ABRAHAM COWLEY

The Wish

Well then; I now do plainly see,
This busy world and I shall ne'er agree;
The very honey of all earthly joy
    Does of all meats the soonest cloy;
And they, methinks, deserve my pity
Who for it can endure the stings,
The crowd, and buzz, and murmurings
    Of this great hive, the city.

Ah, yet, ere I descend to the grave
May I a small house and large garden have!
And a few friends, and many books, both true,
    Both wise, and both delightful too!
And since love ne'er will from me flee,
A mistress moderately fair,
And good as guardian angels are,
    Only beloved, and loving me!

O fountains, when in you shall I
Myself, eased of unpeaceful thoughts, espy?
O fields! O woods! when, when shall I be made
    The happy tenant of your shade?
Here's the spring-head of pleasure's flood,
Here's wealthy Nature's treasury,
Where all the riches lie that she
    Has coined and stamped for good.

Pride and ambition here
Only in farfetched metaphors appear;
Here naught but winds can hurtful murmurs scatter,
    And naught but Echo flatter.
The gods, when they descended, hither
From heaven did always choose their way;
And therefore we may boldly say
    That 'tis the way, too, thither.

How happy here should I
And one dear she live and, embracing, die!
She who is all the world, and can exclude
    In deserts, solitude.
I should have then this only fear,
Lest men, when they my pleasures see,
Should hither throng to live like me,
    And so make a city here.
To Mr. Hobbes

Vast bodies of philosophy
I oft have seen and read,
But all are bodies dead,
Or bodies by Art fashionéd;
I never yet the living soul could see
But in thy books and thee.
'Tis only God can know
Whether the fair idea thou dost show
Agree entirely with his own or no.
This I dare boldly tell,
'Tis so like truth, 'twill serve our turn as well.
Just, as in nature, thy proportions be,
As full of concord their variety,
As firm the parts upon their center rest,
And all so solid are, that they, at least
As much as nature, emptiness detest.
Long did the mighty Stagirite retain
The universal intellectual reign,
Saw his own country's short-lived leopard slain;
The stronger Roman eagle did out-fly,
Oftener renewed his age, and saw that die.
Mecca itself, in spite of Mahomet possessed,
And chased by a wild deluge from the east,
His monarchy new planted in the west.
But as in time each great imperial race
Degenerates, and gives some new one place,
So did this noble empire waste,
Sunk by degrees from glories past,
And in the school-men's hands, it perished quite at last.
Then nought but words it grew,
And those all barbarous too.
It perished and it vanished there,
The life and soul breathed out, became but empty air.
The fields which answered well the ancients' plow,
Spent and outworn, return no harvest now;
In barren age wild and inglorious lie,
And boast of past fertility,
The poor relief of present poverty.

1. The poem is addressed to Thomas Hobbes, the Malmesbury philosopher, a friend of Cowley's; in form, it is a loose imitation of the Greek odes written by the Theban poet Pindar. Cowley understood these odes to be irregular and sublime (in which he was right), and that this was the character of his own genius (in which he was hopelessly wrong). His effort here to work up an artificial “sublime” is not very impressive; but his sense that a new world of philosophy is just opening before men is characteristic of his age. Cowley had an amateur’s interest in science, and great admiration for the Royal Society; but the problem of accommodating scientific rationalism within a rhetoric of poetic enthusiasm was too hard for him to handle.
2. Aristotle (who came from the town of Stagira, in Greece).
3. Alexander the Great, Aristotle’s pupil. Cowley is here tracing the history of Aristotelian philosophy through the ages.
4. Arabian thinkers like Avicenna and Averroes were largely responsible for transmitting Aristotle’s work to the Western world. The “monarchy new planted in the west” is the Moorish regime in Spain.
5. Cowley’s contempt for the scholastic philosophers (Scotus, Occam, Aquinas, and the rest) is unbounded.
Food and fruit we now must want
   Unless new lands we plant.
We break up tombs with sacrilegious hands;
   Old rubbish we remove;
To walk in ruins, like vain ghosts, we love,
   And with fond divining wands,
   We search among the dead
   For treasures buried,
Whilst still the liberal earth does hold
So many virgin mines of undiscovered gold.

The Baltic, Euxine, and the Caspian
And slender-limbed Mediterranean,
  Seem narrow creeks to thee,6 and only fit
For the poor wretched fisher-boats of wit.
Thy nobler vessel the vast ocean tries,
   And nothing sees but seas and skies,
   Till unknown regions it descries,
   Thou great Columbus of the golden lands of new philosophies.
   Thy task was harder much than his,
   For thy learned America is
   Not only found out first by thee,
   And rudely left to future industry,
   But thy eloquence and thy wit
Has planted, peopled, built, and civilized it.

I little thought before,
   (Nor, being my own self so poor,
   Could comprehend so vast a store)
That all the wardrobe of rich eloquence
   Could have afforded half enough
   Of bright, of new and lasting stuff,
To clothe the mighty limbs of thy gigantic sense.
Thy solid reason, like the shield from heaven
   To the Trojan hero given,7
Too strong to take a mark from any mortal dart,
Yet shines with gold and gems in every part,
And wonders on it graved by the learned hand of art,
   A shield that gives delight
   Even to the enemy's sight,
Then when they're sure to lose the combat by 't.

Nor can the snow which now cold age does shed
   Upon thy reverend head8
Quench or allay the noble fires within;
   But all which thou hast been,
   And all that youth can be thou 'rt yet,

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6. Hobbes himself. Cowley’s conviction that the new philosophy of “things” rather than “words” represents a whole new world for exploration and discovery echoes the confident affirmations of Bacon.
7. In Book 8 of the Aeneid, Aeneas gets from his mother, Venus, a splendid shield made by her husband, Vulcan.
8. Hobbes was born in 1588, the year of the Spanish Armada; he was therefore 68 when Cowley’s poem first appeared.
So fully still dost thou
Enjoy the manhood and the bloom of wit,
And all the natural heat, but not the fever too.
So contraries on Etna’s top conspire,
Here hoary frosts, and by them breaks out fire.
A secure peace the faithful neighbors keep,
Th’ emboldened snow next to the flame does sleep.
And if we weigh, like thee,
Nature and causes, we shall see
That thus it needs must be;
To things immortal time can do no wrong,
And that which never is to die, forever must be young.

To the Royal Society

Philosophy, the great and only heir
Of all that human knowledge which has been
Unforfeited by man’s rebellious sin,
Though full of years he do appear
(Philosophy, I say, and call it He)
For whatso’er the painter’s fancy be,
It a male virtue seems to me,
Has still been kept in nonage till of late,
Nor managed or enjoyed his vast estate.
Three or four thousand years, one would have thought,
To ripeness and perfection might have brought
A science so well bred and nursed,
And of such hopeful parts too at the first.
But, oh, the guardians and the tutors then
(Some negligent and some ambitious men)
Would ne’er consent to set him free,
Or his own natural powers to let him see,
Lest that should put an end to their authority.

That his own business he might quite forget,
They amused him with the sports of wanton wit;
With the desserts of poetry they fed him,
Instead of solid meats t’ increase his force;

9. Mount Etna, a volcano in Sicily, is so high that in winter it is sometimes snowcapped.
1. John Evelyn the diarist, an enthusiast for the Royal Society, suggested to Cowley that he write this poem, which he did in the last year of his life.
2. Though he does not make the point immediately clear, Cowley means by “Philosophy” natural philosophy, i.e., scientific investigation. The definition comes clear below when he distinguishes Philosophy from Authority, the latter understood to represent primarily Aristotle and his interpreters.
3. Painters and writers commonly represented Philosophy as a woman.
4. The period of legal minority, when one is not of age (non-age).
Instead of vigorous exercise, they led him
Into the pleasant labyrinths of ever-fresh discourse.  

Instead of carrying him to see
The riches which do hoarded for him lie
In Nature’s endless treasury,
They chose his eye to entertain
(His curious but not covetous eye),

With painted scenes and pageants of the brain.
Some few exalted spirits this latter age has shown,
That labored to assert the liberty
(From guardians who were now usurpers grown)
Of this old minor still, captured philosophy;

But ‘twas rebellion called to fight
For such a long-oppressed right.
Bacon at last, a mighty man, arose
Whom a wise king and Nature chose
Lord Chancellor of both their laws,

And boldly undertook the injured pupil’s cause.  

3

Authority, which did a body boast,
Though ’twas but air condensed, and stalked about
Like some old giant’s more gigantic ghost
To terrify the learned rout,

With the plain magic of true reason’s light
He chased out of our sight,
Nor suffered living men to be misled
By the vain shadows of the dead.

To graves, from whence it rose, the conquered phantom fled;

He broke the monstrous god which stood
In midst of th’ orchard, and the whole did claim,
Which, with a useless scythe of wood
And something else not worth a name
(Both vast for show, yet neither fit
Or to defend or to beget—
Ridiculous and senseless terrors!) made
Children and superstitious men afraid.

The orchard’s open now and free,
Bacon has broke that scarecrow deity;

Come, enter all that will,
Behold the ripened fruit, come gather now your fill.

Yet still, methinks, we fain would be
Catching at the forbidden tree;
We would be like the deity,

5. A standard complaint against scholastic philosophy was that it consisted too largely of merely verbal exercises.
6. Francis Bacon (1561–1626) was both Lord Chancellor of England and a leading scientific thinker.
7. Early scientific investigators were constantly running up against the “authority” of the ancients, particularly Aristotle, to whose judgment they were sometimes asked to make their scientific findings conform.
8. Crowd, mob.
9. I.e., Authority. In the following lines it is compared, as an empty threat, to statues of the Roman nature god Pan, which were set in orchards with a wooden scythe and a giant phallus to scare away birds and evil spirits.
When truth and falsehood, good and evil, we
Without the senses' aid within ourselves would see;
   For 'tis God only who can find
   All Nature in his mind.

From words, which are but pictures of the thought
   (Though we our thoughts from them perversely drew),
To things, the mind's right object, he it brought. 1
Like foolish birds, to painted grapes we flew; 2
He sought, and gathered for our use, the true;
And when in heaps the chosen bunches lay,
   He pressed them wisely the mechanic 3 way,
Till all their juice did in one vessel join,
   Ferment into a nourishment divine,
   The thirsty soul's refreshing wine.

Who to the life an exact piece would make
   Must not from others' work a copy take;
   No, not from Rubens or Van Dyck: 4
   Much less content himself to make it like
The ideas and the images which lie
   In his own fancy or his memory.
   No, he before his sight must place
   The natural and living face;
   The real object must command
Each judgment of his eye, and motion of his hand.

From these and all long errors of the way
   In which our wandering predecessors went,
And like th' old Hebrews many years did stray
   In deserts but of small extent,
Bacon, like Moses, led us forth at last,
   The barren wilderness he passed,
   Did on the very border stand
Of the blesséd promised land,
   And from the mountain's top of his exalted wit
   Saw it himself, and showed us it. 5
But life did never to one man allow
   Time to discover worlds and conquer too,
   Nor can so short a line 6 sufficient be
   To fathom the vast depths of Nature's sea.
The work he did we ought t' admire,
   And were unjust if we should more require
   From his few years, divided 'twixt th' excess

1. I.e., he called the mind away from words to things.
2. The Greek painter Zeuxis was said to have painted grapes so realistically that the birds came and pecked at them.
3. Mechanical, materialistic.
4. The work of Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) and his pupil Antony Van Dyck (1599–1641) was well known and much admired in England.
5. Like Moses, who had a remote view of the promised land from the top of Mount Pisgah, but could never himself get there, Bacon foresaw but never experienced the triumphs of science.
6. I.e., the line of man's life.
Of low affliction and high happiness.\(^7\)
For who on things remote can fix his sight,
That's always in a triumph or a fight?

6

From you, great champions,\(^8\) we expect to get
These spacious countries but discovered yet;
Countries where yet instead of Nature, we
Her images and idols worshiped see.
These large and wealthy regions to subdue,
Though learning has whole armies at command,
Quartered about in every land,
A better troop she ne’er together drew.
Methinks, like Gideon’s little band\(^9\)
God with design has picked out you
To do these noble wonders by a few.

When the whole host he saw, “They are,” said he,
“Too many to o’ercome for me”;\(^1\)
And now he chooses out his men
Much in the way that he did then—
Not those many whom he found
Idly extended on the ground
To drink with their dejected head
The stream just so as by their mouths it fled;
No, but those few who took the waters up,
And made of their laborious hands the cup.

7

Thus you prepared; and in the glorious fight,
Their wondrous pattern too you take:
Their old and empty pitchers first they brake,
And with their hands then lifted up the light.
Io! Sound too the trumpets here!
Already your victorious lights appear;
New scenes of heaven already we espy,
And crowds of golden worlds on high,
Which from the spacious plains of earth and sea
Could never yet discovered be
By sailor’s or Chaldean’s watchful eye.\(^2\)
Nature’s great works no distance can obscure,
No smallness her near objects can secure.
You’ve taught the curious sight to press
Into the privatest recess

\(7\). Bacon knew great success ("happiness") as Lord Chancellor, and great "affliction" when he was impeached for accepting bribes.

\(8\). The members of the Royal Society, to whom the poem is addressed.

\(9\). For the story of Gideon and his little hand, see Judges, especially 6 and 7. The story of how Gideon selected his warriors is substantially as told by Cowley in stanzas 6 and 7.

\(1\). Greek and Roman cry of triumph.

\(2\). Sailors watch the sky to take their bearings; Chaldeans were the famous astronomers of antiquity.
Of her imperceptible littleness;
   You’ve learned to read her smallest hand,
And well begun her deepest sense to understand.

Mischief and true dishonor fall on those
Who would to laughter or to scorn expose
So virtuous and so noble a design,
So human for its use, for knowledge so divine.
The things which these proud men despise, and call
   Impertinent and vain and small,
Those smallest things of Nature let me know
Rather than all their greatest actions do.
Whoever would deposéd truth advance
   Into the throne usurped from it
Must feel at first the blows of ignorance
   And the sharp points of envious wit.
So when, by various turns of the celestial dance
   In many thousand years,
A star, so long unknown, appears,
Though heaven itself more beauteous by it grow,
It troubles and alarms the world below,
Does to the wise a star, to fools a meteor³ show.

With courage and success you the bold work begin;
   Your cradle has not idle been.
None e’er but Hercules and you could be
At five years’ age worthy a history.⁴
   And ne’er did fortune better yet
Th’ historian to the story fit.
As you from all old errors free
   So from all modern follies he
Has vindicated eloquence and wit.
His candid style like a clean stream does slide,
   And his bright fancy all the way
Does like the sunshine in it play.
It does like Thames, the best of rivers, glide
Where the god does not rudely overturn
   But gently pour the crystal urn,
And with judicious hand does the whole current guide.
It has all the beauties Nature can impart,
And all the comely dress without the paint of art.

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³. Meteors were thought to be omens of ill fortune.
⁴. I.e., the History of the Royal Society by Thomas Sprat. After Cowley’s death, Sprat edited a splendid volume of his collected works, and wrote his biography.