

CONVERSATION

First published in *Tait's*, XIV, October 1847, pp. 678–81. Contrary to *Tait's* usual practice, the essay was not printed as by De Quincey.

Reprinted in *F, Letters to a Young Man, and Other Papers* (1854), pp. 127–40.

Revised text, carrying many accidentals but only three substantive variants from *F*, in *SGG*, XIV, *Letters to a Young Man Whose Education has been Neglected, and Other Papers* (1860), pp. 150–62. In 1850, De Quincey published another paper called 'Conversation' in *Hogg's Instructor* (see Vol. 17, pp. 3–13). In *SGG*, he simply joined the 1847 and 1850 papers together to form one article called 'Conversation' (see *SGG*, XIV, pp. 150–79).

There are no manuscripts.

De Quincey was regarded as one of the great conversationalists of his age. 'What would one give', Jane Welsh Carlyle once remarked, 'to have him in a box, and take him out to talk!' (cited in Lindop, p. 288). In this essay De Quincey contrasts Samuel Johnson's 'retrogressive, retrospective' intellect with Edmund Burke's 'prodigious elasticity of...thinking'. While Johnson's thought moved 'back on its own steps', the 'very violence of a projective' as thrown out by Burke 'caused it to rebound in fresh forms, fresh angles....Motion propagated motion, and life threw off life' (see below, p. 219). As is so often the case, De Quincey seems to have taken Burke as a model, for his conversation was frequently characterized by the kind of vitality and expansiveness he celebrated in Burke. "The talk might be of "beeves", R. P. Gillies remembered,

and [De Quincey] could grapple with them if expected to do so, but his musical cadences were not in keeping with such work, and in a few minutes (not without some strictly logical sequence) he could escape at will from beeves to butterflies, and thence to the soul's immortality, to Plato, and Kant, and Schelling, and Fichte, to Milton's early years and Shakespeare's sonnets, to Wordsworth and Coleridge, to Homer and Aeschylus, to St Thomas of Aquin, St Basil, and St Chrysostom. (Hogg, pp. 241–2)

Richard Woodhouse was similarly impressed. De Quincey's conversation 'appeared like the elaboration of a mine of results', and one evening ranged from

Political Economy, into the Greek & Latin Accents, into Antiquities – Roman Roads – Old castles – the origin & analogy of Languages. Upon all these he was informed to considerable minuteness. The same with regard to Shakspeare's Sonnets, Spenser's minor poems & the great writ-

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ers & Characters of Elizabeth's age and those of Cromwell's time.
(Morrison, pp. 6–7)

Yet De Quincey was different from Samuel Taylor Coleridge, that other great conversationalist of the day, for he was a good listener as well. Like many observers, De Quincey reported that unless Coleridge 'could have all the talk, [he] would have none. But then this was not conversation. It was not *colloquium*, or talking *with* the company, but *alloquium*, or talking *to* the company'. By contrast, John Ritchie Findlay remembered that, while De Quincey had 'a just horror of bores, and carefully avoided them', he 'never monopolised talk, allowed every one to have a fair chance, and listened with respectful patience to the most commonplace remarks from any one present' (Vol. 17, p. 9; Hogg, p. 128).

AMONGST the arts connected with the *elegancies* of social life, in a degree which nobody denies, is the art of Conversation; but in a degree which almost everybody denies, if one may judge by their neglect of its simplest rules, this same art is not less connected with the *uses* of social life. Neither the luxury of conversation, nor the possible benefit of conversation, is to be had under that rude administration of it which generally prevails. Without an art, without some simple system of rules, gathered from experience of such contingencies as are most likely to mislead the practice, when left to its own guidance, no act of man, nor effort, accomplishes its purposes in perfection. The sagacious Greek would not so much as drink a glass of wine amongst a few friends without a systematic art to guide him, and a regular form of polity to control him, which art and which polity (begging Plato's pardon) were better than any of more ambitious aim in his Republic. Every *symposium* had its set of rules, and vigorous they were; had its own *symposiarch* to govern it, and a tyrant he was.¹ Elected democratically, he became, when once installed, an autocrat not less despotic than the King of Persia. Purposes still more slight and fugitive have been organised into arts. Taking soup gracefully, under the difficulties opposed to it by a dinner dress at that time fashionable, was reared into an art about forty-five years ago by a Frenchman, who lectured upon it to ladies in London; and the most brilliant Duchess of that day was amongst his best pupils. Spitting, if the reader will pardon the mention of so gross a fact, was shown to be a very difficult art, and publicly prelected upon about the same time, in the same great capital. The professors in this faculty were the hackney-coachmen; the pupils were gentlemen, who paid a guinea each for three lessons; the chief problem in this system of hydraulics being to throw the salivating column in a parabolic curve from the centre of Parliament Street, when driving four-in-hand, to the foot pavements, right and left, so as to alarm the consciences of guilty peripatetics on either side. The ultimate problem, which

closed the *curriculum* of study, was held to lie in spitting round a corner; when *that* was mastered, the pupil was entitled to his doctor's degree. Endless are the purposes of man, merely festal or merely comic, and aiming but at the momentary life of a cloud, which have earned for themselves the distinction and apparatus of a separate art. Yet for conversation, the great paramount purpose of social meetings, no art exists or has been attempted.

That seems strange, but is not really so. A limited process submits readily to the limits of a technical system; but a process, so unlimited as the interchange of thought, seems to reject them. And even, if an art of conversation were less unlimited, the means of carrying such an art into practical effect amongst so vast a variety of minds, seem wanting. Yet again, perhaps, after all, this may rest on a mistake. What we begin by misjudging is the particular phasis of conversation which brings it under the control of art and discipline. It is not in its relation to the intellect that conversation ever has been improved or *will* be improved primarily, but in its relation to manners. Has a man ever mixed with what in technical phrase is called 'good company,' meaning company in the highest degree polished, company which (being or *not* being aristocratic as respects its composition) is aristocratic as respects the standard of its manners and usages? If he really *has*, and does not deceive himself from vanity or from pure inacquaintance with the world, in that case he must have remarked the large effect impressed upon the grace and upon the freedom of conversation by a few simple instincts of real good breeding. Good breeding – what is it? There is no need in this place to answer that question comprehensively; it is sufficient to say, that it is made up chiefly of *negative* elements; that it shows itself far less in what it prescribes, than in what it forbids. Now, even under this limitation of the idea, the truth is – that more will be done for the benefit of conversation by the simple magic of good manners (that is, chiefly by a system of forbearances), applied to the besetting vices of social intercourse, than ever *was* or can be done by all varieties of intellectual power assembled upon the same arena. Intellectual graces of the highest order may perish and confound each other when exercised in a spirit of ill temper, or under the license of bad manners: whereas, very humble powers, when allowed to expand themselves colloquially in that genial freedom which is possible only under the most absolute confidence in the self-restraint of your collocutors, accomplish their purpose to a certainty, if it be the ordinary purpose of liberal amusement, and have a chance of accomplishing it, even when this purpose is the more ambitious one of communicating knowledge or exchanging new views upon truth.

In my own early years, having been formed by nature too exclusively and morbidly for solitary thinking, I observed nothing. Seeming to have eyes, in reality I saw nothing. But it is a matter of no very uncommon experience – that, whilst the mere observers never become meditators, the mere meditators, on the other hand, may finally ripen into close observers. Strength of thinking, through long years, upon innumerable themes, will have the effect

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of disclosing a vast variety of questions, to which it soon becomes apparent that answers are lurking up and down the whole field of daily experience; and thus an external experience which was slighted in youth, because it was a dark cipher that could be read into no meaning, a key that answered to no lock, gradually becomes interesting as it is found to yield one solution after another to problems that have independently matured in the mind. Thus, for instance, upon the special functions of conversation, upon its powers, its laws, its ordinary diseases, and their appropriate remedies, in youth I never bestowed a thought or a care. I viewed it – not as one amongst the gay ornamental arts of the intellect, but as one amongst the dull necessities of business. Loving solitude too much, I understood too little the capacities of colloquial intercourse. And thus it is, though not for *my* reason, that most people estimate the intellectual relations of conversation. Let these, however, be what they may, one thing seemed undeniable – that this world talked a great deal too much. It would be better for all parties, if nine in every ten of the *winged words*, flying about in this world (Homer's *epea pteroenta*) had their feathers clipped amongst men, or even amongst women, who have a right to a larger allowance of words. Yet, as it was quite out of my power to persuade the world into any such self-denying reformation, it seemed equally out of the line of my duties to nourish any moral anxiety in that direction. *To talk* seemed then in the same category as *to sleep*; not an accomplishment, but a base physical infirmity. As a moralist, I really was culpably careless upon the whole subject. I cared as little what absurdities men practised in their vast tennis-courts of conversation, where the ball is flying backwards and forwards to no purpose for ever, as what tricks Englishmen might play with their monstrous national debt. Yet at length what I disregarded on any principle of moral usefulness, I came to make an object of the profoundest interest on principles of art. *Betting*, in like manner, and *wagering*, which apparently had no moral value, and for that reason had been always slighted as inconsiderable arts (though, by the way, they always had one valuable use, viz., that of evading quarrels, since a bet summarily intercepts an altercation), rose suddenly into a philosophic rank, when successively, Huyghens, the Bernoullis, and De Moivre, were led by the suggestion of these trivial practices amongst men, to throw the light of a high mathematical analysis upon the whole doctrine of Chances.² Lord Bacon had been led to remark the capacities of conversation as an organ for sharpening one particular mode of intellectual power. Circumstances, on the other hand, led me into remarking the special capacities of conversation, as an organ for absolutely creating another mode of power. Let a man have read, thought, studied, as much as he may, rarely will he reach his possible advantages as a *ready* man, unless he has exercised his powers much in conversation – that was Lord Bacon's idea.³ Now, this wise and useful remark points in a direction, not objective, but subjective – that is, it does not promise any absolute extension to truth itself, but only some greater facilities to the man who expounds or diffuses the truth. Nothing will be done for

truth objectively that would not at any rate be done, but subjectively it will be done with more fluency, and at less cost of exertion to the doer. On the contrary, my own growing reveries on the latent powers of conversation (which, though a thing that then I hated, yet challenged at times unavoidably my attention) pointed to an absolute birth of new insight into the truth itself, as inseparable from the finer and more scientific exercise of the talking art. It would not be the brilliancy, the ease, or the adroitness of the expounder that would benefit, but the absolute interests of the thing expounded. A feeling dawned on me of a secret magic lurking in the peculiar life, velocities, and contagious ardour of conversation, quite separate from any which belonged to books; arming a man with new forces, and not merely with a new dexterity in wielding the old ones. I felt, and in this I could not be mistaken, as too certainly it was a fact of my own experience, that in the electric kindling of life between two minds, and far less from the kindling natural to conflict (though *that* also is something), than from the kindling through sympathy with the object discussed, in its momentary coruscation of shifting phases, there sometimes arise glimpses, and shy revelations of affinity, suggestion, relation, analogy, that could not have been approached through any avenues of methodical study. Great organists find the same effect of inspiration, the same result of power creative and revealing, in the mere movement and velocity of their own voluntaries, like the heavenly wheels of Milton, throwing off fiery flakes and bickering flames; these *impromptu* torrents of music create rapturous *fioriture*,⁴ beyond all capacity in the artist to register, or afterwards to imitate. The reader must be well aware that many philosophic instances exist where a change in the degree makes a change in the kind. Usually this is otherwise; the prevailing rule is, that the principle subsists unaffected by any possible variation in the amount or degree of the force. But a large class of exceptions must have met the reader, though, from want of a pencil, he has improperly omitted to write them down in his pocket-book – cases, viz., where upon passing beyond a certain point in the graduation, an alteration takes place suddenly in the *kind* of effect, a new direction is given to the power. Some illustration of this truth occurs in conversation, where a velocity in the movement of thought is made possible (and often natural), greater than ever can arise in methodical books; and where, 2dly, approximations are more obvious and easily effected between things too remote for a steadier contemplation. One remarkable evidence of a *specific* power lying hid in conversation may be seen in such writings as have moved by impulses most nearly resembling those of conversation; for instance, in those of Edmund Burke. For one moment, reader, pause upon the spectacle of two contrasted intellects, Burke's and Johnson's; one an intellect essentially going forward, governed by the very necessity of growth – by the law of motion in advance; the latter, essentially an intellect retrogressive, retrospective, and throwing itself back on its own steps.⁵ This original difference was aided accidentally in Burke by the tendencies of political partisanship, which, both from moving amongst mov-

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ing things and uncertainties, as compared with the more stationary aspects of moral philosophy, and also from its more fluctuating and fiery passions, must unavoidably reflect in greater life the tumultuary character of conversation. The result from these original differences of intellectual constitution, aided by these secondary differences of pursuit, is, that Dr Johnson never, in any instance, GROWS a truth before your eyes, whilst in the act of delivering it, or moving towards it. All that he offers up to the end of the chapter he had when he began. But to Burke, such was the prodigious elasticity of his thinking, equally in his conversation and in his writings, the mere act of movement became the principle or cause of movement. Motion propagated motion, and life threw off life. The very violence of a projectile, as thrown by *him*, caused it to rebound in fresh forms, fresh angles, splintering, coruscating, which gave out thoughts as new (and that would at the beginning have been as startling) to himself as they are to his reader. In this power, which might be illustrated largely from the writings of Burke, is seen something allied to the powers of a prophetic seer,⁶ who is compelled oftentimes into seeing things, as unexpected by himself as by others. Now in conversation, considered as to its *tendencies* and capacities, there sleeps an intermitting spring of such sudden revelation, showing much of the same general character; a power putting on a character *essentially* differing from the character worn by the power of books.

If, then, in the *colloquial* commerce of thought, there lurked a power not shared by other modes of that great commerce, a power separate and *sui generis*,⁷ next it was apparent that a great art must exist somewhere, applicable to this power; not in the Pyramids, or in the tombs of Thebes,⁸ but in the unwrought quarries of men's minds, so many and so dark. There was an art missing. If an art, then an artist missing. If the art (as we say of foreign mails) were 'due,' then the artist was 'due.' How happened it that this great man never made his appearance? But perhaps he *had*. Many people think Dr Johnson the *exemplar* of conversational power. I think otherwise, for reasons which I shall soon explain, and far sooner I should look for such an *exemplar* in Burke. But neither Johnson nor Burke, however they might rank as *powers*, was the *artist* that I demanded. Burke valued not at all the reputation of a great performer in conversation: he scarcely contemplated the skill as having a real existence; and a man will never be an artist who does not value his art, or even recognise it as an object distinctly defined. Johnson, again, relied sturdily upon his natural powers for carrying him aggressively through all conversational occasions or difficulties that English society, from its known character and composition, could be supposed likely to bring forward, without caring for any art or system of rules that might give further effect to that power. If a man is strong enough to knock down ninety-nine in a hundred of all antagonists, in spite of any advantages as to pugilistic science which they may possess over himself, he is not likely to care for the improbable case of a hundredth man appearing with strength equal to his own, superadded to the utmost excess of that artificial skill which is wanting in himself. Against such

a contingency it is not worth while going to the cost of a regular pugilistic training. Half a century might not bring up a case of actual call for its application. Or, if it did, for a single *extra* case of that nature, there would always be a resource in the *extra* (and, strictly speaking, foul) arts of kicking, scratching, pinching, and tearing hair.

The conversational powers of Johnson were narrow in compass, however strong within their own essential limits. As a *conditio sine quâ non*,⁹ he did not absolutely demand a *personal* contradictor by way of 'stoker' to supply fuel and keep up his steam, but he demanded at least a *subject* teeming with elements of known contradictory opinion, whether linked to partisanship or not. His views of all things tended to negation, never to the positive and the creative. Hence may be explained a fact, which cannot have escaped any keen observer of those huge Johnsonian *memorabilia* which we possess, viz., that the gyration of his flight upon any one question that ever came before him was so exceedingly brief. There was no process, no evolution, no movements of self-conflict or preparation; – a word, a distinction, a pointed antithesis, and, above all, a new abstraction of the logic involved in some popular fallacy or doubt, or prejudice, or problem, formed the utmost of his efforts.¹⁰ He dissipated some casual perplexity that had gathered in the eddies of conversation, but he contributed nothing to any weightier interest; he unchoked a strangulated sewer in some blind alley, but what river is there that felt his cleansing power. There is no man that can cite any single error which Dr Johnson unmasked, or any important truth which he expanded. Nor is this extraordinary. Dr Johnson had not within himself the fountain of such power, having not a brooding or naturally philosophic intellect. Philosophy in any acquired sense he had none. How else could it have happened that, upon David Hartley, upon David Hume, upon Voltaire, upon Rousseau,¹¹ the true or the false philosophy of his own day, beyond a personal sneer, founded on some popular slander, he had nothing to say and said nothing? A new world was moulding itself in Dr Johnson's meridian hours, new generations were ascending, and 'other palms were won.'¹² Yet of all this the Doctor suspected nothing. Countrymen and contemporaries of the Doctor's, brilliant men, but (as many think) trifling men, such as Horace Walpole and Lord Chesterfield,¹³ already in the middle of that eighteenth century, could read the signs of the great changes advancing, already started in horror from the portents which rose before them in Paris, like the procession of regal phantoms before Macbeth, and have left in their letters records undeniable (such as now read like Cassandra prophecies)¹⁴ that already they had noticed tremors in the ground below their feet, and sounds in the air, running before the great convulsions under which Europe was destined to rock, full thirty years later. Many instances, during the last war, showed us that in the frivolous dandy might often lurk the most fiery and accomplished of *aides-de-camp*; and these cases show that men, in whom the world sees only elegant *roués*,¹⁵ sometimes from carelessness, sometimes from want of opening for display, conceal qualities of penetrating sagacity,

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and a learned spirit of observation, such as may be looked for vainly in persons of more solemn and academic pretension. But there was a greater defect in Dr Johnson, for purposes of conversation, than merely want of eye for the social phenomena rising around him. He had no eye for such phenomena, because he had a somnolent want of interest in them; and why? because he had little interest in man. Having no sympathy with human nature in its struggles, or faith in the progress of man, he could not be supposed to regard with much interest any forerunning symptoms of changes that to *him* were themselves indifferent. And the reason that he felt thus careless was the desponding taint in his blood. It is good to be of a melancholic temperament, as all the ancient physiologists held,¹⁶ but only if the melancholy is balanced by fiery aspiring qualities, not when it gravitates essentially to the earth. Hence the drooping, desponding character, and the monotony of the estimate which Dr Johnson applied to life. We were all, in *his* view, miserable, scrofulous wretches; the 'strumous diathesis'¹⁷ was developed in our flesh, or soon would be; and but for his piety, which was the best indication of some greatness latent within him, he would have suggested to all mankind a nobler use for garters than any which regarded knees. In fact, I believe, that but for his piety, he would not only have counselled hanging in general, but hanged himself in particular. Now, this gloomy temperament, not as an occasional but as a permanent state, is fatal to the power of brilliant conversation, in so far as that power rests upon raising a continual succession of topics, and not merely of using with lifeless talent the topics offered by others. Man is the central interest about which revolve all the fleeting phenomena of life: these secondary interests demand the first; and with the little knowledge about them which must follow from little care about them, there can be no salient fountain of conversational themes. *Pectus – id est quod disertum facit.*¹⁸ From the heart, from an interest of love or hatred, of hope or care, springs all permanent eloquence; and the elastic spring of conversation is gone, if the talker is a mere showy man of talent, pulling at an oar which he detests.

What an index might be drawn up of subjects interesting to human nature, and suggested by the events of the Johnsonian period, upon which the Doctor ought to have talked, and must have talked, if his interest in man had been catholic, but on which the Doctor is not recorded to have uttered one word! Visiting Paris once in his life, he applied himself diligently to the measuring – of what? Of gilt mouldings and diapered panels!¹⁹ Yet books, it will be said, suggest topics as well as life, and the moving sceneries of life. And surely Dr Johnson had *this* fund to draw upon? No: for though he had read much in a desultory way, he had studied nothing;* and, without that sort of systematic reading, it is but a rare chance that books can be brought to bear

* '*Had studied nothing:*' – It may be doubted whether Dr Johnson understood any one thing thoroughly, except Latin; not that he understood even *that* with the elaborate and circumstan-

effectually, and yet indirectly, upon conversation; whilst to make them directly and formally the subjects of discussion, pre-supposes either a learned audience, or, if the audience is not so, much pedantry and much arrogance in the talker.

tial accuracy required for the editing critically of a Latin classic. But if he had less than *that*, he had also more: he *possessed* that language in a way that no extent of mere critical knowledge could confer. He wrote it genially, not as one translating into it painfully from English, but as one using it for his original organ of thinking. And in Latin verse he expressed himself at times with the energy and freedom of a Roman. With Greek, his acquaintance was far more slender, and had not been much cultivated after his youthful days.²⁰