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Abstract
In his Advertisement to The Vicar of Wakefield, Oliver Goldsmith declared that his hero, the Reverend Dr Primrose, "unites in himself the three greatest characters upon earth; he is a priest, an husbandman, and the father of a family." He is also the narrator of a story, and in all four of these positions of authority, Primrose is quixotically ineffective. As a priest he pursues his "peculiar tenet" (p. 13) of strict monogamy to the point of alienating parishioners, even before the initial loss of fortune that precipitates the novel's action. As a husbandman he proves to be comically inept in managing his resources. Throughout the first half of the novel he is an unreliable narrator. But it is in his role of father that the greatest disparity appears between his own image of himself and his actual authority.

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From Patrimony to Paternity in *The Vicar of Wakefield*

David Aaron Murray

In his Advertisement to *The Vicar of Wakefield*, Oliver Goldsmith declared that his hero, the Reverend Dr Primrose, "unites in himself the three greatest characters upon earth; he is a priest, an husbandman, and the father of a family."[1] He is also the narrator of a story, and in all four of these positions of authority, Primrose is quixotically ineffective. As a priest he pursues his "peculiar tenet" (p. 13) of strict monogamy to the point of alienating parishioners, even before the initial loss of fortune that precipitates the novel's action. As a husbandman he proves to be comically inept in managing his resources. Throughout the first half of the novel he is an unreliable narrator. But it is in his role of father that the greatest disparity appears between his own image of himself and his actual authority.

Throughout the book Primrose attempts to exercise fatherly authority in three ways: through control of resources, through direct commands, and through wise adages. In all three ways he largely fails. He is "careless of temporalities" (p. 13) in the disposal of material resources, and his entrusting of the family fortune to an unscrupulous merchant precipitates the first of the chain of catastrophes that the family undergoes. His direct commands are ignored. Though he describes their new dwelling

1 Oliver Goldsmith, *The Vicar of Wakefield* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974). References are to this edition.

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as "the little republic to which I give laws," most of his "edicts" are ignored or flouted. The very first Sunday after their removal becomes "a day of finery, which all my sumptuary edicts could not restrain" (p. 25). He admits at the beginning of chapter 10 that "all my long and painful lectures upon temperance, simplicity, and contentment, were entirely disregarded" (p. 49). When his wife and daughters revive the idea of riding a coach to church, Primrose resists for a while; but in the end "All these objections ... were over-ruled; so that I was obliged to comply" (p. 52). At the very first meeting of the family with Squire Thornhill, Primrose's attempts to discourage their acquaintance are ignored: "As I did not approve of such disproportioned acquaintances, I winked upon my daughters in order to prevent their compliance; but my hint was countermanded by one from their mother" (p. 28).

Primrose's adages and maxims are about as effective as his commands. He admires Whiston's epitaph for his wife so much that he engraves one for his own wife as well, "in which I extolled her prudence, economy, and obedience till death." Although the Vicar is quite capable of sly humour at his family's expense, he seems sincere here. The epitaph is no mere reproof to a woman who proves vain and silly and exhibits little prudence in urging Olivia's match with Squire Thornhill at all costs. Instead, Primrose insists that the epitaph "answered several very useful purposes. It admonished my wife of her duty to me, and my fidelity to her; it inspired her with a passion for fame, and constantly put her in mind of her end" (p. 13).

One way of dealing with the discrepancies between Primrose's imagined (and prescribed) role and his actual behaviour is to stress the primarily satiric nature of the book. Either Goldsmith is poking fun at the bourgeoisie (especially hypocritical clergymen), or he is indulging in harmless self-parody. One may conclude, as has one of Goldsmith's biographers, that the discrepancies are humorous lapses in what, after all, is supposed to be merely satiric fun; to read into the novel sustained social criticism, as Ricardo Quintana does, is "perhaps to attribute to Goldsmith too deadly an intention"; perhaps Goldsmith is finally "amusing himself from beginning to end."[2]

A more sophisticated approach is provided by critics who themselves either admired the novel or sought to explain its enduring popularity throughout the nineteenth century and its appeal to such figures as Goethe. They have sought to minimize its discrepancies of plot and character by anchoring the novel in a controlling moral or didactic scheme

2. A. Lytton Sells, *Oliver Goldsmith: His Life and Works* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1974), p. 270.

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whose coherence has hitherto been unrecognized. Martin Battestin's well-known argument for the pervasive influence of the Job parable on the story's structure is the model here.[3] Raymond Hilliard, for example, reads the *Vicar of Wakefield* in the context of the conduct-books, popular throughout the eighteenth century, which prescribed Christian family roles and duties. According to Hilliard, Goldsmith's complex and humorous portrait of Primrose is a comment on the limitations of the humourless conduct manuals, but it nevertheless agrees with their vision of paternal love as a redeeming force.[4]

But the changes undergone by the Vicar in his "redemption of fatherhood" (as Hilliard calls it) may reflect not merely his own personal transformation from an imprudent overreacher to a humble pastor and father whose Job-like sufferings have purified him. Hilliard's focus on the traditional qualities of Christian fatherhood as outlined in the conduct manuals is not exactly wrong, but it ignores, I think, the extent to which the Vicar's fatherly authority is established on a new footing, rather than simply restored, by the end of the book. Primrose does not become the kind of father he tried and failed to be in the first part of the novel. Instead he re-establishes his authority as pastor and father on the basis of a new and sentimental ethic of sincerity, forged out of his identification with the prisoners in the crucial jail scene.

The transformation of Primrose's fatherly authority may be made clear by contrast with the account presented by John Bender in his essay on prison reform and *The Vicar of Wakefield*.[5] While I agree with Bender that the novel may yield some insight into larger changes in how authority and fatherhood were perceived in the late eighteenth century, I disagree with him completely about what those changes were. I propose that Richard Sennett's earlier work on the "public man" of the eighteenth century offers a much more compelling account of the changes that Bender wants to discuss.[6]

Bender, relying heavily upon Michel Foucault's well-known work on the early nineteenth-century penitentiary, attempts to extend Foucault's notion of the "surveillance principle" in Bentham's Panopticon in order to

3 Martin Battestin, *The Providence of Wit: Aspects of Form in Augustan Literature and the Arts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974).

4 Raymond Hilliard, "The Redemption of Fatherhood in *The Vicar of Wakefield*," *Studies in English Literature* 23 (1983), 465–80.

5 John Bender, "Prison Reform and the Sentence of Narration in *The Vicar of Wakefield*," in *The New Eighteenth Century: Theory, Politics, English Literature*, ed. Felicity Nussbaum and Laura Brown (New York: Methuen, 1987).

6 Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man: On the Social Psychology of Capitalism* (New York: Knopf, 1974).

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explain larger changes in government and social practice. As Bender has it, government was moving from "personal" modes of governance relying on fictions of personal dependence between squire and tenant which obscured class relations to "impersonal" modes of governance utilizing the surveillance principle. The ruptures and discontinuities in *The Vicar of Wakefield* reveal a Goldsmith torn between his conscious politics as a country conservative who idealized George III and his narrative practice, which reveals a nascent nineteenth-century omniscient narrator struggling against still-lingering conventions derived from romance elements in the plot.

Bender is eager to see nineteenth-century mimetic techniques, especially the omniscient narrator, as a reflection of the structures of domination inherent in the penitentiary. But his arguments about "emerging" social forms and narrative techniques mean that he allows himself to explain Goldsmith's narrative conventions not on their own terms, but as embryonic or imperfect anticipations of the nineteenth-century omniscient narrator. In his eagerness to get to his real target—nineteenth-century realism—Bender strains his reading of Goldsmith's narrative techniques: "*The Vicar of Wakefield*, though written in the first person and not self-evidently part of the pre-history of free indirect discourse, nonetheless reaches toward this technique. Primrose's private observations take on the perspective of impersonal narration, though hidden under the first-person."[7] This is simply a piece of mystification; one might as well say that black is hidden under white.

But Bender's primary disability, in my view, is an uncritical acceptance of certain post-Romantic conceptions of what "personal" and "impersonal" mean. Bender might have avoided this error had he been familiar with Richard Sennett's *The Fall of Public Man* (1974). In that earlier work, Sennett subjected the beliefs underlying the modern use of these terms to a searching analysis, employing a social history of the eighteenth century in which the terms are almost exactly the opposite of Bender's. In Sennett's account, mid-eighteenth-century London enjoyed a rich civic life in coffee houses, theatres, public parks, and private clubs, based on meaningfully *impersonal* codes that allowed strangers to interact without inquiring into each others' backgrounds.

Sennett's agenda is to attack the post-Romantic "intimate ethic," which, in his view, impairs political life by transforming practical questions of group interest into questions of personality. Far from viewing the post-Romantic era as one of increasing impersonality, Sennett instead sees a social landscape in which private personality has invaded the

[7] Bender, pp. 184–85.

public realm, transforming questions of political interest into questions of belief in authoritative personalities based on their personal qualities. Sennett complains that

> The reigning belief today is that closeness between persons is a moral good. The reigning aspiration today is to develop individual personality through experience of closeness and warmth with others. The reigning myth today is that the evils of society can all be understood as evils of impersonality, alienation, and coldness.[8]

The mid-eighteenth century, for Sennett, was the great age of sociability precisely *because* its civic life rested on humane artifice and impersonality. "Wearing a mask is the essence of civility,"[9] and the eighteenth century was the great age of civility precisely because it was an age of masks and disguises.

The wearing of masks extended to relations based upon authority. What Bender calls "personal relations" between patriarchal landowners and dependents, which used archaic forms of address and ceremony, were constructs whose impersonality was evident. As E.P. Thompson remarks (on his way to conclusions different from mine), "the same man who touches his forelock to the squire by day—and who goes down in history as an example of deference—may kill his sheep, snare his pheasants or poison his dogs at night."[10] The dependent's daytime deference was not simply a lie. The role had its own validity. Paternalism, whether the king's or a landowner's, was a public fiction whose roles were fixed by convention and could be stepped into by any petitioner or benevolent squire. Bender calls these relations "personal," but they are products of an ethos far different from the intimate, authentic, and anti-theatrical one we appeal to today when we speak of "personal" relationships.

In *Authority*, Sennett provides a more detailed discussion of the changes in patriarchal authority during the end of the eighteenth century. What Thompson loosely calls the "paternalistic" society of the mid-eighteenth century should more properly, according to Sennett, be described as *patrimonial*. In a patrimonial system authority is based on the transmission of property from father to son. Not only large property owners but even guild tradesmen passed on their positions to their sons. Towards the end of the eighteenth century the patrimonial system began to break up under the impact of industrialism. A paternalistic so-

8 Sennett, p. 259.

9 Sennett, p. 264.

10 E.P. Thompson, "Patrician Society, Plebeian Culture," *Journal of Social History* 7 (1974), 382–405.

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ciety, in Sennett's more precise usage of the term, is one in which "the patrimony itself does not exist."[11] In the early nineteenth century:

> the material organization of life was in so much flux that a man was in danger who based his claims to power on his ability to pass on a fixed amount of property to someone else. ... If a male were to legitimate his power, he would have to do so in terms of symbols and beliefs cut loose from such material tests. ... In a paternalistic society no father can guarantee to his children a known place in the world; he can only act protectively.[12]

Sennett does not use *The Vicar of Wakefield* as an example here, but this passage is a good statement of the way in which the Vicar's authority changes by the end of the novel. Primrose "dies" as a patrimonial father who attempts to exercise authority based on control of resources, but is "resurrected" as a paternalistic one (in Sennett's usage) whose authority comes from his ability to "act protectively" towards the prisoners and, finally, his family.

The initial disconnection between the Vicar's public and private selves both mirrors and parodies the split between public and private that was accepted as normative at the time. The split is personified by his double—Burchell/Sir William. Burchell personifies the potency of action that Primrose lacks. The two men share many characeristics. They are both plagued by greedy relatives in the periods of their initial prosperity. Primrose's "cousins, too, even to the fortieth remove, all remembered their affinity, without any help from the Herald's office, and came very frequently to see us" (pp. 9–10). In describing his alter ego Sir William Thornhill, Burchell uses language that could easily apply to both men: "He loved all mankind; for fortune prevented him from knowing that there were rascals ... his profusions began to impair his fortune ... though he talked like a man of sense, his actions were those of a fool" (p. 21).

It is true that the failings of the two men are not entirely similar. Thornhill's main failing has been an excessive benevolence, while Primrose's has been lack of prudence. His protest to the children after the initial loss of fortune that "no prudence of ours could have prevented our late misfortune" does not square with his quite evident imprudence, and pride as well. His entrusting of the family fortune to an untrustworthy merchant is hardly the result of prudence, since during his later abortive trip to the fair, he will admit that "this was one of the first mercantile transactions of my life," yet he insists "I had no doubt about acquitting myself with reputation" (p. 66).

11 Richard Sennett, *Authority* (New York: Knopf, 1980), p. 53.
12 Sennett, *Authority*, p. 54.

The Job-like trials which Primrose undergoes in descending degrees do not simply chastise him; they integrate his personality and transform him into an effective authority who, in the prison, is finally able to act as the paternal figure he has presented himself as being throughout the novel. His ability to act authoritatively increases in tandem with his increasing reliability as a narrator. Hints of his increasing effectiveness appear before his incarceration; he is able, for example, to save his two youngest children from their burning house, in contrast to his earlier paralysis and displacement by Burchell when Sophia was in danger of drowning. When he sets out to reform the prisoners, he is at first mocked and derided; but he persists, "perfectly sensible that what was ridiculous in my attempt, would excite mirth only the first or second time, while what was serious would be permanent" (p. 148). What Primrose here says about himself may be applied to the novel as a whole, for Goldsmith evidently does not intend his satire to apply to the principles that the Vicar articulates.

Bender is right when he says, "In his small nation, the prison, the vicar personally displaces—and then enacts laws to replace—the structures of authority that prevail elsewhere in the world of the novel and that have reduced him to his plight as a prisoner. He acts to retell the story by a different set of rules—those of the penitentiary."[13] But the new rules of the penitentiary turn out not to be "impersonal" at all in Bender's sense; quite the opposite. The Vicar's new authority as narrator and patriarch is sincere and sentimental, not impersonal. Sennett makes clear the distinction that Bender misses: "In the *ancien régime*, public experience was connected to the formation of social order; in the last century, public experience came to be connected with the *formation of personality*" (emphasis added).[14]

Dissociated from his patrimony and all temporal advantages, Primrose, *because sincere*, can now present himself to his fellow prisoners as an authoritative personality: "I previously observed, that no other motive but their welfare could induce me to this; that I was their fellow prisoner, and now got nothing by preaching" (p. 144). Since the Vicar likewise has nothing to hope for by misleading himself about events (such as Burchell's letter), so he has also become a more reliable narrator. For Bender, "the impersonal principle of inspection ... is enacted as the story of a personal intervention by Dr. Primrose."[15] But it is precisely the ties of sympathy and sentiment that allow Primrose to assume

13 Bender, p. 180.
14 Sennett, *Fall*, p. 24.
15 Bender, p. 181.

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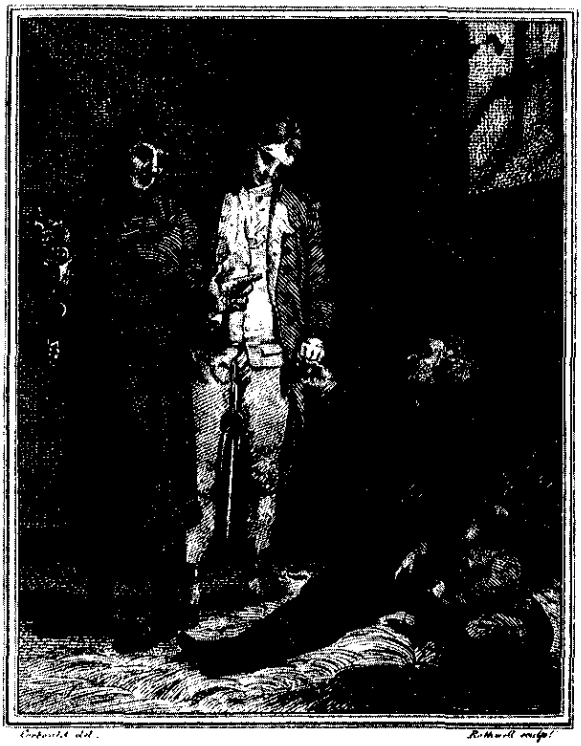
an authoritative role among the prisoners. His authority, based as it is on his *own transformation*, affects the prisoners interiorly as the authority of the jailer and magistrate cannot.



The Vicar of Wakefield by Dr. Goldsmith (London: T. Cadell, 1800), opposite p. 202. Engraved by Thomas Rothwell (1742–1807) after a drawing by Richard Corbould (1757–1831). Reproduced by permission of McMaster University Library.

The motif of disguise is crucially bound up with the novel's exploration of what constitutes a legitimate authority. For the first half of the novel, Primrose is, in a sense, disguised from himself. Sir William Thornhill is disguised as Burchell. Mrs Primrose and the two daughters attempt a kind of disguise by dressing above their station, and the Squire's two disguised prostitutes are comments on where such dressing may lead. The only legitimate authority who disguises himself is Burchell, and the purpose of his disguise is precisely to find an authentic relationship with a woman that is based on sentiment rather than appearances. To put it another way, Burchell's wealth and position actually function as a kind

of disguise that he must lose before he can find his "true" self. Even then, it is only when rejoined with the Vicar that Sir William is able to recognize his nephew's conduct for what it is. His obtuseness has been implausible up to this point, but if he and the Vicar are regarded as two halves of a fractured authority figure, then their reunion contains a logic that depends on something deeper than plausibility.

The most intriguing episode involving disguise is the seeming digression in which Primrose, returning from a fruitless effort to track down his recently eloped daughter Olivia, is befriended by "a very well-drest gentleman" who invites him to his manor for dinner in order to continue a political debate begun in a tavern. As the debate becomes heated, Primrose is on the point of being ejected from the house when the real master and mistress return, revealing that Primrose's host was "all this while only the butler, who, in his master's absence, had a mind to cut a figure, and be for a while the gentleman himself" (p. 99). The butler's appearance is totally believable in its own terms; the Vicar is even forced to admit that "he talked politics as well as most country gentlemen do" (p. 99). Although the scene is comic, the Vicar cannot be accused of the same kind of imprudence he displays in being gulled by Jenkinson. The arrival of the Arnolds, the real master and mistress, prefigures the dénouement. In both cases, the Vicar's disinterested fortitude is rewarded by the marvellous intervention of authority figures who reveal the truth of a situation and vindicate the Vicar.

Jenkinson is an example of the kind of trickster who could flourish in an age when social appearances carried their own code of public belief. "I was thought cunning from my very childhood," he tells Primrose; "at twenty, though I was perfectly honest, yet every one thought me so cunning, that not one would trust me. Thus I was at last obliged to turn sharper in my own defence" (p. 146). The fact that his appearance is untrustworthy not only does not prevent him from making a living by deception, it forces him into it! Jenkinson must become what he seems to be, because social life depends so much on appearances.

Beneath the humorous paradox lies part of the truth of Primrose's assumption of his authority. Jenkinson is obviously able to inspire trust, but this trust is made up of appearances, of impersonal codes of dress and behaviour. When Moses confronts Jenkinson in prison, he asks, "'I can't help wondering at what you could see in my face, to think me a proper mark for deception.' ... 'My dear sir,' returned the other, 'it was not your face, but your white stockings and the black ribband in your hair, which allured me'"(p. 145). Although Sennett praises the coffee-house era as a privileged moment of liberating "impersonality," it is clear

that Goldsmith distrusts social interaction and authority that is based on appearances. An intimate ethic based on sincere self-disclosure must replace the old code of impersonal appearances, so hospitable to frauds and tricksters.

Prison proves to be the place in which the new sentimental ethic of intimacy and sincerity achieves its first realization. It is noteworthy that Goldsmith stages his "trial" scene within the prison, instead of removing it to a courtroom, as he could easily have done. Although Sir William is regularly—and not incorrectly—seen as the *deus ex machina* who is in charge of the dénouement, it is interesting that he also must learn the true situation about his nephew's conduct from the Vicar. In the first half of the novel it is Burchell who appears all-knowing and whose hints Primrose and his family ignore. In the second half, it is Sir William who seems implausibly ignorant for a *deus ex machina*. Though Primrose remarks at the moment of Sir William's uncovering that "Never before had I seen any thing so truly majestic as the air he assumed upon this occasion" (p. 169), it is Primrose himself who seems more majestic.

Sir William has been suffering from his own disconnection; the man "to whose virtues and singularities scarce any were strangers" (p. 170) has in fact been a stranger throughout the book. Sir William has been praised as a material benefactor, but it is the Vicar who effects the transformation of the prison from a place of external punishment to a place "of penitence and solitude, where the accused might be attended by such as could give them repentance if guilty"—and here appears a seeming lapse—"*or new motives to virtue if innocent*" (p. 149).

The Vicar's awkward generalization from his own experience inadvertently exposes the claims that an authority based on personality can make. Prison can improve the innocent as well as the guilty! With this statement we are well into a sentimental ethos. The restored Primrose embodies a new principle of authority, one that elicits a trust based on the authority's own sincere self-transformation. *The Vicar of Wakefield* initiates a search for new forms of legitimate authority, then provides a fantasy resolution in the union of Sir William and Primrose. This accounts for the sentimentality that proves deeper than comedy and explains the work's enduring popularity throughout the nineteenth century.

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