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LECTURES ON  
RHETORIC  
AND BELLES  
LETTRES



HUGH BLAIR

*Edited with an Introduction by*  
Linda Ferreira-Buckley and S. Michael Halloran

Southern Illinois University Press  
Carbondale

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Printed in the United States of America  
08 07 06 05 4 3 2 1

Southern Illinois University Press gratefully acknowledges the contributions of Julie Bush, Mary Lou Kowaleski, and Frederick Williams in preparing this volume.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Blair, Hugh, 1718–1800.

Lectures on rhetoric and belles lettres / Hugh Blair ; edited with an  
introduction by Linda Ferreira-Buckley and S. Michael Halloran.  
p. cm. — (Landmarks in rhetoric and public address)

Originally published: London : W. Strahan, 1783.

1. English language—Rhetoric—Early works to 1800. 2. Literature—History  
and criticism—Early works to 1800. 3. Rhetoric—Early works to 1800. I. Ferreira-  
Buckley, Linda, 1959– II. Halloran, S. Michael. III. Title. IV. Series.

PE1402 .B6 2002

808'.042'09033—dc21

ISBN 0-8093-1754-0 (alk. paper)

ISBN 0-8093-2432-6 (pbk. : alk. paper)

2001049506

Printed on recycled paper. ♻️

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American  
National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed  
Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1992. ♻️



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## LECTURE XXXVII

### Philosophical Writing—Dialogue— Epistolary Writing—Fictitious History

As History is both a very dignified species of Composition, and by the regular form which it assumes, falls directly under the laws of Criticism, I discoursed of it fully in the two preceding Lectures. The remaining species of Composition, in Prose, afford less room for critical observation.

Philosophical Writing, for instance, will not lead us into any long discussion. As the professed object of Philosophy is to convey instruction, and as they who study it are supposed to do so for instruction, not for entertainment, the style, the form, and dress, of such Writings, are less material objects. They are objects, however, that must not be wholly neglected. He who attempts to instruct mankind, without studying, at the same time, to engage their attention, and to interest them in his subject by his manner of exhibiting it, is not likely to prove successful. The same truths, and reasonings, delivered in a dry and cold manner, or with a proper measure of elegance and beauty, will make very different impressions on the minds of men.

It is manifest, that every Philosophical Writer must study the utmost perspicuity: and, by reflecting on what was formerly delivered on the subject of perspicuity, with respect both to single words, and the construction of Sentences, we may be convinced that this is a study which demands considerable attention to the rules of Style and good Writing. Beyond mere perspicuity, strict accuracy and precision are required in a Philosophical Writer. He must employ no words of uncertain meaning, no loose nor indeterminate expressions; and should avoid using words which are seemingly synonymous, without carefully attending to the variation which they make upon the idea.

To be clear then and precise, is one requisite which we have a title to demand from every Philosophical Writer. He may possess this quality, and be at the same time a very dry Writer. He should therefore study some degree of embellishment, in order to render his Composition pleasing and graceful. One of the most agreeable, and one of the most useful embellishments which a Philosopher can employ, consists in illustrations taken from historical facts, and the characters of men. All moral and political subjects naturally afford scope for these; and wherever there is room for employing them, they seldom fail of producing a happy effect. They

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by so many successive publications, as have been given to the world. Several of Lord Bolingbroke's, and of Bishop Atterbury's Letters, are masterly. The censure of writing Letters in too artificial a manner, falls heaviest on Mr. Pope himself. There is visibly more study, and less of nature and the heart in his Letters, than in those of some of his correspondents. He had formed himself on the manner of Voiture, and is too fond of writing like a wit. His Letters to Ladies are full of affectation. Even in writing to his friends, how forced an Introduction is the following of a Letter to Mr. Addison: "I am more joyed at your return, than I should be at that of the Sun, as much as I wish for him in this melancholy wet season; but it is his fate too, like yours, to be displeasing to owls and obscene animals, who cannot bear his lustre." How stiff a compliment is it, which he pays to Bishop Atterbury? "Though the noise and daily bustle for the Public be now over, I dare say, you are still tendering its welfare; as the Sun in winter, when seeming to retire from the world, is preparing warmth and benedictions for a better season." This sentence might be tolerated in a harangue; but is very unsuitable to the Style of one friend corresponding with another.

The gaiety and vivacity of the French genius appear to much advantage in their Letters, and have given birth to several agreeable publications. In the last age, Balzac and Voiture were the two most celebrated Epistolary Writers. Balzac's reputation indeed soon declined, on account of his swelling periods and pompous Style. But Voiture continued long a favourite Author. His Composition is extremely sparkling; he shows a great deal of wit, and can trifle in the most entertaining manner. His only fault is, that he is too open and professed a wit, to be thoroughly agreeable as a Letter Writer. The Letters of Madame de Sevigné, are now esteemed the most accomplished model of a familiar correspondence. They turn indeed very much upon trifles, the incidents of the day, and the news of the town; and they are overloaded with extravagant compliments, and expressions of fondness, to her favourite daughter; but withal, they show such perpetual sprightliness, they contain such easy and varied narration, and so many strokes of the most lively and beautiful painting, perfectly free from any affectation, that they are justly intitled to high praise. The Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montague are not unworthy of being named after those of Mad. de Sevigné. They have much of the French ease and vivacity; and retain more the character of agreeable Epistolary Style, than perhaps any Letters which have appeared in the English language.

There remains to be treated of, another species of Composition in prose, which comprehends a very numerous, though, in general, a very insignificant class of Writings, known by the name of Romances and Novels. These may, at first view, seem too insignificant, to deserve that any particular notice should be taken of them. But I cannot be of this opinion. Mr. Fletcher of Salton, in one of his Tracts, quotes it as the saying of a wise man, that give him the making of all the ballads of a nation, he would allow any one that pleased to make their laws. The saying was founded on reflection and good sense, and is applicable to the subject now before us. For any kind of Writing, how trifling soever in appearance, that ob-



tains a general currency, and especially that early pre-occupies the imagination of the youth of both sexes, must demand particular attention. Its influence is likely to be considerable, both on the morals and taste of a nation.

In fact, fictitious histories might be employed for very useful purposes. They furnish one of the best channels for conveying instruction, for painting human life and manners, for showing the errors into which we are betrayed by our passions, for rendering virtue amiable and vice odious. The effect of well contrived stories, towards accomplishing these purposes, is stronger than any effect that can be produced by simple and naked instruction; and hence we find, that the wisest men in all ages have more or less employed fables and fictions, as the vehicles of knowledge. These have ever been the basis of both Epic and Dramatic Poetry. It is not, therefore, the nature of this sort of Writing, considered in itself, but the faulty manner of its execution, that can expose it to any contempt. Lord Bacon takes notice of our taste for fictitious history, as a proof of the greatness and dignity of the human mind. He observes very ingeniously, that the objects of this world, and the common train of affairs which we behold going on in it, do not fill the mind, nor give it entire satisfaction. We seek for something that shall expand the mind in a greater degree: we seek for more heroic and illustrious deeds, for more diversified and surprising events, for a more splendid order of things, a more regular and just distribution of rewards and punishments than what we find here: because we meet not with these in true history, we have recourse to fictitious. We create worlds according to our fancy, in order to gratify our capacious desires: "Accomodando," says that great philosopher, "rerum simulachra ad animi desideria, non submittendo animum rebus, quod ratio facit, et historia."<sup>2</sup> Let us then, since the subject wants neither dignity nor use, make a few observations on the rise and progress of Fictitious History, and the different forms it has assumed in different countries.

In all countries we find its origin very antient. The genius of the Eastern nations, in particular, was from the earliest times much turned towards invention, and the love of fiction. Their Divinity, their Philosophy, and their Politics, were clothed in fables and parables. The Indians, the Persians, and Arabians, were all famous for their tales. The "Arabian Night's Entertainments" are the production of a romantic invention, but of a rich and amusing imagination; exhibiting a singular and curious display of manners and characters, and beautified with a very humane morality. Among the antient Greeks, we hear of the Ionian and Milesian Tales; but they have now perished, and, from any account that we have of them, appear to have been of the loose and wanton kind. Some fictitious histories yet remain, that were composed during the decline of the Roman Empire, by Apuleius, Achilles Tatius, and Heliodorus bishop of Trica, in the 4th century; but none of them are considerable enough to merit particular criticism.

During the dark ages, this sort of writing assumed a new and very singular form, and for a long while made a great figure in the world. The martial spirit of those nations, among whom the feudal government prevailed; the establishment of single



combat, as an allowed method of deciding causes both of justice and honour; the appointment of champions in the cause of women, who could not maintain their own rights by the sword; together with the institution of military tournaments, in which different kingdoms vied with one another, gave rise, in those times, to that marvellous system of chivalry, which is one of the most singular appearances in the history of mankind. Upon this were founded those romances of knight-errantry, which carried an ideal chivalry to a still more extravagant height than it had risen in fact. There was displayed in them a new and very wonderful sort of world, hardly bearing any resemblance to the world in which we dwell. Not only knights setting forth to redress all manner of wrongs, but in every page, magicians, dragons, and giants, invulnerable men, winged horses, enchanted armour, and enchanted castles; adventures absolutely incredible, yet suited to the gross ignorance of these ages, and to the legends, and superstitious notions concerning magic and necromancy, which then prevailed. This merit they had, of being writings of the highly moral and heroic kind. Their knights were patterns, not of courage merely, but of religion, generosity, courtesy, and fidelity; and the heroines were no less distinguished for modesty, delicacy, and the utmost dignity of manners.

These were the first Compositions that received the name of Romances. The origin of this name is traced, by Mr. Huet the learned bishop of Avranches, to the Provençal Troubadours, a sort of story-tellers and bards in the county of Provence, where there subsisted some remains of literature and poetry. The language which prevailed in that country was a mixture of Latin and Gallic, called the Roman or Romance Language; and as the stories of these Troubadours were written in that language, hence it is said the name of Romance, which we now apply to all fictitious Composition.

The earliest of those Romances is that which goes under the name of Turpin, the archbishop of Rheims, written in the 11th century. The subject is, the Achievements of Charlemagne and his Peers, or Paladins, in driving the Saracens out of France and part of Spain; the same subject which Ariosto has taken for his celebrated poem of *Orlando Furioso*, which is truly a Chivalry Romance, as extravagant as any of the rest, but partly heroic, and partly comic, embellished with the highest graces of poetry. The Romance of Turpin was followed by *Amadis de Gaul*, and many more of the same stamp. The Crusades both furnished new matter, and increased the spirit for such Writings; the Christians against the Saracens made the common ground-work of them; and from the 11th to the 16th century, they continued to bewitch all Europe. In Spain, where the taste for this sort of writing had been most greedily caught, the ingenious Cervantes, in the beginning of the last century, contributed greatly to explode it; and the abolition of tournaments, the prohibition of single combat, the disbelief of magic and enchantments, and the change in general of manners throughout Europe, began to give a new turn to fictitious Composition.

Then appeared the *Astræa* of D'Urfé, the *Grand Cyrus*, the *Clelia* and *Cleopatra* of Mad. Scuderi, the *Arcadia* of Sir Philip Sidney, and other grave and stately



Compositions in the same style. These may be considered as forming the second stage of Romance Writing. The heroism and the gallantry, the moral and virtuous turn of the chivalry romance, were still preserved; but the dragons, the necromancers, and the enchanted castles, were banished, and some small resemblance to human nature was introduced. Still, however, there was too much of the marvellous in them to please an age which now aspired to refinement. The characters were discerned to be strained; the style to be swollen; the adventures incredible: the books themselves were voluminous and tedious.

Hence, this sort of Composition soon assumed a third form, and from magnificent Heroic Romance, dwindled down to the Familiar Novel. These novels, both in France and England, during the age of Lewis XIV and King Charles II were in general of a trifling nature, without the appearance of moral tendency, or useful instruction. Since that time, however, somewhat better has been attempted, and a degree of reformation introduced into the spirit of Novel Writing. Imitations of life and character have been made their principal object. Relations have been professed to be given of the behaviour of persons in particular interesting situations, such as may actually occur in life; by means of which, what is laudable or defective in character and in conduct, may be pointed out, and placed in an useful light. Upon this plan, the French have produced some compositions of considerable merit. *Gil Blas*, by Le Sage, is a book full of good sense, and instructive knowledge of the world. The works of Marivaux, especially his *Marianne*, discover great refinement of thought, great penetration into human nature, and paint, with a very delicate pencil, some of the nicest shades and features in the distinction of characters. The *Nouvelle Heloise* of Rousseau is a production of a very singular kind; in many of the events which are related, improbable and unnatural; in some of the details tedious, and for some of the scenes which are described justly blameable; but withal, for the power of eloquence, for tenderness of sentiment, for ardour of passion, entitled to rank among the highest productions of Fictitious History.

In this kind of Writing we are, it must be confessed, in Great Britain, inferior to the French. We neither relate so agreeably, nor draw characters with so much delicacy; yet we are not without some performances which discover the strength of the British genius. No fiction, in any language, was ever better supported than the *Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*. While it is carried on with that appearance of truth and simplicity, which takes a strong hold of the imagination of all Readers, it suggests, at the same time, very useful instruction; by showing how much the native powers of man may be exerted for surmounting the difficulties of any external situation. Mr. Fielding's Novels are highly distinguished for their humour; a humour which, if not of the most refined and delicate kind, is original, and peculiar to himself. The characters which he draws are lively and natural, and marked with the strokes of a bold pencil. The general scope of his stories is favourable to humanity and goodness of heart; and in *Tom Jones*, his greatest work, the artful conduct of the fable, and the subserviency of all the incidents to the



winding up of the whole, deserve much praise. The most moral of all our Novel Writers is Richardson, the Author of *Clarissa*, a Writer of excellent intentions, and of very considerable capacity and genius; did he not possess the unfortunate talent of spinning out pieces of amusement into an immeasurable length. The trivial performances which daily appear in public under the title of Lives, Adventures, and Histories, by anonymous Authors, if they be often innocent, yet are most commonly insipid; and, though in the general it ought to be admitted that Characteristical Novels, formed upon Nature and upon Life, without extravagance, and without licentiousness, might furnish an agreeable and useful entertainment to the mind; yet considering the manner in which these Writings have been, for the most part, conducted, it must also be confessed, that they oftener tend to dissipation and idleness, than to any good purpose. Let us now therefore make our retreat from these regions of fiction.

1. See his Letter to Atticus, which was written a year or two before his death, in which he tells him, in answer to some enquiries concerning his Epistles, that he had no collection of them, and that Tyro had only about seventy of them. *Ad Att.* 16, 5.

2. "Accommodating the appearances of things to the desires of the mind, not bringing down the mind, as history and philosophy do, to the course of events."