

## The Vicar of Wakefield

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What did people in the 18th century read? There were novels of course, but most of them are forgotten, only a handful are remembered by posterity. In the English realm those by Fielding, Richardson, Sterne and Defoe of course, whose *Robinson Crusoe* I rank among the very best there are, not only among those of that century. And then Oliver Goldsmith, whose novel under review was very popular with Goethe and his friends when they were young. I bought the book in my late teens and recall that I and my mother read it, although I cannot recall anything of it. My father thought it was excessive, only if you have a very specialized interest in 18th century fiction could there any point in reading it. After reading it a second time I am inclined to agree with him. People of the 18th century were not spoiled by narratives, it would be the 19th century during which the novel would reach its maturity and be produced in an embarrassment of riches. People of the previous century basically had to rely on the Bible and the classical literature of the antiquity to satisfy their longings for narratives, thus in a sense they tended to be more 'educated' in good literary taste than later generations cursed with more distractions.

A modern reader may be rather taken aback when encountering the novel addressing an audience with rather different sensibilities than his own. We expect realistic and naturalistic novels with characters carefully delineated undergoing development, instead we get a moral tale, not unlike one depicted by a Hogarth through a sequence of vignettes, with incredible twist and turns of the plot, which certainly does not shy away from fortuitous coincidences and changing of identities. One does for one thing not learn very much of life in the 18th century, except of course the great gulf in wealth and influence between the upper crust of society and the middle and middling ones, as exemplified by the Vicar and his family of wife and six children, among whom there are two beautiful daughters of the emerging age and for whom the mother has a lot of ambition. The story is narrated by the Vicar himself, but he is merely a marionette in the hands of the author, who takes a cruel delight in exhibiting the naivety of the narrator, a naivety probably more easily appreciated by contemporary readers than modern. This heavy handed approach would be more unusual in a modern, i.e. a 19th century novel, in which sarcasm may not be absent, but not liable to be laid on as thick as would be the conventions of the 18th century writer who by necessity would have to address a wider section of the reading public and be more attuned to what it might like. In a sense not that different from a purveyor of public and popular drama to be exhibited at country fairs.

Now the plot may be summarized as one showing the misfortunes of an earnest Vicar only at the very end being vindicated (bot of course postponed satisfaction is only made keener as is postponed gratification). First he loses his admittedly modest fortune and has to move to a humbler parish and supplement his tithes with farming. Then one of his daughters is courted by a neighbor and a rich landowner to boot, by name of Thornhill, a courtship looked at with much apprehension by the Vicar who sees little good to come out

from such a disparity in station, but of course encouraged by the mother, whose worldly sense cannot match that of her husband, but nevertheless dominating the household. It all comes to predictable grief as the landowner finds it expedient to abduct the daughter involving a sham wedding ceremony then only after consummation being cast aside with no more prospects than that of a strumpet. Meanwhile the landowner makes the court of a young lady by name of Wilmot once betrothed to be married to the oldest son, but which was off, once the father-in-law learned of the loss of fortune. The Vicar refuses to honor the marriage and accuses the landowner of his conduct against his daughter. The landowner who has all the cards on his side exploits his power having the Vicar sent to prison being in arrears of his rent as a consequence of the farm having burnt down a few weeks earlier. In the prison the Vicar meets a rough lot of people, whom he tries to convert by his preaching, among them one man who previously had fooled both one of the Vicar's sons and the Vicar himself in connection with selling their horses. Of course they become friends, the Vicar not one to hold a grudge anyone for a longer time. The abused daughter dies, at least according to the crook, who then insists that a petition is sent to the landowner begging forgiveness, even if that would go against the grain of the Vicar's pride, he has to think of his poor family and its prospects. Predictably the petition founders, instead the oldest son turns up again, the first time as a migrant actor, and now in chains, all bloodied. His mother had written to him to avenge the dishonor of the abused sister, and he had taken it to heart, sent a challenge to the landowner, who instead had sent four of his men to arrest him, such challenges recently becoming a legal offense punished by death. This surely is the low point of the prospects of the family, and the good spirits and remarkable fortitude of the Vicar is running out in this tale which obviously has borrowed much from the Biblical tale of Job. But then comes the resolution, all in the prison, which hence becomes the stage of a theatrical performance if in a novelistic setting (Goldsmith having earlier had success with the play 'She stoops to conquer', and the conventions of the stage no doubt being quite congenial to him and more natural than those of a novel). A friendly neighbor of modest means and known as Mr. Burchell and who was subsequently cast-off by the family as being seen as detrimental to their aims, not to say downright deceptive, turns out to be none other than the wealthy Baronet sir William the uncle of the landowner Thornhill, the unassuming persona of Mr Burchell only having been a convenient disguise. In short the real Thornhill of whom we have already heard so much earlier in the novel and then depicted as a formidable character. The proposed marriage of the nephew and Miss Wilmot turns out to be void, as the friendly crook, once in the pay of the scoundrel landowner played a trick on him, making the fake ceremony and the fake parson, real. Thus the nephew is stuck with the abused daughter, who turn out not to be dead after all, the rumor just being a ruse; the uncle marries the other daughter (after testing her affections by proposing that she marries the reformed crook instead, something which she absolutely refuses) and the older son absolved from his crime through the intervention of sir William through his connections with the magistrate, gets to marry his once sweetheart the young lady Wilmot, who cannot be happier than by the prospects. There is an epilog, and as they say if the ending is good, it makes everything good in the end. To a modern reader it is just too melodramatic, yet even to those the happy ending might touch a chord, and that is the mystery and magic of fiction. Why should we care about fictional characters,

they are not real, their tribulations and misfortunes are just made up and mean nothing. But in fact even if the characters are made up, the tribulations are in a sense not, and if made engaging enough, and how this is done is a true mystery, they make as much sense as if they had occurred in real life. In fact most of the people you hear about, however objectively real, are in fact for all intents and purposes fictional, only accessible through the imagination. To be rather cynical, many readers may have closer relation to fictional characters than they have to their acquaintances and hence care more for them<sup>1</sup>.

Now one of the secondary pleasures of reading fiction, especially older fiction, is to become privy to various digressions, that the author has seen fit to include. One such is the case of abhorrent opinions, a very topical thing especially today. The son Moses claims that a man is never master of his thoughts, that thousands of vicious thoughts appear to him without his power to suppress, thus what counts are not thoughts but acts, so if someone entertains heretical views on religion, as long as he does not act upon them, no harm is done. This is of course a good and universal plea for the freedom of thought, and by extension to free speech, because any thought when entertained has an urge to find expression. However, the Vicar has a different take on it. To even form heretical thoughts shows a defective character. Nowadays religion is not taken as seriously as it once was, instead it is politics that provides an arena of opportunities for offense, and many people today are sympathetic to the idea of stamping out offensive thought which goes against the grain of imagined democracy. Those who do not adhere to democratic ideals and the equal worth of all people, are in fact worthless (and thus no longer people?) and should be punished, maybe even eradicated?

The narrator is made to reflect that the hours we pass with happy prospects are far more pleasing than those we spend fruitfully in labor, an observation you would find very much at home in the ruminations of Adam Smith in his treatise on Moral Sentiments, in which he among other things pointout that the most cruel punishment is not the loss of material possession not even of health, as far as they do not impinge on our sweet expectations of the future. Thus we mourn the loss of a child, because of the loss of its future and the expectations we have attached to it, while from a cynical point of view we would welcome the fact that we have one mouth less to feed. In the same vein it is observed that conscience is indeed a coward, it does not take much to suppress it, and we usually do so when we profit from questionable acts. Also that in decline we are made more sensitive to the gleams of hopes and possible prospects than we may usually be, so even if the threat of decline appears dark and gloomy in anticipation, it may be not quite as bad in reality, with the lively mind looking for rays of hope. There is even a longer extract in which the Vicar expounds on political economy and the roles of the middle classes, and make a spirited defense of monarchy as a guarantee that the wealthier classes of society are held in check. It is tempting indeed to assume that the Vicar is here merely the mouthpiece of the views of Goldsmith himself, views with the tenor of those of an Adam Smith again. The older son, incidentally George by name, tries at some time to make a career as a writer but it fails in spite of his manifest talents, as is the case in real life, where many heed

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<sup>1</sup> One is once again reminded of the excessive mourning for princess Diane, when many people with a straight face claimed that their mourning for her had been more intensive than that for their close relatives, clearly a case of letting the imagination have a free run.

the calls, but few are actually chosen, an experience that must have been very close to that of Goldsmith himself, although he had powerful and influential friends, such as Dr. Johnson<sup>2</sup> and would of course, as this review confirms, become vindicated. Goldsmith, in a picaresque digression on the adventures of George lets him reflect on his efforts. His no doubt commendable attempts did not even meet with criticism and censure but were totally ignored. Every man was too busy praising himself and his friends and attacking his enemies. But as he was devoid of friends as well as enemies he had to contend with the cruelest of all mortifications, namely that of neglect. As to his travels he recalls plaintively that the people in Paris were fonder of strangers with money than with wit, and being in possession of neither he once again suffered neglect.

There are also some interesting remarks on the moral of committing some lesser evil in order to procure a greater good, as does the doctor routinely in chopping off a leg in order to save a life, or in warfare when a province may be sacrificed in order to keep a country intact, not to mention politics, but in religion, the Vicar holds forth with warmth, this is not the case. In religion, there the law is inflexible, and commands you that under no circumstances do evil. Evil is never justified by its possible beneficial consequences, because after all you may die before the latter become manifest, and then of course you have to answer for the evil done, without benefitting from its consequences. There are also some quaint references sprinkled, such as women being less liable to forgive the indiscretions of their own sex, as they have a much stronger sense of feminine error than do men.

During his time in prison he gives a lecture on penal punishment to the reader, once again one suspects, being the mouthpiece of the author. Much of the penal laws serve no purpose but to uphold the rights of the rich against the poor, a rather radical if correct view. He claims that savages do not unnecessarily shed blood, holding the lives of other in tenderer regard than civilized people do, and when they do it is only to avenge cruelties which have been imposed on them in the past. There are too many laws directed against insignificant offenses, which only undercuts the sense of distinction between them, and thus erodes the respect of the law and only creates new vices.

At the very nadir of his expectations the Vicar holds forth on the blessings of death. In fact the wretched have two advantages over the lucky ones in life. For one thing death becomes indeed a cause for greater felicity, they having so little to lose (what is a life without prospects?), as well as a keener sense of pleasure afterwards, as an effect of the greater contrast. Yes death seems to be around the corner, especially as we grow older and the days shorter, giving comfort to the thought of cessation when we can lay away the burden of incessant toil.

Now to the ultimate and central question, what is the timeless charm of the novel that has caught the attention of so many generations of readers? The underlying idyll of the account, that the Vicar and his big family represent fortitude in adversity and true happiness in good times, presenting the ideal of a happy content family tied together no matter what. Perhaps.

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<sup>2</sup> actually earning the envy of the busybody Boswell, who no doubt saw in him a rival to be cut to size