

# LITERARY CHARM AS A CAUSE OF ADAM SMITH'S INFLUENCE — AN APPRE- CIATION OF THE WEALTH OF NATIONS

BY

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THERE are very few works in the whole world literature which became so quickly popular with those to whom they were addressed as Smith's *Wealth of Nations*. Various reasons have been ascribed to its popularity, the first and the foremost place being visually given to its supreme literary charm. Although this is not the only cause of Smith's popularity, not even the most important cause, still it ranks highly among the factors which were responsible for the widespread influence which the book exercised. It might be of some interest, therefore, to give an analysis of the literary aspect of this book.

Before attempting the analysis it may be of some use, to mention here that the literary charm in the *Wealth of Nations* has only a relative significance. In itself the book cannot be regarded as a master-piece from this point of view, but as a treatise of economics, the abstract dismal science (as some would like to call it) it occupies a unique position. A close follower is John Stuart Mill,

who is more poetic, more emotional and perhaps more inconsistent, though only a modest rival in popularity.

The literary aspect in Smith owes its origin to the following factors.

1. *The Mental Set-up of the Writer*:—Adam Smith was an interesting sort of man and is proverbial for his absentmindedness. Once he tried to make tea with bread and butter and declared it to be the worst beverage he ever drank. On another occasion he copied another person's signature to a document on which he was to add his own. And still more interesting was the manner in which he, instead of answering a complicated salute as the Commissioner of Customs, merely imitated it with his walking stick. Such people are usually imaginative in their writings although they are likely to be inconsistent at the same time. But it must be borne in mind that this factor plays a very subdued role in the *Wealth of Nations*, due, in the first place, to the reason that he had been advocating the same theories as a teacher for years and years

together and secondly that he revised his book again and again.

2. *His Experience as a Teacher*:—It is needless to emphasize that the once popular legend that Paris, instead of Glasgow, occupies the central place in Smith's philosophy has been disproved by the modern writers. Smith's experience as a teacher at Glasgow was greatly useful in rendering his treatise, worthy to read and easy to understand.

3. *His Function As a Propagandist*:—Writers like Jacob Viner and Eli Ginzberg have attached much importance to Smith's work as a reformer and propagandist. Some have gone even to the extent of saying that the principles in his book are merely statements of ideals which pretend to be the statements of facts. This view is exaggerated but is not wholly void of the truth. Smith himself regarded his book as utopian but this reflects more of his modesty than the truth as does his statement that he was perhaps the only buyer of his book in England.

Nevertheless, Smith as a reformer addressing the public at large and not the trained scientists must have taken care to see that his work had no repellent, unliterary element in it.

4. The fourth factor that helped Adam Smith to avoid technical language which may be difficult

to relish is the fact that economics was yet in its infancy and had yet to take about a hundred years more to mature with all its present subtleties.

5. Another factor is Smith's extensive study of history and literature. He had received the best possible education of his time had a big library consisting of five thousand books and was well versed in philosophy, history and literature which helped him a good deal in the art of exposition.

The most important among these factors is Smith's experience as a teacher. It served to make the book simple, lucid, full of illustrations and elaborations and, of course interesting. He always took pains to see that he was not obscure on any point as is seen in the last passage of his chapter on the origin and use of money.

The *Wealth of Nations* in spite of all its literary charm is to a greater extent a food for the reader's thought than his imagination. If anybody opens the book with the idea of enjoying some beautiful smiles or some thought-provoking metaphors he is sure to face disappointments. The ornamental devices are very scarcely used by Adam Smith and the main characteristic of his book is simplicity and lucidity. A person

having absolutely no knowledge of economics can, not only understand it, but may even begin to take a positive interest in the subject, and history provides us with ample proof of the validity of this view. J. H. Hollander has given the following interesting instance.

\*“Certainly casual episode was responsible for Ricardo’s attraction to his formal economic study. He never thought of Political Economy till happening one day, during an illness of his wife, to be at Bath, he saw an Adam Smith circulating in a library and turning over a page or two ordered it to be sent to his house. He liked it so much as to acquire a taste for the study of economics.”

And it is in fact the simplicity and lucidity of the book which, for the most part, is responsible for the all-embracing influence of Adam Smith over the continent (Germany being an exception) and in England. But it shouldn’t be taken to mean that simplicity is an alternative to the ornamental devices or it defies their use. Both can exist side by side. For instance Gray can be quoted as a striking example of this fascinating combination. Any how Smith would never use phrases like

“a traveller befogged in the Ricardian jungle” when he can say “a reader confused by the unliterary character of his book.”

The reason for this difference, apart from the mental set-up, lies perhaps in Smith as a teacher and it also illustrates to some extent that his basic approach was not that of a propagandist whose purpose is to move, to convert and to persuade. If we bear in mind the distinction drawn by DeQuincey between literature of knowledge and literature of power we can easily judge that the Wealth of Nations belongs fundamentally to the first category.

An important point regarding the existence of literary fervour in his book is that he never uses his art of attractive exposition in relating the principles or scientific arguments. It is almost always in the later elucidations and elaborations that he makes use of his usual artistic touches, which capture the reader’s mind. It is not therefore probable that one should expect to find much truth in the following statement of Jacob Viner.

\*“If Smith at times showed more catholicity than scientific discrimination in what he accepted as

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\*Smith the Founder of A School by G. H. Hallander included in Adam Smith 1776-1926, published by Chicago University (1928).

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\*Smith and *Laissez fair* by Jacob Viner included in Adam Smith 1776-1926 published by Chicago University (1928).

supporting evidence appeared on a closer scrutiny to be conjectural, contradictory, irrelevant or inconclusive, *the richness of argument, the power of exposition, the attractiveness of his conclusions* served to overwhelm the captious critic and to postpone closer scrutiny to a later day.”

The worthy writer of this passage is not quite clear about what he wants to emphasize, but if at all, he means that Smith ever misused his literary talent, he is mistaken. The principles have been so clearly stated that there’s little chance of anybody’s being attracted by the succeeding evidence and postponing a closer scrutiny. Nor does Adam Smith, at least so far as the popular belief goes, distort history to prove his ideas. Thirdly, as has already been pointed out, the literary aspect in his book does not dominate over the scientific aspect and any illusion is not, therefore, likely to occur.

An attractive feature of the *Wealth of Nations* is Smith’s effective use of the superlatives, and other words generally employed for emphasis. This is a successful way of absorbing the interest of the reader in what is being related to him and to prevent boredom from getting hold of his mind. The following passage makes it clear.

\*“The weighing of gold in particular is an operation of some nicety. In the coarser metals indeed less accuracy will be necessary yet we should find it *excessively troublesome*. The operation of assaying is *still more* difficult, *still more tedious* and any conclusion drawn without proper arrangement is *extremely uncertain*. Before the institution of coined money, however, unless they went through this tedious and difficult operation, people must always have been liable *to the grossest frauds* and impositions and might receive in exchange for goods, *the coarsest and the cheapest materials* which have been made to resemble gold.”

The use of superlatives and words like, indeed, extremely, excessively etc., here and there is of great psychological significance. If we remove them we may be a little more accurate but it will certainly be at the cost of reader’s interest. Smith gives here the evidence of a fine sense of proportion and does not indulge in their excessive use. This sense of proportion is manifest not only in this device but all other devices which have been used by him.

In some passages of the book we find an attempt to create curiosity in the reader’s mind. Here Smith

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\**Wealth of Nations* edited by Cannan (1904), Vol. I, page 26.

makes an intelligent use of exclamatory sentences and instead of giving a direct version of his ideas, gives a chance to our imagination, thus making use of the delight which man's imagination takes in occasionally freeing itself from the writer's grip and seeing and feeling things or itself. Writing *on the Division of Labour* and illustrating its advantages in everyday life he gives us the following passage.

\*“The woolen coat for example which covers the day labourer, as *coarse* and as rough as it may appear is the produce of the joint labour of a multitude of workmen ..... How many merchants and carriers must have been employed in transporting the material from some of those workmen to other who often live in a very distant part of the country! How much commerce and imagination in particular, how many ships binders, sailors, etc. must have been employed! ..... What a variety of labour too is necessary to produce the tools of the meanest of those workmen! .....

Some times he creates the same effect by *the contrast method*. An example of this method is given below.

\*\*“Without the assistance and cooperation of many thousands,

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\*Wealth of Nations edited by Cannan (1904), Vol. I, page 13.

\*\*Wealth of Nations edited by Cannan (1904), Vol. I, page 14.

the very meanest person in a civilized country could not be provided, even according to what we very falsely imagine the easy and simple manner in which he is accommodated. Compared, indeed, I say, with the more extravagant luxury of the great, his accommodation must no doubt appear simple and easy and yet it may be true, perhaps, that the accommodation of an European prince does not always so much exceed that of an industrious and frugal peasant as the accommodation of the latter exceeds that of many an African King, the absolute master of the lives and liberties of ten thousand naked savages.” Some other characteristics of his style can also be observed in this passage. Among them is the use of certain words for emphasis which we have just examined. Another feature is the personal presence of or the use of the first person by, the writer which brings him nearer to the reader and makes him familiar to him.

To a great extent, the charm of the book is due, also to Smith's successfully blending together the narrative, the descriptive and the analytical. He has been considered to be the best informed man since Aristotle. The narrative element in the *Wealth of Nations* generally takes two forms.

1. Relation of personal observations and experiences.

2. Providing examples and illustrations from history.

It may be of some interest to mention that some economists of Germany revolted against the method of abstract reasoning employed by the classical school. But this attack cannot be levied against Adam Smith, the founder of that school, who has used historical material with greater sense of selection than many members of the Historical School, have done.

The observations made by Smith are a matter of every day experience but he derives conclusions from them with such an analytical excellence that others cannot do.

This descriptive and narrative element lightens the burden of the technicality of economics and makes it look more life-like. In his chapter, "On the Origin and Use of Money", in his last pages on the limits of the division of labour and in so many others he gives interesting facts of history and sometimes he describes it in such a wholesome manner that one likes to read it again and again. Here is an example of such description.

\*"The nations that according to the authenticated history, appear to

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\*Wealth of Nations edited by Cannan (1904), Vol. I, page 21.

have been first civilized were those that dwelt round the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. That sea, by far the greatest inlet that is known in the world, having no tides, nor consequently any waves except such as are caused by the wind only, was by the smoothness of its surface, as well as by the multitude of its islands, and the proximity of its neighbouring shores extremely favourable to the *infant* navigation of the world; when from the ignorance of the compass, men were afraid to quit the view of the coast and from the imperfection of the art of ship-building, to abandon themselves to the boisterous waves of the ocean. To pass beyond the pillars of Hercules, that is to sail out of the straits of Gibraltar, was in the ancient world long considered a most wonderful and dangerous exploit of navigation. It was late before even the Phenicians or Carthignions, the most skilful navigators and shipbuilders of those times attempted it, and they were for a long time the only nation that did attempt it."

Such passages make it clear that Adam Smith is remarkable for always having an eye on 'life' and 'history'. Something may also be said regarding the angle from which he views these things. He gives a true account of his experiences, his

study and his observations, without any distortion whatsoever, but he has the vision of a poet, a novelist or an essayist not that of an indifferent, cold, scientific, observer. To him history does not constitute “some old unhappy far off things and battles long ago”; it is the evolution of civilization and culture through ages, the story of man, the story of life itself; and Adam Smith of course is a good teller of such stories. He uses history not simply to elaborate his points but to provide something of interest to the reader. It is not so with certain other philosophers who quote history as an authority.

Another marked characteristic of Adam Smith is his fondness of details. In his illustrations he will never be contented with one example where he can give two and will never hesitate to give three where two could also be sufficient. The basic ideas, or the principles which the writer wants to put forth if abridged and put together will hardly form one tenth of the whole book. The effects of these details on the reader’s mind are that in the first place they create interest in the subject and he takes pleasure in reading the book, secondly he can grasp the central idea with greater ease and thirdly he can retain what has been put forth without much

trouble due to the process of free association. And, in fact, the *Wealth of Nations* is a living proof of the fact that he who facilitates the task of those to whom his words are addressed will not find ears lacking, to be heard, and eyes scarce, to be studied.

Another attractive feature of Smith’s style is the use of double adjectives, nouns and verbs. By this I mean that in his illustrations, he will always prefer to use two adjectives, two nouns, or two verbs, instead of one. This method is employed sometimes for the sake of emphasis and sometimes for the sake of a poetic rhythm in the sentences.

Here are a few examples, and only a few indeed, which amply bear out the truth of this statement.

\*“I shall endeavour to explain *as fully and as distinctly as* I can those three subjects for which I must very earnestly entreat *both the patience and attention* of the reader.

“The real price of everything really costs to the man who wants to acquire it *is the toil and trouble* of acquiring it.”

“In his ordinary state of health, *strength and spirits*, in the ordinary degree of his *skill and dexterity*, he

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\**Wealth of Nations* — Cannan Edition 1904, Vol. I, page 30, 32 and 35.

must always lay down the same proportion of his ease, *his liberty and his happiness.*"

Repetition is still another device which Adam Smith usually employs to create the charm of rhythm in his book. This factor like most of the preceding ones owes its origin fit the teaching profession of Adam Smith and takes two forms.

1. The repetition of ideas. This, again is done in two ways.

(a) He gives a summary of the principles on the margin of the book and deals with them in detail in the text.

(b) Sometimes he first gives the main principles and then illustrates them one by one. This also results in repetition.

2. The second form which is more important from the point of view of the study of his style is the repetition of words and phrases such as the *operation of assaying is still more difficult, still more tedious.*"

Such repetition, where it is quite close and with little space intervals creates a harmony of sound but generally it occurs with greater space intervals and to that extent its rhythmic effects are decreased. It is, however, of great service in bringing back the reader's attention to the book if he gets absent-minded

and renders the matters easier to grasp and to retain.

Sometimes Smith would introduce phrases and sentences which are quite simple and do not directly contribute to the central idea of the principles put forth but are sufficient to neutralize the dryness of narration. These phrases create almost the same effect on the mind as his exclamatory sentences which appeal to the imagination. Some instances are given below to clarify this point. The phrases and questions have been written in italics.

\*"Observe the accommodation of the most common artificers in a civilized and a thriving country and you will perceive that the number of people of whose industry a part, *though but a small part* has been employed in procuring him this accommodation exceeds all computation. The woolen coat, which covers the day labourer, *as coarse and rough as it may appear* is the produce of joint labour of a great multitude of workmen."

"Hence the origin of coined money and of *those public offices called mints* ....."

Alliteration also plays a considerable part in the Wealth of Nations. Smith is very careful to keep it

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\*Wealth of Nations, Cannon Edition (1940), Vol. I, page 13.



within limits, because carried to the extreme, it sometimes has undesired effects. It has been said of Tennyson that he was conscious of the excess of this element in his poetry and made a good, many efforts to bring it within reasonable limits. As a reaction to this he began to dislike the sounds as it contributed greatly to the presence of alliteration in his poems.

Smith apart from creating a harmony of sound with the help of alliteration also makes a delightful use of the words like *M* and *N* which produce mildly ringing sounds.

A word may also be said regarding the construction of his sentences. They are usually long, though not as long as those of Prof. Robbins, and this is due to the fact that he likes to have alliteration in his sentences which is not so easily attained if the sentences are short.

In last analysis the whole things boils down to the fact that the literary charm of the *Wealth of Nations* mainly consists in facilitating the task of the reader, by

simplicity and lucidity, by elucidation and elaborations, by repetition and illustration and by rhythm and alliteration, and in occasionally delighting his imagination, and these things in turn are, to a great extent, the fruit of his experience as a teacher.

### Bibliography

(*Note*:— The books were consulted only for some introductory passages. The appreciation itself is my own humble attempt).

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