

“Those Fenceless Fields the Sons of Wealth Divide”:

Enclosures and Idyllic Nostalgia in Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village*

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Abstract

*This paper explores the effects of parliamentary enclosures on the cultural zeitgeist of 18th century Europe, utilizing Oliver Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village* as an explanatory foil. First, the way in which *The Deserted Village* addresses contemporary sentiments on parliamentary enclosures is examined. Afterwards, this sentiment is analyzed in light of Williams' theory of idyllic sentimentality (i.e., “escalator theory”). This research concludes with the proposition that Williams' theory that idyllic remembrances is both true, contemporarily important, and well exemplified in Goldsmith's work.*

Keywords: *Goldsmith, Raymond Williams, Parliamentary Enclosures, Escalator Theory*

Parliamentary enclosures were a controversial phenomenon which occurred in Europe during the 18th-century (Williams 96). Their impact on the contemporary culture and society was profoundly negative, and this unfavorable perception is articulated in various poetic and literary works that arose in that era. One particularly compelling account of this degradation is Oliver Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village* which extols the impact of enclosures on the pure way of being established in pre-enclosure Europe. In his book *The Country and the City* Raymond Williams contends that in contrast to the idea that parliamentary enclosures marked a significant change in the times, they were in actuality one of many factors which lead to the societal changes of 18th-century Europe (35). He further argues that poetic works arising from this time present a persistent longing for an idyllic time which never existed historically. Oliver Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village* engages contemporary concerns for enclosures while simultaneously presenting an idealized version of the past concurrent with Williams' theories.

The phrase “parliamentary enclosure” refers specifically to the renunciation of common rights people held over land and the subsequent restructuring of scattered land holdings into compact blocks (Mingay 16). Previously any individual could graze their livestock in an open field post-harvest, and in so doing they not only benefited individually from free feed but the grazing of their livestock aided those who farmed the land as it cleaned up pastures and yielded fertilizer beneficial to subsequent harvests (Mingay 17). This seemingly idyllic reciprocity characterized the “open field” system in the time before enclosures whereby people shared “common rights” to non-private lands. Contrastingly, enclosures involved restructuring scattered plots of land, parliamentary appropriation of land, and both complimented and caused economic pressures on small tenants or landowners (Williams 97). Accordingly, parliamentary enclosures were viewed antagonistically, and perceived by the populous as being directly responsible for the destruction of established rural communities (Williams 96).

However, in the late 19th-century when parliamentary enclosures were at their height enclosures themselves had been going on for at least six centuries through violence, politics and repression (Williams 97). In fact by the time parliamentary enclosures began the majority of land was already enclosed in many areas throughout England (Mingay 20). The enclosures occurring prior to parliamentary enclosures took one of two forms: (1) “enclosures by agreement” wherein land owners in a parish would enclose all of their separate portions of land and the commons, then re-allot specific re-defined portions to each party; (2) “piecemeal enclosures” wherein owners would agree among themselves to allot smaller portions of the

larger land for individual use (Mingay 22). Rather than painting parliamentary enclosures as exclusively villainous, Williams proposes that they are a function of a larger problem: the developing economic system of agrarian capitalism (97). However, the public perception of parliamentary enclosures among contemporary citizens painted them as the singular and direct cause of the contemporary destruction of rural society, the rise of urban society, and the prevailing poverty which underlined this shift. Here exists the classic mistake of correlation for causation; as the number of landless citizens increased twenty-percent in the 18th-century, people associated this visible trend with the concurrent creation of parliamentary enclosures (which also had visible characteristics) (Williams 98).

Goldsmith addresses the issue of enclosure in *The Deserted Village* by contrasting an idealized perception from the speaker's youth with a lamenting description of post-enclosure life (Chaden 303). The idyllic nature of the speaker's perception is apparent from the very beginning of the poem wherein the town of Auburn is described as the "loveliest village of the plain, / Where health and plenty cheered the labouring swain" (lines 1-2). This passage clearly points to the utopian and hyperbolic nature of this depiction, as Auburn is described not only as the "loveliest" village, but also as a place where the citizens are in good health and are not wanting. The text continues to describe how the spring seems to come earlier there, and the summer lasts longer which further solidifies this idealized remembrance (lines 3-4). Thus, the speaker clearly romanticizes the past and creates what Williams describes as a romanticized nostalgic remembrance (12). This idealization later culminates in the following passage:

A time there was, ere England's griefs began,
 When every rood of ground maintained its man;
 For him light labour spread her wholesome store,
 Just gave what life required, but gave no more:
 His best companions, innocence and health;
 And his best riches, ignorance of wealth. (lines 57-62)

These passages vicariously extol the specific ways in which post-enclosure society has faltered as they imply that their opposites are the current state of affairs. Thus, this passage implies that England is now grieving because people do not have the land required to meet their needs, meeting ones needs now requires more work, and the world is now characterized by greed.

The rise of enclosures is lamented by Goldsmith and his contemporaries, all of whom seemed to view the concurrent shift from rural to an industrialized society as a "fall" from an idyllic and pure society (Williams 96). As mentioned above, the utopian nature which characterized pre-enclosure society is described at length at the beginning of the poem. The causal factor which lead to the fall from this romanticized way of being is concretely defined when the speaker describes the current situation. The current situation is first described as one wherein, "one only master grasps the whole domain" (line 39). Resultantly, the speaker proclaims, "Those fenceless fields the sons of wealth divide / and even the bare-worn commons is denied" (lines 307-308). Here the text clearly describes the catalyst for the fall from utopia as enclosures. Agrarian capitalism compels single individuals ("one only master") to take ownership of ever increasingly large portions of land ("those fenceless fields"). Thus, the result is that they've entirely altered the social and physical landscape ("even the bare-worn commons is denied"); the commons were acreages of land usable by all, but the greed which spawned enclosures denied access to these fields (Mingay 20).

Though there were in fact three types of enclosures occurring in the time in which

Goldsmith was writing, it can be inferred that he was referring to parliamentary enclosures exclusively based upon their predominance in the time between 1750 and 1830 (Mingay 35). The problem of enclosures is not something solely related to the division of land, it also concerns what is to be done with those left impoverished in the ensuing social division occurring concurrently with them. *The Deserted Village* contends that as commons have been enclosed by parliamentary enclosures rural life has become monopolized and doomed; this in turn yields a social division between the few who have and the many who do not (Chaden 304). Resultantly, a new question arises: What is to be done with the poor? In the poem the speaker acknowledges this fact, questioning, "If to the city sped – what waits him there? / To see profusion that he must not share" (lines 309-310). Thus, the text shows concern for the newly expanding poor-class and laments their lack of opportunity. The text acknowledges that this newly crafted class of working poor is entirely without option, and the financial division between them and the upper class pervades society both rurally and in the cities.

Goldsmith's poem unquestionably paints a romanticized version of the past, and a biased perception of the present. The narrator's lamentations culminate in him remarking, "E'en now, methinks, as pond'ring here I stand, / I see the rural virtues leave the land" (lines 397-398). Here the narrator places himself squarely in present situation, and thus creates the idea that the negative impact of enclosures is a real and encroaching threat. The audience is informed that the corruption of enclosures is an issue that has an immediate impact on the present, and thus implies that action should be taken to preserve the current state of affairs. The "rural virtues" refer to those present in the idyllic description at the beginning of the poem, and thus the poem seems to articulate that the perfect society of rural life is being evicted by the enclosures. However, analyzing this idealized conception in light of Williams' "escalator theory" leads to a new understanding of this poetic move.

Williams' describes analysis of the past as occurring on a metaphoric escalator of nostalgic remembrances (12). When one looks back at an idyllic past the escalator is set in motion towards it, but on arrival to that idealized time one finds oneself similarly wanting. As the past is continuously idealized and the present continuously misunderstood the escalator is set perpetually in backwards motion. Does Williams' "escalator" imply situational blindness, such that individuals locked in a particular time period are incapable of seeing it objectively? Aristotle in his *Poetics* proposed that, with the exclusion of self-contained tasks, humans scarcely grasp the structured unity of what they do (Rorty 7). He further proposes that this isn't a factor of perspectivism but rather the idea that actions cannot be fully apprehended until their completion. Thus in the context of enclosures, as society progresses towards a given end, humans cannot apprehend the value or significance of that end until it has been actualized. This is commensurable with Williams' theory of the "escalator" as it implies that an individual would necessarily be incapable of understanding the zeitgeist in which they live objectively, and thus would only be able to apprehend it through contrast. Humans would be aware of impending change, their discontentedness with the times, and associate the two factors as causal (as opposed to correlational). Thus, as Goldsmith laments the social change he ascribes to enclosures, the truth of his perception is that social change is occurring (as the lower class is expanding in size), and enclosures are occurring. As a necessary function of his situationally rooted vantage point he is unable to see the fullness of each historical occurrence which cumulatively built the times as they were. This is what powers Williams' "escalator" as "nostalgic remembrances" set it into motion.

Williams describes the function of his escalator as a metaphor for "the perpetual retrospect to an 'organic' and 'natural' society" (Williams 96). In William's mind the contemporary 18th-century focus on enclosures mirrored an idealized perspective contemporary to his own time in the 20th-century wherein urban industrialism was thought to be the cause of society's

woes. Thus, while both the enclosures and urban industrialism are viewed antagonistically as the sole-cause of contemporary problems, Williams proposes that they in fact represent symptoms of a larger underlined disease, which he identifies as capitalism. This sentiment is defensible in the context of Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village*, as the poem overtly criticizes the upper-class's monopolization of agrarian fields, and their resultant profiteering to the detriment of the lower-classes. This is particularly apparent near the end of the poem when the speaker laments, "To see those joys the sons of pleasure know / Extorted from his fellow creature's woe" (lines 313-314). Thus the text clearly condemns a foundational attribute of capitalism: that the few increase their wealth at the expense of the many. Though, contextually the narrator seems to ascribe blame for society's ills to enclosures, here the narrator seems to acknowledge that enclosures are simply a visible representation of deeper underlining problems.

Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village* makes a strong argument about the evils of enclosures and the negative direction in which society is progressing. However, in light of Williams' escalator theory it becomes apparent that the quest for a past idyllic society is a perpetual journey into history. Williams' theory, coupled with the Aristotelian idea that actions can't be wholly apprehended until their completion, proposes that an individual may never be able to objectively observe the times in which they live. Thus, the truth of Goldsmith's poem is not the nature of its depictions, but the reality of change and the associated fear which change may bring. Goldsmith's idyllic depiction set Williams' escalator in motion, and Williams' escalator is powered by the impossibility of an individual viewing the times in which they live objectively. Thus, until we evolve our faculties such to accommodate perspectival removal, our inherent lack of objectivity will lead us perpetually backwards searching for a time which never existed.

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