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# Literary Convention in Goldsmith's *Deserted Village*

By LEO F. STORM

"IT MAY be observed," said James Prior in his discussion of *The Deserted Village*, "that no English poet of equal education has so few obligations to the antients as Goldsmith; he treats of no subject in common with them . . . his topics, descriptions, and incidents are modern, domestic, and almost wholly applicable to English life, manners, and characters."<sup>1</sup> This patriotic but unlucky assumption results from the habitual disinclination of nineteenth-century critics to regard the poem as conforming to the literary conventions of its time. Modern criticism has since begun to disengage itself from the impressions of Goldsmith's nineteenth-century biographers. Yet its main interest has until recently been either a defense of the poet's social "doctrines"<sup>2</sup> as a consistent expression of the poet's personal convictions or an elaborate but, perforce, desperate defense against the charge of sentimentality.<sup>3</sup> But Goldsmith's debt to classical as well as contemporary convention in *The Deserted Village* was large, and I believe any approach to the poem will be imperfect that does not take it into account. The object of this paper is to show that the social "doctrines" and the "sentiment" of the poem do not so much reflect the ideas and personal feelings of the author as they do the conventional, standardized themes of eighteenth-century "kinds" Goldsmith was imitating. Furthermore, I hope to show that Goldsmith developed from his standardized material a remarkable and dramatic restatement of the Augustan aesthetic of order—of the old conservative social outlook then in a state of decay.

Goldsmith adapted two literary kinds current in eighteenth-century poetry to *The Deserted Village*: a standardized English version of the Virgilian georgic and the topographical or locodescriptive poem.<sup>4</sup> Both

<sup>1</sup>*Life of Oliver Goldsmith*, II (London, 1837), 251.

<sup>2</sup>Howard J. Bell, Jr., "The Deserted Village and Goldsmith's Social Doctrines," *PMLA*, LIX (1944), 747. Prior, II, 246-248, also discussed the overall consistency of Goldsmith's views. The best assessment on Goldsmith's social position is in Earl Miner, "The Making of *The Deserted Village*," *HLQ*, XXII (1959), 125-141. All defend Goldsmith's intellectual powers against the judgment of his contemporaries.

<sup>3</sup>W. F. Gallaway, "The Sentimentalism of Goldsmith," *PMLA*, XLVIII (1933), 1167-1181.

<sup>4</sup>See, however, George Sherburn, *A Literary History of England* (New York, 1948), p. 973: "A poet like Goldsmith, conservative in many of his sympathies, could sit down to write poems like *The Traveller* and *The Deserted Village* without asking himself whether he was writing a Georgic, an elegy, or a pastoral." Sherburn correctly notes the "tendency away from Horatian or French classicism in the less frequent and inexact attention on the part of the

types were popular and extensively written, and Goldsmith found them exactly suited for the kind of ideas and the kind of response that by 1770 their rhetoric was certain to evoke. Perhaps Goldsmith's great achievement was in his unlabored synthesis of the two kinds that produced fresh effects from forms whose possibilities, singly, were then apparently exhausted and whose vitality was worn out by the wild diffusion of sentiments of successive minor poets who practiced these genres widely.

Addison described the general subject of the Virgilian georgic as "some part of the science of husbandry put into a pleasing dress, and set off with all the beauties and embellishments of poetry."<sup>5</sup> Its theme is "The glorification of *labor*; the praise of simple country life in contrast with the troubled luxury of palaces."<sup>6</sup> Dryden's praise of the *Georgics* as the "divinest part of Virgil's writings"<sup>7</sup> might lead us to expect a series of Augustan imitations of the type. But judging from what we know of Augustan critical principles, the Virgilian georgic was regrettably bound to have bad luck in eighteenth-century poetry.

The problem for the Augustan was mainly one of poetic decorum: How might he handle inherently "low" subject matter such as realistic descriptions of nature and peasant occupations in the requisite middle style of Virgil? Very possibly excited by the critiques of Dryden and Addison, Gay attempted a serious paraphrase in *Rural Sports* (1713), but it is instructive that he retreated to a safer burlesque version in *Trivia*—the original burlesque or "town" georgic. Since there are no other imitations of this type by major Augustan poets before Goldsmith,<sup>8</sup> one may

abler poets to the imitation of established generic models" (pp. 972-973), but he draws our attention away from Goldsmith's insistent use of traditional generic matter in the poem. See Ricardo Quintana, "The Deserted Village: Its Logical and Rhetorical Elements," in *CE*, XXVI (1964), 204-214: "He is one of those who signalled a return to more traditional neo-classical practices" (p. 205).

<sup>5</sup>Joseph Addison, "An Essay on Virgil's *Georgics*," *Eighteenth-Century Critical Essays*, ed. Scott Elledge, I (Ithaca, 1961), 2.

<sup>6</sup>Marie Loretto Lilly, *The Georgic* (Baltimore, 1919), p. 45. The most recent and fullest treatment of the georgic in English literature is Dwight L. Durling, *Georgic Tradition in English Poetry* (New York, 1935).

<sup>7</sup>"Preface to *Annus Mirabilis*," *Works*, ed. Edward Niles Hooker and H. T. Swedenberg, Jr., I (Berkeley, 1956), pp. 54-55.

<sup>8</sup>The most significant developments of the English georgic (once Addison denominated it a literary type) in this paper I assume are represented in Gay's *Rural Sports* and Thomson's *The Seasons* (1727-29). John Philips' *Cyder* (1706), Robert Dodsley's *Agriculture* (1753), and Christopher Smart's *Hop Garden* are also of particular interest. Among dozens of others are William Somerville's *The Chase* (1735), a cynegetic or hunting georgic; Francis Fawkes's *Partridge Shooting* (1767), an ixeutic or fowling georgic; William King's *Apple Pye* (which owes, perhaps, as much to Ovidian as Virgilian preceptive material); and Isaac Hallam's *Cocker* (1742), concerning cockfighting.

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fairly suppose that the Augustan was baffled by problems of decorum posed by any serious English imitation of the Virgilian original. However, following James Thomson's *Seasons* (1726-1729), the georgic emerged as an exceptionally popular vehicle for certain of the "pre-romantic" poets, and it is with them that the convention flourished up to and after the writing of *The Deserted Village*.<sup>9</sup>

To Thomson we owe the exceptional popularity of the type, for his influence was strongly felt throughout the eighteenth century.<sup>10</sup> Thomson included addresses to the patron (as in Virgil to Maecenas), statements of the argument of the poem, invocations, realistic genre sketches, narrative digressions, patriotic panegyrics, and some advice to the husbandman. But he muted the purely preceptive matter, greatly expanded Virgil's descriptions, and added his own praise of England's commerce (notwithstanding his running criticism of wealth and luxury). Perhaps most important of all, he introduced a theme of humanitarianism. Hence the tradition that came to Goldsmith had altered the original of Virgil in some important details; but while the rules of practice and advice to the husbandman (the most troublesome content of Virgil's *Georgics*) may by then have been indifferently preserved, the main argument, the rhetorical purpose of the classical georgic, remained intact. This purpose was to celebrate the contentment and innocence of the country as contrasted to the wealth and luxury of the city.

Goldsmith's method was to take advantage of the popular themes of the georgic as they came to him through the English tradition. His commanding distinction was that he recovered for the type a middle style which was restrained and proximate to the example of Virgil. What there is in the poem that is incidentally humanitarian he owes to the tradition of Thomson; what there is of sentimentality he owes largely to the accepted conventions of the original. Most importantly Goldsmith owes

<sup>9</sup>It appears to me that no major poet of the central Augustan tradition cared to try any of the possible variations of the type (except in a burlesque version) because he could find little to adapt from the Virgilian type that could be handled safely in terms of the Augustan decorum he meant to preserve. To the lesser poet, the georgic material offered authoritative relief from the aesthetic restraints imposed upon him by the conventional literary order. Despite Addison's warning that the georgic's low subject matter may "debase his stile, and betray him into a meanness of expression" or a "plebian stile," the minor poet sought to emphasize didacticism in terms of "scientific" or practical knowledge, or he chose to emphasize natural description largely for its own appeal. The cleavage in sensibility is evidenced in the "utility" of the georgic type in the eighteenth century. Until the publication of *The Deserted Village*, the georgic appears to have been inaccessible to the Augustan poet whose taste was formed on a social and literary decorum that viewed nature as the universal and changeless truth of human morals and human psychology; for the minor poet, whose sensibility developed into nineteenth-century Romanticism, the English georgic seemed especially welcome as an escape from contemporary aesthetic strictures to which he could not fully respond.

<sup>10</sup>The authoritative account of James Thomson's debt to the georgic tradition is still W. P. Mustard, "Virgil's *Georgics* and the British Poets," *A. J. Phil.*, XXIX (1908), 1-32.

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to both Virgil and the English convention the standard social argument against commerce and luxury which is the core argument of *The Deserted Village*.

What is often called pastoral in *The Deserted Village* is, in fact, georgic.<sup>11</sup> The pastoral celebrates the idyllic and it is mainly artificial or idealized. The georgic, on the other hand, more realistically describes the peasant's life as one of virtually unremitting toil; he may have his simple pleasures, but they are only interludes in a life of labor. Yet Virgil invested the swain's otherwise drab existence with an unmistakable idealism of his own about which the peasant himself seemed ignorant:

O happy, if he knew his happy State!  
The Swain, who, free from Business and Debate,  
Receives his easy Food from Nature's Hand,  
And just Returns of cultivated Land!  
(II, 639-642)<sup>12</sup>

The poet-speaker assumes a rather interesting relation to his subject matter here that is important. We are not to take for granted that the poet actually prefers the life of the peasant; it is deliberate rhetoric by Virgil to emphasize the contrast between the luxury and vice of the city and the inherent and indispensable virtues of the country. Furthermore, the virtues are "indispensable" because they point out what is necessary to an enduring and orderly society. Here in Virgil is a clear statement of this contrast of values:

No Palace, with a lofty Gate, he wants,  
T' admit the Tydes of early Visitants.  
With eager Eyes devouring, as they pass,  
The breathing Figures of *Corinthian* Brass.  
(II, 643-646)

He boasts no Wool, whose native white is dy'd  
With Purple Poyson of *Assyrian* Pride.  
No costly Drugs of *Araby* defile,  
With foreign Scents, the Sweetness of his Oyl.

<sup>11</sup>Earl Miner (p. 140) assumes that *The Deserted Village* is a pastoral idyll suffused with a pronounced elegiac tone. He concludes that the poem is a "redefinition" of the pastoral-elegy as a "metaphor of tone." In view of the difficulty in ascertaining what form a "redefined pastoral-elegy" might take from one poem to another it is unlikely that a final judgment as to the truth of this theory can be made. It seems sufficient here to observe that Miner does not distinguish in his essay between the georgic and pastoral genres.

<sup>12</sup>John Dryden, *The Poems of John Dryden*, ed. James Kinsley, Vol. II (Oxford, 1958). Goldsmith undoubtedly read the *Georgics* from Dryden's translation; James Prior, *Life of Goldsmith*, Vol. II, p. 582, item 20, records that Dryden's *Virgil*, ed. 1763, was one of the items cataloged in Goldsmith's private library after his death in 1774.

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But easie Quiet, a secure Retreat,  
A harmless Life that knows not how to cheat,  
With homebred Plenty the rich Owner bless,  
And rural Pleasures crown his Happiness.  
(II, 651-658)

In the opening lines of *The Deserted Village* we have much the same subject matter, the same motives, and the same relationship of the poet-speaker to his material:

Sweet Auburn, loveliest village of the plain,  
Where health and plenty cheared the labouring swain,  
Where smiling spring its earliest visit paid,  
And parting summer's lingering blooms delayed,  
Dear lovely bowers of innocence and ease,  
Seats of my youth, when every sport could please,  
(ll. 1-6)

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.  
(ll. 15-18)<sup>13</sup>

Despite the apparent display of his own engaging sensibilities, Goldsmith does not here reveal his mind for us to contemplate. He has adopted standard matter that was useful to him, immediately establishing his sources for the reader at the outset of the poem. In an age that venerated "kinds" of poetry, and hence an age that knew exactly what subject matter to expect from its conventions, Goldsmith's references both to labor and to peasant sport were an unmistakable sign he was introducing georgic matter into his poem. There is decidedly nothing new in Goldsmith's references to rural pastimes in this passage. Gay's earlier *Rural Sports* (1713), for example, was avowedly based upon just such Virgilian material. Here is Virgil's version:

Himself in Rustick Pomp, on Holy-days,  
To Rural Pow'rs a just Oblation pays;  
And on the Green his careless Limbs displays.  
(II, 767-769)

<sup>13</sup>Oliver Goldsmith, *Collected Works*, ed. Arthur Friedman, IV (Oxford, 1966); all quoted passages are from this edition.

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He calls on *Bacchus*, and propounds the Prize;  
The Groom his Fellow Groom at Buts defies;  
And bends his Bow, and levels with his Eyes.  
Or stript for Wrestling, smears his Limbs with Oyl,  
And watches with a trip his Foe to foil.

(II, 772-776)

Goldsmith, expanding his own original reference to "sports," easily adapted this now standard matter to his poem:

And many a gambol frolicked o'er the ground,  
And slights of art and feats of strength went round.  
And still as each repeated pleasure tired,  
Succeeding sports the mirthful band inspired.

(ll. 21-24)

Even Goldsmith's sketches of family life owe their authority to the georgic type. Virgil's peasant family lives out an innocent life unaware of the city and its decadent evils:

His cares are eased with intervals of bliss;  
His little children climbing for a kiss,  
Welcome their father's late return at night;  
His faithful bed is crown'd with chaste delight.

(II, 759-762)

Goldsmith made much of such scenes from Virgil, but he achieved unusual effects with them by making them work very hard dramatizing his theme of depopulation:

The good old sire, the first prepared to go  
To new found worlds, and wept for others woe.  
But for himself, in conscious virtue brave,  
He only wished for worlds beyond the grave.  
His lovely daughter, lovelier in her tears,  
The fond companion of his helpless years,  
Silent went next, neglectful of her charms,  
And left a lover's for a father's arms.

(ll. 371-378)

We have heard a great deal about Goldsmith's sentimentality and, with some justification, not a little of the evidence for it has been adduced from such Thomsonian humanitarianism. But we ought as well to consider these scenes as a conscious rhetorical device for heightening the

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drama of the poem rather than as a revelation of Goldsmith's personal stress of feeling.<sup>14</sup>

That such apparent personal feeling may after all be part of conventional rhetoric is clear enough, it seems to me, in the long-famous "retirement theme" of *The Deserted Village*:

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;  
(ll. 83-86)

O blest retirement, friend to life's decline,  
Retreats from care that never must be mine,  
How happy he who crowns in shades like these,  
A youth of labour with an age of ease;  
Who quits a world where strong temptations try,  
And, since 'tis hard to combat, learns to fly.  
(ll. 97-102)

Almost as if the *Georgics* lay open before him, Goldsmith's wish for retirement reflected Virgil's rhetorical longing for a retreat from life's cares:

My next Desire is, void of Care and Strife,  
To lead a soft, secure, inglorious Life.  
A Country Cottage near a Crystal Flood,  
A winding Vally, and a lofty Wood.  
Some God conduct me to the sacred Shades,  
Where Bacchanals are sung by *Spartan* Maids.  
Or lift me high to *Hemus* hilly Crown;  
Or in the Plains of *Tempe* lay me down:  
Or lead me to some solitary Place,  
And cover my Retreat from Human Race.  
(II, 688-697)

It is dangerous to assume Goldsmith intruded himself into the poem for purely sentimental reasons or even that he had a particular affection for "humble bowers." To do so would be to render scant justice to the poet's purpose. His real motive, like Virgil's, was to point up the private virtues then in a state of decay whose loss might well mean the death of an ordered society. That he might more forcefully demonstrate this loss,

<sup>14</sup>Ricardo Quintana, p. 205: "The personal element is ordinarily slight, direct self-revelation being foreign to the climate of an age which thought first of all in terms of man's general experience."



Goldsmith adapted to *The Deserted Village* certain of the elements of topographical "ruin" poetry worked into an unusually effective combination with the georgic poem.

English topographical poetry did not have behind it the force of classical authority, but it was nonetheless an accepted literary kind widely practiced during the eighteenth century.<sup>15</sup> It had a set of conventions which were more or less carefully observed by practitioners in the type. The topographical poem traditionally commemorated a named locality, usually rural, which "was poetically described with the addition of such embellishments, as may be supplied by historical retrospection or incidental meditation."<sup>16</sup> Denham's *Cooper's Hill*, accurately described by Samuel Johnson as the original of the type, proceeded from generalized natural description to a rather broad range of moralistic commentary on the affairs of society. Like *Cooper's Hill*, Pope's topographical poem *Windsor Forest* is in reality a series of set similes which appropriate the fresh imagery of nature to describe humanity. Subsequent minor poetry retained conventional content, but the emphasis was shifted to natural description largely for its own sake. The difference, then, between topographical poetry and poetry that is merely descriptive is that in topographical poetry social commentary is the justification for description and not the reverse.

A variety of specialized settings developed during the topographical poem's great vogue in the eighteenth century. Among these were "hill," "river," "town," and "ruin" poems. Goldsmith borrowed chiefly from the conventions of "ruin" poetry for the special imagery this popular variation provided him.

The fusion of major genres was likely to introduce problems for the poet eager to develop a coherent point of view and still retain intact the variant conventions of his genres. Both the georgic and topographical genres lent themselves perfectly to Goldsmith's purpose, since they both required a rhetorical dispraise of the city and, in turn, emphatic praise for rural life. Enlarging on a theme in Waller concerning wealth and retirement, Denham wrote in *Cooper's Hill*:

Under his proud survey the City lies,  
And like a mist beneath a hill doth rise;  
Whose state and wealth, the business and the crowd,  
Seems at this distance but a darker cloud:

<sup>15</sup>For a full account of the topographical tradition in English poetry see Robert A. Aubin, *Topographical Poetry in XVIIIth-Century England* (New York, 1946).

<sup>16</sup>Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the English Poets*, ed. George Birkbeck-Hill (Oxford, 1905), I, 27.

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And is to him who rightly things esteems,  
No other in effect than what it seems:  
Where, with like haste, though several ways, they run,  
Some to undo, and some to be undone;  
While luxury, and wealth, like war and peace,  
Are each the others ruine, and increase;  
As Rivers lost in Seas some secret vein  
Then reconveighs, there to be lost again.  
Oh happiness of sweet retir'd content!  
To be at once secure and innocent.

(ll. 25-38)<sup>17</sup>

In the georgics' conventional rhetoric about retirement and in the argument concerning luxury and wealth of the city we can see the operation of ideas that are mistakenly assumed to be peculiar to Goldsmith's thought and feeling. But if Goldsmith's "social doctrines" are not new or his desire for retirement original with Augustan poetic convention, his technique for transforming such common argument into a new and engaging montage is, indeed, original.

Although the ideas developed in both genres are identical so far as Goldsmith has made use of them, the special occasions which have given rise to them are quite different. The distinguishing feature of georgic scenes of realistic peasant occupations on the one hand and the "ruin" imagery of the topographical poem on the other Goldsmith preserved intact, and he made effective use of their variant settings to dramatize the past and present condition of England.

Goldsmith's technique was essentially this:<sup>18</sup> he juxtaposed a scene of Auburn before depopulation (recreated in the poet's imagination) next to a scene of Auburn's present desolation and ruin. The secure and innocent village of the past belongs to the georgic convention; the desolated village of the present is taken entirely from topographical "ruin" poetry. After Goldsmith describes the older, happier Auburn with its rustic labor and sports (ll. 1-33), he concludes the paragraph with the transitional line, "These were thy charms—But all these charms are fled." The ruin poetry follows:

Sweet smiling village, loveliest of the lawn,  
Thy sports are fled, and all thy charms withdrawn;  
Amidst thy bowers the tyrant's hand is seen,

<sup>17</sup>*Poetical Works*, ed. Theodore Banks, Jr. (New Haven, 1928), p. 65.

<sup>18</sup>Miner and Quintana both comment on the manner in which these alternating scenes set up Goldsmith's argument.

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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.  
(ll. 35-48)

The first two verse sections of *The Deserted Village* therefore suggest the structure of the poem and how we are to interpret it in light of the conventions Goldsmith clearly shows he has adopted. The succeeding two paragraphs provide the now-expected charge against wealth and luxury, a panegyric on England's happier past, and the Virgilian glorification of peasant life:

For him light labour spread her wholesome store,  
Just gave what life required, but gave no more.  
His best companions, innocence and health;  
And his best riches, ignorance of wealth.  
(ll. 59-62)

The technique of the first two sections is repeated in the fifth and sixth sections, leading subsequently to a wish for retirement and to genre sketches of peasant life and occupations. From this point Goldsmith ceases to alternate the georgic and topographical genres and instead develops a sustained criticism of commerce for which genre content had already laid the foundation.

*The Deserted Village* is a dramatic working out of the conventional topics and themes of discourse in both the georgic and topographical genres. If, at last, Goldsmith's attack on luxury and commerce were to be found inconsistent with the attitudes expressed in his other writings, it would be because the attitudes Goldsmith expresses in *The Deserted Village* are those standard in the genres he adopted. Furthermore, I do not believe that a condemnation of luxury or of any specific social evil is the primary theme of *The Deserted Village* any more than it is the "theme" of the Virgilian georgic. The basic concern of the poem is to

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defend the conservative social order, which under the changing social conditions of England in 1770 could not long endure.<sup>19</sup>

In this light Auburn, it seems to me, was meant to represent not only an actual place but a whole system of abstract values. In the georgic scenes of the past Goldsmith invests Auburn with the positive, orderly virtues of health, serenity, verdancy, and innocent pleasure—all of which reflect the classical motives for the Virgilian praise of country life. The city, on the other hand, suggests another set of values (luxury, commerce, wealth) which Goldsmith represented as destructive of the orderly virtues Auburn had once embodied. In order to dramatize this conflict forcefully, Goldsmith juxtaposed topographical scenes of Auburn's ruin with georgic scenes of Auburn's past felicity.

The use of standard genres is important, since they were evocative of a very great range of stock emotional and intellectual associations which the eighteenth-century reader brought to his reading of the type. Goldsmith uses these deliberately to achieve the effects he wants—to align the reader's emotions against those values Goldsmith carefully associated with the modern outlook: wealth, commerce, and luxury:

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.  
But a bold peasantry, their country's pride,  
When once destroyed, can never be supplied.

(ll. 51-56)

Rather than a just self-sufficiency representative of a balanced and interdependent society without extremes of wealth and poverty, Goldsmith dramatizes a society rapidly changing for the worse:

But times are altered; trade's unfeeling train  
Usurp the land and dispossess the swain;  
Along the lawn, where scattered hamlets rose,  
Unwieldy wealth, and cumbrous pomp repose.

(ll. 63-66)

<sup>19</sup>In his discussion of Goldsmith's view on luxury, Earl Miner has pointed out that the Augustans' "full emotions and the immediate protest of their Toryism were aroused when Whiggish mercantile luxury threatened a traditional, agrarian society with which so many of their values were associated" (p. 130). Besides Dyer's *The Fleece* (1757), other fusions of Whiggish praise of commerce and condemnations of luxury with added humanitarian themes were Robert Dodsley's *Agriculture* (1753) and James Grainger's *Sugar Cane* (1764), the latter a "West Indian" georgic which urged a more humane treatment of slaves and praised England's commerce and colonialism in the sugar plantations of the West Indies. Dyer, Dodsley, and Grainger are of interest not only for their Whig sympathies but for their debilitation of georgic technique and for the insight into the motivations of Virgil recovered with the publication of Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village*.

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In one guise or another Goldsmith blames luxury repeatedly for the destruction of the English social order:

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 around.

(ll. 385-394)

The paired images of ruin and vigor, health and death, innocence and vice, constructed by the georgic and topographical genres come together in the final paragraph of the poem. Here I think Goldsmith makes it perfectly clear that the poem ought to be ultimately understood as a conflict of abstract values, for he now describes all who had inhabited Auburn no longer as individuals—the Parson, the Schoolmaster, the Soldier—but as abstractions. They are the “rural virtues” leaving England on the same ships, presumably, which have brought luxury to the land:

Even now the devastation is begun,  
And half the business of destruction done;  
Even now, methinks, as pondering here I stand,  
I see the rural virtues leave the land.  
Down where yon anchoring vessel spreads the sail  
That idly waiting flaps with every gale,  
Downward they move a melancholy band,  
Pass from the shore, and darken all the strand.  
Contented toil, and hospitable care,  
And kind connubial tenderness, are there;  
And piety with wishes placed above,  
And steady loyalty, and faithful love.

(ll. 395-406)

The last lines of *The Deserted Village* exactly state the motives of Virgil in his georgics:

Teach erring man to spurn the rage of gain;  
Teach him that states of native strength possess,  
Tho' very poor, may still be very blest.

(ll. 424-426)

## GOLDSMITH'S *DESERTED VILLAGE*

Neither Goldsmith nor Virgil need be suspected of a romantic attraction to the peasant or to nature, or even of a personal conviction of the danger of social luxury. Their concern was for the preservation of a justly proportioned, interdependent social hierarchy. Where well-known versions of the georgic such as Thomson's *Seasons* and John Dyer's *The Fleece* glorified labor and England's commerce as an expression of the Whig aesthetic, Goldsmith's rhetorical idealization of labor and his attack on "trade's unfeeling train" sought to remind his countrymen that the English social order depended upon the full and vigorous representation of every class in society. The increase of the very rich and the decline of the very poor, within the syndrome of ideas of eighteenth-century conservatism, could only lead to chaos. The conservative theory of society had always stressed the interdependence of man on man, class on class, and it was this conservative body of ideas that Goldsmith brought forward to oppose the modern view that society was but a chance aggregation of independent interests.

Goldsmith's art was not in the handling of new ideas, but in the extraordinary effects he achieved rehandling the old. The question of the consistency<sup>20</sup> of Goldsmith's attitude toward luxury—"how completely the poem expressed Goldsmith's actual convictions"—is not as relevant to our understanding of the poem as is the extent of the agreement of those convictions with the conservative viewpoint the poem seeks to express. *The Deserted Village* is not, per se, a documentation of Goldsmith's private opinions on luxury or commerce but a poetic reapplication of genre ideas and Tory attitudes to England's situation in 1770.

Generally speaking we would do well to recognize Goldsmith's limitations along with his strengths: he was not an original thinker, but an extensive borrower of the ideas of others; he was a marvelously inspired hack writer who took the standard literary forms and their ready-made ideas and attitudes and applied them to the contemporary English scene. Both literary types had always posed problems for the Augustan poet, and Goldsmith's rehandling of them is not the least of the achievements of the poem. Goldsmith reinvested in the genres and the ideas that came to him a dramatic power of utterance excelling all earlier eighteenth-century versions. He achieved a decorum of style, and a relation to his material that was in every way correct according to Augustan literary standards and undoubtedly superior to most examples of the popular genres after 1750. He was, according to Johnson,

<sup>20</sup>Ronald S. Crane in *New Essays by Oliver Goldsmith* (Chicago, 1927), has pointed out that Goldsmith's somewhat "meagre" stock of ideas is frequently repeated in his poems and essays, and all that Goldsmith wrote about England's social problems taken together expresses an acceptable consistency.

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a man of such variety of powers, and such felicity of performance, that he always seemed to do best that which he was doing; a man who had the art of being minute without tediousness, and general without confusion; whose language was copious without exuberance, exact without constraint, and easy without weakness.

Such is the claim Goldsmith has on our admiration and the admiration of his contemporaries: not as a social philosopher or a sentimental historian, but as the maker of a poem which was, in itself, the last substantial affirmation of those social and literary attitudes we now associate with Augustan poetry.



See p. 243

IV. AUBURN IN RUINS, BY ISAAC TAYLOR, FROM TITLE PAGE OF FIRST QUARTO EDITION OF GOLDSMITH'S *Deserted Village* (1770)