

THE BICENTENARY OF OLIVER GOLDSMITH*

STEPHEN GWYNN

IT is reported that Goldsmith, perhaps as a piece of jesting braggadocio, yet perhaps half seriously, said to a friend that he would be honoured in his university after two hundred years. If he did so, the prophecy was fulfilled when Trinity College, Dublin, decided to celebrate jointly the two hundredth anniversary of the births of Goldsmith and Burke. But fulfilment was not so long waited for. During a hundred years past, whoever entered Trinity must pass between the statues of these two illustrious alumni.

What would Goldsmith have said if he could have been shown by anticipation a picture of the college gate and Foley's two masterpieces? Nothing bitter, for nothing bitter ever came from those lips. No cry like that over Burns—"Ah, Rabbie, Rabbie, ye askit for bread, and they hae gi'en ye a stane." Yet he might have recalled one passage from the *Enquiry into the State of Polite Learning*, and have asked that another illustration might be added to the moral which he drew there from the case of Swift—who got his degree only "by special indulgence":

When a youth appears dull of apprehension, and seems to derive no advantage from study or instruction, the tutor must exercise his sagacity in discovering whether the soil be absolutely barren, or sown with seed repugnant to his nature, or of such a quality as requires repeated culture and length of time to get its juices in fermentation.

That is the nearest thing to a reproach addressed by Goldsmith publicly to his *alma mater*. Yet we find one terrible sentence in his letter to his brother, the parson at Lissoy, who thought of sending his son to Trinity as a sizar:

If he has ambition, strong passions, and an exquisite sensibility to contempt, do not send him—unless you have no trade for him but your own.

Goldsmith, I am sure, before he consented to stand as the *genius loci*—or at least as one of the geniuses of the place—would have asked "Do sizars still sweep passages and serve tables?" When he learnt that this "judicious and considerate arrangement"

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(as it was described by his first biographer) had ceased to operate, he would have felt that the university and the world had moved in the direction of Oliver Goldsmith's ideals. And if he could have seen the front of Trinity College as it is to-day, he might have said that a great sculptor had contrived to make Goldsmith's face and figure convey what Goldsmith really was: whereas he himself had all his life failed in this endeavour, though he had spent much money in trying to find a tailor who would truly express him. Yet perhaps, after all, Goldsmith would have troubled little about the actual fashion of his statue; his heart would have been too full at the thought of standing there beside Edmund Burke.

I wish one could find that Goldsmith had learnt in Trinity something which he afterwards remembered with pleasure or with profit. He learnt there, God knows; he began the school of life as he was to find it; he made his apprenticeship to misery, contempt and disgrace. And I wish one could find that he formed one lasting friendship in his undergraduate days. Yet it is not surprising that none is to be discovered. Few of us reach even middle age without seeing more than one old acquaintance ended by the loan of a five-pound note.

These are not cheerful reflections, but there are few sadder stories in literature than that which I am endeavouring to recall.

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The Reverend Charles Goldsmith, rector of Pallas in County Longford, having an income of forty pounds a year, married Anne, the daughter of his old schoolmaster, Oliver Jones, and proceeded to beget a family, of which the fifth was Oliver, born on Nov. 10, 1728. But before Oliver was two, his father was raised to the rectory of Lissoy, where the emoluments were £200—then a decent competence. At home he received, like Moses in *The Vicar of Wakefield*, "a sort of miscellaneous education", in part from the village teacher, an old soldier who had risen to be a quarter-master in Marlborough's wars. Then he went to boarding schools at Elphin, at Athlone, and at Edgeworthstown. It was on his way to Edgeworthstown that the adventure befell which was afterwards made the basis of *She Stoops to Conquer*—when he presented himself at a private house, believing it to be an inn. But in real life the good-natured squire was a friend of the boy's father, recognized him, and humoured the misunderstanding.

Then, at the age of seventeen, he came up to the university as a sizar. Trinity held many students having large command of money; Goldsmith was not only ugly and ill-dressed, but he was

stamped with a menial badge, and the young are not compassionate. He was the most sociable of creatures, and his poverty cut him off from friendly intercourse. If he was noticed, it was as a laughing stock. Scott tells of Leyden, the peasant boy who swept all before him at Edinburgh, that people laughed at the ragged scholar, but never laughed twice. Leyden was pugnacious. Goldsmith was stocky and active; but though he certainly was not too proud to fight, he was probably too shy—a common inhibition; and yet most who have had even a little war experience have known men distinguished for bravery who would have done anything to avoid a brawl. But to be poor and a pacifist is not a good combination if a young man wants to be forward in young men's society, and Goldsmith always wanted to be forward. Oddly enough, he was publicly admonished for taking part in a formidable row when the college attempted to break in on the jail. Probably he wanted to distinguish himself.

Worse trouble followed. Goldsmith tried for a scholarship, failed, but got an exhibition of the value of thirty shillings—and celebrated the occasion by a party in his rooms. Both sexes were represented, and there is this to be said for his tutor, the Reverend Theaker Wilder, that we cannot honestly suppose the ladies to have been at all in the same category as those who are to-day so numerous within the magic precinct. Still, Mr. Wilder, who had bullied Goldsmith with his tongue at lectures, had a right to send him down: he had no right to knock him down. The lad, in his bitterness of heart, sold his books and clothes, and ran away, with the project of getting to America. But this exploit, like so many later projects, split on the rock of finance. Goldsmith hung about Dublin till he had spent all but a shilling, when he started on a tramp, and, for the first time, starved. His father, whom he adored, was dead before this; his mother lived, but in this soft-hearted man there is no trace of tenderness for his mother. Mrs. Primrose, in *The Vicar of Wakefield*, is not sketched with severity, but she is sketched without affection. The love for his father transferred itself to his elder brother, who brought him back to Trinity, and ultimately he proceeded to a degree.

Then Trinity was done with him, and he was done with Trinity; and the family proposed that he should take Orders. For two years he lived at Lissoy, awaiting the period when he should be of age to present himself. This was probably the happiest period of his life, for he had no anxieties, and moved among people who liked him and whom he could make laugh. Then he presented himself and was rejected—we need not believe that it was because he wore

scarlet breeches. Failing the Church, he got a job as tutor, which must have been decently paid, for he came back after a year with a decent horse and thirty pounds in his pocket.

There was no welcome before him at home. Once more he thought of a passage for America, and this time he got so far as Cork: but again the money melted, and the place of his decent horse was taken by one that he descriptively called Fiddleback. This was only the beginning of a series of false starts. Next time his good-natured uncle Contarine provided money, and he set off for Edinburgh to be a medical student. Two years later, he left Edinburgh for Leyden, having begged a last twenty pounds from Uncle Contarine, and so began his period of wandering through Europe.

Of course the man was impossible—especially impossible about money. Goldsmith had always one of the readiest means of evacuation—he could not keep away from a gaming table. But there was another leak; he could not resist appeal to his compassion. Ought we to pride ourselves on ability to see a shivering beggar in rags, and retain our overcoats? The accomplishment is very common, but Goldsmith lacked it. He would give away anything to relieve distress. He would give away what did not belong to him. In maturity this man, whose best writings are in praise of his father, nevertheless criticised the upbringing which he received. Here is a passage from the *Citizen of the World*, manifestly describing Mr. Goldsmith:

As his fortune was but small, he lived up to the very extent of it. He had no intention of leaving his children money, for that was dross; he resolved that we should have learning; for learning, he used to observe, was better than silver and gold. For this purpose he undertook to instruct us himself, and took as much pains to form our morals as to improve our understanding. We were told that universal benevolence was what first cemented human society; we were taught to consider all the wants of mankind as our own, and to regard the human face divine with affection and esteem. He wound us up to be mere machines of pity, and rendered us incapable of withstanding the slightest impulse made either by real or fictitious distress. In a word, we were perfectly instructed in the art of giving away thousands before we were given the more necessary qualifications of getting a farthing.

Parts of that passage have the special characteristic of Goldsmith—a delicate irony, scarcely to be so called, a gentle irradiation of laughter, flooding back over the words as fast as they are uttered. Yet at the close there is a graver note; the son for an instant sits in judgment, as is the custom and the right of the younger generation.

But it would be cant to suggest that Goldsmith's difficulties were all due to his charity. He spent money on clothes, for he was pathetically eager to please—particularly to please women. "An ugly and poor man is society for himself", he wrote to a friend from Edinburgh, "and such society the world lets me enjoy in good abundance." In so far as he could procure the society of women by paying for it, he did not deny himself that society. For these purposes and others he was throughout his life a borrower who often did not repay, and such a borrower does not easily retain his self-respect. Goldsmith found himself constrained to many courses which, to put it mildly, he could not have contemplated with satisfaction. Yet his irregularities can be matched from the history of many men famous in literature, who not only indulged their vices, but must bilk their creditors and plunder their friends to get the means for that indulgence. From a soil so treated, Baudelaire grew his *Fleurs du Mal*; Goldsmith grew his *Vicar of Wakefield*. Verlaine is another case, and Verlaine drew out of squalor most lovely melodies; yet in one of the most exquisite lyrics, after picturing a day's enchanted calm and stillness, suddenly the poet rebukes his own sad heart:

*Qu'as tu fait, oh mon coeur
Pleurant sans cesse,
Qu'as tu fait, oh, toi que voila
De ta jeunesse?*

Goldsmith died worn out at five and forty, but he kept his heart young. His laughter has the freshness of a child's.

One need not go through the story of how he tramped through Europe, earning his way at times by playing on the flute, and at others profiting by the arrangement which offered bed and board in continental universities to one who disputed well. Nor need one tell how he came back to England and was in worse plight. Failing in medicine, he became an usher. "I had rather be an under turnkey at Newgate", says the Philosophic Vagabond. "I was up early and late: I was browbeat by the master, hated for my ugly face by the mistress, and worried by the boys." Yet at the Peckham academy Griffiths, the bookseller, met him and opened the doors of Grub Street. He starved there at first, and must come back to Peckham once more: once more he planned a change of scene, getting a nomination to be medical inspector in India. The *Enquiry into the State of Polite Learning* was written to provide for his outfit. No outfit was needed, for on review of the candidates he was struck off the list as unfit. But the *Enquiry* was published, and Goldsmith became known as a name.

Publishers heaped employments on him—at very low rates. The rates did not matter greatly. Goldsmith's expenditure was always nicely proportioned to his income, or to his credit. When he earned more, he was in debt for larger sums. But on the narrower margins there was the risk of jail, and so we come to the famous episode when his landlady had him arrested for his rent, and he sent for Johnson, who went away with the manuscript of *The Vicar of Wakefield* and came back with sixty pounds.

Yet it was not the *Vicar* that made Goldsmith famous. Newbery, who bought the manuscript, thought so little of it that he did not print it till *The Traveller* which he also bought (for twenty pounds) had taken the town by storm. After these two masterpieces had appeared and succeeded, Goldsmith was a made man—or would have been, if a sieve could hold water. The booksellers kept him busy thenceforward, and at fair prices. Yet, to our modern understandings how simple they seem to have been! After the *Vicar of Wakefield* should have come the *Curate of Dillington*, fully to establish taste for a particular brand. He ought to have been kept writing tales of virtuous country clergy and their parishes till the trick became as easy to him as cashing the drafts from the booksellers. Instead of that, these idiotic people kept him at compiling—making abridgments of other people's histories.

Still we may console ourselves—we may even thank God—that the prose jewel was never vulgarised by inferior imitations from the same hand; and that in the poems one masterpiece, *The Reveller*, had its pendant and no more. Goldsmith, of course, might have easily discovered for himself the secret of extending a success ad infinitum; but his was a great literary probity. When Griffiths discovered that money advanced to pay Goldsmith's own debts had been spent to pay those of his landlady (it is true she was threatened with ejection)—and that even books entrusted to him for review had been pawned to make up the balance—he did not spare words like "swindler", and Goldsmith had to wince under them. But he never at any moment lowered the flag of his literary honour.

He wrote to order, for a living. He wrote as much to order as any man that ever lived. But on the work that was his own he took no man's orders, and that is why we have from him six or seven masterpieces in four several kinds. Johnson's famous epitaph has put this into a lapidary phrase: *nullum fere scribendi genus non tetigit, nullum quod tetigit non ornavit*. Yet after all, that is the praise of a hack of genius, and that is how Johnson thought of Goldsmith. Goldsmith came into Johnson's circle when he was

known as a struggling writer for magazines. No man looked to him for masterpieces; when a masterpiece came, it was even disparaged by association with its author. The partiality of his friends was always against Goldsmith; Johnson said, "It was with difficulty we could give him a hearing." Even Johnson often forgot the truth, which nevertheless he—and perhaps he only—knew to the full. Writing to Bennett Langton after Goldsmith's death, he enlarged upon their friend's improvidences and other faults. But then came pronouncement—"Let his frailties be forgotten; he was a very great man."

A very great man must have strength, and Goldsmith, the mere man, was compact of frailties. But Goldsmith, the writer, had the strength to fight his own generation and to win. He was needy to the utmost, he had to live by his pen; but from the first he chose his own literary standards in opposition to the taste of the time. When Johnson was dictator, he preached and practised simplicity of phrase. He protested against "the inflated style that has for some years been looked upon as fine writing."—"Let us, instead of writing finely, try to write naturally." When the theatre reeked of mawkish sentiment, he brought it honest uproarious fun, with so much genuine wit and humour that his pieces are alive to-day. He had to fight not only the public and the critics, but the managers and actors, and make them succeed in spite of themselves. In the last of all his writings, this impecunious dramatist will be found squaring up to David Garrick, lord paramount of the stage. It is true that the central passage in *Retaliation* carries more of compliment than censure. But Garrick also, when he was witty at Goldsmith's expense, had mixed praise with something very like contempt:

Here lies Willy Goldsmith, for shortness called Noll,
Who wrote like an angel, and talked like poor Poll.

It would be almost an impertinence to reproduce the masterpieces of analysis which turned the laugh against Garrick and his pert little epigram. Yet since public memory is faithless, a few couplets may be detached:

Then he, David Garrick, describe one who can,
An abridgment of all that was pleasant in man.

On the stage he was natural, simple, affecting,
'Twas only that when he was off, he was acting.

Of praise a mere glutton, he swallowed what came,
And the puff of a dunce, he mistook it for fame,
Till, his relish grown callous almost to disease,
Who peppered the highest was surest to please.

Retaliation: and here, as elsewhere in that satire, the jest has a serious side.

These are some of the reasons for holding that the statue by the gate of Trinity does not merely commemorate a gifted writer; it is a fit tribute to a spirit that was both gentle and brave. Pugnacity is a likeable quality, because it tends to go with courage—though not always; the Reverend Theaker Wilder was pugnacious: he knocked down a cabman in the street, who was as little free to hit back as Goldsmith, the sizar. But pugnacity with courage is a combination often useful, especially to its possessor. Courage without pugnacity is a virtue that fits a man to serve mankind.

I have not insisted on the fact that Goldsmith was Irish. He was no nationalist. He was a lover of mankind—a citizen of the world—with a passion for home. And home was Lissoy. "Why the plague, then, so fond of Ireland?" he wrote to his brother, enumerating the reasons why he should not be fond of Ireland. "Yet," he goes on, "if I climb Hampstead Hill, than where Nature never exhibited a more magnificent prospect, I confess it fine; but then I had rather be placed on the little mount before Lissoy gate, and there take in to me the most pleasing horizon in nature." He never saw Lissoy again, nor any sod of Ireland. Worse: he who has described home with such intensity of feeling never had a home—never had a child. It would have been a spoilt child—but how did providence have the heart to deny Oliver Goldsmith the chance to spoil a child of his own?

One thing more. This child-lover, this lover of humanity, was a publicist. Even in his poems he is an advocate of political ideas. He discerned, and he denounced, the economic processes which have left England, alone of European countries, without a peasantry. There are still two schools of thought on this matter; I think the better opinion now upholds Goldsmith. But there was one matter in which, by the admission of all, he was far in advance of his age. He argued boldly against the laws of England which then made death the penalty for petty thefts. He exposed the shameful callousness of the propertied law-makers, and summed up the whole in one sentence that should be unforgettable—"A very little blood will serve to cement our security."

So far of the man: let me say a few words of the writer. There are the comedies—amply justified by their continued existence. There are the satires: compare even the *Haunch of Venison* with Horace's account of being beset by a bore, and does not Goldsmith

stand it well? As for *Retaliation*, was ever another satire lasting that had no anger in it? Vindictive writing is the easiest to succeed with: Pope's most famous passage, the lines on Addison, where praise is accumulated only to give weight and driving force to the final stab, gratifies whatever in us loves to see a deadly blow. But Goldsmith triumphed with his portraits of the country parson and the country schoolmaster—portraits inspired by love.

It is a little hard to judge his poems; for, like *Hamlet*, they are terribly full of quotations. But Goldsmith's lines cannot, like so many in Shakespeare, endure endless repetition without losing their fire. He chose to make poetry with the colours of prose. The truth is that Wordsworth's theory was right when he said that poets should use the speech of peasants, and that Wordsworth's practice was right when, for the purposes of his art, he used language which entirely transcended any ordinary uses of speech. Goldsmith, at all times in poetry, confined himself to the vocabulary of educated middle-class men and women; and all we can say is that no one ever did better with that imposed limitation.

But Goldsmith's prose! You are never for an instant in doubt of what he means, and yet he can again and again convey more than he says. Every sentence is finished in form, yet in every sentence you get not only the individual quality of the voice, but its inflections. It is the perfection of English style at the best period, and for that reason it hardly seems to-day even old-fashioned. Here are a few sentences from the *Adventure of a Strolling Player*:

You must know that I am very well descended; my ancestors have made some noise in the world; for my mother cried oysters, and my father beat a drum; I am told we have even had some trumpets in our family.

Apart from the humour, is not the rhythm of that exquisite? But open the *Vicar of Wakefield*, and read how the Primroses, living near the road and keeping open house, found themselves remembered by their cousins "even to the farthest degree of affinity:"

So that, if we had not very rich, we generally had very happy friends about us; for this remark will hold good through life, that the poorer the guest, the better pleased he ever is with being treated; and some men gaze with admiration at the colours of a tulip, and others are smitten with the wing of a butterfly, so I was by nature an admirer of happy human faces.

It should be needless to quote the note which tells how the Vicar disposed of any relation who was found a troublesome guest:

I even took care to lend him a riding coat or a pair of boots, and sometimes a horse of small value, and always had the satisfaction of finding he never came back to return them.

The quintessence of Goldsmith's genius, and of the philosophy which made him above all "an admirer of happy human faces", can be found only in the *Vicar*. What can be put beside *The Vicar of Wakefield*? In my view, Irishmen should look at home, for the spirit of Goldsmith is also in some measure the spirit of Ireland, at least when Ireland is a Christian country; and the story which has most affinity with Goldsmith's quintessential expression is to me "The Charwoman's Daughter". And if I were to look for a prose of to-day where every sentence is speech crystallised, but crystallised into living shapes, I should look in the works of James Stephens. Both men learnt in the same hard school: our contemporary was pugnacious, and he came out of it more aggressive than he who stands at Trinity gate. But both have Ireland on their tongue, and the heart of both is Irish.

Ireland has sent abroad many Christian missionaries: I doubt if any one of them did more for Christianity than Oliver Goldsmith, though you can no more trace nor measure his influence than you can sum up the effect of an hour's sunshine. But though he belongs to the world, it is well that Trinity College, set at the very heart of Ireland's capital, should claim a special right in him for Trinity and for Ireland.