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Neglected Aspects of *The Vicar of Wakefield*

In the Foreword to his valuable study of *The Vicar of Wakefield*, Macdonald Emslie remarks that there has been surprisingly little real criticism of the novel.¹ Undoubtedly one of the best pieces of criticism of it, aside from Emslie's own book, is a short review by George Orwell.² He regards the novel as a sermon on "the vanity of worldly ambitions and the pleasures of the simple life". Not surprisingly, therefore, he feels the long discourse against oligarchy and the accumulation of capital (ch.19) to be thrust in "rather irrelevantly". He also devotes a fair proportion of his space to the "superstitious regard for the sanctity of marriage which makes the most dramatic episode in the book ridiculous and even slightly disgusting."³

The aim of this brief article will be to render the superstition about marriage at least intelligible, and to show that the novel is concerned with social and political themes no less than with private morality. *The Vicar* will be compared to the Book of Job for its general pattern, to Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* for its sexual morality, and to William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* for its social and political message.

The story is told from the point of view of the Vicar, Dr. Primrose, who narrates his Job-like experiences in the first person. Like the holy man of Uz, at the beginning of the story he is wealthy and is head of a happy, God-fearing family. But he loses his property just before the day when his eldest son, George, is to marry an heiress, Miss Arabella Wilmot. The good Vicar is too honest to conceal his loss, and the marriage falls through. He leaves his comfortable parsonage for a poor living where he must farm his own land. Scarcely has he settled in, when the handsome young squire Thornhill seduces his eldest daughter Olivia, goes through a bogus marriage ceremony with her, and then, after two weeks, offers the use of her person to a baronet friend of his.

Meanwhile, Dr. Primrose, wandering the countryside in search of his daughter, falls ill. When he recovers enough, he slowly makes his way back. After several days walking, he discovers Olivia languishing with shame in a poor inn five miles from home. Hastening ahead to persuade his wife to welcome back her fallen daughter, he discovers, as he approaches, that his home is on fire. He is just in time to rescue his two smallest children from the blaze, but in doing so he burns his arm badly. He next hears that squire Thornhill, the man who has ruined his daughter, is about to marry Miss Arabella Wilmot. Since he holds that Thornhill is under an obligation to make an honest woman of Olivia by marrying her, he refuses to give his approval to the Thornhill-Wilmot marriage. The marriage can hardly go ahead without his approval, since he is Thornhill's vicar. Therefore, to extort his approval, the tyrannical squire demands immediate payment of his arrears of rent. As Dr. Primrose cannot pay and will not yield his consent to the marriage, he is cast into the debtors' gaol, to pass his days among felons and his nights, not exactly on a dunghill, but on a heap of straw in a stone-flagged dungeon. His daughter, Olivia, languishing with shame, is close to death. But his cup of bitterness is not quite full. Without his knowledge or consent, his wife Deborah has written to their son George, now a subaltern in the army, telling him to challenge Thornhill to a duel; George has done this, and has thereby come under a recent law which punishes with death anyone who issues a challenge to a duel. So George is brought into the same prison as his father, under sentence of death. Worse still, the younger daughter, Sophia, is kidnapped by Thornhill, who hopes to inflict on her the same fate as her sister Olivia has suffered. Amidst all these trials, Dr. Primrose does not curse God and die; he keeps himself cheerful and even preaches resignation to the other inmates of the prison.

At the end, his Job-like patience is rewarded. His personal fortune is restored to him; Thornhill finds that the bogus marriage ceremony was valid after all; Sophia is rescued from her kidnappers, and her poor suitor turns out to be a wealthy lord. The happy family is reunited, happier and wealthier than before.

As is well known, the central sections of the Book of Job raise serious questions, which are never answered, about the justice of divine providence. The happy ending is no solution; it is taken over from an old tale composed by some simple-minded author who believed that

all's well that ends well.⁴ It can easily mislead the hasty reader into thinking that God's administration of justice has somehow been vindicated in the book — which of course it has not; Job has simply been persuaded to believe without understanding. In *The Vicar of Wakefield*, Dr. Primrose does not call in question the justice of God; he holds firmly the belief to which Job at one point almost arrives (cf. Job 19:25-27), namely, that there is another life after death in which the justice of the upright man is vindicated. However, the central part of *The Vicar* is meant to show up the appalling injustices which masqueraded as justice in eighteenth-century England. Serious social and political issues are raised in the centre of the novel, only to be obscured by the conventional happy ending.

Before discussing these issues, let us look at the reversal by means of which the happy ending is achieved, and at Dr. Primrose's superstitious views on marriage which make it possible. Readers of our generation are likely to find his attitude ridiculous both during the period when he believes Olivia's marriage to be invalid and (still more) when he discovers that it is valid.

When he is told that Thornhill and Olivia have been through a false ceremony and have slept together, he insists that they must marry. He knows that Thornhill is a complete scoundrel who has already ruined other women and will probably ruin more; yet he wants his beloved daughter married to this villain! Why does he not exclaim, "Thank God the marriage was invalid!"? No explanation is given in the book, but it is not therefore illegitimate to supply one. Dr. Primrose must be presumed to think as many a Christian of his day did, and as Angel Clare still does in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, that in marriage man and woman become "one flesh" (Gen2:24) through carnal union, the verbal contract before an ordained minister of religion being complementary to the physical union. St. Paul appears to countenance or even encourage this view when he quotes Gen 2:24 and says that a young man who commits fornication with a prostitute becomes "one flesh" with her (1 Cor 6:16) — his use of this Scriptural phrase seems to imply that he thought Adam and Eve (whom he regards as historical persons) became "one flesh" by copulation rather than by formal consent. If this view is taken seriously, it leads to the conclusion that intercourse before marriage renders impossible any true and perfect marriage except with the partner of that intercourse. Dr. Primrose apparently

feels that his daughter, having become “one flesh” with Thornhill, cannot truly marry anyone else, and if Thornhill attempts to marry Arabella, the union will be adulterous. While holding out in prison, Dr. Primrose says:

Though my submission and approbation could transfer me from hence to the most beautiful apartment he is possessed of, yet I would grant neither, as something whispers me that it would be giving a sanction to adultery. While my daughter lives, no other marriage of his shall ever be legal in my eye.⁵

This attitude is, of course, illogical. From the premises employed it should follow that Thornhill is really married to the first woman he ever seduced, and that his union with Olivia was for that reason adultery. But Dr. Primrose chooses to turn a blind eye to Thornhill’s previous seductions. The conclusion to which his inner voice leads him is absurd: the only way for his unfortunate daughter to become an honest woman is to marry the promiscuous blackguard who seduced her! Such are the results of reading metaphysical mysteries into the pictorial language of the Bible.

When it is discovered that the duper Thornhill was duped by the super-duper Jenkinson, who provided a real priest and a true license for the marriage ceremony, the reaction, to a modern reader, is likely to seem utterly ridiculous:

Happiness was expanded upon every face, and even Olivia’s cheeks seemed flushed with pleasure. To be thus restored to reputation and fortune at once was a rapture sufficient to stop the progress of decay and restore form, health and vivacity. But perhaps among all there was not one who felt sincerer pleasure than I. (p.175)

Both Olivia and her father are delighted to know that she is and has been an honest woman all the time.

A modern clergyman or lawyer would, I think, object at once that even though the minister was rightly ordained and the license legally valid, the marriage was null, because Thornhill, at the time of the ceremony, believed the contract was null and had no intention whatever of binding himself for life to Olivia. Dr. Primrose’s attitude to this marriage is thoroughly irrational. He judges according to popular prejudices and misconceptions based, not on reason, but on Scripture misunderstood.

The same popular misconceptions can be seen in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*. When Lydia elopes and lives with Wickham, everyone in the novel takes it for granted that Lydia must marry him; there is no

alternative; the matter is not even discussed. But Hardy's attitude in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is much more critical. He represents Angel Clare as still adhering to the old prejudice, but he wants the reader to condemn him for it. When Angel learns, after the marriage ceremony, that some years earlier Tess was seduced by Alec d'Urberville, he refuses to sleep with her; he regards her as being still tied to Alec d'Urberville by an invisible, spiritual bond, and therefore as being unable to be his own true wife. That this is in his mind becomes particularly clear when he says that it would make a difference if Alec were dead: "How can we live together while that man lives? — he being your husband in Nature, and not I. If he were dead it might be different..."⁶ Tess's one involuntary act of physical union with Alec long in the past renders impossible a true marriage between her and anyone else so long as Alec lives. Illogically, Angel Clare does not regard himself as still bound to the woman with whom he once had an affair. Premarital sex is pardonable for the man but unpardonable to the woman. Hardy's novel is meant to challenge these views which are so blandly accepted by Goldsmith.

At several points in his novel, Goldsmith gets us to chuckle at Dr. Primrose's pet theological foible, his devotion to the Whistonian thesis that "it was unlawful for a priest of the church of England, after the death of his first wife, to take a second." (p.13) The obvious Scriptural basis for this view, though it is never quoted in the novel, is St. Paul's list of the qualities desirable in a bishop (or presbyter — he does not distinguish): "Now a bishop must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, sensible, dignified, hospitable, an apt teacher..." (1 Tim 3:2) But the text from Gen 2:24 may have its influence here too. If physical union creates a metaphysical bond between man and woman, making them "one flesh" (or even "one person", according to some modern versions), the pious believer in resurrection may well suspect that this mystical bond does not cease to be, when the partners are separated by death. Will they not one day be reunited in heaven? The spiritual remnants of the first bond would impair the perfection of any second marriage somewhat as premarital copulation is thought to impair the bond of a woman's first marriage. Dr. Primrose thinks that, as a priest, he should set an example of the strictest monogamy.

To turn now to the social and political message of the novel: as was mentioned above, this is distressingly concealed by the happy ending,

which can easily give the impression that for Goldsmith God is in his heaven, all is well with the world, and things turn out right in the end, if good people will only have patience. Such, however, was not Goldsmith's view. In other works, notably in *The Deserted Village*, he shows himself keenly aware of the misuse of the law by the rich for the exploitation of the poor and hopes to stir the public conscience to set things right. As Howard Bell observes, in *The Deserted Village* "the laws had failed to protect the villagers; the rich man had made his money legally; he had bought up the land legally; he had evicted the people legally; he and his fellow landlords had enclosed the pasture land legally."⁷ The poem has a political purpose in so far as Goldsmith wishes "to arouse popular feeling against the wealthy tyrants and the governments that make their depredations possible."⁸

If we recognize the political purpose in the poem, it should not be difficult to recognize it in the novel, though it must be admitted that Goldsmith's intentions in the novel are complex. As George Orwell says, he is preaching on the vanity of worldly ambitions and the pleasures of the simple life. He is also showing up the folly of naive idealism in a world which is full of deceivers; and he is showing how happy a virtuous life could be, if only idealism were joined with prudence. But, as in the poem, he is also showing the outrageous ways in which the rich use the law as their instrument of tyranny. Thornhill evicts the Primrose family legally; he imprisons the Vicar legally; he apprehends his son legally; and for a while it seems that he will get possession of Arabella's dowry legally. Surely Goldsmith meant the reader's feelings to be incensed by all this. What sort of a country is England if the wealthy can behave like tyrants and go free, while the innocent poor rot and starve in prison? Does wealth place a man above the laws of England and license him to oppress and torture the poor? The book is meant to open the reader's eyes to the urgent need for reform and renewal of the social structure of England. "Government, when it grows older, seems to acquire the moroseness of age." (p.143)

And yet, as we close the book, we are not incensed. The happy ending robs the book of its seriousness. Critics have rightly said that the clever denouement is half-way toward parody of the conventional happy ending.⁹

William Godwin was much wiser when he gave his *Caleb Williams* an unhappy ending. The two novels are in some ways very much alike. Both contain stories of the sexual and legal oppression of the poor by

the rich. In both novels a wealthy squire ruins an honourable girl and misuses the legal and penal systems to oppress an innocent man. Godwin's novel bears the subtitle "Things as They Are" – which would be equally applicable to *The Vicar of Wakefield*, if Goldsmith had not chosen to end his story in a dream-world ruled by a different system of Providence from any discernible in the world of things as they are.

In a letter written to the editor of the *British Critic* in July 1795, Godwin described his intention in *Caleb Williams* as follows.¹⁰ "It is to expose the evils which arise out of the present system of civilized society; and having exposed them to lead the enquiring reader to examine whether they are, or are not, as has commonly been supposed, irremediable." Godwin was, of course, writing after the French Revolution, which had convinced him that radical reform was a real possibility; social injustices were remediable. Goldsmith, writing before the French Revolution, believed the same, but with a difference. He gave no countenance to any revolutionary or reforming initiative coming from below, from the oppressed poor. When the Vicar's parishioners, outraged by squire Thornhill's treatment of him, threaten to intervene to save him from imprisonment, the Vicar rebukes them severely: "Is this the manner you obey the instructions I have given you from the pulpit? Thus to fly in the face of justice and bring down ruin on yourselves and me!" (p.132) The Vicar seems quite unaware of any irony in his use of the word "justice," but surely Goldsmith intends his readers to spot it. To use Dickens's word, Goldsmith sees England in a fearful muddle, and hopes that his novel will contribute to reform – but not by stirring up the poor.¹¹ Reform must come from the rich and powerful who are placed over the poor with the obligation of ruling them justly.

Dr. Primrose is a true Tory. He supports monarchy as the best safeguard of liberty, and he uses his influence as a clergyman of the established Church to support the political *status quo*.¹² Here again, the Scriptural passages which explain his frame of mind are not quoted; but it should not be supposed that such a clergyman supports the political establishment from blind self-interest. The instructions which he gave from his pulpit would, no doubt, be comments on the well-known words of St. Paul, who, though he was a radical in theology, was an ultra-conservative in his social and political thinking: "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God; the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever

therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God; and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation." (Rom 13:1-2) In his discourse to Mr. Arnold's butler, Dr. Primrose uses a good measure of irony and refrains from quoting Scripture, but he is probably to be taken as saying just what he means when he says: "I am for, and would die for, monarchy, sacred monarchy; for if there be anything sacred amongst men, it must be the anointed sovereign of his people, and every diminution of his power in war or in peace is an infringement upon the real liberties of the subject." (p.95)

The ex-Calvinist preacher Godwin, on the other hand, has freed himself from theological tradition in regard to monarchy (as also in regard to marriage). In *Caleb Williams*, he makes no overt attack on monarchy, but he maintains that in every society the spirit of the ruler diffuses itself downward through all the orders of society and he represents squire Falkland as embodying the evil spirit of monarchy. The county goal is Falkland's bastille. In Caleb's eyes, Falkland is "a copy of what monarchs are, who reckon among the instruments of their power prisons of state."¹³

The difference between the two novelists is that whereas Goldsmith wants to see reform brought about through constitutional channels and hopes for the cooperation of an enlightened monarchy with what he calls "the middle order", Godwin has no trust in monarchy and wants change to come, not indeed through popular revolution, but through pressure exerted by thoughtful men of every class, including the labouring poor. But perhaps, in the long run, the difference is not great: each of these two authors hoped that his novel would influence the general climate of opinion in England and so prepare the way for much-needed social changes.

Footnotes

1. Cf. Macdonald Emsleie, *Goldsmith: The Vicar of Wakefield*, Studies in English Literature, 9 (Arnold, London, 1963), p.7.
2. Reprinted in George Orwell, *Collected Essays*, Vol. 3 (London, 1968), pp.268-73.
3. Orwell, p.270.
4. Curiously, St. Paul seems to have accepted this view in his discussion of God's treatment of the Jews (cf. Rom 11:25-26). However, Rom 11:33-35 shows that he was not fully satisfied with his own reasonings on this matter.
5. *The Vicar of Wakefield* (Signet edition, New York, 1961), p.146. All further references to the novel will be to this edition and will be included in the text.

6. Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (Norton, New York, 1965), pp.203-04.
7. Howard J. Bell, "The Deserted Village and Goldsmith's Social Doctrines," *PMLA* 59 (1944), 761.
8. Bell, p.753.
9. Cf. M. Emslie, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, p.78.
10. Quoted from D. Gilbert Dumas, "Things as They Were: The Original Ending of *Caleb Williams*," *SEL* 6 (1966), 583.
11. In *Hard Times*, II, v (Penguin edition, 1969, p.181), Mr. Bounderby says to Stephen Blackpool: "Now perhaps you'll let the gentleman know, how you would set this muddle (as you're so fond of calling it) to rights." Stephen replies: "I donno, sir. I canna be expecten to't. 'Tis not me as should be looken to for that, sir. 'Tis them as is put ower me, and ower aw the rest of us. What do they tak upon themseln, sir, if not to do't?" G.B. Shaw, in an essay on *Hard Times* (G.H. Ford and L. Lane, *The Dickens Critics*, New York, 1961, pp.133-34), quotes this passage as an example of Dickens's Toryism and regards the whole novel as evidence of a conscience "newly stricken by the discovery of the real state of England."
12. This does not of course imply that he approved of the existing Ministry.
13. William Godwin, *The Adventures of Caleb Williams* (Rinehart, New York and Toronto, 1960), p.201.