CHAPTER 1

Life

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Published in the *Public Advertiser* one month after his death on 4 April 1774, An 'EPITAPH *on Dr*. GOLDSMITH' was a cruel amplification of many of the slights that Goldsmith had suffered from enemies (and indeed some ostensible friends) over the course of his writing life, slights concerning the discrepancy between his personal presence and his literary style, his lack of deep learning, his scientific and medical pretensions:

> HERE lies the Butt of all his Betters;
> The Riddle of the World of Letters;
> A *Man of Sense* of *no* discerning;
> A *Scholar* of *no greater* Learning:
> A *Bard*, whose Genius soar'd sublime
> A whole half Year to tag a Rhime;
> Made roar Box, Gallery, and Pit,
> Without one Grain of Mother-Wit;
> A *Man of Science* so profound,
> He'd prove a Square to be a *Round*;
> Would talk of *animated Nature*,
> As if himself had been Creator;
> Of Animation though bereft,
> His Right Hand oft forgot his Left:
> A mere *good natur'd Man* through Meekness,
> His *moral* Virtue, *natural* Weakness:
> A *Medic oft*, whose matchless Skill,
> In working Cures, was sure to kill;
> By his own Art who justly died
> A blundering, artless Suicide:
> Share, Earth-worms, share, since now he's
> dead,
> His megrim, maggot-bitten Head.[1]

The inimical view, authored in all likelihood by his long-time arch-nemesis, William Kenrick, would be found more selectively and gently put, and

balanced against his writerly virtues, in the accounts of others. Virginia Woolf remarked on the duality of Goldsmith's image handed down to us in biographical posterity by James Boswell. For all of his annoyance at Goldsmith's absurdity, writes Woolf, Boswell

> brings the other Goldsmith to the surface – he combines them both. He proves that the silver-tongued writer was no simple soul, gently floating through life from the honeysuckle to the hawthorn hedge. On the contrary, he was a complex man, a man full of troubles, without 'settled principle'; who lived from hand to mouth and from day to day; who wrote his loveliest sentences in a garret under pressure of poverty. And yet, so oddly are human faculties combined, he had only to take his pen and he was revenged upon Boswell, upon the fine gentleman who sneered at him, upon his own body and stumbling tongue. He had only to write and all was clear and melodious; he had only to write and he was among the angels, speaking with a silver tongue in a world where all is ordered, rational, and serene.[2]

Goldsmith's life story can be told along a spectrum between an affecting cautionary tale, even as a tragedy if the challenges he faced are amplified, or as a sort of absurdist comedy. Much depends on the temperament of the biographer and their empathy or otherwise with their subject. In fact, his life was not a particularly difficult one, all obstacles considered, and there were some: his incomplete education, his damaged looks, his impecunious habits. It could have been much worse: he could have had less talent. In fact, he was gifted and dexterous across the genres, and increasingly well paid for his work. Biographical posterity has him as a fool in life and a genius with a pen, but this duality cannot be fully true.

Goldsmith was born on 10 November, probably in 1728, either at Pallas near Ballymahon in Co. Longford or in Smith Hill near Elphin, Co. Roscommon, the second son and fifth child of the Rev. Charles Goldsmith (*c.*1690–1747) and Ann Jones (d.1770). Goldsmith's father was a clergyman of middling income who upon becoming rector at Kilkenny West moved to a dwelling near Lissoy, Co. Westmeath, the scene of much of Goldsmith's childhood and, to many, the 'Sweet Auburn' of his most famous poem, *The Deserted Village* (1770). His relatively peaceful childhood was, however, sorely interrupted by a dose of smallpox when he was eight or nine, which would leave him badly marked and a target of unkind remarks on his appearance for the rest of his life.

His education was a peripatetic affair, its earlier phase taking him around the towns and villages of the Irish midlands, its later – university – phase taking him from Dublin to Edinburgh, Leiden, Paris, and Padua.

His first teacher was a Mrs Elizabeth Delap, who was decidedly unenthused about his intellectual prospects. Goldsmith improved considerably, however, under the tutelage of Thomas Byrne, a veteran of the War of the Spanish Succession, who detected in his young charge a curiosity for languages, travel, and poetry. Goldsmith was then sent to the diocesan school in Elphin, previously run by his maternal grandfather and now under the successful stewardship of the Rev. Michael Griffin. He was then educated at Athlone and finally Edgeworthstown, where he attended the school of the Rev. Patrick Hughes. Hughes encouraged his interest in Latin.

Though his prospects for university education were endangered by his sister's careless early marriage, Goldsmith's beloved uncle Thomas Contarine subvented his enrolment at Trinity College Dublin between 1745 and 1750. Straitened circumstances dictated that he needed to enrol as a sizar, a student obliged to carry out menial tasks for wealthier students in lieu of a portion of his fees and board. It was intended that Goldsmith would proceed to a career in the clergy; an interview with the Bishop of Elphin, however, determined that he was not suitable for that vocation. After an abortive attempt to emigrate to America, and an equally abortive proposal that he study law at the Temple in London, he decided, or it was decided for him, to study medicine in Edinburgh, where he would reside from October 1752 until early 1754, after which point he went to Leiden to pursue further medical studies. From there he travelled to Paris and through central Europe. He would study further at Padua but the nature of his final medical qualification remains something of a mystery. The culture of the universities at which Goldsmith studied is described in Chapter 6 ('Universities') of this volume.

His continental studies occasioned a period of philosophically reflective travel, enabled by his linguistic dexterity and a serviceable talent in debating and in playing the flute. His entrepreneurial mode of travel informed his views of nations and national character and on the nature of travel and cultural comparison. These peregrinations he would later reimagine as those of a 'philosophical vagabond' in his famous novel *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766); they would also inform his delineation of national advantages and disadvantages in his breakthrough poem, *The Traveller, or A Prospect of Society* (1764).

Goldsmith reached London, broke and professionally aimless, in February 1756. He worked at an apothecary's shop and tried for a spell to work as a physician, but his practice was unsuccessful: his hazy qualifications and Irish brogue may have discouraged monied clients, while the

clients he did have were not monied enough to pay him. He wrote home to his brother-in-law Daniel Hodson on 27 December 1757 of his trials as a recently arrived immigrant 'in a Country where my being born an Irishman was sufficient to keep me [unem]ploy'd'. He was, he confided, just about able to 'make a shift to live' as a physician and as a writer (*Letters*, 21).

His first brush with the literary world was his acquaintance with Samuel Richardson, at whose print shop he worked as a proofreader. Subsequently he would become acquainted with Ralph Griffiths, to whom he was introduced by the Rev. John Milner, headmaster of a Peckham school where he worked as an usher. Griffiths was the proprietor of the *Monthly Review*, for whom Goldsmith would commence writing reviews (see Chapter 4, 'Booksellers and the Book Trade', and Chapter 23, 'Periodicals and Literary Reviewing'). Griffiths provided Goldsmith with an excellent apprenticeship, but the latter was very much cast in the role of menial dependent. Griffiths furnished him with room and board and an income at Paternoster Row, but the relationship was personally and intellectually stifling. Goldsmith would wriggle free of his connection to Griffiths in December 1758 – their relationship, and his relationship with the *Monthly Review*, soured considerably thereafter, though he would contribute one further review in October 1763.

After an attempt to emigrate to Coromandel as a ship's surgeon with the East India Company was stymied – he failed the Company's examination – Goldsmith would commit himself once again to a Grub Street existence, this time with Tobias Smollett's *Critical Review*. He would also publish his first book, *An Enquiry into the Present State of Polite Learning in Europe*, which drew upon his European travels and his reading, with Robert and James Dodsley, in April 1759. The book was not well reviewed by his erstwhile colleagues at the *Monthly Review*, nor was David Garrick impressed with Goldsmith's critique of contemporary theatre management. Goldsmith would revise *An Enquiry* and a second edition, controversial opinions on contemporary theatre subtracted, would be published four months after his death.

Goldsmith would go on to write for several periodicals in the years 1759–61. He piloted his own, the *Bee*, late in 1759. During this period he would become acquainted with Thomas Percy and Samuel Johnson, figures crucial to his career and to his biographical posterity. He would also fall under the relatively benign influence and management of John Newbery, for whose *Public Ledger* he would write the Chinese letters which would become *The Citizen of the World* (1762; see Chapter 11, 'Cosmopolitanism', and

Chapter 26, 'Orientalism'). Though his reputation was increasing amongst the literati, his works to this point were as yet published anonymously. Still, his income increased, allowing him to move from Green Arbour Court to better accommodation at Wine Office Court, near Fleet Street. The move was perhaps more than Goldsmith could manageably afford, however, and Johnson would have to intervene when Goldsmith was threatened with eviction in the autumn of 1762. Johnson assisted him in selling his manuscript of *The Vicar of Wakefield* to cover rent payments outstanding. The copyright was sold on 28 October 1762, though the novel itself would not be published until 1766. The threat of eviction prompted Goldsmith to reconsider his circumstances. He moved to Canonbury House in Islington, where John Newbery arranged for him to have his finances and domestic life managed by Elizabeth Fleming while he produced work for Newbery, including his *History of England, in a Series of Letters from a Nobleman to His Son*, which would be published (again anonymously) by Newbery in June 1764 (see Chapter 24, 'History Writing').

His status and anonymous Grub Street operations notwithstanding, Goldsmith's prose, and the esteem in which that prose was held, was such that he would be a charter member of the Literary Club founded by Joshua Reynolds which would meet at the Turk's Head Tavern in Soho (see Chapter 8, 'The Club'). Around this time he would move back from Islington into the heart of the city, taking up residence at King's Bench Walk in the Temple.

The confidence of Reynolds and Johnson would be justified in December 1764 with the publication of Goldsmith's long philosophical poem *The Traveller*, the first work which would have his name featured on the title page. The work was dedicated to his brother Henry and the dedication featured his thoughts on contemporary party politics and the decline of poetry (see Chapter 22, 'Prospect Poetry'). *The Traveller* was extremely well reviewed. Johnson, perhaps inappropriately – he had contributed key lines to the poem – proclaimed in the *Critical Review* that it was work of a standard not easily found 'since the death of Pope'.[3] Other reviews, including that in the *Monthly*, predictably were not as effusive, but generally the poem caused many onlookers, hitherto suspicious of what Goldsmith himself called his 'brogue [an]d his blunders', to reflect on their prejudices against him (*Letters*, 20). His fellow Irish midlander Robert Nugent, Viscount Clare, would upon reading *The Traveller* come to befriend and champion him. Anthony Chamier, knowing that Johnson had contributed some lines, admitted that he believed Goldsmith to have been the primary author of the work, and 'that', he asserted, 'is believing

a great deal' (*LOJ*, 3:252). Mrs Cholmondeley, for her part, proclaimed upon reading it that she 'never more shall think Dr. Goldsmith ugly'.[4] Goldsmith's fame was consolidated fifteen months later: *The Vicar of Wakefield* (see Chapter 19, 'Fiction') was generally acclaimed also, though the author (as in the book's 'Advertisement') and reviewers alike admitted its somewhat chaotic structure.

The next phase of Goldsmith's career saw him venturing into the world of the theatre, a potentially lucrative line of writing (see Chapter 20, 'Theatre'). Though his first comedy, *The Good Natur'd Man*, was tepidly reviewed, it did well enough following its Covent Garden opening early in 1768 that Goldsmith was able to move to Brick Court in the Middle Temple. He was also in a position to rent a retreat along the Edgware Road, near Hyde, where he would work on his next major poem, *The Deserted Village* (see Chapter 21, 'Pastoral Poetry'), as well as a two-volume *Roman History*. The former, one of his best or best-known works, first appeared on 16 May 1770, the first edition of seven published in that year alone. *The Deserted Village* and the subsequent success on the stage of his brilliant comedy *She Stoops to Conquer* in March 1773, along with his earnings from histories and the eight-volume *History of the Earth, and Animated Nature* for which he had been handsomely contracted, meant that Goldsmith became one of the best earners in literary London over the last years of his life.

Unfortunately, he was also one of the most reckless with those earnings. He spent wildly on clothes and entertainments at Brick Court, to the extent that indebtedness was his default state. A neighbour and friend, the independently wealthy lawyer Edmund Bott, seems to have become the primary creditor for much of his extravagance. As his career progressed, and after leaving behind the personal stewardship of John Newbery, Goldsmith was increasingly in debt and inclined to focus on composing lucrative works and to neglect the sorts of writing which might have better enhanced his literary legacy. For all that he produced, however, he was never above the financial waterline.

As his health declined he tried to maintain sociability, but his engagement in a competition of wits amongst his friends at the St James's Coffeehouse was foreshortened by his rapid decline and death from renal failure on 4 April 1774. His unfinished poem *Retaliation*, submitted to the publisher George Kearsly by an unknown figure (possibly Bott, recouping debts Goldsmith owed by selling the last, uncontracted works among the papers left in the latter's rooms), was the product of his last round of sociability with an illustrious group which included Joshua Reynolds,

David Garrick, and Richard Cumberland, and a London Irish legal fraternity consisting of the Burkes (Edmund and Richard), John Ridge, and Joseph Hickey, as well as the Dean of Derry, Thomas Barnard. This final poem shows some of the best of Goldsmith's wit, just as its provocation and reception demonstrated the less flattering perceptions that some of his friends and all of his enemies had of him. He was certainly a figure of fun to some, but he had a better capacity than is generally thought for making fun of himself and turning a cutting line against his peers when required or provoked. The *Retaliation* episode, and the comic verse it produced, shows just how brilliant he could be, if not immediately in conversation, then certainly in the exquisitely marinated phrases that he produced when alone with pen and paper.

Goldsmith put his life into his creative work in several ways; it is fair to say, however, that he also put some creativity into his life story, for wherever he recounted it to others, he invariably embellished matters to the extent that biographers of the first generation found him a difficult case. Goldsmith provided for Thomas Percy an autobiographical dictation at the Duke of Northumberland's house on 28 April 1773; Percy, however, found his account of his own personal and family history at times fanciful. Percy's long-delayed biographical preface to Goldsmith's *Miscellaneous Works* (1801), assisted by the interim research of Thomas Campbell, Henry Boyd, and Samuel Rose, was an honourable if necessarily incomplete effort.

James Prior's 1837 *Life of Oliver Goldsmith* was the first sustained attempt to piece together the details of Goldsmith's formative years. It was, in its way, a groundbreaking and pathfinding piece of work. Norma Clarke has documented the fascinating story of the reception of Prior's biography, and in particular the response of the biographer who would criticize and seek to supplant it. In his early review in *The Examiner* John Forster complained that Prior 'wanders away from his subject at every second or third page'. Forster's 1848 biography sought also to overcome what he saw as an unnecessary digressiveness and Irish emphasis in Prior's work, in accordance with the hope, expressed in *The Examiner*, that in a future edition 'the information will be plainly and simply put together, and that the reader may be allowed to satisfy his interest about Goldsmith, without the penalty of stumbling at every other page over Carolan the Irish bard, or Mr Burke and his schoolfellows, or Mr Contarine and all his connections, or Mr Lachlin Macleane', among other 'Misters and Doctors beside'.[5] Credited with a far more focused achievement, Forster's biography went to several editions. Prior's has never been reprinted.

The set-to between biographers captures for Clarke 'an important disagreement in early biographical practice'.[6] Prior thought it especially imperative that the life of a great Irish writer was properly investigated, which he proceeded to do by initiating correspondences with several figures in the Irish midlands with connections to Goldsmith and the Goldsmiths. Forster's biography was more impatient with Irish material and the Irish background is referred to throughout rather dismissively. Only upon his arrival in London, for Forster, does Goldsmith begin to be cultivated into the man of worth that he would become. In that sense Forster's biography, its first edition tellingly titled *The Life and Adventures of Oliver Goldsmith*, was a narrative of becoming, in some senses a romance with its own identifiable teleology, whereas Prior's was a more digressive work grounded in new and extensive primary research.

The second half of the twentieth century saw the publication of three full biographies which have been, to varying degrees, successful in putting Goldsmith in his contexts. Ralph Wardle (1957) augmented the nineteenth-century biographical tradition in the light of twentieth-century scholarship to that point. Arthur Lytton Sells's *Oliver Goldsmith: His Life and Works* (1974) emphasized Goldsmith's command of the French language and sources, while John Ginger's *The Notable Man: The Life and Times of Oliver Goldsmith* (1977) situated Goldsmith's career amidst the increasing cultural influence of the middle class.

Most recently, Norma Clarke (2016) has authored a compelling account of Goldsmith's writing life, beginning with his arrival in London in 1756. Clarke's account is a realistic one, acknowledging Goldsmith's considerable flaws and vulnerabilities without narrating those flaws and vulnerabilities as sources of unremitting calamity. Fully attuned to the biographical history and the pitfalls of romanticism, Clarke is not shy of depicting the prejudices Goldsmith faced, but recreates a three-dimensional person who was hard-nosed enough to get on with the business of writing across the genres and producing several classics in an evolving professional literary marketplace.

Notes

1. *Public Advertiser* (4 May 1774).
2. Virginia Woolf, 'Oliver Goldsmith', in *The Captain's Death and Other Essays* (London: Hogarth Press, 1950), 18.
3. Johnson, *Critical Review*, 18 (December 1764), 462.

4. *Johnsonian Miscellanies*, ed. George B. Hill, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1897), 2:268.
5. *The Examiner* (25 December 1836), 819.
6. Norma Clarke, '"More National (to Ireland) than Personal": James Prior's *Life of Oliver Goldsmith* (1837)', *Biography* 41.1 (2018), 49.