



Ethics in the Wasteland: Image and Structure in Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village*

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Ethics in the Wasteland: Image and Structure in Goldsmith's
THE DESERTED VILLAGE

THE PUBLICATION OF *The Deserted Village* ON MAY 26, 1770, ELICITED a curious critical response. On the one hand, Goldsmith was praised for providing more pleasure for the reader "than he has received from poetry since the days of Pope,"¹ while on the other, he was attacked for the political and social views expressed in the poem. The reviewer in *The Critical Review*, for instance, noted that in "descriptive poetry Dr. Goldsmith has a few superiors," and that "he has this advantage over the author of the Seasons . . . that he writes excellent poetry in rhyme." But this same reviewer expressed strong reservations concerning Goldsmith's thesis that luxury and wealth are the ruin of England: "England wears now a more smiling aspect than she ever did; and few ruined villages are to be met with except on poetical ground."²

This separation between the "beauties" of the poem and its subject matter has characterized critical attitudes toward *The Deserted Village* to the present day, and, in a slightly altered form from that of the critical views of Goldsmith's contemporaries, may be said to be the established critical norm of most modern commentaries. Current criticism of *The Deserted Village* is about evenly divided among three subjects of evaluation: Goldsmith's political and social doctrines, the poem as a personal expression of Goldsmith's sentimental views, and the beauty of the poem as consisting in its "charm" and "descriptive accuracy." Most analyses of the poem, moreover, usually combine these three approaches, resulting in uninformative and often incorrect treatments of *The Deserted Village*. Clara Kirk, for instance, speaks of the "sensitive sad spirit of Goldsmith the poet, looking back with brooding affection on the dream of his youth," while Ralph Wardle finds the success of *The Deserted Village* to lie in its "appeal to the emotions and . . . appeal to the eye" and goes so far as to assert that "whether he wished it or not, Goldsmith virtually anticipated the Romantic Revival in all but his adherence to neo-classical diction." Morris Golden, too, while subjecting *The Deserted Village* to a generally useful analysis, places it in "Goldsmith's

¹ [John Hawkesworth?], review of *The Deserted Village*, *Gentleman's Magazine*, 40 (1770), 271-273.

² *Critical Review*, 29 (1770), 435, 436.

'pre-romantic' view of life, of art, of politics, of history, indeed of everything," which is "grounded largely in his view of the family and the son who escaped it, with this in turn based on his evaluation . . . of his own experience."³

Without examining at length the nature and validity of these and other critiques of *The Deserted Village*, I note only that the stress on Goldsmith's "Romanticism" and "emotionalism" is based not so much on an incorrect view of eighteenth-century poetic method, as on a general lack of sympathy with a kind of poetry that exercises a deliberative control over its material. A poem, to writers like Goldsmith, is, on its simplest level, a collection of diverse materials to be unified in a coherent, logical manner. These materials, moreover, already exist in pre-established forms and are entirely neutral, gaining value only from their place in and relationship to the whole artistic structure of the completed poem. Paul Fussell notes that eighteenth-century writers seem more "committed to the premise *ut architectura poesis*" than they are to the "Horatian formula *ut pictura poesis*." Moreover, to the eighteenth-century poet, "poems are . . . houses. . . . As a house is constructed according to plan by the accumulation and interrelationship of pre-existent, solid, objective materials, so is a poem; and similarly, as a house will not fall or change its nature radically as a result of alterations, neither will a poem necessarily suffer from carefully contrived revisions."⁴

In view of this Augustan conception of what a poem is and how it works, an examination of *The Deserted Village* must be conducted in terms radically different from those used in the past.⁵ The view that Goldsmith's poem is a kind of *cri de coeuer* may safely be dismissed, and the notion that the poem is a valuable statement of Goldsmith's

³ Clara M. Kirk, *Oliver Goldsmith* (New York, 1967), p. 74; Ralph M. Wardle, *Oliver Goldsmith* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1957), p. 203; Morris Golden, "The Family-Wanderer Theme in Goldsmith," *ELH*, 12 (1958), 193. Curiously, Robert H. Hopkins in *The True Genius of Oliver Goldsmith* (Baltimore, 1969) omits any discussion of *The Deserted Village* in favor of an entire chapter on *The Traveller*. I note the omission only as a comment on the state of criticism regarding *The Deserted Village*.

⁴ Paul Fussell, Jr., *The Rhetorical World of Augustan Humanism* (Oxford, 1965), pp. 189, 190.

⁵ See Ricardo Quintana's assertion that "Goldsmith never ceased to be essentially neoclassic in spirit and in the literary principles he adhered to" (*Oliver Goldsmith: A Georgian Study* [New York, 1967], p. 23). William Cooke, one of Goldsmith's early biographers, takes pains to point out that "Goldsmith, though quick enough at prose, was rather slow in his poetry—not from the tardiness of fancy, but the time he took in pointing the sentiment, and polishing the versification . . . and . . . was actually engaged in the construction of [*The Deserted Village*] above two years" ("Dr. Goldsmith," *European Magazine*, 24 [1793], 172). So much for Goldsmith's "spontaneity."

social beliefs,⁶ and very little else, must be subsumed under a more encompassing idea of what the poem is as an independent artistic structure.

Goldsmith's theme in *The Deserted Village* is more general than the limits of the theory of depopulation allow, and it is this very generality that enables him to unify many disparate elements and techniques in an original poem of high technical and thematic virtuosity. "Luxury"—*luxuria*—is Goldsmith's theme, and England's depopulation, whether in fact it ever existed or not, is only one means of developing this theme. At the heart of *The Deserted Village* is a lament for the dissolution of social order and the destruction of the humanistic values on which, Goldsmith feels, society ought to be based. This ethical theme is presented in three ways: an account of England's present sterility and decline, a series of contrasting pictures of an ideal past and an all too real present, and the positioning of a generalized "I" between the extremes of the society of the past and the social order of the present.

In his idealized representations of "sweet Auburn," Goldsmith does not play the romantic, longing for a return to thoughtless innocence. His ideal representations are only vehicles for picturing a concept of social and ethical order he sees being destroyed. Like his Augustan fellows, Goldsmith tended to interpret his own age in terms of first-century Rome, translating the longing of such Roman writers as Virgil and Horace for the supposed virtue of an earlier, republican Rome into ideal images of his own country's past.⁷ Ricardo Quintana, in fact, suggests that Virgil's first *Eclogue* was Goldsmith's model for *The Deserted Village*. Elsewhere in his works, too, Goldsmith comes out consistently and squarely against simplistic views of society; and his attacks on rural innocence and noble primitivism with their supposed corollaries, virtue and ethical purity, ally Goldsmith firmly with the conservative tradition of eighteenth-century humanism, which saw innocence tending toward ignorance and ignorance leading toward ethical culpability.⁸

Significantly, Goldsmith's deliberate use of conventional evocations of a "Golden Age" of innocence and virtue (here associated with "the vacant mind") is consistently couched in abstractions that reinforce the idealized nature of the subject:

⁶ See, for instance, Howard J. Bell, Jr., "The Deserted Village and Goldsmith's Social Doctrines," *PMLA*, 59 (1944), 747-772.

⁷ See Fussell, p. 296.

⁸ Fussell quotes Burke's rejoinder to Bolingbroke's primitivist assertion that "nature is man's nature" as an illustration of the Augustan belief in the primacy of the human mind over its environment. Burke replied "art is man's nature" (Fussell, p. 8).

To me more dear, congenial to my heart,
 One native charm, than all the gloss of art;
 Spontaneous joys, where Nature has its play,
 The soul adopts, and owns their first born sway,
 Lightly they frolic o'er the vacant mind,
 Unenvied, unmolested, unconfined.

(ll. 253–258)⁹

Immediately, he contrasts this vague evocation of rural innocence with a portrait of reality that, though still general, has none of the idealism and abstract diction of the preceding lines:

But the long pomp, the midnight masquerade,
 With all the freaks of wanton wealth arrayed,
 In these, ere triflers half their wish obtain,
 The toiling pleasure sickens into pain;
 And, even while fashion's brightest arts decoy,
 The heart distrusting asks, if this be joy.

(ll. 259–264)

The two passages just cited are an index to the structure and meaning of the whole poem, exemplifying the Augustan ideal of balance. Between the idealized “rural virtues” of a past world and the harsh reality of a world grown sotted and cruel with its lust for material comforts somewhere lies the golden mean of temperance and social order.

“Sweet Auburn’s” pleasures are not the re-creations of a lonely mind almost drowned by waves of sentimentalism. Instead, as Martin Price has noted, the idea of order, social and natural, as opposed to the disorder inherent in “trade’s unfeeling train” dominates Goldsmith’s picture of the Auburn of the past.¹⁰ But this Auburn no longer exists, perhaps never existed, thus is an ideal re-creation, a warm symbolic world of Platonic perfection, whose artistic construction is intended to reveal the glaring impotency of modern social progress.¹¹

The opening description of the village life immediately establishes the order and balance in the life of Auburn:

The sheltered cot, the cultivated farm,
 The never failing brook, the busy mill,
 The decent church that topt the neighbouring hill,
 The hawthorn bush, with seats beneath the shade,

⁹ *The Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith*, ed. Arthur Friedman (Oxford, 1966), IV. All subsequent references to *The Deserted Village* are from this edition and are cited in the text.

¹⁰ Martin Price, *To the Palace of Wisdom: Studies in Order and Energy from Dryden to Blake* (2nd. ed., New York, 1965), p. 383.

¹¹ Seitz, “The Irish Background of Goldsmith’s Social and Political Thought,” p. 409.

For talking age and whispering lovers made.
How often have I blest the coming day,
When toil remitting lent its turn to play,
And all the village train from labour free
Led up their sports beneath the spreading tree,
While many a pastime circled in the shade,
The young contending as the old surveyed.

(ll. 10–20)

Goldsmith comments: “sports like these,/ With sweet succession, taught even toil to please” (ll. 32–33). Every aspect of life is in just proportion to every other. Work is balanced by play, youth has its sports, old age its honor, and all existence is a “sweet succession” of functions ruled by moderation. Goldsmith gives the entire scene a sacramental significance when he reveals that he “blest the coming day.” Social order is elevated to a quasi-religious ritual that finds its expression in a “dancing pair” who spread “their cheerful influence” so that it permeates the universe (ll. 25–26). Suzanne Langer sees this harmony as a “group dance” symbolizing the “Dance of Life.”¹² Whatever one chooses to call it, the rhythmical order Goldsmith portrays is an image of that greater Newtonian order so dear to Augustan minds.

If Goldsmith’s idealization of Auburn tends toward symbolism, so does the contrasting picture of eighteenth-century England function more as a symbolic than an actual statement. In a passage of high poetic intensity, the result of the shift toward economic emphasis in England is depicted in terms of a symbolic landscape:

Amidst thy bowers the tyrant’s hand is seen,
And desolation saddens all thy green:
One only master grasps the whole domain,
And half a tillage stints thy smiling plain;
No more thy glassy brook reflects the day,
But choaked with sedges, works its weedy way.
Along thy glades, a solitary guest,
The hollow sounding bittern guards its nest;
Amidst thy desert walks the lapwing flies,
And tires their echoes with unvaried cries.
Sunk are thy bowers in shapeless ruin all,
And the long grass o’ertops the mouldering wall,
And trembling, shrinking from the spoiler’s hand,
Far, far away thy children leave the land.

(ll. 37–50)

The passage is rich in symbolic associations. Unremittingly elegiac, the lines would suggest to an age steeped in Milton’s poetry the expulsion

¹² *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* (New York, 1953), pp. 231–232.

of Adam and Eve from Paradise. Biblical echoes also abound. The utter desolation pictured here finds its close parallel, and perhaps its genesis, in certain passages from the book of Isaiah in which the poet curses the land of Israel's enemies (Isaiah 34: 11–14).¹³

Goldsmith reinforces his portrait of natural dissolution with a characteristic Augustan "sentence" intended to explain and universalize the metaphoric material antecedent to it:

Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey,
Where wealth accumulates, and men decay;
Princes and lords may flourish, or may fade;
A breath can make them, as a breath has made.

(ll. 51–54)

The Augustan writer inclines consistently toward a discussion of man's general nature, rather than toward a dissection of individual struggles of the soul, as Goldsmith does in these passages.

The thematic contrast between the order of a past society and the dissolution caused by a social emphasis on "trade," "wealth," and "luxury" functions on a symbolic level throughout *The Deserted Village*. The relationship between "land" and a "bold peasantry" on the one hand and "rural virtues" and "order" on the other is seen by Goldsmith as organic rather than imposed; whereas the new order of "wealth" and "trade" is viewed as mechanical, sterile, and forced on man. Goldsmith's conception of order is that of a natural, generative relationship between man and nature. But this relationship is not passive. Instead, the emphasis in *The Deserted Village* is on a tensile harmony arising out of the Augustan concern with freedom and limit that is expressed in the poem as a balance of work and pleasure (ll. 113–124). Goldsmith emphasizes this harmony by speaking of the "mingling notes" of village that adhere to each other in a balance made all the more permanent by its very tension. A milkmaid singing while she works, naturally joining work and play; "children just let loose from school"; a "watchdog's voice, that bayed the whispering wind"—all of these images are symbolic of the vital harmony that is resolved in "sweet confusion."

But now, in the "new order," such union of human and natural felicity has disappeared. The "hollow-sounding bittern" replaces the intricacy of a "nightingale's" song, while the lapwing "tires" the scene with "unvaried cries." The new order is one-dimensional, uninspired, and "waits the fall" in "barren splendour" (ll. 285–286), having made

¹³ See my complete analysis of the parallels in "*The Deserted Village and Isaiah*," *Notes and Queries*, 16 (September, 1969), 351–352.

the country "a garden, and a grave" (l. 302). Death in Auburn is natural, part of the order of things, a Christian mystery:

But on he moves to meet his latter end,
Angels around befriending virtue's friend;
Bends to the grave with unperceived decay,
While resignation gently slopes the way;
And all his prospects brightening to the last,
His Heaven commences ere the world be past!

(ll. 107–112)

But in the new order of things, death is an affront to human striving, so that "garden" and "grave" are placed in unresolved contrast, unlike the harmony of death and life in Auburn in which the natural scenery of life merges imperceptibly with the "prospects" of heaven.

Goldsmith's technique of describing society in terms of natural images reinforces the structural principle of symbolic contrasts on which the poem is built. Having compared, for instance, the old village life with the coming of the new order in the opening two verse paragraphs, Goldsmith moves to a more metaphoric statement of the same theme by equating men with the natural processes of growth and decay in which the new order by implication is contrasted with the old:

These gentle hours that plenty bade to bloom,
Those calm desires that asked but little room,
Those healthy sports that graced the peaceful scene,
Lived in each look, and brightened all the green.

(ll. 69–72)

In deadening opposition to the program of natural and social harmony that involves man in an organic order, the new landscape of "luxury" is shown to be wild and uncontrolled, a scene in which man exists as an isolated, inharmonious unit. Picturing a world in which "the bloomy flush of life is fled" (l. 128), Goldsmith introduces an old woman, once a part of the harmonious order of nature and society, gathering faggots. A "widowed, solitary thing/ That feebly bends beside the splashy spring" (ll. 129–130), she is "forced . . . to pick her wintry faggot from the thorn" (ll. 131–133).

Goldsmith is saying here and in similar descriptions that once the destruction of the social order has begun, even those who remain behind find the harmony which they once enjoyed beyond recapture, so that they are caught between two worlds, neither of which will any longer have them. Structurally and thematically, the purpose of the individual portraits of the minister, the schoolmaster, and others as they appear in the society that has passed away is to compare one kind

of order with another. The descriptions of the peasants attempting to live in the city symbolize the inability of the two orders to adjust to one another and as such these passages form an organic part of the whole poem.

The utopian nature of the old order must be emphasized. Once dissolved, it cannot be resurrected, as Goldsmith suggests in his account of the attempt by its refugees to found the old society in "distant climes, a dreary scene, . . . / Far different there from all that charmed before" (ll. 341, 345). It is as if the disorder caused by the imposition of the new social order in England is transferred and doubly amplified in the New World. The natural world of America becomes a chaotic jungle of "poisoned fields with rank luxuriance crowned" (l. 351), in which "the mad tornado flies, / Mingling the ravaged landscape with the skies" (ll. 357–358) in a startling contrast to the "mingling notes" of life in old Auburn. The philosophical and ethical foundations of the old society having crumbled, man is now doomed to be a "stranger" in a "ravaged" landscape.

At the same time, the imposition of the new, artificial order on the old society also causes severe dislocations in nature. Luxury is contrasted with natural plenitude through images of clothing. The harmonious relationship between man and nature, seen as a "mantling bliss," is supplanted by "all the freaks of wanton wealth arrayed" (l. 260). The "robe that wraps [the tyrant's] limbs in silken sloth / Has robbed the neighbouring fields of half their growth" (ll. 279–280). "The glaring impotence of dress" becomes a symbol of artificiality. There are, Goldsmith suggests, two kinds of social flowering. One is based on a natural acceptance of the world as it is, while the other uses "art" to create a beauty that is systematic and quantitative and leads inevitably to the paradox of the country as "a garden, and a grave":

Thus fares the land, by luxury betrayed,
In nature's simplest charms at first arrayed,
But verging to decline, its splendours rise,
Its vistas strike, its palaces surprise . . .
The country blooms—a garden, and a grave.

(ll. 295–298, 302)

In a concluding Juvenalian attack on "luxury," Goldsmith brings the interchangeability of man and nature in his poem full circle. Having shown how man's domination of nature has destroyed the natural society of Auburn, he logically follows that picture with a description of the corrupt society which has replaced it:

O Luxury! Thou curst by heaven's decree,

How ill exchanged are things like these for thee!
How do thy potions with insidious joy,
Diffuse their pleasures only to destroy!
Kingdoms by thee, to sickly greatness grown,
Boast of a florid vigour not their own.
At every draught more large and large they grow,
A bloated mass of rank unwieldy woe;
Till sapped their strength, and every part unsound,
Down, down they sink, and spread a ruin round.

(ll. 385–394)

The new order too is here seen to be natural, but nature has been transformed into a disorderly, putrid jungle, an ironic counterpoint to the “mantling bliss” of the old harmony.

The gap between the two societies is unbridgeable, and the image that dominates Goldsmith’s conception of the chasm between the two worlds is that of time. The contrast between the world as it was and the world as it is now is made stronger and its tragedy more immediate by the presentation of the persona as a character caught in the unreconcilable gap between an idealized past and a terrible present. To the “I,” “Time’s ever-rolling stream,” as Watts calls it,¹⁴ becomes a barrier that both literally and symbolically “bears all its sons away.”

In the context of eighteenth-century conservative humanism, social and individual ethical concerns are inseparable. For the Augustan, a change in society cannot occur without individual ethical action. Within this conceptual framework, the intrusion of the “I” in *The Deserted Village* is not merely an index to Goldsmith’s own emotional involvement in the plight of the disenfranchised, but is a deliberate technical instrument through which the poet builds a bridge between the poem and the reader. In this way too, the persona serves as the moral and ethical consciousness through which the clash of values Goldsmith describes is filtered and expressed. While the persona is the victim of his environment, the “I” is not damned to perpetual hopelessness—he makes his own way, asserting the primacy of the human will to shape society in its image. The forces that shape society, Goldsmith suggests at the end of his poem, ultimately are individual forces put into motion by individuals. Finally, it is the individual who must redeem himself in whatever society he happens to be placed; Goldsmith’s use of time as an image of social tension enables him to record the extent to which the individual must be engaged in ethical action.¹⁵

¹⁴ Isaac Watts, “Man Frail and God Eternal,” ll. 25–26.

¹⁵ See Paul Fussell’s statement that to the humanist, “The mind and the imagination . . . are the quintessential human attributes” (Fussell, p. 5). Also,

The focus of Goldsmith's dreams for a return to the ideal society of Auburn forms one of the structural and thematic foundations of *The Deserted Village*. Trapped between the past and the present, the poetic Goldsmith moves from remembrance to pain to ultimate optimism. Memory calls up the image of Auburn as it was and simultaneously brings the sorrow of realization that the past is forever dead: "Remembrance wakes with all her busy train,/ Swells at my breast, and turns the past to pain" (ll. 81–82). In lines 75–240, Goldsmith moves deliberately from self-indulgent pity to a blind acceptance and celebration of the rural ideal and finally to an ironic detachment from which he is able to view Auburn with a realism that recognizes the pastness and limitations of his vision.

Through the force of memory, the persona initially sees himself as part of the organic society to which he hopes to return:

In all my wanderings round this world of care,
 In all my griefs—and God has given my share—
 I still had hopes my latest hours to crown,
 Amidst these humble bowers to lay me down;
 To husband out life's taper at the close,
 And keep the flame from wasting by repose.
 I still had hopes, for pride attends us still,
 Amidst the swains to shew my book-learned skill,
 Around my fire an evening group to draw,
 And tell of all I felt, and all I saw;
 And, as an hare whom hounds and horn pursue,
 Pants to the place from whence at first she flew,
 I still had hopes, my long vexations past,
 Here to return—and die at home at last.

(ll. 83–96)

Within this verse paragraph Goldsmith states the movement and the themes of the poem. The identification of man with nature used as an image for the natural order characteristic of the society of Auburn is here momentarily extended to include the persona himself. By desiring to seclude himself "amidst these humble bowers" and "husband out" the rest of his life, he sees himself as part of that great natural order of growth to which Auburn had belonged. But the image shifts with startling rapidity as Goldsmith once more places his mnemonic action on the symbolic level. He sees that human pride is at the heart of his desire, and he changes the metaphor subtly from an image of order to one of the chase. He suddenly sees himself as a hare "whom hounds

"The Humanist believes that man's primary obligation is the strenuous determination of moral questions" (Fussell, p. 7).

and horns pursue." The image accomplishes several objectives. First, it points up the impossibility of the persona's attaining the vanished bliss of Auburn. Secondly, through the reference to the "hounds and horns" (l. 93), it touches briefly and delicately on the change that has taken place in society by making the image a tantalizing though fleeting reference to the vast hunting parks that have displaced the Auburns of a former age. And third, and most important, it draws an ironic contrast between the traveler, rich in both direct and indirect human experience ("all my wanderings" and "book-learned skill"), and the society which is now forever closed to him because, paradoxically, that very experience has made him so sophisticated that he can no longer be a part of its unsophisticated pleasures.

Throughout *The Deserted Village*, Goldsmith's realism asserts itself as he displays the ideal nature of his reminiscences. In presenting his famed "portraits" of the various "mansions" that hold the life of the village, he consistently uses the past tense. The repeated use of the word "mansion" in these pictures, moreover, indicates the humanistic grounding of Goldsmith's art in Augustan thought, for, as Fussell points out, buildings may serve as metaphors for social and ethical order in the eighteenth century.¹⁶ The pastness of Auburn's "buildings" signifies the loss of order in the universe which the persona inhabits.

Each portrait is built on the one preceding it, creating a pattern of realistic assertion in which the persona becomes less and less ideal in his description as he moves through the landscape of memory. As a man of experience, the "I" is forced to admit that the world to which he so avidly wishes to return is inexorably lost to him.¹⁷ The world of trade and material wealth has left its ironic mark on him, forever sundering him from Auburn's innocence.

Of the series of three portraits, that of the country parson is entirely ideal. The language used reflects its idealism. Dealing primarily with the good man's virtues, Goldsmith employs the language of moral abstraction popular in the century, but here not in a conventional way since the phrasing tends toward allegory. The action stands frozen in a poetic tableau. A dying man becomes the universal "parting life" (l. 171), while the Vicar himself is referred to as the "reverend champion." "Despair," "anguish," and "comfort" are personified as abstractions that give the portrait the stylized moral force of a medieval painting and remove both persona and reader to a safe distance from sentimentality.

¹⁶ Fussell, p. 189.

¹⁷ Morris Golden, in fact, sees the entire poem as "a symbolic picture of the disintegration of the author's dream world" in "The Broken Dream of *The Deserted Village*," *Literature and Psychology*, 9 (1959), 44.

In his portrait of the schoolmaster, however, Goldsmith's tone and imagery move from the lofty approbation accorded the parson to a bemused and ironic detachment which emphasizes the failings, rather than the virtues of this village fixture. The schoolmaster's jokes can only be laughed at in "counterfeited glee" by his students (ll. 201–202) and when he argues, "even tho' vanquished, he could argue still" (l. 212). And in describing the reaction of the villagers to the schoolmaster's learning, Goldsmith takes the irony one step further by making the entire world of Auburn the subject of his satire, paradoxically removing himself farther and farther from its embrace: "And still they gazed, and still the wonder grew,/ That one small head could carry all he knew" (ll. 215–216). Each portrait also emphasizes the present through the medium of a natural image such as a plant or a flower growing near each "mansion" as the only remaining evidence of a former harmony between man and his environment—in other words, in the case of the portrait of the village inn, a symbolically suggestive "thorn."

The tension created in the life of the persona through his ambiguous position between the two societies is not left unresolved, however. The conclusion of *The Deserted Village* (ll. 395–430), long a puzzle because of its apparent dependence on mere association instead of organic connection, develops as the inevitable resolution when it is seen in terms of the persona's experience rather than in terms of Auburn. Goldsmith does not, as has been assumed, present a sentimental picture of the villagers leaving the shores of England, but instead comments deliberately on the moral and ethical virtues that are in the process of forsaking England: "I see the rural *virtues* leave the land" (l. 398; my italics). The distinction is crucial: one village's depopulation is not, within the larger scheme of things, of major importance. But insofar as Auburn's destruction is the prelude to and symbol of a more general wearing away of ethical principles, its significance is major indeed. Clothing his imagery in the conventions of the age, Goldsmith dresses these ethical principles in the rags of a crowd of villagers drawn from all England, that "darken all the strand" as they prepare to leave (ll. 395–406).

In the middle of this scene of ethical dissolution, Goldsmith somewhat surprisingly places Poetry itself as one of the "virtues" that stands ready to leave (ll. 407–430). The passage begins as a conventional lament for true poetry, but then changes subtly to an affirmation of the individual's ability to conquer the transitory existence of social systems ("Still let thy voice prevailing over time,/ Redress the rigours of the inclement clime"). By means of his identification with the muse of Poetry, the persona resolves the problem of the individual trapped between two societies, in neither of which he can comfortably exist. For to the

Augustans, poetry is never an escape. The world of poetry is the world of human experience. Poetry is ethical; it pleases and instructs. "Nurse of every virtue," its voice, "prevailing over time," aids "slighted truth" in teaching "erring man to spurn the rage of gain" (ll. 416–424). This ethical view of poetry moves the persona deftly into the timelessness that bridges the gap between present and past, so that, in a very real sense, the "soul selects her own society." In this context Auburn and "trade's proud empire" (l. 427) recede into insignificance, their virtues and vices abstracted and recast within the mold of the poetic experience which releases the individual from the chains of temporal social systems and preserves his individual ethical freedom ("While self dependent power can time defy,/ As rocks resist the billows and the sky," ll. 429–430). *The Deserted Village* then becomes deserted in another sense, as men leave its protection for the more important ethical encounter with the world around it.

*The William Paterson College
of New Jersey
Wayne, New Jersey*