The Ambiguity of ‘Union’ and the Development of rhetoric in Scottish-American Higher Education: provincial anxiety in John Witherspoon’s language and syntax

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On March 17 1777, while British cannons were firing just metres away from his window in Nassau Hall in the College of New Jersey, John Witherspoon sat down to write a letter to his son David in Scotland. As a former Scottish divine, Witherspoon had moved to America in 1767 in order to assume the presidency of the College of New Jersey, later to be called Princeton. Before writing the letter to his son, he had become the only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence.¹ His influence is suggested by a British officer who, writing to Major General Sir Guy Carleton in 1783, pointed to ‘Dr Witherspoon … the political firebrand, who perhaps had not a less share in the Revolution than Washington himself. He poisons the minds of his young students and through them the Continent’.² Indeed, alongside teaching one President (Madison, B.A. 1771) and one Vice-President (Burr, B.A. 1772), forty-nine US representatives, twenty-eight U.S. senators, three Supreme Court justices, one secretary of state, three attorney generals and two foreign ministers, Witherspoon was also a delegate to the Continental Congress, a member of three standing committees during the Revolutionary War and of more than one-hundred-and-twenty Congressional committees.³

Witherspoon, however, did not immediately mention any of these activities in his letter to David. Instead, rather bathetically, in the first words of the first paragraph, he stated that ‘it gratifies me exceedingly that you and Fanny [Witherspoon’s daughter] are so punctual on writing, and that your letter is well written & quite free from bad spelling so that I hope by pains and practise you will write a good & fair and current hand … I do assure you that

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this will be a very great service to you & indeed would of itself at this time and place procure you a handsome livelihood’.4

‘At this time and place’- the place being the College of New Jersey where he had emigrated from Scotland, at a time when the American War of Independence reached the College outskirts - of utmost importance to Witherspoon was the sound, simple and effective grammar and syntax of his children. In a letter that only briefly chronicled his wife’s illness, his brother’s severe Rheumaticism, and the British forces’ advance towards his institution of higher education, he preceded these facts with a far more lengthy discussion of the merits of good writing. He went on to say, ‘at the same time I have the pleasure to say that Fanny’s letter is just as well spelt and rather the more neatly written of the two.’ Only then did he describe the events around the College of New Jersey that lead him to ‘order all my books to be put up in boxes & sent to the country lest the enemy should come that way again’.5

Witherspoon could afford such a phlegmatic response to the events around him because in his orthodox Calvinist worldview, they simply reflected God’s providence. This article will demonstrate that the ‘handsome livelihood’ he referred to above derived from an experience of higher education that produced citizens capable of proper expression in public assemblies. Divine providence could be enacted in these public forums provided their constituents maintained a correct duty to God. Witherspoon’s approach to language and rhetoric in America allowed a classically influenced form of expression to articulate a Scottish evangelical form of virtue. This article will show that those who employed such language and rhetoric could be empowered, and set apart above others, precisely by submitting themselves to a higher duty, and minimising their own agency as individuals within public deliberative forums. In order to do so, they needed a grounding in persuasive rhetoric and linguistic clarity in order to command these public arenas and persuade the multitudes within them to similarly subsume their selves towards divine duty.

That ‘great and eminent men have generally, in every nation, appeared in clusters’, allowed Witherspoon to portray the purpose of higher education in both classical and providential terms - he was educator for the few amongst the one and the many.6 His students were to be situated outside of their selves in God’s moral conscience. A negation of their human agency could provide a rhetorical justification for their rise to public
prominence as future senators, representatives, judges, and statesmen. In Witherspoon’s religious terms, one gave up any notion that one had individual agency, in exchange for access to God’s grace, which if accessed by like-minded individuals, could offer unity and stability to a political system. This religious language paralleled classical conceptions of virtue. For Cicero, Aristotle and Isocrates, the classical ability to express the public interest above private concerns was the characteristic of the complete orator. Similarly, individual depravity could be minimised in order to access a public virtue, or grace, that allowed a communal connection.

This connection between classical and Calvinist forms of persuasion will allow us to modify existing historiography that seeks to understand Witherspoon in his Scottish-American context. Although he was of the Scottish Reformed theological tradition, the historical consensus is that Witherspoon to some extent sacrificed his Calvinist doctrine of total depravity when he arrived in New Jersey from Scotland in 1768. This sacrifice supposedly led to a heightened sense of moral ability that he used in order to encourage a generation of students to test their faith by the rule of experience. Such an appropriation of Scottish common sense epistemology would supposedly have made his most significant contribution to American culture the propagation of this Scottish school of philosophy in the minds of a new generation of Americans. Much has been made of the impact of Scottish Common Sense Realism on Protestant evangelicalism in America during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Here, common sense is said to have challenged the scepticism of David Hume by affirming that the senses could be trusted and that cause-and-effect relationships could be discerned genuinely through human observation. A second emphasis entails an ethical common sense that asserted that humans could rely on moral intuition.

John Witherspoon is most often held as the most significant figure in the transmission of these ideas from Britain to America. For Ahlstrom, ‘Moderate philosophy’ challenged ‘the old Calvinistic tradition of the Established Church and in the Universities,’ where ‘the honor of being the first real ambassador [in America] should probably be assigned to John Witherspoon.’ Ellingson argues that ‘in America, Common Sense Philosophy took a foothold in the major universities during the colonial period, most decidedly through the influence of the Scotch Common Sense
Realist, John Witherspoon, who became President of the College of New Jersey (Princeton) in 1768. The authors of The Search for Christian America propose that Witherspoon underwent an ‘intellectual conversion when he crossed the Atlantic to take up his post at Princeton’. While he was ardent defender of orthodoxy in Scotland and a leader of the conservative Popular Party in the Presbyterian Church, ‘a strange transformation took place when Witherspoon crossed the Atlantic’. Witherspoon takes official place in the pantheon of the American National Biography as a figure who established ‘the new moral philosophy as propounded by the Scots-Irish thinker Francis Hutcheson’, using it as a basis for ‘science, politics, ethics and Christian apologetics’, so that the consequence of his appropriation of Common Sense thought was that he ‘gave up the intense God-consciousness that had driven Puritans like Edwards’. In his widely published Princeton and the Republic, Mark Noll refers to Witherspoon as having ‘placed [with Hutcheson] great reliance on the ability of intuition to uncover the truth about human nature and the powers of virtue’ so that ‘an examination of human nature discloses that people have an internal sense for virtue and beauty very much analogous to the external senses that communicate the reality of the world.’ L. Gordon Tait notes that Witherspoon demonstrated a ‘curiously positive view of human reasoning’. Tait’s biographical publication, which narrates some of Witherspoon’s religious writings, once again links them to ‘the effects of the Scottish Enlightenment and the realism it engendered … so that they [Americans] could trust their sense and their reasoning powers’. In his study of universities during the eighteenth century, Sloan refers to Witherspoon in the following manner: ‘When Witherspoon departed for America, he carried more of the Moderate than he, his moderate adversaries, or his American friends would have dared to suppose.’ Jeffry Morrison, a political scientist rather than a historian, does not point to any tension between a Calvinist epistemology of total depravity, and a Scottish philosophy of common sense reasoning. Instead, he seeks ‘to suggest how the Scottish common sense philosophy helped make him and his students into practical American politicians’.

In countering the notion that Witherspoon propagated a clear form of Scottish Common Sense philosophy in American education, I seek to contextualise this revision in the light of Scottish Moderate theories of language and rhetoric, and the power that opposition to these ideas in America could give a man
such as Witherspoon. His departure to America from enlighten-
ment Scotland allowed him to articulate a new approach to
youthful acculturation that was not constrained, or lampooned, by
a Scottish Moderate approach in which words were deemed to be
the individual’s tool of sensual discernment.\(^{17}\) His new freedom,
nonetheless, should be understood as having been characterised
by a moral viewpoint that suggested that man did not have a truly
free agency. According to Witherspoon, this over-emphasised
agency fraudulently allowed some Scottish Moderates to use
language in order to construct a new sociable reality. Duty to
divine moral conscience, rather than individual human agency
governed by a common moral sense, could bring about social
stability. Ned Landsman, in an otherwise incisive article, argues
that despite lampooning those Scottish Moderates who seemed
to be obsessed with Francis Hutcheson’s moral philosophy,
Witherspoon in America shared some of Hutcheson’s principles
‘such as the belief in a moral sense written on the heart’.\(^{18}\) Yet it
is important to stress that there was little personal capacity for
aesthetic choice in his understanding of human nature: ‘Religious
actions are not chosen, but submitted to, through fear or worse,’
he wrote in his *Practical Treatise* (1764).\(^{19}\) Fear and duty, rather
than benevolence, led to human choices. For Witherspoon the
most important aspect in human development was a ‘compliance
with duty or supposed obligation. Take away this, and the beauty
vanishes as well as the pleasure.’\(^{20}\) What remained in man’s heart
was a primal goodness in the form of ‘moral conscience,’ which,
in the words of one of his most widely published American
sermons of 1776, was the result of ‘the constant influence and
over ruling power of divine providence’ that ‘preserves man from
himself’.\(^{21}\) Landsman’s Hutcheson-Witherspoon parallel with
regards to moral conscience written on man’s heart overlooks this
disparity: Any Hutchesonian feeling of ‘pleasantness’ from
morally sound human behaviour in fact took place ‘because I feel
myself under an obligation to do it… It is not duty because pleas-
ing, but pleasing because duty.’\(^{22}\) This duty situated individuals
*outside* of their own moral selves, and united them in a covenanted
nation which faced divinely ordained trials to remind it of its
binding duties as an elect community. This will allow us to go
further in answering Landsman’s perceptive question regarding
Witherspoon’s Scottish-American career: ‘Since a covenant is by
definition a binding, perceptual and unalterable agreement
between God and nation, one wonders how Witherspoon could
reconcile his belief in Scotland’s covenanted role with his equally fervent transfer of loyalties from Scotland to America.”

Landsman argues that men such as Witherspoon ‘changed their view of church and nation, away from a strictly national and sectarian conception to the broader perspective of provincial Britons.’ This article will slightly modify Landsman’s depiction of Witherspoon’s understanding of religious duty vis-à-vis Hutcheson, in order to support his wider view that Witherspoon increasingly promoted a trans-national form of Scottish evangelism. The duty of citizens to choose morally sound representatives was tantamount to maintaining duty to God, given that the moral sense they would use to do so was in fact his, and not theirs. Only by alienating individuals from their own moral centres could they be connected to divine moral conscience, and taught that their role was to react to its political manifestation (disunion from Britain). They were taught by Witherspoon to do so by subsuming their selves even further towards carrying out their duty to revelation, rather than deceiving themselves that they could construct a new nation according to their supposedly innate moral sense. This will support Landsman’s later statement that by ‘emphasising impersonal forces, he [Witherspoon] was able to transfer his loyalties from Scotland the state to the Kirk and the people [in America].’

A deeper distinction between duty and morality will also develop and modify Thomas Miller’s analysis of Witherspoon’s classical rhetoric. For Miller, the latter was situated alongside moral philosophy so as to help to ‘introduce [Scottish] common sense moral philosophy, which exercised a dominant influence on American education until the Civil War.’ Miller correctly argues that Witherspoon ‘reasserted the classical connexion between rhetoric and moral philosophy.’ The former Scottish divine argued that moral philosophy ‘not only points out personal duty; but is related to the whole business of active life.’ Miller uses Witherspoon’s words here in order to illustrate a ‘communitarian aspect of [Scottish] common sense philosophy’ that could enter the American setting. Yet this article demonstrates that Witherspoon’s many references to duty cannot be squared with the notion that he introduced a clear form of Scottish Common Sense philosophy in America, via his practical link between moral philosophy and civic rhetoric. Such rhetoric was to be employed, we may see, in order to teach a new generation that they could not truly know the outside world, other than through
their dutiful engagement with divine moral conscience. This differed significantly from the Common Sense notion that human reason could support revelation, and therefore articulate a notion of moral sense. This revision will in fact support Miller’s correct assumption, made elsewhere, that Witherspoon ‘viewed the church as a social force for public piety, not polite refinement.’

By connecting Witherspoon and Scottish Moderates such as Francis Hutcheson’s system of understanding, historians have incorrectly superimposed a generic form of knowledgeable insight onto what was, for Witherspoon, viewed as a Calvinist obligation to God’s moral discernment: As he argued in his Lectures on Moral Philosophy to his American students:

… The moral sense implies … a sense of obligation, that such and such things are right and others wrong; that we are bound in duty to do the one, and that our conduct is hateful, blameable and deserving punishment, if we do the contrary.

Witherspoon downplayed the link that Scottish Moderates such as Hutcheson had made between aesthetics and morality: ‘The various theories upon the principles of beauty are … of very little importance in morals’. Rather, conscience was the law ‘written upon the heart of man’, which ‘both intimates and enforces duty, previous to all reasoning’.

Rather than reflecting a Scottish Common Sense focus on individual perceptual discernment, Witherspoon could defend duty against those on both sides of the Atlantic who suggested that virtue, manifested in human benevolence, was its own reward, given its ability to connect various individual consciences and create a positive social order. Instead, men condemned only by their own conscience were ‘blinded in their understandings, as well as corrupt in their practice- They deceive themselves, and are at peace,’ and should instead feel obligated to virtue based on ‘a sense of duty and subjection to the Supreme Being.’ On the one hand, the mind was alienated from the present world, whose virtue lay in future salvation. Yet this fact also necessitated present action, or more accurately put, reaction: Preparation for this future state would allow its future reward. A lack of such preparation in the present life would be a sign of punishment in the next:
It would be clean contrary to the justice and benignity of God that when the body dies, the mind should be reduced to nothingness, whereas it should be saved for a life of bliss, for the enjoyment of which it seems to have been made by God on condition that in this life it pursues correctly the path assigned to it by God.36

In a phrase pregnant with meaning, Witherspoon described the need for religious duty in the education of American youth, in his *Letters on Education*, stating that ‘the wisdom of man disappoints itself.’37 Properly conceived virtue should, paradoxically, alienate people from any supposed connection between individual action and outside stability. This virtuous duty was necessary in order to prevent a diabolical disruption of Godly providence:

It must be done from a sense, not only of the unalterable obligation, but the perfect excellence of the law of God; renouncing all pretence of merit in the actor; depending for assistance entirely on divine strength; and with a single eye to the divine glory.38

For Witherspoon, individuals within an elect group could be connected by ‘sympathy’ of spirit: Man could only link to other men by situating himself outside of his own centre, thereby connecting to other individuals similarly situated outside of their own selves. Where ‘the history of the world’ was ‘but the history of human guilt’, Witherspoon thus sought an extra human source for the ethical.39 Yet the idea of preservation also had a comforting aspect. His doctrine of total depravity did not mean that humans were wholly incapable of positive action that could lead to a healthy community, but that every act was tainted and ‘essentially defective’.40 While this depravity meant that good acts could only be derived from duty to God’s moral discernment, humans were united by this covenant. They were communally linked through God’s conscience. In re-establishing the primacy of evangelical Calvinist epistemology in Witherspoon’s outlook, we can see that the role he attributed to higher education and linguistic expression in America was intimately linked to the communality that derived from human depravity and the comfort of the covenant. Original sin, he told his students, corrupted man’s reasoning powers so that, ‘the supreme desire of the mind, and leading principle’ was wrongly directed so that man ‘loves the creature rather than
the creator’. Witherspoon - the self-styled evangelical leader, sought to educate men on the cusp of adulthood in order to overcome these desires. It would therefore be misleading to view him as a proponent of a Scottish Moderate notion in which a commonly held individual moral sense allowed a sympathetic ability to act according to others’ interests.

Indeed, in his new American context, it seems probable that Witherspoon drew inspiration from a Scottish Covenanting influence that was itself positioned as an alternative to Scottish moral sense reasoning. Here, duty to divine agency was deemed to covenant individuals on both sides of a new and expanding British union, rather than any individual moral discernment gifting a disinterested form of agency to those who were supposedly able to act as sociable articulators of the new union’s best interests. When Witherspoon pointed out in his satirical Ecclesiastical Characteristics (1753), that ‘all moderate men have a kind of fellow feeling with heresy’, where they avoided ‘the mysteries of grace, which the common people are so fond of’ while catching ‘as much of the air and manner of a fine gentleman’, he helped to galvanise Scottish evangelical supporters, many of whom would join, or at least sympathise with, the Scottish Covenanter movement of the later eighteenth century. That in 1774 a Scottish visitor to Witherspoon’s Princeton reported that he had heard ‘forty boys repeat Orations at the … commencement, every one of them full of Old Cameronian resisting sentiments’ should suggest that these links were not simply an outgrowth of New England Puritanism, remnants of the kind of covenanting sentiment identified by historians such as Perry Miller and Sacvan Bercovitch. This would support Richard Sher’s bold statement that the ‘Scottish Presbyterian framework’ from which many American revolutionary sermons emerged has been neglected by most scholars of early America in favour of an overemphasised ‘influence of Puritan New England on the historiography of eighteenth century American political preaching.’ Sher is right to remark that with respect to sermons such as Witherspoon’s Dominion of Providence (1776), ‘remarkably little has been written … and still less has been said about the Scottish Presbyterian framework’ that influenced them. Despite becoming an American, Witherspoon thus supported a strong Scotland within the new British union, so that Scottish evangelical ideas could have wider access to an enlarged and expanding sphere of influence. He even pointed out in several
publications that it was possible to be both a loyal Scotsman in support of an expansive British union, and an American Patriot. He opposed the English radical John Wilkes when in America, because Wilkes maintained a rather jaundiced view of Scotland as ‘North Britain,’ which threatened to alienate those of Scottish ancestry in America, who nonetheless supported a strong Anglo-Scottish union. Paradoxically, support for a strong Scotland within an expanding British union was maintained alongside a separate desire for America to withdraw from union with this very same Britain, and create its own union of states. These states could adopt precisely the kind of public morality that led to his support for Scotland’s union with England, provided the covenantering potential of this union could be unleashed. Referring to providence, Witherspoon stated:

… Nothing appears to me more manifest than that the separation of this country from Britain, has been of God; for every step the British took to prevent, served to accelerate it, which has generally been the case when men have undertaken to go in the course or providence, and to make war with the nature of things …

A system of moral philosophy, which merged civic duty with religious duty, was the only response to human political constructs that would otherwise inevitably fragment under predicable human corruption. Reflecting the pessimistic view of human political structures held by those evangelical figures who had advocated a Scottish commonwealth galvanised by reformed Christian behaviour, Witherspoon linked Calvinist duty to national strength in America, which was a necessary corollary to a new constitution which, as a human construct, would always be subject to eventual corruption and degradation:

Nothing is more certain than that a general profligacy and corruption of manners make a people ripe for destruction. A good form of government may hold the rotten materials together for some time, but beyond a certain pitch, even the best constitution will be ineffectual … when the manners of a nation are pure, when true religion and principles maintain their vigour, the attempts of the most powerful enemies to oppress them are commonly baffled and disappointed.
A misinformed perception of individual moral sense might fragment the individual’s proper union with other similarly depraved men within a newly covenanted American state. Witherspoon’s approach to language and rhetoric in American can therefore be viewed as a response to a Scottish Moderate attempt to circumvent this problem by creating a notion of moral sense, which they promoted in order to construct an idea of sociability. He therefore sought an alternative to individual reliance on common moral sense, which was but a chimera constructed to enhance an agency that, as depraved humans, they could never truly have. Scottish Common Sense philosophers had responded to Locke’s assertion that things in nature and ideas in the mind were connected by symbolic words which were used to describe them. For Witherspoon, however, without faith, words would be arbitrary products of the individual mind - there could never be true union between the mind and the outside world. This was the case because an extra-human force - Godly or diabolical - would always mould these individual perceptions according to their own will, thereby reducing any notion of common perceptive insight. It was precisely through a recognition of man’s inability to ‘sympathise,’ that he could access God’s grace, or at least his moral conscience. He could do this in order to step out of himself - alienating though this may have been - and ‘observe’ others’ obedience to a duty which, properly understood, could go some way towards binding individuals together and maintaining social stability.

This provides an important link to Witherspoon’s pedagogy, and his application of these abstract ideals to the social circumstances of revolutionary New Jersey. In particular, for our purposes, we may view his approach to language and rhetoric in the light of Scottish evangelical norms. In lampooning the Scottish Moderate preacher in his Ecclesiastical Characteristics, Witherspoon had stated that he must avoid ‘all orthodox’ sounding phrases, agreeing to substitute ‘moral virtues’ for ‘graces of the spirit.’ One ought to do so because ‘there is something immoderate in the very idea of raising the passions; and therefore it is contrary to our character: nor was it ever known that a truly moderate man raised or moved any affection in his hearers.’ Interestingly in this instance, Witherspoon specifically linked orthodoxy in language with orthodoxy in religion, as part of his defence of his evangelical approach to education while still in Scotland. Rather than a poetic or aesthetic style stirring the
soul, power in public discourse came from the ‘single propositions’ of the evangelical message. In projecting the concerns of Scottish Moderates onto the upwardly mobile in and around New Jersey, for whom the purpose of higher education was in many ways the creation of private connections, Witherspoon’s stress on public rhetoric thus took on an extra importance. In a letter of 1786, he blasted ‘the mistakes of parents and their desire to precipitate the education of their children’ according to their ‘worldly’ concerns, and resolved to admit only those who would enter one of the lower classes in good standing and to graduate only those who had completed a ‘full course of study’ away from home.55 For Witherspoon, such parents shared some of the problematic tendencies associated with well-to-do families within the Anglo-Scottish union. Speaking of his experiences of family leaders in both Scotland and America, he made the following observation:

If they [offspring] perceive you [parents] happy and lifted up by the visit or countenance of persons of high rank, solicitous to entertain them properly, submissive and flattering in your manner of speaking to them, vain and apt to boast of your connexion with them: and if, on the contrary, they perceive you to be hardly civil to persons of inferior stations, or narrow circumstances … will not this naturally lead the young mind to consider riches and high station as the great sources of earthly happiness?56

A refined focus on polite letters designed to speak to a social group separated from the ‘multitudes’ was not an option. Instead, America could provide the context for Witherspoon to install in a new generation of youth a form of public rhetoric that was designed - in its simplicity - to appeal to the ‘multitudes’ that would soon make up a new American union. ‘The multitude’, he explained in his Lectures on Moral Philosophy, ‘are exceeding apt to be deceived by demagogues and ambitious persons. They are very apt to trust a man who serves them well with such power as that he is able to make them serve him’.57 When the public gathered to deliberate, Witherspoon feared, passion overtook rationality, hindering the use of moral sense, let alone the ‘common sense’ that scholars argue he came to view in political man. Witherspoon blamed political tyranny and coercion not on the rulers, but on the human slothfulness of those who came to be
ruled in this manner: Precisely because of their sensual indolence, promiscuous assemblies could become slaves to whichever force was most dominant. In this, they were very much like Scottish Moderates who were ever reliant on patronage from whichever source was powerful at a particular time. This American similarity with a previous critique of Scottish Moderatism does not accord with Morrow’s assertion, in his discussion of the growth of American political rhetoric, that Witherspoon’s [and James Madison’s] understanding of the human tendency for forming factions was ‘a judgment consistent with Scottish Common Sense-Ciceronian humanism.’58 Rather, it was a religious, depraved view of human nature, and an allied belief that all men did not have a common moral sense, that led to Witherspoon’s perception of the dangerous characteristics of promiscuous assemblies, and their liability to form into differing human factions.

Thus for Witherspoon, ‘the intention of all speech, or writing which is but recorded speech, is to persuade, taking the word with latitude’.59 His focus on persuasion drew from certain civic elements in his understanding: the need for a public voice and more homogenous expression in a new republic whose integrity after dis-union had to be maintained. This stress on simple, orthodox and public expression could mark a distinct movement away from the kind of disinterested observation whose definition of cultivation, which encompassed the increased primacy of individual empiricism and moral ability, did not accord with his evangelical Calvinist epistemology. He proclaimed in his Lectures on Eloquence that people should be persuaded, ‘to perceive what I perceive, and feel towards it as I feel.’60 Where figures such as Hutcheson had portrayed an empirical sense of ‘beauty’ that led to the primacy of individual perception and a heightened moral ability, Witherspoon saw the necessity for persuasive classical rhetoric, which, if applied correctly, could create a more homogenous mode of perception, and therefore, expression. After referring to ‘articulate language’, Witherspoon explained in his Lectures on Eloquence that ‘the excellence’ of ‘a conception in my mind … may be considered as fully explained by saying it includes information and persuasion.’61 Students had to be persuaded in order to carry out their duty to God’s moral conscience as active participants in society, rather than as disinterested observers, or figures who although in the public light, could only gain such a position through private connection and ‘worldly’ concerns.
Witherspoon charged himself with teaching a new generation of leaders, many of whom would become political representatives, a form of rhetorical persuasion that could best package his moral philosophy. Accordingly, he taught that a ‘double duty,’ meant that citizens were charged with choosing political representatives who were ‘men of inward principle, justified by exemplary conversation’. The duty of citizens to choose morally sound representatives was tantamount to maintaining duty to God, given that the moral sense they would use to do so was in fact his, and not theirs. Moreover, the other side of that ‘double duty’ was that representatives themselves were duly obligated to promote moral virtue. This was the national ‘conversation’ they needed to promote, and which Witherspoon labelled as ‘exemplary’. They were to promote ‘the impartial guardianship of the rights of conscience’. Grace had elected them to a position of leadership that allowed them a heightened form of knowledge: they were ‘impartial’ because thanks to a ‘higher’ education from divines such as Witherspoon, they had a greater sense that they had no moral sense at all. This was an insight that made them ‘impartial’, as it situated themselves outside of their selves, in divine virtue. This impartiality was not, therefore, derived from Scottish common sense principles, which centred on a supposed disinterestedness that grew out of an educated awareness of one’s own perceptive ability, and common moral sense. The ‘right of conscience’ represented a right to maintain a subservient duty to God’s moral conscience, rather than the right to act according to one’s own. This was a form of ‘conscience’ that Witherspoon endeavored to teach to his students. That we can identify Witherspoon as the figure who was charged with teaching a new generation of leaders this form of counter-intuitive legitimacy, should allow us to connect him to a fundamental paradox with regards to the rise to prominence of men such as James Madison, and the rhetoric that they used: Witherspoon’s religious strain of thought meant that they could only justify their entrance into an aristocracy of leaders by negating the agency which supposedly allowed them to become a member of a public political elite within a federal representative system. In his *Address to the Students of the Senior Class*, delivered before their ‘commencement’ into the wider world, Witherspoon even alluded to this idea:

I beg of you to consider that the advantages that you have enjoyed [in bringing them into his privileged
system of higher education] will be an aggravation of your guilt [as universally depraved human sinners] if they are not improved … Some persons, by the early pains taken upon them, and the privileges they have enjoyed, fill up the measure of their iniquities sooner than others.63

Witherspoon’s students could still learn natural sciences, the classics, philosophy, and mathematics in what became a broad education at Princeton.64 Yet paradoxically, they were able to focus on these academic pursuits precisely because they had been situated outside of their own sensual selves. They were no longer ruled by worldly interests and haughty arrogance, precisely because of a moral philosophy that taught them that they could have no real individual discernment that could act as a basis for such worldliness. This is a point that historians who would link the American Witherspoon to Scottish Moderate philosophy, simply because he encouraged a broad curriculum for his students, fail to take into account. Daiches, for example, argues that ‘there is considerable irony in the fact that this Presbyterian minister from the anti-Moderate or ‘Orthodox’ party in the Church of Scotland, who had been invited to Princeton by the ‘New Side’ faction of evangelical Presbyterians in America, should have become so well known for his love of rhetoric and belles lettres … Witherspoon’s faith in the senses extended to the moral sense that Francis Hutcheson had done so much to establish.’65 One might be tempted to argue that just as Witherspoon included various differing philosophical treatises in his Princeton curriculum, so his former students could deploy various, and even contradictory, philosophical influences during their subsequent lives as lawyers, politicians, ministers, and judges. Indeed, it would be easy to point to the eclecticism in Witherspoon’s New Jersey teaching methods, in order to highlight a Scottish Moderate influence, in which various intellectual influences could be studied in a disinterested manner. Yet a more nuanced analysis of a figure who taught Hume alongside Hutcheson, as well as the Old and New Testament, may show that such American eclecticism did not in fact derive from a Scottish Moderate focus on belles lettres, but an orthodox view of total human depravity, which sat in opposition to the former. This phenomenon perhaps derived from an educational approach whose Calvinist emphasis actually paralleled Hume’s philosophy of scepticism. The latter highlighted a human tendency to break
into ‘factions’ of different groups and individuals who all held
different perceptions of external reality. This notion of course
contained within it a certain analogue with a Calvinist view of
corrupted human nature, whose various passions led to a human
tendency for factions of interest - the dangerous ‘promiscuous
assemblies’ that Witherspoon so often referred to.

As all human theories were products of man, and were
therefore essentially tainted, a curriculum which contained a
smorgasbord of these ideas could aptly reflect this state, paradoxical
as such an approach might at first seem. Thus, for Witherspoon,
the ‘confusion’ and disparity of ‘moral’ writers ‘throughout the
ages’ served as proof of the ‘truth of the Scripture doctrine of the
depravity and corruption of our nature’. Philosophers such as
Hutcheson were forced to deny depravity by including character-
istics in human nature ‘which are in reality propensities of nature
in its present state’. For Witherspoon, these characteristics ironi-
cally formed ‘the fruit and evidence of [human nature’s] departure
from its original purity’. The fall had affected all humans, and
‘even with the greatest natural powers [malignity] blinds the
understanding, and prevents the perception of truth itself.’ The
ideas of Hume, classical writers, and Scottish Moderates, were
therefore all relative, could never achieve ultimate superiority,
and did not thus carry the attendant risk of rivalling revealed
Scripture in authority. Without revelation, man could not truly
‘know’. Ironically, then, this idea enabled an eclectic approach to
American higher education, where varying philosophical views
usefully highlighted man’s perceptual depravity. Rather than
reducing virtue to man’s greatest happiness (Hutcheson), man’s
‘relation to him [God] not only lays the foundation of many moral
sentiments and duties, but complete the idea of morality and law,
by subjecting us to him, and teaching us to conceive of him … as
our righteous governor and supreme judge.’ Speaking of Moral
Philosophy, Witherspoon stated that ‘all simple and original
discoveries have been the production of Providence, and not the
invention of man.’ So much for the Hutchesonian science of
human nature supposedly propagated in this American setting.

Andrew Hook argues that the influence of Scottish rhetori-
cians in America, most notably Hugh Blair, promoted a ‘genteel
tradition’ in American letters that emphasised elegance and
correctness at the expense of the American vernacular, so that ‘the
study of rhetoric in schools and colleges impeded the develop-
ment of a native American literary idiom’. Blair had recognised
that issues were often decided by private deals rather than public
debate, and so emphasised the polite style and aesthetic response.
Most of his readers and students would have little real occasion to
speak to political issues, and, ‘without any prospect of this kind,
may wish only to improve their taste with respect to writing and
discourse... to acquire principles which will enable them to judge
for themselves in that part of literature called the Belles Lettres.’
Rhetoric was ‘not so much a practical art as a speculative science;
and the same instruction which assists others in composing will
assist them in discerning and relishing the beauties of composi-
tion.’ Rather, they ‘may just be pleased to observe, that a cool,
plain, and simple manner of speaking, is necessary in teaching
this, as well as every other art.’

Witherspoon’s approach, however, provides a counter-
example to Hook’s depiction of Scottish rhetoricians in America,
and their promotion of a ‘genteel tradition’ in American letters
that prevented any native American idiom. It was precisely in
opposition to belles lettres and a ‘genteel’ definition of style that
Witherspoon advocated the use of language in public forums in
order to teach a form of civic rhetoric that could best package his
moral philosophy. In America, he did not subordinate political
rhetoric to the literary concerns of belles lettres, explicitly warning
his students that his own lectures would not be examples of
elaborate elegance. In the New Jersey Historical Society’s manu-
script holdings for Ashbel Green, a student of Witherspoon’s in
New Jersey and his later successor as head of the institution in
the early nineteenth century, one can better understand how
Witherspoon erroneously came to be understood as a practioner of
belles lettres as opposed to a more classical form of rhetoric,
which also served his particular form of Calvinist epistemology.
Addressing Princeton’s alumni in 1840, Green observed:

Blair’s Lectures on Belles Lettres are much more
extended than those of Witherspoon, but the leading
ideas of the two writers are wonderfully similar.
I once asked my old master, whether there had
not been some correspondence between him and
Dr. Blair, on the subject of these lectures; and the
answer was, that there never had been the interchange
of a single thought between them, on any topic which
they had severally discussed. The similarity remarked,
therefore, is doubtless to be attributed, to these
authors having studied under the same teachers, and thus derived their original train of thinking on the subjects in question, from a common source. They were either classmates or cotemporaneous members of the University of Edinburgh.74

Green’s written manuscript of 1850, *The Life of Revd. John Witherspoon*, makes a similar link.75 If he were alive, Witherspoon could have replied that Blair’s lectures were not available to the general public until printed in 1783, several years after he had established subject matter of his own lectures. More generally however, one might tentatively suggest that Green, writing in the mid-eighteenth century when burgeoning romanticism, with its faith in individual style and perception, manifested itself in his intellectual circles, for example, in the form of Emerson’s transcendentalism, a faith in empirical perception was perhaps projected onto Witherspoon from a Romantic viewpoint.76

Witherspoon was more interested in composition than the kind of literary criticism developed by Blair. He was not wholly responsible for any increased stress on empiricism in American intellectual culture, which led to the use of an unorthodox ‘stylish’ language that supposedly derived from a heightened sense of individual discernment.77 Benjamin Rush, another of Witherspoon’s students, may provide a more accurate appraisal of a figure who, in his *Address to the Inhabitants of Jamaica, and other West-India Islands*, specifically pointed out that ‘in addition’ to the regular course at the *College of New Jersey*,

the President gives lectures to the juniors and seniors, which consequently every student hears twice over in his course, first upon chronology and history, and afterwards upon composition … the three younger classes … pronounce an oration on a stage erected for that purpose in the hall, immediately after prayers; that they may learn, by early habit, presence of mind and proper pronunciation and gesture in public speaking. This excellent practise … has had the most admirable effects. The senior scholars, every five or six weeks, pronounce orations of their own composition, to which all persons of any note in the neighbourhood are invited or admitted.78

Rush wrote of Witherspoon: ‘He gave a new turn to education,
and spread correctness in literature throughout the United States. It was easy to distinguish his pupils everywhere whenever they spoke or wrote for the public'. Tellingly, Rush makes specific reference here to homogeneity in public expression. Witherspoon wrote: ‘Oratory has its chief power in promiscuous assemblies, and there it reigned of old, and reigns still, by its visible effect.’ Using public forums to create more homogenous modes of expression through persuasive rhetoric was very different from the Scottish Moderate conception of unitary perception, which was innate within individuals, who could best harness their trust in their own perception through disinterested observation. Six of the seven subjects that Witherspoon’s Lectures on Eloquence would thus develop belonged to composition and public expression, with ‘taste and criticism’ only discussed in the seventh lecture.

Witherspoon explicitly referred to Xenophon in his discussion of the merits of public as opposed to familial education, and the kind of rhetoric that the former necessitated. In his Lectures on Eloquence, he stated that ‘Xenophon is superior to almost every author in dignity, elegance, and sweetness in the narration.’ Xenophon’s Education of Cyrus (whose influence receives little mention in the historiography of colonial and early national American education) portrayed a civic order where young men left their familial farms for Persian cities in order to be instilled with stoical discipline. Yet for Witherspoon, while classical approaches to higher education correctly removed parents from the process in order to instill public duty in a public forum, there remained flaws in such a vision. After outlining the new problems that may arise from overly ‘platoon-like’ student groups removed from their families, Witherspoon made a direct parallel between the offspring of well-to-do American families and those in classical Athens:

I take it for granted that an assembly of the vulgar in Athens was just like an assembly of common people is … and they were very disorderly in plain from what we read of Plato being pulled down from the desk when he went up to defend Socrates.

Indeed, these problems had been anticipated by classical authors themselves: In Plato’s Laws, the ‘Athenian stranger’ describes the regimented education practises of Sparta and Crete: ‘You keep your young in a flock, like a bunch of colts grazing in a herd … None of you gives him private groom and educates him by currying … him.’ Where Locke argued that a sense of morals
could only be installed by parents, Witherspoon responded to the problems inherent in a classically structured education removed from parental involvement with his own version of moral conscience. His first Letter on Education (1772) thus began by emphasising education as the ‘duty’ of a ‘Christian’ as well as a ‘citizen’, where ‘you and I have chiefly in view the religious education of Children’, meaning primarily that one ‘desires to educate his children in the fear of God’.86 ‘The end I consider as most important’, he argued in the third letter, ‘is, the glory of God in the eternal happiness and salvation of children.’87

In terms of public expression and rhetoric, Witherspoon’s analysis of the figurative and metaphorical language of Native Americans in his Lectures on Eloquence perhaps demonstrates another of Xenophon’s influences in his Scottish-American context. Plato had modified traditional classical approaches to educative rhetoric through his Athenian stranger’s recommendation that poetic forms of expression, which could contain more than one meaning, might be superior to Xenophon’s focus on more simple methods of persuasion. ‘Poetic’ speech could truly educate a group of young people, as in the same speech the poet could address different messages adaptable to the radically different personalities in the audience.88 Yet Witherspoon departed from this Platonic influence in his discussion of the supposed political immaturity of Native Americans. He connected this immaturity to a mode of expression whose layered meanings did not allow the kind of persuasive rhetoric needed for public communication and political continuity between individuals of a particular community. In all uncultivated ‘tongues’, figurative language was ‘frequent and very strong … The Indians in America have a language full of metaphors. They take up the hatchet, for going to war, and they brighten the chain, when they confirm a peace.’89 While scholarly attention has recently focused on figures such as Jefferson’s anxiety that Native American words might enter the American lexicon, Witherspoon’s attention to the latter’s figurative language ought to merit similar attention.90 Figurative language and rhetoric was inappropriate for public persuasion. The latter ought to make other citizens understand ‘single propositions’, and cement their political unity through shared duty to divine moral conscience. For several layers of meaning to appear in one poetic proposition was unacceptable, on both political, and Calvinist epistemological grounds.

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We should not forget that Witherspoon’s attention to clarity of expression in America partially derived from a provincial anxiety. Ironically, this anxiety was structurally similar to that which motivated Scottish Moderates to articulate a language of sociability in post-Union Scotland. Scottish Moderate ‘disinterested observers’ had created a version of moral sense that mitigated their own depoliticised positions within the new British union. By placing themselves as the intellectual fountainheads for a version of philosophy that instilled them as spokespeople for civic sociability, they could carve out for themselves a privileged social position. Their positive disinterestedness derived from their position as newly depoliticized provincial actors in an Anglo-Scottish union. This could garner upon them a *raison d’etre* that was based on their supposed individual perceptual abilities, which allowed their elite focus on belles letters and polite discourse. Men such as James Beattie, in opposition to Hume, countered any provincial anxieties by reasserting the primacy of empirical understanding and ‘common sense’ perceptions. They did so as disinterested observers whose literary studies and belles lettres cultivated a sense of linguistic style that could enable them to emulate ‘an English author of learning [who] is the master, not the slave, of his language’. This could connect them to London, despite the provincial position that located them within the new federative Anglo-Scottish union.

In a new American environment, attention to orthodox expression within a new political union could allay similar anxieties for Witherspoon: America’s distance from London’s metropolitan centre created a similar predicament to Scotland’s provincial position, even after American independence. In an article in the *Pennsylvania Journal* on 9 May 1781, on the use of language in the new American republic, Witherspoon described Princeton’s new curriculum:

> Education … must be very imperfect in any seminary where no care is taken to form the scholars to propriety and accuracy, in that language which they must write and speak all their lives … our situation is now, and will probably continue to be such, as to require peculiar attention upon this subject.

That ‘our situation’ required ‘peculiar attention’ to language and grammar was especially relevant to Witherspoon, who sought to redefine the meaning of cultivation and expression. Indeed, in
1782, Witherspoon replied to a letter from William Stewart in Edinburgh inquiring about life in America. Discussing the maintenance of ‘the advantage of persons of property’ in America and the differences in legal language and documentation between the two countries, he pointed out that, ‘the State of things and ideas of the different countries [Britain and America] are so different that deception is very common and this deception arises more frequently from error than fraud’. While Witherspoon, the Scottish-American educator, was anxious to distinguish between ‘error’ and ‘fraud’ when it came to the expression and composition of ideas in the new republic, the notion of fraud took on another meaning: a provincial anxiety, where a threat of betrayal by previous national identities could be made apparent through language and self-expression, hovered ominously. In a new American nation, the danger of interruption from older linguistic identities could be reduced by a rigorous and orthodox approach to the English language in idiomatic as well as syntactical terms. Witherspoon thus protested against the use of the word ‘Scotch’ in the phrase ‘Scotch and foreign mercenaries’ in the original draft of the Declaration of Independence. The authority for this statement is found in R.H. Lee’s *Life of R.H. Lee*, published in Philadelphia in 1825: ‘It was said that Dr. Witherspoon, the learned president of Nassau Hall College, who was a Scotchman by birth, moved to strike out the word ‘Scotch’, which was accordingly done.’ Lee’s assertion seems to be corroborated by the words in the manuscript of Witherspoon’s *Address to the Natives of Scotland Residing in America*: ‘It has given me no little uneasiness to hear the word ‘Scotch’ used as term of reproach in the American controversy.’ Witherspoon argued elsewhere that ‘by the removal of the court to London, and especially by the union of the two kingdoms, the Scottish manner of speaking, came to be considered as provincial barbarism; which, therefore, all scholars are now at the utmost pains to avoid.’

Added to the fear of ‘Scoticisms’, was the American dimension to Witherspoon’s conception of provincial distance from the English linguistic benchmark. When he wrote a series of thoughts known collectively as *The Druid*, he most explicitly considered the problems of language and expression in America, coining the term ‘Americanism’: ‘The word Americanism’ he wrote, ‘is exactly similar in its formation and significance to the word Scotticism.’ Landsman points out that Witherspoon’s discussion of Americanism criticised the suggestion that ‘a metropolis
ought to dictate cultural standards, such as language, contending instead that the supremacy of metropolitan English over dialects filled with Scotticisms or “Americanism” - a word he coined - came only from the dominant position of the metropolis and not from any inherent superiority in expression.” Nonetheless, local vulgarisms could still come about thanks to America’s distance from Britain on the one hand, and the further distance between educated centers within America, on the other. Landsman slightly overstates Witherspoon’s case for the province, in this respect. For Witherspoon, America had not yet reached the capacity to match its previous metropolitan benchmark, and in this embryonic stage of national development, older provincial identities could rise up in the form of local vulgarism. The fact that a discussion of ‘Americanism’ appeared alongside that of Scotticism, which Witherspoon did in fact criticise on a number of occasions, supports this idea. Idiomatic peculiarities could arise because ‘we are at a great distance from the island of Great Britain, in which the standard of language is as yet supposed to be found’. Words such as ‘bamboozle’, ‘bilk’, ‘bite’ (meaning to cheat), and ‘Sham Abraham’ (meaning to shirk duties), were described by Witherspoon as ‘cant phrases, introduced into public speaking or composition’. In the Pennsylvania Journal in 1781 he allowed himself to speculate that ‘in this new empire, some centre of learning … will … be found, which shall obtain influence, and prescribe the rules of speech and writing to every other part’. That Witherspoon used the term ‘as yet’ in relation to the need for America to use Britain as a linguistic benchmark does suggest that he saw a time in the future when standards could be set closer to home. But for the moment at least, provincial anxieties for Witherspoon remained in what was still a young republic.

In a letter between one George Tucker and Witherspoon, regarding the former’s sons who came from Scotland to New Jersey, Witherspoon responded by writing that “It was a pleasure for me to receive your letters because you have Precisely the Idea which I wish were more general respecting education. We are obliged to contend against the Prejudices of the Times which are much against the ancient Language meaning particularly the Latin & Greek”, while, importantly, in New Jersey he has endeavoured to increase understanding of ‘not only the ancient Languages but the modern & the Theory of universal Grammar’. Witherspoon thus distanced himself even from certain English writers such as Samuel Johnson, whom he described as ‘such a lover of hard
words, that he is the worst pattern for young persons that can be named.\textsuperscript{102} By seeking to express themselves in such an advanced manner, they would risk provincial error. Rather, simplicity and orthodoxy of language would be most persuasive in public discourse, and maintain the integrity of those connected in the new American federation of states. ‘Where there is no affectation’, Witherspoon pointed out, ‘men speak properly’.\textsuperscript{103}

Despite any similarities between Witherspoon’s provincial American anxiety and Blair and Beattie’s social predicament in post union Scotland, the new American union provided the context for Witherspoon to attack the very form of cultivated and ‘affected’ expression that they had used to assuage their own provincial anxieties. Witherspoon’s departure from enlightenment Scotland allowed him to articulate a new approach to linguistic expression that was not constrained, or lampooned, by a Scottish Moderate approach in which words were deemed to be the individual’s tool of sensual discernment. His new linguistic freedom, of course, derived from a moral viewpoint in which man did not have a truly free agency. This over-emphasised agency, which fraudulently allowed Scottish Moderates to use language in order to construct a new sociable reality, prevented their access to divine duty: for Witherspoon, duty to divine moral conscience, rather than individual human agency and perception, could bring about social stability. The notion that individuals within a new American federal union maintained an unrestricted perceptual agency was religiously problematic, according to the Scottish evangelical approach that Witherspoon had maintained in America. It could prevent the necessary ‘disunion’ between the individual moral self and his actions in the outside world. Two forms of fragmentation - linguistic and moral - created an anxiety that necessitated a particular form of language and rhetoric. The latter could be promoted in order to mitigate the individual’s necessary alienation from the outside world. It could do so by teaching him a form of public rhetoric that could clearly articulate to other individuals the need for duty to divine moral conscience, which could allow a stable and communal connection, and a stable American union.

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Indeed, Witherspoon’s unregenerate man, who failed wholly to perceive the external world, shared the same problematic epistemology that characterised David Hume’s scepticism, against which Scottish Common Sense philosophers had defined
themselves. That parallels developed between Witherspoon’s evangelism and Hume’s scepticism seems less surprising if we consider the socio-political context in which their respective philosophical approaches were formed. Here, a reading of Gilles Deleuze’s analysis of David Hume’s writings, in which Hume’s linguistic and grammatical structures are used as evidence for the provincial position in which he found himself, may provide us with the conceptual tools to do the same with Witherspoon in a Scottish-American, as well as an Anglo-Scottish, linguistic context. For Deleuze, Hume’s understanding of the need for repetition of words and ideas in the mind, in order to ‘imagine’ a union between the self and the outer world, arose from a political position in which he found himself, as a Scotsman by birth, distanced from the centre of experience in London. Hume’s scepticism, in which true union between the inner mind and the outer world could not be obtained, is here related to an underlying anxiety surrounding the perception of the inherent fragility of political union between Scotland and Britain. Of course, Hume, who changed the title of his History of Britain to the History of England, was in practice a strong proponent of Scotland’s absorption into Britain and the connection to London. This is not to say, however, that provincial anxieties did not remain in his consciousness and characterise his thinking. In fact, such anxieties may even have corresponded to a greater emphasis on federation between Scotland and England. Federation, after all, was a specific means by which a form of union could take place, so that the constituent parts of that union could still remain autonomous in certain respects.

Witherspoon experienced this tension in his early life, and replaced it with a similar one centering on America’s relationship with metropolitan Britain. This may contextualize any epistemological similarity between his Scottish evangelism in a new American union, and Hume’s Scottish scepticism within the new British union. Consider the following: Both Witherspoon’s Calvinist sense of depravity, and Hume’s philosophical scepticism, distanced the individual from truly perceiving the world in the same manner - with the same moral sense - as other human beings. Both of these epistemologies fragmented the mind from the outside world, and necessitated a ‘federative’ connection that was somehow ‘imagined’. Hume’s scepticism necessitated the use of repetitious rhetoric, so as to order the mind’s flawed perceptive qualities, and fashion an imagined external reality based on a
repetition of ideas in the mind. For Hume, the repetition of ideas was analogous with the role of grace, allowing its own fleeting, imagined glimpse of external reality. In his *Treatise*, he argued that the mind was ‘a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations.’

Language - the words used to describe external reality - could not truly reflect this reality. For Witherspoon, it could not express more universal, religious, truths: In fact, external realities were perceived according to God’s will, rather than one’s own individual moral (or any other) sense. Witherspoon suggested that humans were always one step away from true action and engagement with outside affairs, which were only truly understood, and controlled, by God. He would have described Hume’s ‘infinite variety of perceptions’, and the lack of continuity between individuals it represented, as the universal state of fallen man who, rather than seeking to perceive an external reality that was always at one distance from his own moral centre, ought instead to conform to a duty to God’s understanding.

Susan Manning connects the instances of ‘parataxis’ in Hume’s language to his anxious political position: Anglo-Scottish union conjoined two linguistic identities in a ‘paratactic’ manner. A fear of betraying this union necessitated simple language with short sentences, so as to avoid longer clauses and conjunctions that might inadvertently advertise older provincial Scottish identities. Paratactic paragraphs contained jarring syntactical connections that lacked integrity and lucidity through conjunctions, making one clause simply follow another. They reflected the author’s wish to maintain a simple, staccato run of sentences so as to avoid giving away any older linguistic identities through more elaborate sentence structures. We can connect Witherspoon and Hume with similar methodology. Where things might be joined only in the imagination, all forms of conjunction, including those between words, could betray the integrity of identity. Like Hume, Witherspoon found himself in a provincial position where connections between words and between paragraphs could betray the integrity of his expression. By paying close attention to the nature of these connections, and reducing or simplifying them if possible, their dangers could be reduced. Parataxis in the writing of formerly provincial Scottish authors such as Hume and Witherspoon may have demonstrated a remaining provincial anxiety in their developing identities. An anxiety regarding
‘union’ between words (conjunctions) may have stemmed from a remaining anxiety about the new political unions from within which these respected thinkers articulated their philosophies. As we have seen, these philosophies often related to the structure of language and its relationship with the mind. A case could therefore be made that these two related anxieties better contextualise the similarity between Hume’s sceptism and Witherspoon’s Calvinist epistemology. After all, this similarity related to a fundamental inability for true ‘union’ between the mind and the workings of the outside world.

For example, parataxis tended to appear in their writings when they sought to link personal perceptions with new conceptions of political union. Hume’s Abstract of a Treatise of Human Nature insisted:

\[
\text{in no single instance [is] the ultimate connexion of any object … discoverable, either by our senses or reason … ‘Tis their constant union alone, with which we are acquainted.} \quad 109
\]

Unions broke into fragments where ‘everything, that is different, is distinguishable, may be separated’. 110 Note the lack of conjunctions and use of paratactic clauses in his writings on these issues. His most famous proposition regarding the integrity of personal identity relates to this observation:

\[
\text{what we call a mind, is nothing but a heap or collection of different perceptions, unites together by certain relations, and suppos’d tho’ falsely, to be endow’d with a perfect simplicity and identity …} \quad 111
\]

Hume suggests that ‘this uniting principle’ is ‘not to be consider’d as an inseparable connexion’, but ‘a gentle force, which commonly prevails, and is the cause why … languages so nearly correspond to each other’. 112 The mind was ‘federative’ rather than ‘incorporative’, reflecting a sum of parts rather than a core structure. 113

A kind of mental parataxis represented a union between the mind and its outer world, which, however, lacked true integrity, where ‘the perplexity arising from this contradiction produces a propension to unite these broken appearances by the fiction of a continu’d existence …’ 114 One had to remain unthinking about this ‘fiction’ and maintain it through language, in order to remain ‘whole’ to one’s perception. While at pains to remove evidence
of pre-union origins, as is evident in his writings, traces could always betray these efforts and show in personal linguistic terms the fragility of the identity of a new political union. While Hume lamented ‘the very corrupt Dialect’ of even educated Scots, his own paratactic repetitions betrayed the very linguistic orthodoxy he preached.115

One could make a similar link regarding Witherspoon’s emphasis on a new federation between American states and his continual stress on orthodox English language. This language was necessary in order to create a more homogenous mode of public expression so as to unite the states within such a federation. Our understanding of Hume’s paratactic analogy between personal union and political integration may therefore influence our analysis of Witherspoon’s approach to language and education in his Scottish-American context. How could the integrity of connections between different parts of a single American entity be maintained through education towards common speech and rhetoric? It is telling that in his ambiguous discussion of the ‘state of nature’ in his Lectures on Moral Philosophy, Witherspoon’s ends abruptly with several syntactical breaks as he begins explicitly to discuss the nature of political union. He sought to justify a new nation founded in conflict with another one, but which was also in debt to older cultural and political ideas such as notions of contract. Moreover, he did so as an individual who had experienced life in both of these nations. On the one hand, for Witherspoon, ‘there are those who say … that the principles of our nature lead to society’, yet,

Our nature as it is now, when free and independent, is prone to injury, and consequently to war, is equally manifest; and that in a state of natural liberty, there is no other way but force, for preserving security and repelling injury … one class of the above mentioned writers say, that nature prompts to society; and the other, that necessity and interest obliges it.116

After several paragraphs composed of paratactic sentences without real conjunctions or ordered syntax, Witherspoon fails to synthesise the two classes of writers. An element of uncertainty and relativity remains with qualifications such as ‘equally manifest’. This failure to synthesis ideas, alongside a disintegration of syntax, comes at a point when Witherspoon discusses man’s development within a new union of states in contrast to a previous
union with Britain. His language continues to remain tentative and qualified: ‘The end of the union should be the protection of liberty, as far as it is a blessing.’ With clauses such as ‘as far as it is’ Witherspoon wrestled with the problem of political union and individual liberty within this new union. An anxiety that such a union may lack integrity seems evident in this tentative language.

Witherspoon’s Lectures on Eloquence seem, in this light, perpetually focused on word order and the nature of the division between words, sentences and paragraphs. This focus, alongside his often-repeated recommendation that his students make clear ‘one single proposition’ rather than many connected ideas, seems particularly apt for analysis using Deleuze’s methodology. The lectures’ preface noted the reduction of the number of divisions between sections from seven to three, as ‘a composition must have a beginning, a middle and an end’. Many connections between sections would create confusion, interrupt the ‘narrative’ and would discourage ministers employed in education from avoiding ‘all turgid declamation’. In the summary of topics that he proposed to cover, Witherspoon repeatedly spoke of the need to teach aspects of language that related to words and their division into ‘constituent parts’, as he proposed for Lecture III, and ‘their order, connexion, proportion and ends’, as he proposed for Lecture VI. After dismissing the ‘old’ rhetoric that had formerly been taught in the College of New Jersey, he described the importance of a ‘good order’ of words in a discourse. He proclaimed as though some original concept that ‘Every work … is to be considered as a whole, and a clearness of judgment in point of method, will decide the place and proportion of the several parts of which they are composed’. ‘The necessity of order in the whole structure of a piece’, he repeated, ‘shows that the rule is good which is given by some, that an orator before he begin his discourse (he seems to refer to ‘orator’ in the Augustan sense, to mean writer as well as speaker) should concentrate the subject as it were, and reduce it to one single proposition, either expressed or conceived in his mind’. ‘Agreeably to this principle’, he continued, ‘I think that not only the subject of a single discourse should be reducable to one proposition, but the general divisions or principle heads should not be many in number.’ ‘Subdivisions’ should be connected with each other ‘as naturally’ as possible.

The rhetorical device of syllogism, relating to the ordering of ideas, thus seems to have been particularly important for Witherspoon because it enabled links and connections even when
they were difficult to make: ‘Sometimes the sensible ideas of time and place suggest an order, not only in historical narrations and law pleadings, which relate to facts, but in drawing of characters, describing the progress of virtue and vice, and even in other subjects, where the connection between those ideas and the things spoken of, is not very strong’. Like Hume, Witherspoon found himself in a provincial position where connections between words and between paragraphs could betray the integrity of his expression. By paying close attention to the nature of these connections, and reducing or simplifying them if possible, their dangers could be reduced.

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For Witherspoon, an epistemology whose impetus derived from the necessity to make others ‘perceive’ what he ‘perceived’, took on a classical meaning, which related to rhetorical persuasion. It also took on a Calvinist meaning, which related to a fundamental human inability to perceive the world through individual conscience. This inability carried with it a concomitant need for evangelical persuasion in order to make such individuals ‘perceive’ their connection to each other through a common duty to God’s conscience, which situated them outside of their own sensual selves. The greater role for civic leaders in the early American republic - a new generation of whom were under his tutelage - allowed Witherspoon to insert something of his evangelical Calvinist influence into the more traditional classical rhetoric that these potential leaders came to be schooled in. Because a more classical form of homogenous rhetoric and expression was not predicated on a view of individual moral perception, it could compliment a more religious, and specifically Calvinist epistemology. The latter emphasised that human actors - whose perception since the fall of Adam was inherently corrupted - could only be taught to communally perceive God’s conscience in the manner that their teacher did: through duty. By focusing on educating citizens for simple but persuasive public expression, Witherspoon could at the same time reduce the relevance of the Scottish Moderates’ sensually orientated definition of linguistic cultivation.

Higher education would best equip Witherspoon’s American students to access God’s ‘moral conscience’ through duty, rather than pure understanding. To this sense of alienation, where humans were unable to truly perceive morality, we may add a provincial one. The latter derived from a rather Humean understanding of
the fragility of union. This anxiety influenced an approach to language in American higher education that did not reflect a quick dismissal of Hume through recourse to Scottish notions of individual common sense. In Scotland these notions allowed the development of belles-lettres and literary influences through their stress on the primacy of individual expression. The moral philosophy that Witherspoon promoted in order to attack this notion of individual expression on Calvinist epistemological grounds in fact reflected Hume’s sceptical epistemology.

Where a system of moral philosophy, which merged civic duty with religious duty, was the only response to a human political construct that would inevitably fragment under predicable human corruption, another original sin also posed the threat of fragmentation, and influenced Witherspoon’s stress on the necessity of communal higher education. Forever present in his mindset - like Hume’s - was the fragmenting tendency in one’s own language and expression. A Scottish linguistic upbringing, like innate human depravity, would always threaten any new human political system, which is what, for the only clergyman to have signed the Declaration of Independence, America represented. Older provincial influences threatened to personally disrupt a new political union between states. The same applied to his students’ varying and unpredictable use of ‘Americanism’. Philosophical analogues between Witherspoon and Hume could thus also reflect a certain shared provincial experience in their lives.

For Witherspoon, two forms of alienation - moral and provincial - led to a perceived need for more homogenous forms of expression in public forums. A heightened sense of individual perceptive agency had both negative moral and political implications: it would open the door to innate human corrupting tendencies, as well as linguistic and expressive corruptions. Both would inevitably disrupt a new union of states that needed to be made more cohesive, in order to respond collectively and dutifully to the divine providence that had brought their union about.
Notes

1 John Witherspoon, born near Edinburgh, on the 5th of February 1722, was the sixth president of Princeton, New Jersey, a signor of the Declaration of Independence, and from 1776 to 1782, a member of the Continental Congress. Aged fourteen, he went to Edinburgh University. At twenty-one, he graduated and followed his father into preaching. In 1745 he was ordained a minister of the parish of Beith. He married Elizabeth Montgomery, and had ten children. With her death, he remarried and had a further two children. He gained a wide reputation through his many ecclesiastical writings and, in January of 1757, was installed as pastor at Paisley. Widely known as a leader of the evangelical Popular Party in the established Church of Scotland, he came to America in 1768 in order to assume the presidency of the College of New Jersey, later to be called Princeton. He held office until his death a quarter of a century later in 1794. For biographical information, see M. Stohlman, John Witherspoon: Parson, Politician, Patriot (The Westminster Press: 1976) and V. Collins, President Witherspoon: A Biography, 2 vols., (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1925).


4 John Witherspoon, ‘Letter to David Witherspoon, March 17 1777’, John Witherspoon Collection, Princeton University Department for Rare Books and Special Collections, Correspondence, Box 2, folder 23.

5 Ibid.


8 For Henry May, Scottish Common Sense Realism served as the primary vehicle for the ‘Didactic Enlightenment’ in America, which espoused ‘a variety of thought which was opposed both to scepticism and revolution, but tried to save from what it saw as the debacle of the Enlightenment the intelligible universe, clear and certain moral judgments, and progress’. George Marsden suggests that Scottish Common Sense Realism affirmed the existence of ‘both reality and morality’. H. May, The Enlightenment in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), pxvi; G. Marsden, The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), p.48.
17 For example, Witherspoon lampooned the Moderate preacher in his *Ecclesiastical Characteristics*, written in Scotland in 1753; Witherspoon, ‘Ecclesiastical Characteristics; or The Arcana of Church Policy - being a humble attempt to open up the mystery of moderation’, *Works*, vol. III, p. 221.
22 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
Thomas Miller, at least, recognises that Witherspoon rejected the aesthetic elements of Hutcheson's philosophy; Miller, ‘Witherspoon, Blair, and the Rhetoric of Civic Humanism’, p. 108.
34 Ibid, p. 379.
36 Witherspoon, ‘Philosophical Disputations’, *Works*, pp. 159-161, 166.
42 Scottish Covenanters in the later eighteenth century maintained an outward looking form of evangelical Calvinism that encompassed a ‘national program’ that made use of older seventeenth century Scottish Covenanting influences in order to link this program to the ascendancy of Britain after the Act of Union. See R. Findlay, ‘Keeping the Covenant: Scottish National Identity’, in T.M. Devine and J.R. Young (eds.), *Eighteenth Century Scotland, New Perspectives* (East Lothian: Tuckwell Press, 1999), pp. 121-134.
43 See Witherspoon, ‘Ecclesiastical Characteristics; or The Arcana of Church Policy - being a humble attempt to open up the mystery of moderation’, *Works*, 3. p. 211.
47 Ibid.
48 See Witherspoon, ‘Letter Sent to Scotland for the Scots Magazine’, *Works*, IV, pp. 283-8; Witherspoon, ‘Address to the Natives of Scotland Residing in America’, *Works*, III, p. 47. For Scottish evangelicals, an outward looking form of Calvinism encompassed a ‘national program’ that made use of older seventeenth century Scottish Covenanting influences in order to link this program to the ascendancy of Britain after the Act of Union. The enhanced prosperity and territorial
expansion inherent in such a union could provide greater opportunity for the evangelical mission. Their support for Scotland’s link to London, then, derived from a rather different impetus than that of the Moderates. The Scottish Convention of Friends of the People thus made numerous references to Scotland’s covenanting past, and in their championship of a Scottish Calvinist ‘commonwealth’ tied to the wider interests of Britain, were an important icon for democratic aspirations in Scotland during the late eighteenth century.


53 They sought to connect mental perception with ‘the real empirical lineaments of the thing itself’; T D Bozeman, Protestants in an Age of Science, p. 9.

54 Witherspoon, Ecclesiastical Characteristics, Works, III, p. 221.

55 Witherspoon, ‘Letter to Nicholas Van Dyke, May 12, 1786’, John Witherspoon Collection, Princeton University Department for Rare Books and Special Collections, Correspondence, Box 2, folder 8.

56 Ibid, pp. 148-149.


60 Ibid, p. 498.


62 Witherspoon, ‘Thanksgiving Sermon, April 19 1783’, Works, III, p. 82

63 Witherspoon, ‘Address to the Students in the Senior Class, (1775)’, Works, III, p. 102.
On the relatively broad curriculum at Princeton, see Francis L. Broderick, ‘Pulpit, Physics, and Politics: The Curriculum of the College of New Jersey, 1746-1794’, *William and Mary Quarterly* 6 (Jan. 1949), pp. 42-68.


Ibid, pp. 370, 374.


Ibid, pp. 369, 370, 374.


Green, ‘Dr Witherspoon’s Administration at Princeton College’, *The Presbyterian Magazine* IV, October 1854, p. 468.


For this view, see, for example, M.A. Noll, ‘Common Sense Traditions and American Evangelical Thought’, *American Quarterly* 37, 1985, pp. 216-238.

Witherspoon, ‘Address to the Inhabitants of Jamaica, and other West-India Islands, in behalf of the College of New Jersey (1772)’, *Works*, IV, p. 193.


Ibid, p. 484.

87 Ibid, p. 140.
94 Witherspoon, ‘Letter addressed to a William Stewart at North Castle Street, Edenborough, 1782’, John Witherspoon Collection, Princeton Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Box 2, Folder 19.
95 Cited in Boyd, *Declaration of Independence*, p. 36.
100 Ibid, p. 459.
101 Witherspoon, ‘Correspondence with St. George Tucker, May 1 1787’, John Witherspoon Collection, Princeton Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Box 1, folder 16A.
103 Ibid, p. 554.
105 See Deleuze, Difference and Repetition, pp. 70-73.
107 Hume, Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals, p. 73.
113 Deleuze, Difference and Repetition, p. 73.
117 Ibid, p. 419.
120 Ibid, p. 497.
121 Ibid, p. 543.
122 Ibid, p. 543.
124 Ibid, p. 549.