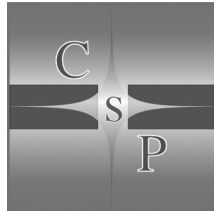


The Concept and Practice of Conversation
in the Long Eighteenth Century,
1688-1848

The Concept and Practice of Conversation
in the Long Eighteenth Century,
1688-1848

Edited by

Katie Halsey and Jane Slinn



Cambridge Scholars Publishing

The Concept and Practice of Conversation in the Long Eighteenth Century, 1688-1848,
Edited by Katie Halsey and Jane Slinn

This book first published 2008 by

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

15 Angerton Gardens, Newcastle, NE5 2JA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2008 by Katie Halsey and Jane Slinn and contributors

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system,
or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or
otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-84718-497-9, ISBN (13): 9781847184979

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Illustrations	vii
Acknowledgements	viii
Introduction	ix
Katie Halsey and Jane Slinn	
Chapter One.....	1
Improving Talk? The Promises of Conversation	
Stefan H. Uhlig	
Chapter Two.....	20
An “Intercourse of Sentiments” and the Seductions of Virtue:	
The Role of Conversation in David Hume’s Philosophy	
Amanda Dickins	
Chapter Three.....	40
Distressful Gift: Talking to the Dead	
Mary Jacobus	
Chapter Four.....	65
Heinrich von Kleist and the Transformation of Conversation in Germany	
Paul E. Kerry	
Chapter Five.....	87
American One-Sidedness: The Unrealisable Ideal of Democratic	
Conversation	
Jay Fliegelman	
Chapter Six.....	103
“A Proper Exercise for the Mind”: Conversation and Education in	
the long Eighteenth Century	
Michèle Cohen	

Chapter Seven.....	128
Conversation in the Law: Sir William Jones's Singular Dialogue Jean Meiring	
Chapter Eight.....	151
Picture-Talking: Portraiture and Conversation in Britain, 1800-1830 Ludmilla Jordanova	
Chapter Nine.....	170
Portraiture as Conversation Peter de Bolla	
Bibliography.....	183
Contributors.....	208
Index.....	211

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

4.1	The flow of electrical matter during a Leyden experiment , J.A. Nollett, <i>Essai sur l'électricité des corps</i> , Paris 1746, facing p.216, by permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.	76
5.1	Richard Caton Woodville, Politics in an Oyster House , 1848, Oil on canvas, 16 x 13 in. (40.6 x 33 cm), The Walters Art Museum.	88
5.2	Charles Willson Peale, Mrs James Smith and Grandson , 1776. Oil on canvas, 36 3/8 x 29 1/4 in. (92.4 x 74.3 cm) Smithsonian American Art Museum, 1980.93. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Wilson Levering Smith, Jr. and museum purchase.	95
5.3	James Burgh, <i>Art of Speaking</i> . London, 1768.	96
5.4	William Dunlap, The Dunlap Family , 1788. Oil on canvas, 42 1/4 x 4 in (107.3 x 124.5 cm), New York Historical Society, Gift of John Crumby 1858.87.	98
5.5	John Singleton Copley (1738-1815), William Vassall and his son Leonard circa 1770-72. Oil on canvas, San Francisco Museum of Fine Art, John D. Rockefeller 3rd 1979.7.30.	99
8.1	William Hazlitt , replica by William Bewick, chalk, 1825, 575mm x 375mm, National Portrait Gallery, London.	152
8.2	Sir William Knighton, 1st Bt. by Charles Turner, after Sir Thomas Lawrence, mezzotint, published 1823, 387mm x 305mm, National Portrait Gallery, London.	156
8.3	Sir Walter Scott, 1st Bt. by John Henry Robinson, after Sir Thomas Lawrence, published 1833, line engraving, 424mm x 328mm, National Portrait Gallery, London.	157
8.4	Sir Walter Scott being Painted by James Northcote , by James Northcote, oil on canvas 1828, 28 1/4 x 21 1/4 inches, Royal Albert Memorial Gallery, Exeter.	158
8.5	James Northcote , by Frederick Christian Lewis, after George Henry Harlow, stipple engraving, published 1824, stipple engraving, 406mm x 280mm, National Portrait Gallery, London.	163

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This volume had its genesis in a conference, *The Concept and Practice of Conversation in the Long Eighteenth Century*, organised at the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (CRASSH) at the University of Cambridge in October 2005. We would like to acknowledge the financial support provided at that stage by the British Academy, CRASSH, and King's College, Cambridge. We are also grateful to all the participants at the conference, in particular to the chairs of and respondents to the various sessions, and to Peter de Bolla, Simon Goldhill, and Ludmilla Jordanova. We would like to express our gratitude to the Syndics of Cambridge University Library, the Walters Art Museum, The Smithsonian American Art Museum, the San Francisco Museum of Fine Art, the New York Historical Society, the National Portrait Gallery, London, and the Royal Albert Memorial Gallery, Exeter, for permission to reproduce material from their holdings. We would also like to thank Rosalind Crone, Kate Griffiths, Luke Houghton, Amanda Millar, Maartje Scheltens and Richard Serjeantson for their help in the preparation of the manuscript. Sadly, Professor Jay Fliegelman did not live to see this volume published, but we owe a debt of gratitude to him, and to his widow Christine, for their dedication in preparing his chapter for publication under very difficult circumstances.

INTRODUCTION

KATIE HALSEY AND JANE SLINN

Conversation, as concept and practice, arrived at pivotal, and unprecedented, stages in its development during the historical period that has come to be known as the long eighteenth century.¹ The eighteenth century's attention to, and production of, conversational forms manifests itself in the period's plethora of texts and images that address themselves to the description and conceptualization of conversation across a range of disciplines and genres. The chapters in this book attest to this period's breadth of interest in conversation by their disciplinary range: there are contributions from literary studies, art history, philosophy, history and law. An exceptionally wide range of long-eighteenth-century authors, artists, texts and works of art are also covered, with the volume containing essays discussing artists, philosophers and lawmakers as different as Jane Austen, Henry Ballow, Immanuel Kant and Thomas Gainsborough. Even allowing for the rearrangement and rethinking of disciplinary boundaries between the eighteenth century and today, the reach of conversation into so many areas of the period's life and thought is striking. Also striking are the serious purposes and functions (for example, ethical, pedagogical or political) with which *concepts* of conversation are imbued in the period. Thus we find David Hume insisting that conversation "gives and receives Information, as well as Pleasure", and that the "conversible" world must be brought into contact with that of the "Learned" to reinforce conversation against triviality, or "gossiping (*sic*) Stories and idle Remarks".² Michèle Cohen's emphasis on the inextricable connections between pleasure and improvement in domestic conversations (in Chapter Six of this volume) demonstrates the reach of Hume's philosophy into the didactic literature of the period, and its corresponding influence on the education of young people. Significantly, in the *Oxford English Dictionary's* definition of conversation, the only meaning that does not include an eighteenth-century example is that which emphasizes conversation's triviality, as well as being the most familiar gloss of the term to a modern reader: 7c, "to make conversation: to converse for the sake of conversing; to engage in small talk."³

Despite the breadth of conversation's conceptual and semantic reach in the eighteenth century, most existing scholarship on the subject tends to focus on examining a limited set of generic forms, most notably "Conversation Poems" and, in painting, "Conversation Pieces", or to identify conversation too easily with the sociability of the expanding "public sphere" in the period. Further, the distinctiveness of conversation as a concept and practice—and indeed the question of whether conversation can be said to be distinct from its cognate concepts (dialogue, discussion and argument, for example) is rarely examined in literature about the period. This volume was inspired largely by the wish to redress these deficiencies. Thus the introductory text will proceed by examining two key places in which we can observe the development of conversational concepts and practices in the long eighteenth century. First, we will consider how, at the beginning of the period, notions of conversation were forged in the "conversible" world of salons and coffee-houses, described by David Hume and his near contemporaries, which cannot be made to fit into Jürgen Habermas's theorization of the public sphere. We will then turn to reflect on the ethical content of conversation in the novels of Jane Austen, a novelist who has gradually come to represent to many readers the world of the long eighteenth century. In discussing these texts and authors, we attempt to address and define some of the interactions between conversational concepts and practices.

Our title for this volume draws attention to the fact that conversational forms, concepts and practices developed, and continue to develop, in dialogue with, in distinction from, and in the shadow of, each other. In other words, language, practices and concepts are inextricably intertwined. However, we currently lack a satisfactory theory and vocabulary for the ways in which these three variables are interrelated. When we find ourselves in such a situation, we can only begin, as it were, "from the bottom up". Suffice it to say, the relationships concerned are complex and multifarious; and the essays collected here explore the contours of some of these complexities, dealing with a range of different media, authors, sub-periods, genres and languages. Although the focus of the work is largely on eighteenth-century Britain, the volume takes note of the rich relationships between continental European thought and British intellectual life in the period, and of the influence of British ideas in the newly independent American republic.

After Habermas

The eighteenth century has long been regarded as an “age of conversation” in which forms of polite sociability developed (conversation in this period could mean “company” or “society”), structured around metropolitan coffee-houses, clubs, salons and country-house entertaining. Much influenced by Jürgen Habermas’s account of the “public sphere”, an idealized model of human interaction in the Enlightenment emerges in which European bourgeois subjects congregate in the newly created social spaces of salons and coffee-houses to exchange ideas freely, equally and reasonably in an environment governed by the rules of politeness.⁴ These gentlemen spoke on their own authority on what the period characterized as matters of “general ethical humanism, indissociable from moral, cultural and religious reflection.”⁵ According to Habermas, such conversations developed into a critical discourse, through which the people monitored state authority, and modern democracy was ultimately born.

Habermas’s account has itself been subject to much criticism in recent scholarship, usually on the grounds that his idealized model of the bourgeois public sphere as rational, male and egalitarian rests on a set of unsustainable exclusions.⁶ Further, as Peter de Bolla points out in Chapter Nine of this volume, Habermas’s account is seriously flawed in the ways he understands, and demarcates, private and public experience in the eighteenth century. Indeed de Bolla suggests that the Habermasian notion of the “public sphere”, whether accepted or contested as an account of aspects of the period, has become “so ubiquitous in the scholarship on the Enlightenment ... that its utility may no longer be very significant.” With this scepticism towards Habermas’s account in mind, it is noteworthy that a number of authors in this volume offer versions of conversation that, explicitly or implicitly, depart from the Habermasian ideal: Ludmilla Jordanova discusses James Northcote’s gossipy, competitive conversations, motivated by personal relationships and rivalry; Paul Kerry cites the familiar “rational-critical” characterization of conversation in eighteenth-century Germany, only to show how Heinrich von Kleist’s concept of conversation differs from this; and Jay Fliegelman charts the discrepancies between democratic ideals of conversation and their practical embodiments.

Further, if we no longer read eighteenth-century conversational concepts and practices through a Habermasian lens, two possibilities—not necessarily mutually exclusive—become open to us. Firstly, we may find ourselves giving less weight to those well-known documents of eighteenth-century rational conversation that are often invoked by

commentators on the period, namely, the periodicals, *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*, the writings of Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury and some of David Hume's essays. These texts' emphases on the improvement and cultivation of the human subject by means of reasonable conversation on "History, Poetry, Politics"⁷ may chime with Habermas's account of the public sphere, but are—we now know—only one version of conversation in the eighteenth century, and not necessarily the dominant one. As Markman Ellis, for example, has shown, rational and improving conversation had to vie for attention with other forms of sociability that were "vulgar, popular, subversive, grotesque and sexual".⁸ Future research will give us a more accurate map of the relative significance of rational and "unruly" conversations in the period.⁹

Secondly, if we are no longer to regard these texts as providing us with descriptive accounts of life in the eighteenth-century coffee-house or salon, or perhaps more accurately, accounts of the point at which a conceptual ideal of conversation is embodied in practice, we are free to see them as something else: contributions to the normative intellectual projects of their authors, to their conceptualizations of the disciplines within which they wrote. To take one key example, Lord Shaftesbury's ambition to rescue "philosophy ... from colleges and cells" and place it in the domain of "modern conversations"¹⁰ is imitated, linguistically and conceptually, by Addison and Hume. These texts of Shaftesbury, Addison and Hume are now taken as exemplars of the spirit of the Habermasian public sphere, with conversation read invariably as synonymous with rational sociability. Such glosses may well be valid for Addison's reinterpretation of Shaftesbury. They can certainly be substantiated by comments to be found throughout his periodicals and his well-documented attempts to encourage, and participate in, what would now be regarded as the culture of the Enlightenment public sphere. Shaftesbury's original declaration, however, has little to do with the construction of a "bourgeois public sphere", and everything to do with his conceptualization of philosophy, and in particular, moral philosophy. As Lawrence Klein writes:

Shaftesbury thought that philosophy should make people effective participants in the world. It was a practical enterprise and, given the disabilities from which humans generally suffered, often a therapeutic one.¹¹

For Shaftesbury, philosophy's task was to produce moral agents. Crucially, these putative agents must experience philosophy conversationally: the two-way interchange of moral ideas (in contrast to a

“top-down” model of transmitting knowledge) encouraged the sought-after activity and autonomy in the learning subject.¹²

In this instance, then, conversation is to be understood as a method of communicating philosophy, as well as the means of making the concept of practical philosophy a reality: it is necessary to execute Shaftesbury’s prescriptive philosophical project. Shaftesbury suggests that the language of philosophy should resemble that of “good company and people of the better sort”¹³, but he does not inextricably link philosophical conversation and the public sphere. The conversations or scenes of instruction he has in mind could take place almost anywhere—not necessarily in a salon or coffee-house—and what distinguishes them from other forms of linguistic exchange is their pedagogic function. Shaftesbury’s notion of conversation is indebted to classical as well as contemporary models and his rescuing of philosophy is, in part, understood as a return to its classical heritage. Most important for us, however, is Shaftesbury’s formulation of a distinctive concept of conversation which accounts for a particular interaction between the reader and philosophical text. Any readerly experience which falls short of engagement with this active pedagogy cannot be classified as properly conversational in Shaftesbury’s terms.

If we now turn to consider David Hume’s “Of Essay Writing” in relation to Shaftesbury, instead of in relation to Habermas, we find discussions of the nature of philosophical language, its relationship to conversational forms and the role of philosophy, rather than a document in the development of the Habermasian public sphere. Thus the demise of philosophy, gone “to Wrack by this moaping (*sic*) recluse Method of Study”, is exemplified by its linguistic deficiencies: philosophy is “as chimerical in her Conclusions as she was unintelligible in her Stile and Manner of Delivery.” Hume argues that philosophical discourse should model itself on conversation, and that philosophers require experience of conversation to acquire the “Facility of Thought and Expression”¹⁴ necessary to communicate with their audiences. Hume’s central concern is the formation of a viable philosophical discourse which would succeed in “alluring us into the paths of virtue by the views of glory and happiness ...”, “...*make* us feel the difference between vice and virtue” and “excite and regulate our sentiments”¹⁵ without sacrificing “the Substance to the Shadow.”¹⁶ This is philosophical discourse conceptualized in terms of conversation, and such conversation as ethical sentimental education.

For Hume and Shaftesbury, then, conversation is understood primarily as a specific means of communicating between readers and philosophical texts. Such writings draw on conversational forms in order to enable two-way conversations between writers and readers. Thus conversation in this

sense becomes conceptualized, to a large extent, as the antithesis of Habermasian sociability. In *The Machiavellian Moment*, J. G. A. Pocock relates Machiavelli's account to Francesco Vettori of "how he comes home in the evening, puts on formal clothing, and enters into the presence and conversation of the ancients by reading their books. The conversation is meant to restore Machiavelli not only to the understanding of politics, but *indirectly* to actual civic participation".¹⁷ Hume's and Shaftesbury's readers are prepared, if not for civic participation, at least for ethical conduct, but, like Machiavelli, they are prepared indirectly, and frequently alone, through reading. The human interactions, quick-fire exchanges and bustle of the salon or coffee-house are far away. Instead, the philosophical text as conversation seeks to shape the subject who may *afterwards* become a social subject in the form of, for example, a Humean moral agent. Towards the end of the long eighteenth century, however, this particular connection between private and public selves began to disintegrate. Paul Hamilton writes of the "romantic habit" of "recovery through one's own aesthetic...of an intimacy with past writers which can restore their readers to the citizenship of a neglected republic."¹⁸ For Hamilton, romantic readers are still characterized according to the conversational model: they experience "intimacy" with writers. But their "citizenship" is of a "neglected republic", that is, an historical or forgotten state. And there is no mention of virtue or ethics, as there is in Hume and Shaftesbury. It seems that these romantic textual conversations, in contrast to those of the earlier eighteenth century, will end in fantasy or illusion. The early to mid eighteenth-century concept of conversation as a two-way interaction between reader and text, in which a specific type of philosophical discourse formed ethical, self-governing subjects, is no longer in extensive use.

Hume's belief in the moral and educational value of conversational forms is taken up and reformulated in much eighteenth-century writing, perhaps most notably in the didactic and advice literature discussed by Michèle Cohen in Chapter Six of this volume, but also in the fiction—by writers such as Samuel Richardson, Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth, Hannah More, Mary Brunton, Jane West and even Laurence Sterne—of the long eighteenth century. Richardson's *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753-54), for example, notably educates its female protagonists, Harriet, Emily and Charlotte, through the medium of the conversations held in the cedar parlour. We turn now to one of Richardson's most dedicated readers, Jane Austen,¹⁹ who learned much from the pedagogical scenes of conversation in *Grandison*, discovering in them a stylistic technique that she could appropriate and perfect.

Jane Austen's Ethical Conversations

Jane Austen, the great chronicler of the leisured classes from 1790 to 1817, recognised the centrality of both “conversation” as an ideal and “conversations” as practice in the lives she portrayed. In her novels, as in Hume’s philosophy, there is a close and important link between conversation and moral or ethical judgement. Austen is famously economical with her use of visual description; it is through the voices of her characters, either in direct speech or through her characteristic free indirect speech that a reader comes to know them. Austen’s style is, in this sense, truly “conversational” but she also uses the term “conversation” in a very specific sense. Conversation, for her, is differentiated from mere social communications. In *Persuasion* (1818), Anne Elliot regrets, for example, that she and Wentworth had had “no conversation together, no intercourse but what the commonest civility required”.²⁰

Conversation must be meaningful, either emotionally or intellectually. The difference between communication that is not conversation and conversation itself is clearly spelt out in *Northanger Abbey* (1818), where the imbecilic Mrs Allen spends the chief of her days “by the side of Mrs. Thorpe, in what they called conversation, but in which there was scarcely ever any exchange of opinion, and not often any resemblance of subject, for Mrs. Thorpe talked chiefly of her children, and Mrs. Allen of her gowns.”²¹ Although Emma Woodhouse and her father communicate all the time, he “cannot meet her in conversation, either rational or playful”.²² Similarly, in *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), Elinor Dashwood is constantly listening to others, but has very little conversation: “Neither Lady Middleton nor Mrs. Jennings could supply to her the conversation she missed; although the latter was an everlasting talker, and from the first had regarded her with a kindness which ensured her a large share of her discourse.”²³

Conversation is vital in an Austen novel, because without it, it is impossible to know another person—it is only through what they say and how they interact that judgements about their character can be made. In *Mansfield Park* (1813), for example, it is Mary Crawford’s conversation that exposes her, for it demonstrates both her charm and her insincerity. Edmund Bertram is bewitched by Mary’s liveliness and wit, but her moral unsuitability is nonetheless revealed beneath the charms of her conversation. Both Edmund and Fanny Price (the moral arbiter of the novel) recognize that there was something “in her conversation that struck you as not quite right” as soon as they meet her, and even when he is most in love with her, Edmund worries that “the influence of her former

companions makes her seem—gives to her conversation, to her professed opinions, sometimes a tinge of wrong.”²⁴ Mary reveals her moral slipperiness by her verbal slipperiness: in a conversation about conversations, she shows that she is happy to play around with the truth, and that she fundamentally misunderstands the ethical necessity of sincerity in conversation: “*Never* is a black word. But yes, in the *never* of conversation, which means *not very often*, I do think it.”²⁵

In an Austen novel, real conversation is impossible with someone who is dishonest. The wickedness of her villains hinges almost entirely on their untruthfulness. Unlike those of her contemporaries, Austen’s villains rarely behave badly within the timescale of the novels. We may hear of their previous misdoings—such as Willoughby’s seduction of Colonel Brandon’s ward in the pre-history of *Sense and Sensibility*, or William Walter Elliot’s unkindness to Mrs Smith in the pre-history of *Persuasion*—but their wickedness within the novels always depends on their verbal deceptions. Conversations are essential to knowledge of another person in an Austen novel, but they are also peculiarly vulnerable to exploitation. Emma Woodhouse is taken in by Frank Churchill because of his plausibility as a conversationalist, and she is hurt by the difference between what he says and what he is. As a novelist, Austen naturally exploits the gap between speech and meaning—as she puts it in *Emma*, “Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised, or a little mistaken.”²⁶ As a moralist, however, she is deeply suspicious of things that are disguised or mistaken, demonstrating the virtues of sincerity and the dangers of insincerity in conversation through the plots of her novels. For Austen, therefore, the term conversation has a moral imperative: not only should it be meaningful and intelligent, it should also be sincere. Like Shaftesbury, Austen also recognises the importance of the particular relationship between text and reader, and moulds the relatively new genre of the novel into a form that could create an ethical conversation between text and reader. Austen’s famously spare, elliptical and elegant novels demand from their readers a particular type of readerly engagement: a willingness to fill in the gaps that are deliberately left open for interpretation. At the same time, the narrative voice subtly manipulates readers, ensuring that we are encouraged to recognise the difference between good and bad choices, ethical and unethical behaviour.²⁷

Austen’s faith in the morality of conversation²⁸ and her recognition of the dangers of the exploitation of conversation puts her squarely in a tradition of female Christian moralists. Eliza Haywood is relevant here, but we wish to focus briefly on Hannah More. Although elsewhere Austen

mocks and parodies More, their views on conversation are strongly congruent. Hannah More's *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799) contains a long chapter on conversation, in which she points out conversation's vulnerability to the dangers of affectation, false wit, pedantry, vanity, irreligion, flattery, duplicity, and a whole catalogue of other sins. However, she claims that conversation also has an inherent moral value precisely *because* of these dangers; by struggling against the temptation to show off in conversation, we strengthen our Christian humility:

Conversation must not be considered as a stage for the display of our talents, so much as a field for the exercise and improvement of our virtues; as a means for promoting the glory of our Creator, and the good and happiness of our fellow-creatures. Well-bred and intelligent Christians are not, when they join in society, to consider themselves as entering the lists like intellectual prize-fighters, in order to exhibit their own vigour and dexterity, to discomfit their adversary, and to bear away the palm of victory. Truth and not triumph should be the invariable object; and there are few occasions in life, in which we are more unremittingly called upon to watch ourselves narrowly, and to resist the assaults of various temptations, than in conversation. Vanity, jealousy, envy, misrepresentation, resentment, disdain, levity, impatience, insincerity, and pride, will in turn solicit to be gratified. Constantly to struggle against the desire of being thought more wise, more witty, and more knowing, than those with whom we associate, demands the incessant exertion of Christian vigilance; a vigilance which the generality are far from suspecting to be at all necessary in the intercourse of common society. On the contrary, cheerful conversation is rather considered as an exemption and release from watchfulness, than as an additional obligation to it. But a circumspect soldier of Christ will never be off his post; even when he is not called to public combat by the open assaults of his great spiritual enemy, he must still be acting as a centinel (*sic*), for the dangers of an ordinary Christian will arise more from these little skirmishes which are daily happening in the warfare of human life, than from those pitched battles that more rarely occur, and for which he will probably think it sufficient to be armed.²⁹

For both Hannah More and Jane Austen, conversation is to some extent a battleground, a struggle with oneself and one's conversational partner to discover truths about both self and other. To converse is to make oneself vulnerable, but in doing so, to make oneself stronger. Conversation encourages skirmishes with evils of many kinds, but it allows people to resist and conquer these evils. It is for this reason that it can be a moral force for the good, as well as a dangerous tool in the hands of evil. More's martial rhetoric, referencing the battlefield and the jousting list, may seem

to us overblown and faintly ridiculous, but More is by no means unique among eighteenth-century writers in conceptualizing conversational choices starkly in terms of good and bad, right and wrong, and when focusing on the long eighteenth century, it is always as well to bear in mind the moral framework within which long eighteenth-century writers understood themselves to be working. We may not generally associate the Evangelical Hannah More with the sceptical David Hume, but we see here an unusual degree of agreement in their shared interest in the moral value of conversation. While the motive for paying careful attention to conversational habits and practices is different for Hume and More, the *result* is the same: the purpose is to make individuals into better citizens of the social world.

The Concept and Practice of Conversation

Stefan H. Uhlig's chapter, "Improving Talk: The promises of conversation", begins by discussing the "conversational ideal" in the humanities, posing a question that underpins all the work collected in this volume: to what extent can we consider "conversation" to be a useful methodological or theoretical framework for scholarly work in the arts, social sciences and humanities? Through a probing discussion of eighteenth-century theories and practices of conversation, he suggests that a yearning for a more "conversational" intellectual framework in today's Academy might be characterised as a nostalgic yearning for a politer past. The mannered politeness of eighteenth-century "conversational ideals", he argues provocatively, defines itself "against professionalism", and can be seen to work "against the formal purposes of research or debate". Thus conversation, he claims, has limited utility as a model for academic discourse and scholarly interaction in the contemporary academy.

For Amanda Dickins, however, conversation remains a useful, if contestable model, "a thread to guide the reader through the labyrinth" of David Hume's philosophy. She examines the role played by conversation in Hume's philosophical writings, arguing that attention to conversation in Hume enriches our understanding of his philosophical work, and his moral philosophy in particular. Firstly, she suggests that conversation is crucial as "raw material" for philosophical reflection, which must be empirically based and not pursued in isolation. Hence Hume's well-known articulation of the mutual dependence of the Learned and Conversible worlds in his essay "Of Essay Writing". The Learned reflect on, refine and distil the empirical material of conversation to produce knowledge; the sociable world must be raised from idleness and triviality by its interactions with

the Learned. While Stefan H. Uhlig argues that Hume sees the separation of the Learned and the Conversible worlds as productive in terms of intellectual enquiry, Dickins suggests that in fact, in Hume's thought, "both suffer if they are isolated from each other." The next section of the chapter focuses on the role played by what Hume calls the "intercourse of sentiments" in developing moral judgement. As Peter de Bolla also suggests in Chapter Nine, in relation to the visual arts, Dickins argues that this interplay of conflicting perspectives in conversation exposes us to the perspectives of others, takes us beyond our own point of view and evokes our capacity for sympathizing with other human beings. Dickins then discusses the relationship between conversation and virtue in Hume's writings, emphasizing Hume's belief in the connections between conversation, benevolence and pleasure. Finally, she proposes what she calls a "triptych of seduction" in Hume's account of conversational virtue. The central element in this triptych is our own seduction by virtue—the fact that we are drawn into society by the attractiveness of its "natural" virtues. The second side of the triptych is comprised of self-effacing women, who facilitated, but did not participate in the conversation of Enlightenment salons; its last side is shored up by the anxiety of the eighteenth-century aspirant middle-class. Dickins ends her chapter by considering whether Hume's account of morals and conversation is irredeemably compromised by its reliance on social anxiety and gender inequality.

Mary Jacobus uses the concept of conversation to construct a theoretical framework for her reading of William Wordsworth. In her chapter "'Distressful Gift': Conversations with the dead", Jacobus explores the conversational nature of elegy's unheard address to the dead by considering William Wordsworth's writings to his dead sailor brother, John, and Derrida's collected memorials to his dead friends in *The Work of Mourning* (2001). Derrida's memorials to Levinas and Marin are representative of his other tributes to the dead friends commemorated in *The Work of Mourning*, which take the form of posthumous responses, unfinished conversations, and personal re-readings—often continuing dialogues that had previously been conducted in print and in person, over many decades. In this moving essay, Jacobus shows us poetry as "a kind of conversation that is constantly turned towards another: an averted apostrophe". Mourning is, in the formulation of Maurice Blanchot, a kind of "infinite conversation", characterised achingly by the fact that "here there can be no direct communication, only a hiatus, or unknown mode of being". Conversations with the dead must always be one-sided; but, in line with Peter de Bolla's argument in Chapter Nine that conversation must involve some element of "talking back", they are not monologic. Talking

to the dead can be understood, Jacobus argues, “as a form of *désœuvrement*, in Blanchot’s sense—a restless un-working that refuses totalization and proceeds not by way of critique, but rather by juxtaposition, divergence, and difference. This is a dialectic without negation, yet capable of responding to disaster, broaching the unknown of one’s own thought through repetition, return, and response.” Taking conversation as a model for analysis, we see here, brings its own opened rewards to the scholar of literature.

Paul Kerry sets out to offer an account of how conversation was thematized in late eighteenth-century German texts, with particular emphasis on a neglected essay by Heinrich von Kleist that, he suggests, transforms the German discourse on conversation in this period. Kerry begins with discussions of the relationship between conversation, Enlightenment and the public sphere in Immanuel Kant’s well-known essay “What is Enlightenment?” and the place of conversation in eighteenth-century German theatre. He then provides an account of Adolph Freiherr von Knigge’s *The Art of Conversing with Men*, the most widely recognized work on conversation in eighteenth-century Germany, drawing parallels between Knigge’s connections between conversation, sociability and politeness and the civic vision of Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury. Heinrich von Kleist’s often-neglected essay, “On the Gradual Production of Thoughts whilst Speaking”, utilizes a conversational style to suggest that thoughts are best developed in the process of conversation. Further, intellectual empathy is as crucial to the process of thought creation as verbal exchange. Kerry also shows that Kleist uses the metaphor of electricity to figure conversation as unpredictable, in contrast to the tradition of advice literature that, as Michèle Cohen also shows us, assumed conversation could be mapped and planned. The implications of Kleist’s conceptualisation of conversation are then examined within the context of the university, where Kleist argued conversations should typically take place. Kerry concludes by drawing parallels between Kleist’s notion of conversation and those of twentieth-century thinkers, including Hans-Georg Gadamer and Sigmund Freud, and arguing that Kleist’s essay marks a turning point in German Enlightenment discourse on conversation.

Turning from Continental Europe to the new American republic of the late eighteenth century, Jay Fliegelman begins his essay by focusing on the discrepancy between the late eighteenth-century American political ideal of conversation as a bulwark to democracy, aiding the circulation of opinion and information, and the reality of American political conversation as one-sided, performative and illusory. Fliegelman argues

that this discrepancy manifests itself widely across cultural forms in the period. Thus Richard Caton Woodville's painting *Politics in the Oyster House* does not represent a democratic conversation, but a harangue. More provocatively, the correspondence of Adams and Jefferson is characterized, not as an ideal, but "perhaps the most manipulative of all American political conversations". If, as the essays in this volume have established, authentic conversation must comprise a two-sided exchange, then the solipsistic and one-sided Adams-Jefferson correspondence is not truly conversational. Fliegelman then turns his attention to the revolution in oratory and rhetoric of the 1760s and 1770s that stressed theatricality and performance in speaking over conversation and exchange of views. He focuses discussion on a text central to this rhetorical revolution, and written and visual responses to it: James Burgh's *The Art of Speaking*. The essay ends with some reflections on Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) and the observation that "productive horizontal conversation", fantasized as a foundational article of early democratic faith, is rarely met with in reality.

Michèle Cohen shows how Hume's beliefs about the interdependence of the Learned and Conversible worlds were put into practice in educating eighteenth-century children, particularly girls. She argues, in response to Stefan H. Uhlig's essay, for the benefits of considering conversation seriously, claiming that the centrality of "conversation" to social and cultural life in eighteenth-century England and France is now incontestable, having been firmly established in both nations in the last decades of the twentieth century. She raises a number of important questions: given the essential orality and evanescence of conversation, is its study not an impossible project? How does conversation differ from other forms of verbal exchange such as the dialogue? And to what kind of conversations are we referring? Since Lawrence Klein's remark that in the eighteenth century, conversation was the "master metaphor" of politeness, what scholars have increasingly confronted is both the polysemic range of "conversation" and its elusiveness and irreducibility. Cohen chooses not to investigate the nature of conversation, but to explore the role it played in a specific aspect of the culture of sociability and politeness, as a mode of informal instruction. In her chapter, Cohen argues that many eighteenth-century authors chose the "familiar format" (*i.e.* the forms of conversation) for instructional works. While modern historians represent didactic dialogues as structurally different from familiar conversations, Cohen believes that a number of eighteenth-century writers intended to minimize this difference, claiming that their dialogues were not only based on actual conversations, but also resorted to a variety of techniques such as digressions

or using the language of “ordinary” conversation to simulate conversational authenticity more effectively. In eighteenth-century English and French societies, social conversations became an archetype of an art of living and thinking, linked to morality. Morality required, as we have seen in the works of Jane Austen, that social conversation should be improving. Within the culture of politeness, the social or familiar conversation, at once an art of pleasing and a discipline, was expected to be not just entertaining but instructive. This is why it is plausible, Cohen suggests, to consider that social conversations were instructive. Conversations may be oral, but they are not just a “shallow stream” of words at the “tongue’s end”, as Wollstonecraft would have it. They involve the mind and the judgement. Using letters, diaries, memoirs and biographies as well as texts that used conversation to instruct, Cohen argues that social conversations in domestic settings played a key role in the development of critical thinking in both adults and, crucially, in children. She raises questions not just about the meaning of “didactic” in conversations and dialogues, but also about informal domestic instruction, generally ignored in the historiography of education.

Moving from texts of educational literature to those of the law, Jean Meiring argues that the concept of conversation is a useful way of understanding Sir William Jones’s arguments for the integration of Roman and Common law ideas in his 1781 *An Essay on the Law of Bailments*, as well as the distance between this text and earlier eighteenth-century dialogues between Roman and Common law. Meiring begins by charting the dissemination of continental Natural Law ideas, often associated with Roman law, in eighteenth-century England, and sketching the seventeenth-century background to Jones’s text. Before turning to discuss William Jones in detail, this chapter considers dialogues between Roman and Common law in a number of eighteenth-century legal treatises, including those of Thomas Wood, Henry Ballow, Robert Eden and William Blackstone. Emphasis is placed both on the difficulties of establishing dialogues between the systems and the impetus to impose intellectual coherence on the Common law and equity in the eighteenth century. After a brief biography of Sir William Jones, focusing on the broad range of his intellectual interests and his involvement with the polite, conversational culture of his age, Meiring goes on to offer a close reading of *An Essay on the Law of Bailments*. He comments in some detail on the structure of the text, as well as its indebtedness to the various legal systems under consideration in this essay. Meiring concludes that Jones’s treatise brings together and reconciles Common law and, through the medium of Roman law, Natural reason. Crucially, the most fitting concept for understanding this accord is conversation.

Ludmilla Jordanova's chapter sets out the case for a special relationship between portraiture and conversation, and then examines that relationship in the early nineteenth century—arguably the last part of a long eighteenth century. She does so through the examination of one remarkable yet little-studied man, a painter, biographer and conversationalist, James Northcote (1746-1831). As Uhlig notes in the first essay in this volume, for many scholars of the long eighteenth century, there are profound links between conversation and politeness. By contrast, Northcote's published conversations were notably rude, difficult, abrasive, critical, gossipy and judgemental. Far from being a convivial form of urbane exchange, Northcote's conversations were concerned with the harsh evaluation of people and their works. Drawing upon Northcote's art works, his own writings and comments by others about him, Jordanova explores the role of conversation at the beginning of the nineteenth century, its peculiar pertinence for portraiture in particular and for the visual arts in general. One late work by Northcote, his portrait of Sir Walter Scott (1828), which includes a self-portrait, is examined in more depth. The artist is shown as Titian-like; Northcote produced a biography of Titian not long before his death. Jordanova discusses the ways in which Northcote can be said to be "in conversation" with both Titian and Scott, and engages with current views of artistic "influence" to suggest that "conversations" between artists may be more common than has been hitherto supposed. Her chapter argues that "conversation", both as complex idea and as range of practices, is indispensable when considering portraiture and the so-called "portrait transaction", and that it is exceptionally apt in the case of James Northcote.

Peter de Bolla's concluding meditation on the central themes of this volume also deals with the connections between portraiture and conversation. He opens with some reflections on the nature of conceptualization in order to investigate "some of the lineaments of the concept of conversation". De Bolla concludes that the distinctiveness of the concept of conversation is to be found in the fact that it can be said to occur only when something addressed in conversation, whether animate or inanimate, talks back, and when what that thing says is heard. The remainder of the essay examines how aesthetic responses to paintings can be construed as conversations in which things "talk back". It proceeds by discussing texts on portraiture by the eighteenth-century artist and connoisseur Jonathan Richardson, as well as writings on ethics and aesthetics by the philosophers Adam Smith and Immanuel Kant. De Bolla argues that these accounts provide valuable models for understanding the cognitive, affective and moral relationships at stake in conversations between human beings and portraits. He then

discusses the positioning of portraiture in relation to the much-debated public-private distinction in the eighteenth century, contending that both portraiture and conversation must always have the potential for being overhead. Furthermore, the scene of overhearing may include things as well as persons. Where portraits are concerned, this means that in our conversation with the depicted sitter, we sense the ears and eyes of things overhearing and overlooking ourselves. This focus on the senses in portraiture, in particular touch, is also discussed in the essay, both in terms of the physical creation of paintings and the work and thought of Thomas Gainsborough. De Bolla's essay concludes by making a claim for what he calls "the utility of the aesthetic". He contends that conversations with portraits are forms of aesthetic appreciation that participate in encounters *with* others: they are a refusal of narcissism. Moreover, such conversations are not restricted to the genre of portraiture. They are just one example of the aesthetic's capacity to make contact with the realm of sociality.

We have seen how, from early in our period, conversation was central to the formation of new concepts and practices, as well as to the negotiation between the two. In other words, thinking about conversation enables us to think too about the process of concept building, the distinctiveness, or otherwise, of concepts such as conversation—regularly invoked but not interrogated in the humanities and social sciences—and the usefulness of concepts developed over three hundred years ago for scholars working in today's academy. Thus, despite this volume's focus on the long eighteenth century, and the hospitability of that period to explorations of conversation, this collection's aims are not exclusively historical or genealogical. That is, our contributors ask not only what conversation signified during the eighteenth century, and how current ways of thinking about conversation reflect their Enlightenment and Romantic legacies, but what work the concept does, and could do, today. As befits any good conversation, their conclusions are disparate, provoking and unexpected. Moreover, in the process of their enquiries, they make persuasive and ambitious claims for the distinctiveness of the conceptual architecture of conversation, and the complexity and richness of conversational practices.

¹ For a discussion of the periodization of the “long eighteenth century”, see de Bolla et al., “Introduction” to *Land, Nation and Culture, 1740-1840: Thinking the Republic of Taste*, eds Peter de Bolla, Nigel Leask and David Simpson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), *passim*.

² David Hume, “Of Essay Writing”, in *David Hume, Essays: Moral, political, and literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985), 533-537 (533-534).

³ The *Oxford English Dictionary* has the following meanings for Conversation: “1. The action of living or having one’s being *in* a place or *among* persons. Also *fig.* of one’s spiritual being. 2. The action of consorting or having dealings with others; living together; commerce, intercourse, society, intimacy. 3. Sexual intercourse or intimacy. 4. *fig.* Occupation or engagement *with* things, in the way of business or study; the resulting condition of acquaintance or intimacy with a matter. 5. Circle of acquaintance, company, society. 6. Manner of conducting oneself in the world or in society; behaviour mode or course of life. 7a. Interchange of thoughts and words; familiar discourse or talk. 7b. A particular act of discoursing upon any subject; a talk, colloquy. 7c. to make conversation: to converse for the sake of conversing; to engage in small talk. 8. A public conference, discussion or debate. 9 An “At Home”; = *conversazione*”. The *OED* also includes, under heading 10, the term “conversation piece”: “A painting representing a group of figures, esp. members of a family, arranged as in conversation in their customary surroundings”. Interestingly, all of these *except* 7c (to converse for the sake of conversing; to engage in small talk) include long-eighteenth-century examples. *Oxford English Dictionary*, second edition, 1989.

⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Enquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989), *passim*.

⁵ Terry Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism* (London: Verso, 1984), 18.

⁶ See for example, Bruce Robbins, ed., *The Phantom Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1993); *Women, Writing and the Public Sphere 1700-1830*, eds Elizabeth Eger, Charlotte Grant, Cliona Ó Gallchoir and Penny Warburton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Cindy L. Griffin, “The Essentialist Roots of the Public Sphere: A Feminist Critique,” *Western Journal of Communication*, 60 (Winter 1996): 21-39, and Kendall R. Phillips, “The Spaces of Public Dissension: Reconsidering the Public Sphere,” *Communication Monographs* 63 (September 1996): 231-48.

⁷ Hume, “Of Essay Writing”, 534.

⁸ Markman Ellis, “Coffee-women, *The Spectator* and the public sphere in the early eighteenth century”, in *Women, Writing and the Public Sphere 1700-1830*, eds Elizabeth Eger, Charlotte Grant, Cliona O Gallchoir and Penny Warburton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 27-52 (31).

⁹ *Ibid*, 31.

¹⁰ Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. Lawrence E. Klein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 232-233.

¹¹ *Ibid*, viii.

¹² For a discussion of the emergence of various conceptions of morality as self-government in eighteenth-century philosophical thought, see J.B. Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 5-9.

¹³ Shaftesbury, 75; compare Adam Smith: “Our words must not only be English and agreeable (*sic*) to the custom of the country, but likewise to the custom of some particular part of the nation. This part undoubtedly is formed of the men of rank and breeding.” *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, ed. J.C. Bryce (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 4.

¹⁴ Hume, “Of Essay Writing”, 533-37.

¹⁵ Hume, “Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding” in *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, eds L.A. Selby-Bigge & P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 5-6.

¹⁶ Hume, “Of Essay Writing”, 537.

¹⁷ J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 62. Emphasis added.

¹⁸ Paul Hamilton, *Metaromanticism: Aesthetics, Literature, Theory* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 189-190.

¹⁹ “Her knowledge of Richardson’s works was such as no one is likely again to acquire... Every circumstance narrated in *Sir Charles Grandison*, all that was ever said or done in the cedar parlour, was familiar to her; and the wedding days of Lady L. and Lady G. were as well remembered as if they had been living friends.” James Edward Austen-Leigh, *A Memoir of Jane Austen* (London: The Folio Society, 1992; first published 1770), 79.

²⁰ Jane Austen, *Persuasion*, ed. John Davie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 63.

²¹ Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), 23.

²² Jane Austen, *Emma*, ed. Ronald Blythe (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), 38.

²³ Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, ed. Tony Tanner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 85.

²⁴ Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 56, 243.

²⁵ Ibid, 82.

²⁶ *Emma*, 418-19.

²⁷ For a fuller discussion of how Austen’s novels demand and create particular types of ethical engagements from her readers, see Katie Halsey, “The Blush of Modesty or the Blush of Shame? Reading Jane Austen’s Blushes”, *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 42.3 (July 2006): 226-238 and Katie Halsey, “Spectral Texts in *Mansfield Park*”, in *British Women’s Writing in the Long Eighteenth Century: authorship, history, politics*, eds Cora Kaplan and Jennie Batchelor (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

²⁸ This phrase is taken from Bharat Tandon’s *Jane Austen and the Morality of Conversation* (London: Anthem, 2003).

²⁹ Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*, ed. Gina Luria, 2 vols (New York: Garland, 1974), II, 66-67.

CHAPTER ONE

IMPROVING TALK?
THE PROMISES OF CONVERSATION

STEFAN H. UHLIG

In Stephen Miller's recent portrait of decline, the author briskly sets out what we often think we know about the history of conversation, and reminds us why we tend to care about its fate.¹ Having discussed some early forms, like Job's pained altercations with his friends or Plato's radiant dialogues, Miller devotes much of his book to the Enlightenment. For him, as for so many, it is the eighteenth century which both defines best practice and, if anything more resonantly, prompts us to believe that conversation will, in any setting, foster more constructive dialogue.² Since then, Miller attests, things have invariably gone downhill. Our modern practices seem dangerously inauthentic, partisan, or simply single-minded and we are therefore urged to call upon the conversational legacy so as to integrate, and to improve our talk. This classic stance or "mode", as Harold Bloom commends it on the cover, partakes equally of "elegy" and "celebration". And a number of our recent calls in the humanities for better or just broader conversation have displayed this blend of wistful, and in many ways admiring, curiosity about the past. What Miller's book exemplifies in academic terms, is how a certain view of conversation has acquired something like redemptive status as a subject for historical and literary research. When we are asked to study conversation, that is to say, we are likely being tempted or explicitly encouraged to improve our own professional talk. The eighteenth-century record seems, by implication, likely to benefit the ways in which we interact and share our work.

We have learnt much about this "conversational ideal" in the humanities—especially where their rhetoric has been shaped by literary concerns—from David Simpson's study of postmodern trends in the academy. It was some time ago that the extensive influence of what was principally a literary mode of "theory" went into sharp decline. Simpson suggests that for as long as its "professionalism" (otherwise "called

theory”) is still subjected to “such heavy attack”, we ought to “read” the fact that we are routinely called to focus on, indeed to foster conversation “as nostalgia *for* the preprofessional”.³ We seem to long, that is, for a politer, and more situated, paradigm of intellectual exchange than what we find in formal arguments, discussions or debates. Simpson historically describes the “culture of politeness” as a “long-durational” constituent of this ideal. As we shall find, politeness is just one of the shared traits of eighteenth-century thought on conversation. It is instructive, though, to note his gloss that the “prerequisite of the polite was *leisure*” or—not least discursive—“freedom from the exigencies of work”, “divided labor”, or some “(vested) interest”. Along these lines our quest for conversation aims, whether historically or now, at dialogue as it might function “prior to the emergence of divisive expertise”. By contrast, what “today’s apologists of common sense like to call jargon” marks the specialisms we are encouraged to suspend, or even leave behind (46).

Of course the advocates of conversational styles are perfectly well placed to know the limitations as well as the costs of its discursive norms. Simpson reminds us that polite forms of address are what we commonly “resort to” where a “difficult” exchange must be maintained, or first made possible. Yet once we interact, in a more diverse context, “outside the subculture whose ideals have composed the model of what is polite” (or meet those “who simply will not recognize them”), these routines prove “fairly useless” just where we would need them most (44). For Simpson the pervasive zeal for academic conversation shores up confidence in our “sincerity and identity” (49), and substitutes these local virtues for such “master narratives”, ostensibly “discredited”, as “race” or “nation”, theory or “scientific method” (52). In the face of ever more “inclusive knowledge”, and the task of working with “materials and relationships” that are continually evolving and “unstable” (51), literary studies, history or even philosophy may pin their hopes on a new “consensus among at least a few people in some places”.⁴ A sense of who we are becomes as pressing as what we believe, or how we stage an argument across diverse communities. The “rhetoric of conversation”, it would seem, “seeks to suggest that, as long as we talk to others in the same social circle, we can avoid radical concerns about the languages we do not understand.” And Simpson is by no means on his own in linking conversation with the tendency of “small-group cultures” within larger disciplines to foreground their identities in lieu of more abstract or faceless premises (52).⁵

Much of this scepticism seems to be borne out by ways in which we have, in recent years, been asked to concentrate on conversation. Our belief in its historical success feeds much hope to resolve long-standing,

institutionally and substantively intricate disputes. To live up to the legacy, we are urged not only to be more attentive to our interlocutors, but equally to voice the places we are (as the phrase goes) coming from, and to reflect them in our argumentative exchange. Much of this advocacy we are apparently to take on trust, and to accept both its unflinching confidence and contradictions as a mark of their deep cultural roots. For some enthusiasts it seems as if constructive dialogue, in any context and at least since the Enlightenment, depends primarily on our capacity to contribute and re-articulate our most capacious selves. In view, by contrast, of the formalized and open-ended protocols of academic work there will be downsides to this need for self- as well as mutual assurances. We may collectively (in a more open sense) not wish to bear the costs of nurturing more localized communities, however pleasurable, either across or in the disciplines.

Ludmilla Jordanova, in remarks that helped prepare the present volume, notes the fact that without being “owned by any single discipline”, our focus has seemed plausible, indeed germane to “every field in the humanities and social sciences”.⁶ And she is quick to highlight the “utopian impulse” which appears to be at work “inside the concept ‘conversation’”. By privileging it we may, in other words, be doing less to back “open exchange” than to endorse the “common enough”, yet obviously non-trivial, “presupposition that unhealthy relationships, whether personal, occupational, institutional, economic or political can be ameliorated by more”, or “better conversation” (3). We may well credit the assumption in these separate, restricted terms, but how would we extrapolate from, say, an amorous relationship to the effectiveness of humanistic work? If we are happy to, for instance, foreground conversation as an interdisciplinary concern, yet scientific disciplines are not, is that our therapeutic gain or good for them? Do we need more of it even beyond the point at which commensurable questions and procedures would allow for a debate? Or do we long for conversation only where, and for as long as, we are suffering from a deficit of interlocking arguments? Not least because this longing tends to translate study into disciplinary critique, we should be clear about what is, for academic purposes, held to be wrong with argument, debate, or more discussion. Why, rather than just study conversation either in historical or analytic terms, are we to make this interest central to the way we work?

Compared with organized deliberation, or conversely with small talk, with hectoring or monologues, conversation has of course a number of intriguing traits. It calls for roughly balanced status and participation, some familiarity and curiosity amongst the interlocutors, a shared

enjoyment, generosity and courteous respect: overall criteria that have mirrored the development of courtly or increasingly urbane politeness since the seventeenth century.⁷ Plainly all these are aspects of a kind of interaction we would often and in several different contexts want. And there are doubtless some attempts to rectify shortcomings in the disciplines whose stress on conversation underlines a real concern. Despite his mistrust of all “zealous references” to a desired “academic norm”, Simpson still measures “fantasy formations about how we wish things to be, or still think that they should be”, as against their genuine counterpart beyond the classroom or the seminar. It may be symptomatic, he points out, that “few of us” are in a “classic”, non-professional sense that “good at strenuous listening, though most of us are delighted to talk about ourselves” and “our own work” (66). Whatever motivates the zeal, however, the sought-after joys of conversation may not blend too well with targeted exchange. The modest numbers who, either in person or in print, can interact in balanced ways, the need not to upset even those to whose beliefs we most object, or possible embarrassment about directing our attention to the most compelling points—all these constraints may prove worthwhile within some settings and their wider expectations. Yet there surely are, by contrast, formalized, deliberately public, or to all intents anonymous environments in which the obvious related costs would prove exorbitant to intellectual work.

One route by which to test these doubts is the decisive turn which Richard Rorty has pursued in order to re-humanize philosophy, not least with literary support. For some, the lines which separate a more historically involved and conversational philosophy from the meticulous debates in analytic work will seem too sharply drawn to be compared with other trends in the humanities. Yet we should note to what extent Rorty’s inviting version of enquiry as so much open-ended conversation (with the help of literary works) looks to his colleagues like a blatantly obstructive move. Rather than some stylistic, and undoubtedly well-meant, attempt to interface the field, he has been seen to block what others think of as its core activities.⁸ This clash gives us a helpful sense of what our best-intentioned preferences for certain kinds of talk may, in existing institutional frameworks, help to do. Jacques Bouveresse sums up his wider “disagreement” by confronting Rorty’s sense that “what needs to be encouraged in philosophy is not”, as most philosophers might think, “the tendency to offer and ask for reasons and arguments”. Now, Bouveresse complains, “it is the opposite tendency whose development is encouraged as having only positive and “liberating” consequences.” Although he putatively works in a more conversational environment, Bouveresse