, MSPN173.W2, was compiled by Robert Rintoul over a year from July 22, 1761, to April 1, 1762. It is entitled “Rhetorick Displayed,” and charts a complete rhetoric course divided into two parts: “On the principal components of excellence of discourse and the rules pertaining to them,” and “On Poetry.” MSBC6.WI is dated 1776 and is titled “A Compendium of Logic and Universal Grammar by Robert Watson, professor of Logic, United College, University of St Andrews, transcribed to David Brown.” Its 258 pages are divided into two books, first Watson’s short course on Universal Grammar and second his comprehensive course on “Introduction to Logic.” MSBC6.W2 repeats the previous book for the first 206 pages, and then turns to a “Compend of Rhetoric.”

The contents of the lecture notes assist in our understanding of the practice of the “new rhetoric” of eighteenth-century Scotland as a philosophical intervention in the teaching of rhetoric. This intervention conceptualized moral and ethical agency as arising in relation to the practice of criticism. The most obviously radical new feature of Robert Watson’s curriculum is the replacement of oratory with the study of poetry. His lecture notes document uniquely how the moral sentiments philosophy of Hutcheson and Smith, and the common-sense realism of Reid, Blair and Campbell, transform classical rhetoric into literary and aesthetic criticism. The significance of this work for scholarship in the humanities is that it offers a way of seeing how, for eighteenth-century Scots, steeped as they were in classical rhetorical learning, rhetoric played an integral role in inquiring into a philosophy of mind and examining the foundations of judgment, most keenly those of moral habit and discrimination. For Watson, and for Smith, the practice of rhetorical criticism of literature is a means to the kind of moral virtue that results from being able to contextualize and reflectively judge one’s own affective responses.

¹⁰ Bator, “Unpublished,” 104..

Watson's stamp on this philosophy is arguably unique. He defines rhetoric specifically as "criticism or Rhetoric, for if it deserves the one it deserves the other also" ("Rhetoric Displayed," 1).¹¹ In this way he actually conflates, in definition as well as practice, the arts of literary criticism with rhetoric in general, first gathering all forms of writing into discourse, and then offering this definition of his approach:

Rhetoric may be defined to be that art, which delivers rules for the excellence and beauty of discourse ... by the rules of rhetoric or fine writing nothing else is meant but observations concerning particulars which render discourse excellent and useful; it is not proposed to deliver them in the form of rules, but in the form of general criticism illustrated by passages of different authors (*ibid.*).

Thus, criticism itself is a contingent rhetorical analysis of how an author uses discourse in ways we find "excellent and useful," but the "laws" are observational generalities, not positivistic rules. Watson's lectures present literary criticism, in practice, as a somewhat extemporaneous act of analysis of shared literary text based upon guidelines such as "the only way to give an idea of the beauties of language, is to enumerate the particulars of which it consists, such as smoothness, metaphors, personification, etc." Enumerating the particulars that arise from reading a text is a form of inductive analysis, but the general hypothesis derived from the particulars is idea or sense of beauty, rather than general laws. This sense of beauty can be found in all form of literary production, and we can see Watson drawing from contemporary novels and poetry with as much interest as he does Shakespeare or Homer.¹²

One thing that comes across clearly in Watson's rhetoric lectures is that his belletristic rhetoric is more akin to a praxis than rules for literary

¹¹ MS PN 173.W2, "Rhetoric Displayed" dictated to Robert Rintoul between July 22, 1761 and April 1, 1762. p. 1.

¹² Cf. Paul G. Bator, "Rhetoric and the Novel in the Eighteenth-Century British University Curriculum," *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 30.2 (Winter, 1996/1997): 173-195. Crawford points out that while Watson did not seem supercilious about novels or contemporary poets, he did not ever appear to use or assign Scottish authors or value Scottish contributions particularly: see *Launch-Site*, 5. This was not true of his colleague William Wilkie, professor of Natural Philosophy, who also had a close relationship with Robert Fergusson, although arguably the contrast between Watson's *belles lettres* and Wilkie's valuing Scottish works can be overstated; the critical tools offered by Watson's view of rhetoric and *belles lettres* enfranchised all forms of literary work as the realm of eloquence. In support of this, cf. Hugh Blair's patronage of Burns and other younger Scottish poets: see Ralph McLean, "Blair and the Influence of Rhetoric on Imaginative Literature," in Ronnie Young, Ralph McLean, and Kenneth Simpson, eds., *The Scottish Enlightenment and Literary Culture* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2016), 137-152.

criticism.¹³ We are left to imagine how the literary texts were introduced, whether and by what method they were assumed to have been read by teacher and students, and then contemplate the many gaps the written lecture notes leave, which must have been filled by viva voce exposition in the classroom. The lecture notes are an outline of the main ideas, and for this reason, it behooves us to look at the theoretical and philosophical questions that Watson engages as main ideas.

Poetry, in the classroom of Robert Watson, is treated as the apex of the language arts. To understand why poetry, and criticism of poetry, is so essential for Watson's classroom, however, we must see where he differentiates himself from the empirical tradition. He leaves out the study of oratory altogether. In this Watson's lectures seem singular, for Smith and Blair both leave room for oratory as traditionally considered, in the form of lectures on "Eloquence, or Public Speaking."¹⁴ However, attention to poetry is common in Scottish rhetoric, with scholars seeing in Blair particularly a move "away from deliberative, forensic, and epideictic discourse and toward poetic discourse."¹⁵ As Blair would do, Watson follows the lead of Smith in analyzing taste and style, but more specifically in a philosophical context. In Scottish rhetoric, taste and judgement represent the rhetoricization of the development of judgment, reason, and emotion: taste and judgement are the final observable outcomes of the interaction of our experience with our faculties of perception and abstraction.

For Scottish rhetors, even our most basic faculties of perception operate via communication, and logic is itself a communicative act involving our higher faculties. Watson's lecture notes on logic argue that

¹³ Cf. Bator's criticism (p. 68) of Vincent M. Bevilacqua's comment that Watson was "delivering rules for the excellence and beauty of discourse": Bevilacqua, "Philosophical Influences in the Development of English Rhetorical Theory: 1748 to 1783," *Proceedings of the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society*, 12.6 (1968): 198. Bevilacqua's interpretation presumably guided other scholars who, unlike Bator, did not have access to Watson's manuscripts.

¹⁴ The study of eloquence in Smith and Blair is also radically different from the study of the practice of oratory in the scholastic tradition. Both Smith and Blair teach eloquence in the form of rhetorical analysis of historical speeches, offering it almost as a case study of the history of oratory, demonstrating through the historical examples the various forms eloquence can take. Blair uses these lectures to teach his students legal public speaking and sermonizing.

¹⁵ Gregory Clark and S. Michael Halloran, "Transformations of Public Discourse in Nineteenth Century America," in Clark and Halloran, eds, *Oratorical Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), 1-26 (p. 15).

belief is employed upon objects that are past, future, or absent. Between our actualizing an object when present, and the belief we enter of it when absent, there is no essential difference.¹⁶

On this point Watson is agreeing with Locke. The difference between a direct perception and a perception of a mental object differs “chiefly in respect to liveliness and clearness.” But here he diverges from Locke on a critical point, contending that according to the author of *Philosophical Essay on Human Understanding*,

belief is nothing but a more vivid forcible conception of an object, than what the imagination was able to attain. But that in this the author is mistaken, it appears from hence that in fiction or poetry our conception of innumerable events, is infinitely livelier and stronger than many events recorded in real history (*ibid.*,51).

Literature, in other words, creates mental objects that can have more power over our direct understanding than real events, with interesting implications for where it stands in relation to experience and to logic.

Watson’s lectures on metaphysics and logic demonstrate a philosophical understanding of perception itself as a rhetorical act of belief and judgment, so that perception is therefore subject to conditioning, persuasion, and experience. Watson’s explanation essentially rhetoricizes logic, for all of logic is a conceptual comparison between objects of belief (which is the same as perception), and belief is always subject to persuasion. The proof of this is in the “liveliness,” and therefore belief, that we experience through the language arts. This move places *belles lettres* and the theorization of taste that follows from it into a central interpretative position. Consider Watson’s opening lecture on poetry:

By Poetry according to the derivation of the word is meant that species of discourse in which the author does not confine himself to the descriptions of real objects, but forms or creates objects for himself (*ibid.*).¹⁷

Poetry is epistemic of ideas, creating objects that can then be communicated, via the liveliness of imagination and the attendant passions, to others. Watson’s approach to rhetoric and *belles lettres* offers a frame of reference through which to read Smith’s notoriously oblique take on poetry, which, in his student lecture notes, is cryptically untheorized.¹⁸ Like Smith, Watson

¹⁶ MS BC6.WI, Book II, Chapter I “The Powers of the Understanding,” p. 50.

¹⁷ MSPN173.W2, Part 2, “Of Verse or Poetry,” Sec. 1.

¹⁸ W.S. Howell see this as Smith’s greatest weakness: “In one sector of his rhetorical theory Smith showed himself to be seriously weak; and that was in his willingness to accept pleasure or entertainment as the sole distinguishing characteristic of poetical composition. Surely poetry gives its readers pleasure, but so on occasion does history or even didactic discourse. Thus Smith’s theory of the distinction between poetical and non-poetical composition does not meet the most elementary

teaches that “the principle species of poetry are tragedy, comedy, and the epick poem” and these three species of poetry are

commonly comprehended under the name of imitation and therefore to explain the principle of imitation is the same thing as to explain the principles of tragedy, comedy or the epic poem. A poet is said to imitate when from his own inventions he forms characters, actions, and events similar to those of real life.¹⁹

And yet, when this is understood in conjunction with the definition offered previously, it becomes clear that mimetic creation is constitutive of something new: moral knowledge. Watson argues that this moral knowledge is gained by the exercise of sympathetic or mimetic emotion:

It is not only compassion, pity, terror, that are exercised by poetry but likewise every other virtuous affection of the mind, such as love, esteem, and admiration of virtue, hatred, aversion, and contempt of vice.²⁰

In a subsequent lecture on “Imitation,” he returns to the idea:

to enquire concerning the ends of imitation is the same thing as to enquire concerning the advantages derived from it. The principle of this kind of poetry is to afford a profitable exercise to the virtuous passions and affections.²¹

For Watson, therefore, the criticism of poetry develops the capacity to critique one’s own passions: what draws them forth, what means and tools act upon us, and whether these affective responses are appropriate. This is important, because for Watson, perhaps following the Neo-Platonists more closely than the moral sentimentalists, passions, while natural, are not necessarily beneficent.

In contrast to Watson, Blair follows the Hutchesonian tradition in teaching that eloquence is a natural human response to a “critical situation,” and that “high eloquence” is “always the offspring of passion.”²² Watson

standard of adequacy, and it could not survive comparison with a really effective standard like that, for example, which Aristotle developed in his *Poetics*. Aristotle’s distinction insisted upon the existence of the principle of mimesis in all the forms of poetry, and upon the non-existence of that principle in historical writing, didactic writing, and oratory. Smith was deeply interested in the principle of artistic imitation, and he wrote a short treatise upon that subject, but his treatise did not apply the principle to poetical composition in any sense that would allow poetry to emerge as distinctively mimetic” (Howell, 1971, as in n. 4 above, 575-6).

¹⁹ MS PN 173.W2, Part 2 “Of Verse or Poetry,” p.1.

²⁰ *ibid.*, “Of Imitation,” p. 14.

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 19.

²² Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, ed. Linda Ferreira-Buckley and S. Michael Halloran (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), 266 (Lecture XXV).

however cautions students against the falseness of passions in relation to truth. In perhaps Watson's most startling passage, he teaches students that "Passions obstruct our enquiries into truth and lead us into errors in different ways, one is by which we may call their diffusive influence is the cause why our aversion or attachment to every other object that is connected with it, among innumerable other bad effects of this principle is the cause why we find it so difficult to be duly sensible of the weaknesses or faults of one whom we love, or the good qualities of one to whom we stand ill-affected."²³ This raises an interesting question about the premises of persuasion, for it opens self-reflectiveness as the legitimate moral end of criticism.

Blair's more romantic assertion of the naturalness of passion and its production of eloquence asks his readers to believe that, to counter error, reason needs eloquence, claiming "Give truth and virtue the same arms which you give vice and falsehood, and the former are likely to prevail."²⁴ Watson, on the other hand, argues that "passions lead us into error ... by that power which they have of adopting objects to their gratification and indulgence," a propensity he attributes to the principle of imitation or sympathy:

Another principle, against the influence of which in our search for truth, there is equal reason to be on our guard, as the influence of passion is that of imitation or sympathy, by which is meant that disposition or propensity in man to enter into and participate of the perceptions, feelings, and passions of others."²⁵

While Watson agrees with Smith that sympathy is the foundation for our moral approbation, he is very clear in the injunction to keep it in its proper bounds, "to guard always remembering that still higher respect is due to truth and virtue than to opinions, prejudices, and practices of other men" (*ibid.*, 208). Criticism is the skill crucial to testing our sympathetic engagement against our ideas of virtue and truth, making Watson a mediating figure between the economy of virtue found in Smith and later Enlightenment thinking.

Jeffrey Smitten comments that Watson "does not appear to have taught a separate course in metaphysics," from which one might infer his metaphysical teaching was in fact delivered within the contents of other topics, particularly under what is called "universal grammar."²⁶ In the

²³ MS BC6.WI, Book II, part II, Chapter 2.

²⁴ Blair, *Lectures*, 265-266 (Lecture XXV). Blair argues that "Eloquence is no invention of the schools. Nature teaches every man to be eloquent. Place him in some critical situation; let him have some great interest at stake, and you will see him lay hold of the most effectual means of persuasion" (*ibid.*).

²⁵ MS BC6.WI, Book III, Chapter 3, "Of Sympathy or Imitation," p. 205.

²⁶ Smitten, "Watson, Robert," in *ODNB*.

opening lecture for his 1776 series on that topic, Watson defines universal grammar as a kind of general linguistic theory “that without regarding several idioms of particular languages respects the Principles which are essential to them all.”²⁷ The “essential” principles of language are immediately metaphysical. For instance, Watson defines nouns as “substantives,” which can in turn be described as “principle words which are significant of substances” and require an understanding of substances as natural, artificial, or abstract. Under “attributes,” or what we would call adjectives, he lectures on the absolute or qualified nature of existence, telling his students that “again, all existence is either mutable as an object of sensation: or immutable as in the object of Intellection and Science (i.e. ‘Orange is ripe’ as opposed to ‘diameter of a square is incommensurable to its side’).”²⁸

In this Watson is following the tradition of “philosophical grammar” laid before the Aberdeen Philosophical Society by Thomas Gordon between 1761-1763. Gordon’s manuscript lectures mostly lie in the archives, although it may be presumed that the ideas presented in the Philosophical Club were discussed more widely among the Aberdeen literati. Gordon followed Bacon’s distinction between “literary” and “philosophical” grammar, exploring what he called the “noble branch of the Philosophy of Grammar to treat various properties of particular languages, and to point out their excellencies and defects upon rational principles.”²⁹

What Gordon argues about the *ars signorum* of philosophical grammar is that our attaching a sign to an idea is either of transient or permanent signification, the latter of which give “fixedness and permanency to thought; and being intended to transmit the memory of things to after times, or to convey our thoughts to the absent, require durable materials,” that is, forms of writing. For Gordon the alphabet and grammatical structures themselves signify metaphysical conceptualization. Therefore, he argues for the theory of universal grammar, along with the notion that writing essentially creates as it represents our philosophical thinking. Gordon presents Chinese characters as the “top of perfection” because they themselves were founded “upon reasons of Philosophy”: “The characters express the very definition

²⁷ MSBC6.WI, “A Compendium of Logic and Universal Grammar,” Book I, Ch. 1.

²⁸ MS BC6.WI, Book I, Ch. II, “Of Species of Words.”

²⁹ Thomas Gordon, “Of the Philosophy of Language and Grammar,” Aberdeen Philosophical Society, 1761, in H. Lewis Ulman and Dennis Quon, eds, *Semiotics in Eighteenth-Century Aberdeen: Thomas Gordon’s Contributions to the Aberdeen Philosophical Society 1761-1763* [*Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 317] (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1994), Sec 6, 74.

of the thing signified; and by relation of the thing signified with other things that are better known."³⁰

Gordon uses his lectures to make a case for the study of grammar as a branch of philosophy, a notion interestingly rebutted by his colleague George Campbell, more at home in Western orthographic traditions, who argues for reputable custom as the sole grounds of grammatical usage. Campbell contends that

there can be no natural connexion between the sounds of any language, and the things signified, or between the modes of inflection and combination, and the relations they are intended to express.³¹

Watson is something of a mediating figure between these two poles. He espouses the idea of "literary grammar" as entirely contingent: he opens a lecture "Of Words in General" with the definition of words as "sign of our ideas or perceptions," that

represent things only in so far as our Ideas and Perceptions represent them. Words are mere arbitrary signs in that there is no natural connection between them and the things that they signify."³²

It is interesting that Watson chooses to teach metaphysics *as* grammar. It is a philosophical position attached to the realist elements of Reid's common sensism, but I believe that the theorization of the metaphysical basis for universal grammar, which may be traced straight through to Chomsky, reveals an intriguingly complex element of Scottish rhetoric. There are significant divergences in how Scottish Enlightenment rhetoricians viewed Language Origin Theory, differences perhaps made more visible in pedagogical practices by figures such as Robert Watson who did not directly publish on this topic.

Further examination of some of Watson's key arguments will be of interest not only to historians of rhetoric and Scottish Enlightenment thinking, but also to literary scholars. Those interested in the turn from Augustan to Romantic literary sensibility in poetry will find Watson rewarding. We can see in Watson's lectures, especially when read in conjunction with the lecture notes of Reid on art and beauty, Smith on *Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, and, finally, those of Blair and Campbell, that

³⁰ Thomas Gordon, "Of the permanent signs of thought used in language, and particularly of the origin and progress of writing," Aberdeen Philosophical Society, May 1762. On 18th century language origin theory, see Hans Aarsleff's *From Locke to Saussure* (London: Athlone Press, 1982); and his translation of Condillac's *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

³¹ Campbell, *Philosophy of Rhetoric*, Book II, Ch I, 342.

³² MS BC6.WI, Book II, "Of Logic," Chapter XI, "Of Words in General," 93.

the rhetoric of Scottish moral philosophy was concerned with what Spivak calls the “uncoercive rearrangement of desire” lying at the heart of the enlightenment educational project.³³ Criticism was regarded as an essential skill to be carefully examined and practiced. The apex of human arts was considered the language art of poetry, whose mimetic power acts upon the faculty of human imagination itself.

Watson’s lectures present new pedagogical evidence of how these ideas were taught in practice, in addition to how they were theorized. It remains to consider what *belles lettres* would look like if these lecture notes were taken seriously as philosophical praxis. The picture of Scottish rhetoric derived from the major published texts should be widened to include also the numerous other sets of contemporary lecture notes that are still available only in archival form; these include notes from the teaching of Thomas Gordon, Robert Eden Scott, Alexander Gerard, and Thomas Blackwell, and their study would add significantly to our understanding of the continuities and discontinuities in Scottish rhetorical thinking. As W.S. Howell, Robert Crawford and others have shown over the years, *Belles lettres* in the mid-eighteenth century represented the successful movement to establish the study of literature as a university subject in the English-speaking world; Watson’s lectures show that the development was initially rooted as much in philosophical issues rather than literary study itself. The fusion of poetry, philosophy, and rhetoric in this defining period worked to create literary history and criticism as an independent field of enquiry, and, it may be argued, created the modern specialized disciplines of the academy as we know them today.

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³³ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Terror: A Speech After 9-11,” *boundary 2*, 31.2 (2004): 81-111 (82).