

Always more to say

On the place and purpose of conversation in literary history.

by James Como



Samuel Johnson

To begin, this quiz: who is the speaker of the long quotation below? Hint: it is one of the most famous fictional characters in the history of English letters. Another hint: early in the narrative, the character “muttered some inarticulate sounds.” Later, he speaks:

You have destroyed the work which you began; what is it that you intend? Do you dare to break your promise? I have endured toil and misery: I left Switzerland with you; I crept along the shores of the Rhine, among its willow islands, and over the summits of its hills. . . . I have endured incalculable fatigue, and cold, and hunger, do you dare to destroy my hopes?

In fact, Dr. Frankenstein's creature develops into quite the eloquent self-advocate, to whom his creator must surrender the conversational floor.

That garrulous entity arrived not very long after the regular gatherings of quite irregular men. Readers here will know of [*The Kingdom of Speech*](#), Tom Wolfe reminds us that we are *Homoloquax*, alone in the *regnumloquax*. He finds that the most rigorous research has concluded, in print, that "the most fundamental questions about the origins and evolution of our linguistic capacity remain as mysterious as ever." Expressing his astonishment, Wolfe observes that, "in fact, in the one hundred and fifty years since the Theory of Evolution was announced [linguistic researchers] have learned . . . *nothing*." He emphasizes: "speech is not one of man's several unique attributes—speech is the attribute of all attributes."

Wolfe's conclusion is elegant: "To say that animals evolved into man is like saying that Carrara marble evolved into Michelangelo's David." Or as Walker Percy has put it in his *Message in the Bottle*:

Existentialists have taught us that what man is cannot be grasped by the science of man. Man is . . . that being in the world whose calling it is to find a name for Being, to give testimony to it, and to provide for it a clearing.

St. John is right: in the beginning indeed was the Word.

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