Cowper and Conversation

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'To my taste, the most fruitful and most natural exercise of our minds is conversation', said Montaigne ('Le plus fructueux et naturel exercice de notre esprit, c'est à mon gré la conference').[1] Many an eighteenth-century writer would have agreed, including, I would hazard, Cowper. Soon after he met Lady Austen in July 1781 when he was writing 'Charity', the sixth of his set of 'moral satires', he praised her as 'a lively agreeable Woman', who 'has seen much of the World and accounts it a great Simpleton as it is, she laughs and makes laugh, and keeps up a conversation without seeming to labor at it'.[2]

This brand of effortless wit may not have been entirely to the taste of John Newton, here Cowper's correspondent. However, Newton would have been content enough to recognise the value of good serious conversation. Cowper attested in *Adelphi*, his conversion narrative, to the value of talk when describing his time at the 'Collegium Insanorum' of Dr Nathaniel Cotton in St Albans. The healing power of conversation was no small part of the process by which Cowper recovered from his l763 mental attack. 'In a short time', he reports, 'Dr Cotton became satisfied and acquiesced in the soundness of the cure, and much sweet communion I had with him concerning the things of our salvation. He visited me every morning while I stayed with him, which was near twelve months after my recovery, and the Gospel was always the delightful theme of our conversation.'[3]

Indeed, Cowper had always been interested in the theory and practice of conversation, and it is in the union of these two facets of talk, its wit and its seriousness, its elegance and its gravity, that we can locate his consistent view of its salving qualities.

We can trace this interest from the very earliest of Cowper's writings. During the period of his association in London with the so-called 'Geniuses' (his fellow scions of Westminster: Charles Churchill, George Colman, Robert Lloyd and Bonnell Thornton), Cowper contributed five articles to *The Connoisseur*, a journal edited by Colman and Thornton. The last of these, in number 138 (September 16, 1756),[4] was on the topic of conversation.

This is a light, nonchalant and witty essay, of a piece with the manner of his poetry at this early period. Cowper begins by citing a one-act comedy by Louis de Boissy called *Le Français à Londres*, which features a 'rough *Englishman*' called Jacques Rosbif, whose conversational limitations are amusingly played on by a sophisticated marquis, the Frenchman in alien territory. When the marquis decides to mimic 'conversation à l'anglaise', he stays silent save for an occasional 'How do you'. This comedy was first performed by the Comédiens français in 1727 and published in the same year. An English translation appeared in 1755, and so the play is likely to have been topical when Cowper wrote the *Connoisseur* essay. Having glanced humorously at the English reputation for lacking social graces, Cowper goes on to list a number of faults of conversation. He mocks people of fashion whose conversation is limited to the card-games they incessantly play. He attacks those who commandeer conversation and so reduce dialogue to monologue. He mocks the

'Attitudinarians and Face-makers' who accompany talk with grimaces and absurd gestures, and the 'Emphaticals' who ram home random words, such as 'the' and 'and'. He is disgusted by 'Low Speakers' who whisper close up to your face. All this is comic knock-about of a pleasant enough kind. There is just one brief serious moment, when Cowper refers to the commonplace that it is speech that distinguishes us from animals. The idea dates back at least to the first book of Cicero's *De Officiis*, where Cicero states that humans differ from animals in having reason ('ratio') as well as instinct. The power of reason allows us to associate with each other in the common bonds of speech ('oratio') and life. Cowper's satirical point, of course, is that abuses of speech return us to an animal-like state. He gives us a series of parallels to make this point, so that, for example, those who complain all the time are like screech owls, and those who are always repeating the same dull note are like cuckoos. This may remind us of the serious point at the heart of the eighteenth-century poem most concerned with the uses and abuses of words, Pope's *Dunciad*, which is predicated on the premise that the misuse of language dehumanises us.

Reference to Cowper's small but instructive body of essays in literary criticism supports a link between the jokes about poor conversationalists and the serious idea of language as the definition of humanity. His 'Dissertation on the Modern Ode', published in the *St James's Magazine* (edited by Robert Lloyd), in April 1763,[5] makes splendid fun of the meaninglessness of the language of fashionable odes, such as their exclamatory 'Ah me!'s and their habit of thoughtlessly repeating conventional descriptions, so that every poetic 'rill' must 'babble' or 'prattle'. One of Cowper's likely targets is Thomas Gray, whose 'Elegy' of 1751 has a poet pouring his listless length by a babbling brook and whose Pindaric odes of 1757 would later be subjected to a serious analysis for their linguistic abuses in Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*. Cowper's later book reviews in the *Analytical Review* also pay attention to misuses of language. Timothy Dwight's *The Conquest of Canaan* (1785; published in England in 1788)[6] is praised, but is also taken to task for such solecisms as confusing 'learn' and 'teach' ('Sooth his rack'd nerves, and learn them not to feel') and 'suspend' and 'depend' ('For ah! On Irad all my joys suspend'). When dealing with a translation from the Persian *Poems of Ferdosi* by Joseph Champion,[7] Cowper's criticism becomes more amused and sardonic. Of the couplet, 'In acts beneficient, as when the rain, / Of fertile Behmen cultivates the plain', Cowper observes that it 'informs us, that the rain in Persia not only waters but *cultivates* the soil. Our English farmers would be glad of such showers: they would save them the expence of many labourers.' Particularly interesting in view of Cowper's own experiences is his joke about a line in an anonymous volume of poems by 'a young Gentleman of Hertford College, Oxford'.[8] Of the poet's appeal to his readers to learn the lesson 'To finish life before that life expires', he comments that the line 'is a very alarming one, especially considering that it is written by a lover mourning the death of his mistress. His tutor should watch him narrowly, and his bed-maker should every night take care to secure his garters.' Cowper can joke about these matters! It is fortunately no longer necessary to insist on Cowper's literary skill and the seriousness with which he approached composition. These reviews demonstrate that serious concern with language together, even as late as 1789, with a lively talent for the witty rejoinder.

In fact, a combination of wit and seriousness is the characteristic of Cowper's attitude to words and literature throughout his life; and it is such a combination that also marks his own mature poetic style. Words are the province of the spoken as well as the written

language, and it is in 'Conversation', one of the most significant and best of the moral satires of 1782, that Cowper most tellingly brings his interest in speech into the written language.

For Cowper's biography, I think it highly significant that his decision to write this poem followed hot on his happy meeting with Lady Austen. Only 15 days after the letter to Newton in which he praised her conversation, he wrote again to Newton to tell him that he was busy writing 'Conversation'. This, he said, was meant to open a second volume in parallel with the earlier 'Table Talk', which was intended to open the first volume. In the event, both poems were published in the 1782 volume.[9] However, Cowper was at pains to insist to his publisher Joseph Johnson that the two poems were very different, and he expanded on this point in a letter to Mrs Newton:

> …it is not a dialogue as the title would lead you to surmise, nor does it bear the least resemblance to Table-talk, except that it is serio-comic like all the Rest. My design in it is to convince the world that they make but an indifferent use of their tongues, considering the Intention of Providence when he endued them with the faculty of Speech; to point out the Abuses, which is the jocular part of the Business, and to prescribe the remedy, which is the grave and sober.[10]

'Conversation' begins by asserting that there is a difference between mere talking and real conversation. Samuel Johnson, one of the century's great conversationalists, made this same point, as reported by James Boswell in his famous biography:

> Though his usual phrase for conversation was *talk*, yet he made a distinction; for when he once told me that he dined the day before at a friend's house, with 'a very pretty company'; and I asked him if there was good conversation, he answered, 'No, Sir; we had *talk* enough, but no *conversation*; there was nothing *discussed*.'[11]

Cowper establishes a serious note right from the outset by defining language as the 'sacred interpreter of human thought' and not to be lightly treated or misused in the service of vice. But he is quickly into the 'jocular' part of the poem, where he lists a serious of abuses of language and satirises those who are guilty of maltreating it. Some of these abuses are those he had described back in the *Connoisseur* essay of 25 years earlier. Thus an attack on swearing picks up on the 'Half-swearers' of the essay who 'split, and mince, and fritter their oaths into *gad's bud*, *ad's fish*, and *demme*'; and these lines bring to mind the essay's 'Emphaticals':

> Th'emphatic speaker dearly loves t'oppose
>
> In contact inconvenient, nose to nose,
>
> As if the gnomon on his neighbour's phiz,
>
> Touched with a magnet had attracted his. (ll. 269-72)[12]

Other motifs are continued. For example, Cowper has a passage on the bashful man who is so acutely sensitive and fearful that he ends up entirely mute:

> We sometimes think we could a speech produce
>
> Much to the purpose, if our tongues were loose,
>
> But, being tied, it dies upon the lip,

Faint as a chicken's note that has the pip:

Our wasted oil unprofitably burns

Like hidden lamps in old sepulchral urns. (ll. 353-58)

Remembering the French play from the *Connoisseur* article, Cowper observes that this fault seems to be a British one, since 'Few Frenchmen of this evil have complained' (l. 359). The list of conversational faults in the poem is longer than in the relatively short periodical essay, and this length accommodates a more formalised argument, which structurally works either by placing opposite faults beside each other or by placing a fault against its opposite good quality. So, while excessive assertiveness is seen as destroying the true interchange of conversation and as replacing the search for truth with dogmatic selfishness and the sin of pride, the opposite fault of hesitation, lack of clarity and cowardice is mocked:

DUBIUS is such a scrupulous good man –

Yes – you may catch him tripping if you can.

He would not with a peremptory tone

Assert the nose upon his face his own;

With hesitation admirably slow,

He humbly hopes, presumes it may be so….

He ties up all his hearers in suspense,

Knows what he knows as if he knew it not,

What he remembers seems to have forgot,

His sole opinion, whatsoe'er befall,

Centring at last in having none at all. (ll. 119-34)

Cowper's own conversationally witty style is conveyed in these extracts by his characteristic comic juxtaposition of contrasting linguistic registers, the colloquialism of 'phiz' and 'has the pip' set against the self-consciously literary style of 'contact inconvenient' and 'old sepulchral urns'. Notable, too, are the mimetic effects of Cowper's satiric language, as in the repetitive 'Knows what he knows as if he knew it not'. Similar techniques are effectively employed when Cowper mocks long-winded tellers of the same old stories, always about themselves:

But sedentary weavers of long tales,

Give me the fidgets and my patience fails.

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[1] Michel de Montaigne, 'De l'Art de Conferer', *Essais*, 3, 8; introduction by Alexandre Micha (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1969), 3, 137. Translation by M. A. Screech, *Michel de Montaigne: the Complete Essays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), p. 1045.

[2] 7 July 1781; *The Letters and Prose Writings*, ed. James King and Charles Ryskamp, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979-86), 1, 495.

[3] *Letters and Prose Writings*, 1, 40.

[4] *Letters and Prose Writings*, 5, 23-27.

[5] *Letters and Prose Writings*, 5, 33-39.

[6] *Letters and Prose Writings*, 5, 84-89.

[7] *Letters and Prose Writings*, 5, 115-19.

[8] *Letters and Prose Writings*, 5, 132.

[9] *Letters and Prose Writings*, 1, 499.

[10] *Letters and Prose Writings*, 1, 506.

[11] *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934-50), 4, 186.

[12] Quotations from *The Poems of William Cowper*, ed. John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980-85).