

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-02821-9 - Conversations at Little Gidding: 'On the Retirement of Charles V' - 'On the Austere Life'

Edited by A. M. Williams

Excerpt

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Part I

The narrator, Nicholas Ferrar, relates the considerations which led to the founding of the Little Academy at the behest of the Maiden Sisters on the Feast of the Purification, 2 February 1630/1, and comments on its early struggles. The first dialogue recorded took place on Ash Wednesday of that year, but the extended discussion on Charles V did not begin until the end of May. The Chief proposes the topic—that 'our well chosen resolutions' should be confirmed by immediate action—and tells a story of Pyrrhus who, deaf to advice to seek peace and happiness, died by accident after years of warfare and suffering. She applies the moral to Christians who postpone the fulfilment of promises made to God and to themselves—those who, while intending to lead austere and godly lives, devote themselves to 'foolish employments of minds and times in gauds and trifles'. The Patient tells a story of Trajan, and the Cheerfull one of a bishop's wealthy mother. The Affectionate concludes this section by a short story illustrating how the foolish defence of errors can multiply guilt.

NOTE: These stories as well as the introductory remarks are also included in B.M. Add. MS. 34657 and were printed by Miss Sharland in *The Story Books of Little Gidding*, pp. 2–10.

It was the same day wherein the Church celebrates that great Festival of the Purification [2 February], that the Mayden Sisters longing to bee Imitatours of those Glorious Saints, by whose Names they were called (for All bare Saints Names, & she that was elected Cheif that of the Blessed Virgin Mary) hauing entered into a ioynt Couenant between themselues & some others of Neerest Bloud (which according to their seueral Relations they stiled Founder, Guardian, & Visitour) for the performance of diuers Religious Exercizes, Least as sweet Liquours are oftentimes corrupted by the sowreness of the vessels wherein they are infused, there should arise in their hearts a Distaste or Abuse of those Excellent things, which they proposed: They therefore

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resolved together with the Practize of Deuotion to intermingle the study of Wisedome, Searching & Enquiring diligently into the knowledge of those things, which appertaine to their Condition & Sex; Finding in themselues and obseruing in others, that doe sincerely pursue vertue, that the Greatest barre of Perfection was Ignorance of the Truth, whereby through misapprehension many preiudicial things were embraced, & many most behouefull to their Ends & most delightfull in performance <1> were not only neglected but abhorred. Which hauing by many particulars experimented [experienced] in themselues, doubting that they were alike abused in most of these things, which wee haue receiued by Tradition from our Fathers, they determined with firm promises each to other to make a particular survey of those Opinions & Practizes, which the World recommends or disallows, weighing them not in the Scales of Common iudgement, but of true & right Reason¹ according to the weights & by the

¹ Right reason—the exact definition of this phrase, even when used by more careful philosophic writers than the Ferrars, is very difficult. Douglas Bush in *English Literature of the Earlier Seventeenth Century*, p. 35, defines it as ‘the eternal and harmonious law of God and nature written in every human mind and heart’. The same writer remarks in *Paradise Lost in our Time*, p. 37, ‘Right reason is not merely reason in our sense of the word; it is not a dry light, a nonmoral instrument of inquiry. Neither is it simply the religious conscience. It is a kind of rational and philosophic conscience which distinguishes man from the beasts and which links man with man and with God. This faculty was implanted by God in all men, Christian and heathen alike, as a guide to truth and conduct.’ Although the Cambridge Platonists flourished in a period too late to have a direct influence over the Ferrars, their appeal to ‘right reason’ and the ‘light of nature’ had been anticipated by Richard Hooker, as Basil Willey points out in his *Seventeenth-Century Background*, p. 121. Hooker died in 1600 and his thought and works must have been familiar to the Ferrars. Professor Willey also remarks, *op. cit.* p. 72, ‘Reason . . . was for the Platonists the ultimate source of authority in matters of faith; and the function of Scripture was to illuminate and confirm its dictates, never to contradict them. Revelation is not confined to the pages of holy writ nor to the age of the prophets and apostles, for Reason, a “seed of deiform nature”, is “Natural revelation”’ (pp. 72–3). This comment should be considered in relation to the many instances in which the Ferrars traced the working of God’s hand in the lives and actions of nearly contemporary persons.

For a full discussion of right reason the reader is referred to *Right Reason in the English Renaissance* by Richard Hoopes. Hoopes quotes a passage from

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Standard of the Scripture, wherein they being excellently versed so as they were able to repeat by heart both the Booke of Psalmes & most part of the New Testament: they found that there was neither Action nor Opinion that could be propounded but might receiue a Cleare Solution & direction from that Booke. Wherefore not vpon Presumption of their own Abilities but on Confidence of Gods Gracious Assistance to their humble & diligent Endeauours they agreed euery day at a sett houre to conferre together of some such subiect, as should tend either to the Information of the Vnderstanding¹ or to the Exciting of the Affections² to the more ready and fervent prosecution of vertues, & better performance of all such duties <2> as in their present or other Course of Life hereafter should bee required of them.

The First Proceedings, as it alwaies happens in great Attempts, that haue no Presidents [precedents] to direct, were both in forme & substance farre short of that whereunto they were in the end reduced.

Wherefore as Artists vpon the full accomplishment of their works Cast aside the first Draughts so silencing what was lesse exactly done I shall goe on with the Recording of things, from that time, which themselues accompt the beginning being about the end of May. Only by way of Introduction, as Porches were anciently sett in the Fronts of greater Buildings, I will sett down the Passages of Two or Three seueral daies, which may well serue for a preface to the Reader of this Following Booke, as in truth they were maine arguments to the Confirmation of their minds, who were the Actours of this & other Noble Vndertakings.

Reasons Academy (1605), which he attributes to Robert Mason rather than to Sir John Davies: "Since then the knowledge and vse of Reason is the onely salue to cure these reasonless infirmities, it is not amisse in this little Dispensatorie, to show the true manner of this composition, that every man knowing the ingredients and their naturall operations, each man may be his owne physition, and cure those maladies which make the world run mad with toys and fantasmes." This passage is very close in thought to the spirit of the Little Gidding discussions.

¹ Vnderstanding—the mind or intellect.

² Affections—natural inclinations.

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On Ash Wednesday therefore Although for the better suiting of their Bodies to their Hearts, & their Hearts to the Meditations of the day they forbore the refreshment of Corporal Food, yet so much the more desirous to Feast their minds in the ⟨3⟩ Fast of their Bodies meeting at their appointed time & place together with that other Company, which were alwaies Auditours & sometimes, at least some of them, partner Actors in their Exercises, The CHEIF began thus.

My Dearest Sisters & sweet Companions the Solemnitie of this Day inviting vs to sober Thoughts, I shall desire our Stories may be such As both befits the Season & tend to a serious Confirmation of our well-Chosen Resolutions. And that so much the rather, because if you shall agree thereunto, wee will Make this Day the Beginning of our Exercize accompting this week already past, but as the Tuning of Instruments before Musick, harsh larring to sweet Harmonie. The whole Companie seeming by Cherefull gesture to approue the matter, The GVARDIAN in all their behalvs made answere.

Faire Cheif: The motion is like your self most Acceptable & worthy to be so. Wherefore in Gods Name, doe you make Entrance, & wee will to the best of our Abilities, second you both in Cloth & Colour [offer similar examples] as the Proverb is. Wherevpon She thus proceeded:—⟨4⟩

That Braue King & Captaine Pirrhus,¹ whom Hannibal iudged the worthiest Cheiftaine next Alexander, that cuer the World had, Boyling with Ambitious desires of Enlarging his Dominions & Encreasing his Honours, brought one Day into Consultation amongst his Captaines & other Freinds, the Resolutions of Warring vpon some of his Neighbours, against whom he had rather made then found iust Quarrel. The whole Counsel gaue their votes according to the Kings mind, Onely one excepted

¹ Pirrhus—Pyrrhus, 318–272 B.C., King of Epirus. His story is told by Plutarch, but comparison of their version with that in North's translation shows that the Ferrars relied here on one of the many Latin editions which had earlier appeared.

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Named Cineas a man of Long Robes, who excusing his Ignorance in Martial matters, besought his Maiestie, that wauing all Arguments touching that subiect he might freely demand some few questions of him. To which the King graciously condescending Cineas said: Sir, when you haue ouercome these against whom you are now bent, what will your Grace farther doe? Marry quoth the king, if wee herein proue successfull, the whole state of Greece must submitt to our Empire. Bee it so, sayth Cineas, will you rest there? Nay verily, quoth Pirrhus, but then immediately will wee goe against the Romans, & if wee ouerthrow them, then Italy shalbe the Fruit of our Labour & Hazard. A Noble & Happy Conquest <5> sayd Cineas. But when this shalbe effected, what shall wee then doe? Why then quoth the King wee shall not doubt to sett on the Carthaginians. And suppose you haue ouercome them, sayd Cineas, what then? Why then quoth he, All Africa shalbe ours. In a Blessed houre replied Cineas. And what shall wee then doe? Pirrhus now grown aweary, half in Anger, half in Mirth, Oh Cineas, sayd he then will wee giue our selues to Rest & Quiet, to Banquets & Games, & enioy all the Happiness, which wee shall haue purchased. If that (sayd hee), Dread Soueraigne, be the vpshott of your Intents & Aimes, who forbids you now to accomplish the same, with the sauing of all that Labour and Hazard, which wee shall vndergoe & perhaps be ouerwhelmed with? How can it be Conformable to your Excellent Wisedome to fetch a large & wearisome Course about for the Attainment of those pleasures, into the Fruition whereof you may immediately enter, if you please. If a happy & delightfull Life bee that you Aime at in the end, why doe wee not without delay take our part thereof? This sayd Cineas. And though Pirrhus could not gainsay, yet could he not follow the Prudent Advice of this wise Counsellor, but led on stiffly by his <6> Confused & blind desire after some yeares spent in Extremities, Toyle, & Anguish of mind & Body was miserably slaine by a peice of Timber cast from the top of a House by a womans hand. But this Tragical End is not

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that, which I have recompted this story for. But the proposal of Cineas his Argument to convince [show] the madness of vs Christians. That professing the seruice of God out of a pure heart & a good Conscience to be the maine & vps hott of all our desire & Aimes doe not withstanding all by a ioynt Conspiracy, as it were, in folly sett that part to be performed in the Catastrophe of our Life, giuing our youth & present times to the pursuite of Vanities, spending the strength & vigour both of mind & body in a violent Race cleane contrarie to that path, at the head whereof the Prize is sett, which wee pretend to seek. But let vs no more, my Dearest Sisters, be as Children tossed to and fro with euery windy & frothy Argument of the Louers of this World, but come to a cleare & stable Resolution touching the Leading of our Liues henceforth. If this seruice of the World & the Flesh be good & beneficial, & worthy our souls, that fetch their original from heauen, why then let vs sett seriously thereabout, loosing no time gett what we may <7> of the Pleasures & Profitts they afford & perhaps offer a liberal tast unto vs: & herein Let vs sett vp our rest. If we say Nay, but though for a while wee shalbe glad to be partakers of this Worlds delight, yet on no hand will wee take them for our portion but purpose in the End, bidding adue to them all. (As with greatest Honour to her & Ioy to ourselues, wee see our Dearest Grandmother to haue done.) Why then what silly fondness will it be not to begin euen from this very instant to follow the Course, which in the End wee resolue to take & to endeaouour the Attainment of those things, which wee know only to be worthy keeping, Wisedome, Temperance, Patience, Meeknes, Humilitie & the rest of those heauenly ornaments. As for the vaine Fancies in Apparel, the Licorish Appetites¹ in diet, Foolish imployment of our minds & times in Gauds & Trifles, peeuish venting of Humours & all the like infirmities, which vex our weaker sex. Why should wee not from this very houre bid an vtter defiance vnto them, since at the last wee meane with

¹ Licorish Appetites—appetites for dainty and fancy food.

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shame to Casheere them, as our Reproach & danger. If it wilbe Honourable & good in our gray haire, how much more now in youth, to be wise & vertuous? <8>

Here the CHEIFE stayd, & hauing for a good space sett her Eies on the ground. At last with a Cheerfull Eie veiwing the Company round about, Your thoughtfull Countenances (sayd she) giue a Testimonie, that I haue sayd too much & perhaps in other manner then I ought, & therefore I will no further encrease your wearines or my own fault.

Not so (Replied the GUARDIAN) most worthy Cheif: But rather the Excellency of the matter & your answerable handling of it, hath bred this solleme Alteration on our parts, so as though wee could gladly heare your discourse, till the starres should appeare, yet that wee may not at present ouercharge your nor our own memories, desirous to beare away that, which you haue already sayd wee are Content to yeeld to your desires.

Wherevpon the CHEIF arose & took the Patient by the Hand & sett her down in the Chaire, saying, To you it belongs, Deare Sister, by some better recompted story to make satisfaction for that which I haue been wanting in. To whom the PATIENT Replied. Whatsoever shall this day, Worthy Cheif, be sayd on this subject, must be but descant on the song, which you haue now sett. And in proof thereof I <9> shall tell you an Example tending to that purpose. That Euery man in his place should be carefull to performe his own offices without delay:

Traian¹ that Incomparable Emperour, being on a day in speedy March against some Barbarians, that had broken into the Roman Pale, A Poore Widdow pressing through the midst of his Guard, Casting herself on her knees took hold of his stirrop, & with a shower of Teares, that poured from her Eies, besought him to doe her iustice of one, that had cruelly murdered her only Son. The

¹ Trajan—Roman Emperor from A.D. 98 to 117. This story is told by Dante in the *Purgatorio*, Canto x, and in the *Fiore di Filosofi* attributed to Brunetto Latini.

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Emperour bad her rise saying, that at his return he would doe her iustice to the full. But now, Mother, sayd hee, my hast is too great. Wherevpon the old Woman replied. Suppose you Come not back againe, Who then shall doe mee right? That shall my Successour, sayd Traian. Alas Sir, sayd she, if hee should fail me too, shall not you then remaine indebted to iustice & to mee? But put case, that thy successour doe mee right, shall his iustice free thee? Nay shall it not rather augment thy fault? Happy will it be for him if all, that he can doe suffice to discharge himself. Which is more, as <10> thou perceiuest then thou now canst doe. The Emperour hearing this dismounted presently, & sent for the Accused, did the Widdow iustice according to her desire & his own duty. And afterwards discomfited his Enemies & returned with great Honour. This was one of those Noble Acts, which made this Emperour so famous & beloued, as After-Ages out of Compassion that such incomparable vertues should be damned fained Traians soul to be returned out of Hell by St Gregorie the Greats Prayers. But surely where euer his soul be, the Wisdome & Worth of his Action ought to be imitated by vs neuer putting off the doing of right & iustice which wee are bound to performe.

The Patients story was of all much Commended. & the CHEIF taking the Cheerfull by the hand, Although (sayd she) the mends of my defects be already made by this Renowned story, yet that it may be with greater Advantage, I shall desire you, Sweet Sister, to fitt vs with some of those Excellent ones, which you are Mistresse of.

Wherevpon the CHEERFULL made Answere. I am at the most but a steward, that keeps others Wealth, but because I know with their good liking I may make vse of <11> that, which is in my store, I shall tell you an Example to perswade vs not to deferre the bestowing of our Almes & the Exercize of our Charitie (as the manner of too many is) to the period of our Liues, but whilst opportunitie serueth to be ready to distribute & willing to Communicate [share with others] according to the Apostles Counsell

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& Encouragement. Laying vp in store a good Foundation against the time to come.¹ To this purpose shall my story bee. Whereof howeuer the Fact may be doubtfull, the moral I am sure is most profitable.

A Great Lady high both in Bloud & Riches but much more high & happy in the vertues of Her Son by Dignitie a Bishop & in holy Conversation a Saint, being oftentimes pressed by him to the Exercize of Charitie in an ouerflowing measure, still put him off with the large bequest that she intended in her will to Good Vses, which she conceiued would be as acceptable to God & profitable to herself as any present distribution. Her good son perceiuing that by solid Arguments he was not able to perswade her, bethought himself by a more plaine & material kind of proof to convince her. One night therefore hauing invited her to supper at his <12> Palace, which he studiously protracted. At her getting into the Coach to returne home it being very late & dark she called for torches to attend & guide the way. The Bishop who had purposely commanded there should be none ready desired her to lett the Coach driue on easily. To which when she made answeere that all the way being bad needed light, but especially the passage of the Bridge, which was very perilous. The Bishop Counsell'd her to proceed saying that hee would send the lights after, which should ouertake her by that time shee came to the Bridge. Whereunto with much passion she replied. That will I not hazzard sayd shee, by any meanes. For suppose wee should bee on it, before we are aware. There would then perhaps need more then Lights to help vs out againe, & to remedy the hurt, that might befall us. I will not therefore stirre, sayd shee, till I haue the Torch'es before mee. The Bishop seeing that it wrought as he wished, with great Humilitie besought her to Consider, whether it were not fitt to obserue the same Course in that, which was of farre more importance, sending her good works & Almes deeds

¹ I Timothy vi, 18 and 19.