"So violent a metaphor." Adam Smith's metaphorical language in the *Wealth of Nations*

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1 Introduction

Adam Smith, philosopher, rhetorician and economist, was one of the foremost representatives of the Scottish Enlightenment. As an author of the 18th century, Smith was much concerned with language, style and the use of imagery. In his *Wealth of Nations* he places particular emphasis on metaphorical language by explicitly marking it with short meta-fictional statements. A computer-assisted approach that traces all instances of these statements across the text supplies valuable insights into one particular phenomenon of 18th-century poetics.

2 Imagery in the *Wealth of Nations*

Adam Smith's monumental study of some 900 pages, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), is a seminal study of the state of the nation and a treatise on economics. In addition, this book was intended to exemplify Smith's notion of plain and thus adequate language and concise presentation. In this, the book serves the double function of a scientific analysis of social and economic matters on the one hand and as an exercise in impeccable prose style on the other. As a recent edition of the English journal *The Economist* puts it: "The 'Wealth of Nations' [is] a work of literature rare among economic tracts."

Adam Smith, the professor of Rhetoric, claimed that the proper way of dealing with complex social and philosophical problems in a serious study was to avoid excessive or florid metaphor, simile and metonymy. In his posthumously published *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1762–63) Smith says about the function of language:

[I.v]
> When the sentiment of the speaker is ex-
> pressed in a neat, clear, plain and clever
> manner [...] then and then only the expres-
> sion has all the force and beauty that
> language can give it.

He thus professed to use language in a manner that would allow the reader to concentrate on the subject in the first place, and that would make language only serve the purpose of communication. Smith, who was highly critical of Shaftsbury's "pompousness" (Smith's word) and who strongly disliked the use of imagery for purely ornamental purposes, prided himself on a sober, simple, straightforward style that would convince the reader by the force of the argument and not obfuscate the issue under consideration.

Thus, in a philosophical treatise like the *Wealth of Nations*, Smith strongly favoured plain language in order to focus the reader's attention on the subject matter of the treatise or discussion rather than on its form and medium, language as such. His narrative strategy relies on repetition rather than on striking singular impressions. Smith supplies a vast number of observations taken from everyday life to emphasize his point, even if his arguments become "tedious". After the publication of the *Wealth of Nations*, even Smith's friend, the philosopher David Hume, said in a letter:

> Not that the reading of it [*Wealth of Nations*] 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 it has depth, and solidity, and acuteness, and is so much illustrated by curious facts that it must at last attract the public attention.

Smith made it very clear that to attract the public's attention he was not disposed to use an appealing prose style. On the contrary, his personal poetics clearly state that total command of language and narrative organization are best displayed in a neutral way. Thus, in those instances where he deviates from his self-proclaimed sober style and reverts to imagery, Smith explicitly marks metaphorical language in the *Wealth of Nations*. Even a cursory reading suggests that the analysis of those passages that are introduced by specific, repeated phrases merit close inspection.

3 Marked imagery

Most frequently Smith uses the phrase "if one may say so" or "if I may say so" to introduce or identify unusual imagery, and in addition a number of other phrases appear consistently. A computer-assisted analysis that scans the text for all instances of explicit marking concentrates on a specific set of repeated words and phrases that indicate overt narrator intervention. Based on a detailed knowledge of the text and aided by a variety of wordlists and lists of collocations, search-patterns

for nearly all explicit references to imagery could be designed. Identifying, indexing and extracting all passages that contain marked imagery eventually provided a large corpus of "pre-filtered" text. This text could then be classified according to the set of words and phrases that Smith uses for marking and, more importantly, according to the text that actually gets marked and that he apparently considered noteworthy or special. In this context it is not of primary interest to note what kind of repeated or varied references Smith uses for a meta-discourse on his own text, but it is much more rewarding to analyse the imagery he thus isolates from the main body of the text. For the first time, a specific kind of metaphorical language can be extracted from the text electronically, relying on explicit information provided by the narrator.

The following passages from the *Wealth of Nations* constitute typical examples:

[III.iii]
> *Sometimes they have been introduced, in the manner above mentioned, by the violent operation, if one may say so, of the stocks of particular merchants and undertakers, who established them in imitation of some foreign manufactures of the same kind.*

[IV.ii]
> *Home is in this manner the centre, if I may say so, round which the capitals of the inhabitants of every country are continually circulating, and towards which they are always tending, though by particular causes they may sometimes be driven off and repelled from it towards more distant employments.*

In these paragraphs unusual illustrations, visualisations but most frequently not-too-original imagery is explicitly marked by the first-person narrator. Personifications can frequently be found, and a rather striking metaphor likens the movements of celestial bodies to the financial transactions on earth. This imagery, typical for the 18th century (Smith himself wrote a long essay on "The History of Astronomy") visualizes the forces of gravitation and selective affinities that influence economic matters in the sublunary world. In the *Wealth of Nations* the narrator frequently interacts with the reader, and, for instance, in his explanations at the beginning and ending of most chapters he talks of the need for further examples even if it is wearisome. The narrator supplies meta-information on the structure, organisation and setup of the text and occasionally he even introduces some unusually boring chapter with "I must very earnestly entreat both the patience and attention of the reader." [I.iv]

In addition to these passages Smith uses proverbs when they fit the context, but he explicitly points out that they are proverbs or quotations from other sources (like fellow philosophers) and that thus other criteria apply than those that he would accept for his own style:

[I.v]
> *Wealth, as Mr. Hobbes says, is power.*

[II.iii]
> *It is better, says the proverb, to play for nothing than to work for nothing.*

These and many other examples to the same effect point out that this kind of language clearly deviates from the strict norm of Smith's style. Together with the first group of examples they form the body of Smith's explicitly identified images, and from the frequency of these instances – there is one to be found every five pages – and their even distribution over the text they slowly but steadily develop into an idiosyncratic stylistic feature. They seem to lose their original function of alerting the reader and are soon perceived as linguistic mannerisms.

But finally there are those examples that really merit closer inspection, those passages that are introduced with more emphasis and that clearly point out to the reader that a shift of stylistic levels is taking place:

[II.ii]
> *The judicious operations of banking, by providing, if I may be allowed so violent a metaphor, a sort of waggon-way through the air, enable the country to convert, as it were, a great part of its highways into good pastures and corn-fields, and thereby to increase very considerably the annual produce of its land and labour.*

The comparison of monetary circulation with a highway is first introduced and then, having fulfilled its function by illustrating again a process of circulation, gets expanded into the image of lightweight, speedy and airborne banking.

With these images, clearly marked for easy identification, Smith underlines his claim for total mastery of language and style; his deviations from a sober, scientifically detached discourse provide the reader with ready-made conceptualisations of complex problems and thus enhance understanding. By explicitly marking his wellchosen and adequate imagery, Smith celebrates his mastery of both content and form.

4 Conclusion

The computer-assisted analysis traces those explicit meta-fictional statements of the narrator in the *Wealth of Nations* that are designed to influence the reader's perception of certain, predefined concepts. A detailed analysis and the ensuing interpretation, based on the complete set of data from the long text, makes possible a thorough thematic analysis of one particular type of explicit reference.

Imagery, notoriously difficult for computer-applications to deal with, thus becomes the object of electronic indexing and eventually yields an interpretation that can be substantiated with findings from the text. The result illustrates that this particular aspect of 18th-century poetics can be dealt with effectively. Adam Smith, the meticulous collector of data and examples, would have liked a thorough investigation of his *Inquiry* by means of a computer, because "everybody must be sensible how much labour is facilitated and abridged by the application of proper machinery." [I.i]

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