Goldsmith the good natured man

*by A. Norman Jeffares**

Carlyle was taken by William Allingham to Goldsmith's grave in the Temple. They stood beside what Allingham described as the simple but sufficient monument, a stone about coffin length and eighteen inches high. Allingham read the inscription aloud, Carlyle took off his broad-flapped black hat and said 'A salute' . . . after they had replaced their hats and turned away Carlyle remarked, 'Poor Oliver, he said on his deathbed, "I am not at ease in my mind" '.

There have been many biographies—Carlyle complained later to Allingham that Black's gave no creditable Goldsmith—and many explanations of Goldsmith's deathbed remark. Dr Johnson who knew, and, in his way, loved him, told Boswell that Goldsmith had died of a fever made more violent by uneasiness of mind. 'His debts began to be heavy, and all his resources were exhausted. Sir Joshua [Reynolds] is of opinion that he owed not less than two thousand pounds. Was ever poet so trusted before?' And the next day he wrote to Bennet Langton that Goldsmith had 'died of a fever, exasperated, as I believe, by the fear of distress. He had raised money and squandered it, by every artifice of acquisition and folly of expense. But let not his frailties be remembered; he was a very great man.' Johnson's famous Latin epitaph for the monument in Westminster Abbey included the phrase that there was almost no form of literature Goldsmith had not put his hand to, and that whatever he had attempted he had made elegant.

To Johnson, then, as to many of Goldsmith's biographers, it was a matter of the contrast between greatness and frailty. By the time Goldsmith died in London, two hundred years ago, on 4 April 1774, he had composed two of the eighteenth century's best

*The Trinity Monday Discourse, 1974

known poems, 'The traveller' and 'The deserted village' and there are other well known poems of his too, notably the 'Stanzas on woman', 'When lovely woman stoops to folly', 'Retaliation' and the 'Elegy on the death of a mad dog'. He had also written *The Vicar of Wakefield* which was probably most popular in the nineteenth century but is still read for its gentle irony, and for its wisdom as well as its sense of absurdity. He had created two comedies, *The good natured man* and the ever-amusing *She stoops to conquer*, recently seen by vast audiences on television, and still standing up nobly to the onslaughts of amateur dramatic groups. He had written histories of England, of Greece and of Rome which survived in school syllabuses up to this century. He had written the *Letters from a citizen of the world* in which he viewed his London world from the point of view of a Chinese visitor. He had written a sensitive biography of Richard Nash as well as one of Voltaire. He had provided much information, still giving pleasure to those who enjoy description—and humour—in his *History of the earth and animated nature*. And, of course, there was his hack writing: introductions, prefaces, biographies, criticism, and compilations. The exhibition of some of his works in the T.C.D. Library (in May, 1974) gives some idea of how much he wrote: it was a vast output and he may well have been temporarily written out when he died. Unlike Johnson he had received no State pension. He had outrun the constable. His life as a writer went through a cycle, indeed a series of cycles, of over-spending (very often in charity to others, for he was generous to the point of absurdity), of over-borrowing and then of over-working in vain efforts to catch up.

The strain was very great, and his London friends were not perceptive; they did not recognize at the end how ill he was. He must have reached the point of asking himself what was the value of it all. But that does not fully answer his final mental unease. And yet there are many passages in his writings which indicate more of his nature than may have been obvious to his friends in London. He suffered from *maladie du pays*. Indeed he can be explained in terms of equations which describe the lives of many Irish writers. In the first equation ambition and poverty equal achievement; in another achievement is the sum of compulsion to write and sacrifice of happiness. Goldsmith was ambitious, but his father gave him no training for fending off poverty. Here is how Goldsmith's character, The Man in Black—who is very like his author—described his father the country clergyman:

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 was resolved they should have learning; for learning, he used to observe, was better than silver or 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 society; we were taught to consider all the wants of mankind as our own, 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 taught the more necessary qualifications of getting a farthing.

And his father was disappointed in his expectations by the middling figure made in the university by his son.

He had flattered himself that he should soon see me rising into the foremost rank in literary reputation, but was mortified to find me utterly unnoticed and unknown. His disappointment might have been partly ascribed to his having overrated my talents, and partly to my dislike of mathematical reasonings, at a time when my imagination and memory, yet unsatisfied were more eager after new objects than desirous of reasoning upon those I knew. This, however, did not please my tutors, who observed indeed that I was a little dull; but at the same time allowed, that I seemed to be *very good natured,* and had no harm in me.

Here is the *leitmotiv* which runs through many of Goldsmith's self-portraits. He was indeed very good natured and there was no harm in him—the latter a very Irish phrase.

Like Swift before him, Goldsmith disliked the mathematics of the college syllabus. Like Swift he got involved in disturbances—Swift cut his lectures, joined in starting a tumult in college and had had to beg the Dean's pardon publicly on bended knees. Goldsmith, too, got involved in a tumult, a more serious one which went beyond the walls of the College. A bailiff arrested an undergraduate for debt, was himself hunted by the debtor's friends in the streets and brought to the College pump to be ducked. There was an irruption into the streets, the Trinity students storming the Black Dog prison with the idea of freeing its prisoners, and in the ensuing riot lives were lost. Five undergraduates were struck off the books and Goldsmith was one of five others publicly admonished.

Worse followed—he began to cram, and so successfully that he won a money prize. He promptly spent the money on that famous party in his rooms—to which he had invited women. His tutor

Theaker Wilder burst into the middle of this party and knocked his pupil down. Goldsmith left College, hung about Dublin till his money was exhausted, then walked towards Cork for three days before heading for home in Lissoy. Eventually all was sorted out by his brother and he returned to College. Like Swift before him he must have realised he was neither exhibiting brilliance nor the application displayed by those worthy if dull pupils who found it easy to fit into the orthodox university pattern of the day. In his admirable *Enquiry into the state of polite learning in Europe* he criticised British universities for using their magnificent endowments to 'more frequently enrich the prudent than reward the ingenious':

> A lad whose passions are not strong enough in youth to mislead him from that path of science which his tutors and not his inclinations, have chalked out, by four or five years' perseverance may probably obtain every advantage and honour his college can bestow. I forget whether the simile has been used before but I would compare the man whose youth has been thus passed in the tranquillity of dispassionate prudence, to liquors which never ferment, and consequently continue always muddy. Passions may raise a commotion in the youthful breast, but they disturb only to refine it. However this may be, mean talents are often rewarded in colleges with an easy subsistence. The candidates for preferments of this kind often regard their admission as a patent for future indolence; so that a life begun in studious labour, is often continued in luxurious laziness.

Goldsmith had come to college with reluctance. He belonged to the middle rank of the Anglo-Irish, the professional class. Shaw has described this particular level of Irish society well. Discussing his family in the preface he wrote in 1879 to his first novel *Immaturity*, he said the Shaws were younger sons from the beginning. 'I was', he said, 'a downstart, and the son of a downstart: I sing my own class: the shabby Genteel, the Poor Relations, the Gentlemen who are No Gentlemen . . .' He described his family in terms that would apply to Swifts, or Congreves, or Farquhars, or Goldsmiths, or Sheridans, or Wildes or Yeatses or Synges:

> on the whole, they held their cherished respectability in the world in spite of their lack of opportunity. They owed something, perhaps, to the confidence given them by their sense of family. In Irish fashion they talked of themselves as the Shaws, as who should say the Valois, the Bourbons, the Hohenzollerns, the Hapsburgs, or the Romanoffs, and their world conceded the point to them. I had an enormous contempt for this family snobbery, as I called it, until I was completely reconciled to it

by a certain Mr Alexander Mackintosh Shaw, a clansman who, instead of taking his pedigree for granted in the usual Shaw manner, hunted it up, and published one hundred copies privately in 1877. Somebody sent me a copy, and my gratification was unbounded when I read the first sentence of the first chapter, which ran: 'It is the general tradition, says the Rev. Lachlan Shaw [bless him!], that the Shaws are descended of McDuff, Earl of Fife.' I hastily skipped to the chapter about the Irish Shaws to make sure that they were my people; and there they were, baronet and all, duly traced to the third son of that immortalized yet unborn Thane of Fife who, invulnerable to normally accouched swordsmen, laid on and slew Macbeth. It was as good as being descended from Shakespeare, whom I had been unconsciously resolved to reincarnate from my cradle.

Goldsmith's father had behaved within this tradition. When he was tutoring a wealthy neighbour's son this lad fell in love with the clergyman's daughter and married her. Out of pride, self-respect, in short out of an awareness that the Goldsmiths were somebodies, Mr Goldsmith entered into a bond to pay £400, twice his total income, in order to match the young man's position. Land and tithes were sacrificed to this sense of family pride or self-respect and so, in a way, was Oliver. For there was no money now to send him to Trinity as his brother Harry had gone. The only way for him to obtain a university education was to become a sizar. And even before he was awarded a sizarship Goldsmith viewed the prospect of becoming one with loathing. His brother had told him enough about it to make it seem humilitating to him, ambitious as he was, to have as a sizar to undertake menial tasks in return for his education, rooms and commons.

In his *Enquiry into the present state of polite learning in Europe* Goldsmith had ended his chapter on the universities with a heartfelt echo of the humilation he had experienced because, as a sizar, he had been in a different category from that of the average undergraduate:

Surely pride itself has dictated to the fellows of our colleges the absurd passion of being attended at meals, and on other public occasions by those poor men who, willing to be scholars, come in upon some charitable foundation. It implies a contradiction, for men to be at once learning the *liberal* arts and at the same time treated as *slaves*; at once studying freedom and practising servitude.

And later he advised his brother when the clergyman was thinking of sending his son to Trinity that the boy, if assiduous and divested

of strong passion, might do well in college, for, he said, it must be owned that the industrious poor have perhaps better encouragement there than in any other university in Europe. But, he added, if he 'has ambition, strong passions, and an exquisite sensibility of contempt, do not send him there unless you have no trade for him but your own'.

However little Goldsmith liked being a sizar, however dull he thought the curriculum, and however unpleasant he found Theaker Wilder as a tutor, he discovered some compensations: playing the flute and composing ballads which he sold at five shillings a piece to the printer Hicks. The first stanza of one of his compositions, 'The march of intellect', clearly conveys his attitude to academic life.

Oh, learning's a very fine thing,
  As also is wisdom and knowledge,
For a man is as great as a king,
  If he has but the airs of a college.

And now-a-days all must admit
  In learning we're wonderful favoured,
For you scarce o'er your window can spit,
  But some learned man is beslavered.
  Sing, tol de rol, lay.

He was certainly very happy to be back at home in Ballymahon in 1749 once he had obtained his B.A. His father had died in 1747, his own future could be left to its own devices and an essay in *The bee*, written when he was thirty and beginning his career as a writer, looks back on those halcyon days:

When I reflect on the unambitious retirement in which I passed the earlier part of my life in the country, I cannot avoid feeling some pain in thinking that those happy days are never to return. In that retreat all nature seemed capable of affording pleasure; I then made no refinements on happiness, but could be pleased with the most awkward efforts of rustic mirth; thought cross-purposes the highest stretch of human wit, and questions and commands the most rational amusement for spending the evening. Happy could so charming an illusion still continue! I find that age and knowledge only contribute to sour our dispositions. My present enjoyments may be more refined, but they are infinitely less pleasing. The pleasure Garrick gives can no way compare to that I had received from a country wag, who imitated a Quaker's sermon. The music of Mattei is dissonance to what I felt when our old dairy-maid sung me into tears with Johnny Armstrong's Last Good Night, or the Cruelty of Barbara Allen.

But the cares of the world had crept into this midland paradise and there is a likely explanation in *The history of the man in black*:

> In order to settle in life my friends advised (for they always advise when they begin to despise us), they advised me, I say, to go into orders.
>
> To be obliged to wear a long wig when I liked a short one, or a black coat when I generally dressed in brought, I thought was such a restraint upon my liberty, that I absolutely rejected the proposal. A priest in England is not the same mortified creature with a bonze in China: with us, not he that fasts best, but eats best, is reckoned the best liver; yet I rejected a life of luxury, indolence, and ease, from no other consideration but that boyish one of dress. So that my friends were now perfectly satisfied I was undone; and yet they thought it a pity for one who had not then the least harm in him, and was so very good natured.

The *leitmotiv* is there again, he was good natured, with no harm in him. There was no harm in appearing before the local Bishop as a candidate for ordination in scarlet breeches; and Goldsmith took his dismissal in a good natured way. There were various efforts to make a living, and he tried tutoring. Was there autobiographical experience behind the Man in Black's description of a period in his life when poverty begot dependence, when he was admitted as flatterer to a great man, and at first found the situation agreeable?

> . . . I found, however, too soon, that his lordship was a greater dunce than myself; and from that very moment my power of flattery was at an end. . . . Every time I now opened my lips in praise, my falsehood went to my conscience; his lordship soon perceived me to be unfit for service; I was therefore discharged; my patron at the same time being graciously pleased to observe, that he believed I was tolerably good natured, and had not the least harm in me.

There was an expedition to Cork with a very vague idea of emigrating to America, with his own horse under him and thirty pounds in his pocket from a year's tutoring. He was soon back minus his horse and his money, but with a very good story about his adventures. Next time off he went with fifty pounds from an uncle to enter the Inns of Court in London. Soon back, penniless and with yet another good story about his misadventures. Then the idea of medicine arose and in 1752 he left Ireland for ever. His letters from Edinburgh where he was studying medicine—in his way—are delightful. On 8 May 1753 he told his uncle Contarine that he had left behind in Ireland everything he thought worth

possessing—friends that he loved and a society that pleased while it instructed. He had left home, where he was somebody. He described himself in Edinburgh 'almost unknown to everybody, except some few who attend the professors of physic as I do'. He was, of course, having a lot of social life, and dressing well—his great weakness—in rich sky blue satin, white allopeen, blue dinant, fine sky blue shaloon, and high claret coloured cloth. He hoped to return possessed of medical skill, to find his friends standing in need of his medical assistance. Two winter sessions at Edinburgh and then he was off again, to the University of Leyden first—after another absurd adventure on the way—where, he said, necessaries were so extremely dear and the professors so very lazy. And in February 1755 he was off on his grand tour of Europe, a guinea in his pocket, one shirt to his back and his flute in his hand. It was the last year of his education.

He arrived in London in February 1756, at the bottom of fortune's wheel, confident that every new revolution might lift but could not depress him, cheerful as the birds that carolled by the road, heading to the mart where abilities of every kind were sure of meeting distinction and reward. He worked as a dispenser for the apothecaries, as a proof reader for Samuel Richardson, as an usher, and even during this period as a physician, something for which he was not very suited. (A later anecdote tells us that when a patient called in her apothecary instead of Goldsmith he swore he would leave off prescribing for his friends and Topham Beauclerk replied 'Do so, my dear Dr.—whenever you undertake to kill, let it only be your enemies'.) Then for six months he worked as Griffith's assistant on the *Monthly review*, reviewing amongst other books, *The philosophical inquiry into the origin of our ideas on the sublime and beautiful* by Edmund Burke, his fellow countryman (indeed fellow midlander) and contemporary in College. After two years in London he wrote a letter to his brother Henry, telling him how, without friends, recommendations, money or impudence, he had had difficulties to encounter. He described them and returned to his imaginary picture of Lissoy, his fondness for Ireland:

> I suppose you desire to know my present situation. As there is nothing in it at which I should blush, or which mankind could censure, I see no reason for making it a secret. In short, by a very little practice as a physician, and a very little reputation as a poet, I make a shift to live. Nothing is more apt to introduce us to the gates of the Muses than poverty; but it were well if they only left us at the door. The mischief

is, they sometimes choose to give us their company at the entertainment; and want, instead of being gentleman-usher, often turns master of ceremonies.

Thus, upon learning I write, no doubt you imagine I starve; and the name of an author naturally reminds you of a garrett. In this particular I do not think proper to undeceive my friends. But whether I eat or starve, live in a first-floor, or four pair of stairs high, I still remember them with ardour; nay, my very country comes in for a share of my affection. Unaccountable fondness for country, this *maladie du pays*, as the French call it! Unaccountable that he should still have an affection for a place who never, when in it, received above common civility; who never brought anything out of it except his brogue and his blunders. Surely my affection for it is equally ridiculous with the Scotchman's, who refused to be cured of the itch, because it made him unco' thoughtful of his wife and bonny Inverary.

But now to be serious,—let me ask myself what gives me a wish to see Ireland again? The country is a fine one, perhaps? No. There are good company in Ireland? No. The conversation there is generally made up of a smutty toast or a bawdy song; the vivacity supported by some humble cousin, who has just folly enough to earn his dinner. Then, perhaps there's more wit and learning among the Irish? Oh, lord, no! There has been more money spent in the encouragement of the Padareen mare there one season, than given in rewards to learned men since the times of Usher. All their productions in learning amount to perhaps, a translation, or a few tracts in divinity, and all their productions in wit, just to nothing at all. Why the plague then so fond of Ireland? Then, all at once,—because you, my dear friend, and a few more who are exceptions to the general picture, have a residence there. This it is that gives me all the pangs I feel in separation. I confess I carry this spirit, sometimes to the souring the pleasures I at present possess. If I go to the opera where Signora Columba pours out all the mazes of melody, I sit and sigh for Lishoy's fireside and 'Johnny Armstrong's last good night' from Peggy Golden. 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 Lishoy gate, and there take in—to me—the most pleasing horizon in nature.

There were several letters in this vein: Bob Bryanton his friend had not written to him, and a letter to a cousin records the fact that he himself had written from Leyden, Louvain and Rouen but received no answer. He wrote to his brother-in-law and to his brother Charles whom he advises on his son's education—'Take the word of a man who has seen the world, and who has studied human nature more by experience than precept; take my word for it, that books teach us very little of the world.' The paradox was that he had both attitudes of mind in him. He was deeply read in French literature, as his prose continually shows us:

his *Enquiry into the present state of polite learning in Europe* were highly intelligent and based on an unusual experience and observation of European intellectual life which he had gained on his grand tour (in which he is reputed to have paid his way by debating in universities as well as playing his flute in less intellectual societies). Though this long essay lacks the flow and ease of his later prose, he had realised the virtues of directness and simplicity: 'Let us instead of writing finely try to write naturally.' Poetry, however, seemed to him, as he wrote to his brother, 'a much easier, and more agreeable species of composition than prose, and could a man live by it, it were not unpleasant employment to be a poet'.

The first work he published—on 19 December 1764—under his own name was *The traveller*. And he proudly added after the title 'by Oliver Goldsmith, M.B.' He dedicated the book to his brother—thus giving up a possibility of advancing his own career in an accepted way by dedicating it to some patron. It is a model of dignity and self-respect, and was a sign that Goldsmith (who, as author of *The traveller*, became famous in London, once people got over their shocked unbelief that the man who laughed at himself and made a butt of himself to amuse company could have written it) in writing this poem and inscribing it to his brother had shown he was his own man; he was somebody good natured, and there was no harm in him. And Goldsmith praised his brother, in explaining that

> It will also throw a light upon many parts of it [the poem] when the reader understands that it is addressed to a man, who, despising Fame and Fortune, has retired early to Happiness and Obscurity, with an income of forty pounds a year.

The traveller is an unusual poem for its time, just as its author was an unusual man. And his tour had indeed been unusual. In the *Enquiry* he remarks:

> Countries wear very different appearances to travellers of different circumstances. A man who is whirled through Europe in a post chaise, and the pilgrim who walks the grand tour on foot, will form very different conclusions.

He records his *maladie du pays* in a manner which shows how personal emotion can ring through the formality of the couplet:

Remote, unfriended, melancholy, slow,
Or by the lazy Scheld, or wandering Po;
Or onward, where the rude Carinthian boor
Against the houseless stranger shuts the door;
Or where Campania's plain forsaken lies,
A weary waste expanding to the skies.
Where'er I roam, whatever realms to see,
My heart untravell'd fondly turns to thee;
Still to my brother turns, with ceaseless pain,
And drags at each remove a lengthening chain.

He is like the traveller in his first essay in *The bee*:

When will my wanderings be at an end? When will my restless disposition give me leave to enjoy the present hour? When at Lyons, I thought all happiness lay beyond the Alps; when in Italy, I found myself still in want of something, and expected to leave solitude behind me by going into Romelia, and now you find me turning back, still expecting ease everywhere but where I am.

And in verse he records his travelling:

But me, not destin'd such delights to share,
My prime of life in wand'ring spent and care:
Impell'd, with steps unceasing, to pursue
Some fleeting good, that mocks me with the view;
That, like the circle bounding earth and skies,
Allures from far, yet, as I follow, flies;
My fortune leads to traverse realms alone,
And find no spot of all the world my own.

The 'maladie du pays' emerges strongly:

But where to find that happiest spot below,
Who can direct, when all pretend to know?
The shudd'ring tenant of the frigid zone
Boldly proclaims that happiest spot his own,
Extols the treasures of his stormy seas,
And his long nights of revelry and ease;
The naked Negro, panting at the line,
Boasts of his golden sands and palmy wine,
Basks in the glare, or stems the tepid wave,
And thanks his Gods for all the good they gave.
Such is the patriot's boast, where'er we roam,
His first best country ever is at home.

There is praise of Italy's scenery, 'Bright as the summer', in the generalised terms so beloved of the eighteenth century, with reflections on the pastoral revival, the peasants, like bucolic T. S. Eliots, building sheds out of and in vast ruins; there is a realisation that the Swiss are cheerful despite or because of their rigorous climate. France is a 'gay sprightly land of mirth and social ease' where Goldsmith's tuneless pipe led the sportive choir:

> And haply, tho' my harsh touch faltering still
> But mock'd all time, and marr'd the dancer's skill
> Yet would the village praise my wondrous power
> And dance, forgetful of the noontide hour.

Holland is described in a few compressed lines, the land won from the ocean:

> The slow canal, the yellow blossom'd vale
> The willow tufted bank, the gliding sail,
> The crowded mart, the cultivated plain,
> A new creation rescued from his reign.

But liberty is bartered there, and there are equal dangers in Britain where the English exercise the consequence of freedom, which was, as he put it in an essay entitled 'A comparative view of races and nations', the power of reason:

> Stern o'er each bosom reason holds her state.
> With daring aims, irregularly great,
> Pride in their port, defiance in their eye,
> I see the lords of human kind pass by
> Intent on high designs, a thoughtful band,
> By forms unfashion'd, fresh from Nature's hand;

The traveller ended with a summing up as 'vain, very vain' his search for final bliss. In *The deserted village* he took up the subject matter of a couplet in *The traveller*:

> Have we not seen at pleasure's lordly call
> The smiling long-frequented village fall?

The second poem, which took two years to write, combined Goldsmith's overflowing affection for homely simplicity as well as his indignation at its destruction. He could present a generalised picture:

Dear lovely bowers of innocence and ease,
Seats of my youth, when every sport could please,
How often have I loitered o'er thy green,
Where humble happiness endeared each scene;
How often have I paused on every charm,
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,
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;
And many a gambol frolicked o'er the ground,
And sleights of art and feats of strength went round.

He is excellent in his depiction of the continuity of life:

Sweet was the sound, when oft at evening's close,
Up yonder hill the village murmur rose;
There, as I past with careless steps and slow,
The mingling notes came softened from below;
The swain responsive as the milk-maid sung,
The sober herd that lowed to meet their young;
The noisy geese that gabbled o'er the pool,
The playful children just let loose from school,
The watch-dog's voice that bayed the whispering wind,
And the loud laugh that spoke the vacant mind,—
These all in sweet confusion sought the shade,
And filled each pause the nightingale had made.

Into this pastoral happiness had come the tyrant: the villagers have left the land, and Goldsmith describes the effect on the area:

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,
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, choked 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.

There is a pensive note woven through the contrapuntal composition of the poem; there follows a sonorous outburst of thundering rhetoric:

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.

In turn this declamation gives way to a quieter, generalised picture of what has gone:

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;
And every want to opulence allied,
And every pang that folly pays to pride.
Those gentle hours that plenty bade to bloom,
Those calm desires that asked but little room,
Those healthful sports that graced the peaceful scene,
Lived in each look, and brightened all the green;
These, far departing, seek a kinder shore,
And rural mirth and manners are no more.

And there is a passage which is the real key to Goldsmith. The poem's memories of former communal life jostle with those of desertion. The poem has gained intensity by constant contrast, constant awareness of the past in its view of the present. Memories of home crowd in upon the solitude of the city dweller. Goldsmith was living as a solitary guest in England, but in Ireland his brother was dead, the man he had loved better than most men. And once his brother was dead any imagined retreat from loneliness was cut completely. No future existed in terms of the past for the traveller, that lost past, that timeless past, spent in the peaceful Irish midlands:

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 show my book-learned skill,
Around my fire an evening group to draw,
And tell of all I felt and all I saw;
And, as a hare whom hounds and horns pursue
Pants to the place from whence at first he flew,
I still had hopes, my long vexations past,
Here to return—and die at home at last.

The hope was vain. But Goldsmith seldom permitted himself to complain and then not for long. He had not wanted to be an exile: but he was by nature a citizen of the world. His financial generosity to his ever-needy contemporaries continued on its paradoxically self-destructive yet harmless good natured way. It was matched by his generosity to his readers, then and now. We are taken into this writer's confidence; he is patient, gentle, kind, and amusing. He wishes to please us; he makes his moral points with ease; he disguises his personal melancholia and loneliness with public laughter. He shows his good nature throughout his writings: he was magnanimous and humane. It is fitting that he and his friend and contemporary, Edmund Burke, truly civilized sons of this college, stand, in Foley's fine statues, in front of its walls to welcome those who enter its doors. Both of them enriched its traditions and those of the world outside.