

Nicholas Grindle, Bohemians and Marginal Communities in the 18th Century: George Morland in Context, Symposium, University of Leeds, 29 May 2015.

Georgian accents: dialect, accent and speech in George Morland's social encounters

In the exhibition you will see Morland's painting *Farmyard*, which we borrowed from the Atkinson in Southport. I have to confess that while it's a fine painting in many ways (for reasons I'll come back to in a few minutes), its principal recommendation was that it had some pigs in it. You can't have an exhibition of Morland without some pigs, I thought, at the point when it seemed that might just happen. So we borrowed this picture. In fact I'd been working on Morland for a couple of years and hadn't really given the pigs much thought, but it seems to be what most people have in mind when they think about Morland. Yet Morland's works are more than just pigs, although farmyards were most fitting subjects for big Royal Academy works. Morland's association with lower orders also more complex than is usually recognised, both in range of associates and one-off relations with them.

My interest is in people and things on the move in the late eighteenth century and how those movements were shaped by flow of money. I conceive of Morland very much as an artist whose practice is situated in London. There were still pigs - he died in a spunging house within earshot of Smithfield market - but they were London pigs.

Speech is one of key ways in which Morland's biographers represented him as a specifically urban figure, a dandy or 'buck', especially William Collins's 1805 *Memoirs*. Speech also takes a prominent role in his paintings. I'll explore both in more detail shortly.

It was in this context that I came across the following quotation, in Patsy Rodenberg's book *The Right to Speak*:

'Urban life has given the voice a brashness, a quality of irony and mistrust with no room for answering. The glottal attack, push and vocal strain so very perilous to the good health of the voice are found mainly in urban speakers and in their accents [...] They are so prevalent in these circumstances that they seem almost genetic rather than environmental. The urban breath is shorter and more shallow, the speaking more rushed, clipped and careless, the jargon and slang richer and the overall vocal quality more domineering and aggressive. Images, too, are more sharp, rapping and pungent' (Patsy Rodenberg, *The Right to Speak*, p.68-9).

This made me think about the prominence of dialect and accents in biographies of Morland, and also in his works.

I don't have any theoretical model or critical paradigm for thinking about how speech figures in representations of Morland, or in his works themselves. The most well-known critical writing on Morland is by John Barrell in his book *Dark Side of the Landscape* (1980).

Barrell argues that way the poor are represented in the late eighteenth century did not hide the fact of poverty but presented it in a way that was believable but also 'innoculated' from some of the harsher truths of rural life by its very plausibility. He suggests that Morland was able to make pictures of the poor acceptable by portraying them as soliciting some aid from those who are better off. *Morning, or the Benevolent Sportsman* is the example he cites to prove his point.

Barrell's argument is well known for its suggestion that Morland's paintings resist this image of the poor as often as they admit it. Standing close enough to the figures for them to appeal to our feelings and allow us to see and hear their pleas for relief are the factors that make for a reassuring image of the poor (Barrell, p.110). On the other hand, standing close enough to see that they are not appealing for help, or that they are oblivious to our presence altogether, are factors that can make for a profoundly disturbing encounter. In a discussion of another painting featuring the lower orders, *The Alehouse Door*, Barrell suggests that our proximity to the labourers, and their indifference to our presence, goes beyond the limits of what could be tolerated in a picture (Barrell, p.114). The fact their faces are only part-hidden suggests that Morland does not want to attenuate the impact of the composition, a point he makes through comparisons with the close-studied physiognomies in Wilkie's *Village Politicians* (which show the poor as comic) and the hidden faces in Rowlandson's drawing *Labourers at Rest* (which don't show the labourers' faces at all).

Barrell takes this a step further and suggests that what's most worrying of all in this picture is the possibility that the labourers are talking radical politics. The labourers are knowable but what we know about them - their interest in radical politics - prevents further knowing of the kind that affirms relations in a way the rich viewer we may wish to have them affirmed.

I think it's likely that Morland did have connections with radical politics. Critics - Barrell included - say that his sympathy with the lower orders was fostered through his association with gypsies, smugglers, post-boys and so on. I'm less convinced by this and tend to think that his connections with radical politics - if he had any - were more about associations with Radical politicians, and alignment with Radical causes such as resistance to press-gangs and recruitment for the army.

The reason I'm mentioning Barrell's work is that he is concerned with questions about who could command a vantage point that allowed them to comprehend the unity of the nation, and what language was associated with that conceptual position, and who had the authority to pronounce on correct usage. His essay on Morland proposes that Morland and his associates presented a challenge to the authority claimed by the landed elites firstly by means of their own speech, mainly because it lacked the appropriate markers of deference; and secondly by the kind of speech that was represented, such as seditious talk.

In the remainder of this paper I'll revisit both these themes and offer a few provisional conclusions about how speech can help us understand Morland's life and work better.

Let's revisit *Morning, or the Benevolent Sportsman*, since it's the painting Barrell takes as an exemplary case of deference correctly displayed. Would an eighteenth century viewer conceive of the exchange principally in terms of class, of the rich being generous to the poor? To put it another way, would a viewer expect to 'hear' an exchange in which relief was begged and gratefully received?

Eighteenth century Britain and Europe saw a wide range of 'advice to magistrates' literature on how to deal with gypsies. A common feature of this kind of writing took the form of warnings about the allegedly skilful and deceitful speech of gypsies, especially on impressionable young girls. Large books such as Grellmann's *Dissertation on the Gypsies* used linguistic analysis to trace their origins, understand them better, and govern them effectively.

But by 1790 gypsies were regarded also as residually local, a part of the landscape. Local terms such as 'bender' (to describe the bivouac) and local customs such as being able to erect a roof and hearth had a bearing on the sense that Stuart and his neighbour Pleydell Mansell would have made of gypsy pictures. Magistrates such as John Langhorne struggled to reconcile admiration for liberty with problems it caused. Canting dictionaries helped gentlemen know gypsies better in order to admire them.

So the gestures of each figure in *Morning, or the Benevolent Sportsman* might affirm the gentleman's generosity and the recipient's 'forelock-tugging' gratitude. But as Sarah Houghton-Walker has pointed out, the social relations portrayed are more ambiguous than Barrell allows, and the key point I want to make is that eighteenth century viewers had the resources in the form of dictionaries, dramatic performances, poetry, and so on, to conceive of the nuances of this encounter, and the different dimensions of deference.

Exchange is often used by Morland as a central organising motif. He wasn't the first: *Morning, or the Benevolent Sportsman* borrows the composition from Edward Penny's painting *The Marquis of Granby*. But Morland's work is conspicuous for organising his paintings around a moment of dialogue. For example, a gesture lies at the dead centre of *A Farrier's Shop*, but the dramatic tension exists entirely in the moment of dialogue, a question that's been asked and is waiting for an answer.

It seems to me that when we consider dialogue we must conceive of it as dialect. Viewers of pictures such as Tate's *Cowherd and Milkmaid* could draw on a range of resources to supplement the experience of looking. For example, dramatic performances such as Charles Dibdin's very funny farmyard farce *Jacky and the Cow*, performed in his theatre in Leicester Square, imitated rural accents to great comic effect. If picturesque imagery made a little poverty acceptable in a picture, then surely so did picturesque accents. Cheap mezzotints which had an illustration of the principal character with the words of his song beneath may have encouraged this association.

In other cases the pictorial and aural interest hinges on the clash of accents. *Easy Money* is a case in point, where clash of accents is one dimension in central principle of social comedy (a point re-worked from long-standing motif of innocent rural traveller in town).

We also need to acknowledge that so often in Morland's painting it's silence rather than dialogue that's the central organising feature. For example, the Southampton *Interior of an Inn*, where the sportsman and the labourer's muted exchange contrasts with the discussion the man in an apron is having with his companion, or the Southport *Farmyard* in which we can't really see enough to hear what's being said. As we've already seen, Barrell argues that Morland's viewers found his compositions unsatisfactory because they didn't communicate the right messages about the relations between the figures. I think the key point is that viewers had the resources to conceive of the relations invoked within the picture, and between subjects and themselves, in a variety of ways. Especially important is the contingency of dialect and accent, since exchange nearly always takes place in the context of travel in Morland's work. Accents signify the extent to which relations are bound to the environment, and I'm not sure people were able to imagine relations abstracted from the environment and registered simply in terms of class in the way that Barrell claims.