

“AUBURN” IN GOLDSMITH’S *THE DESERTED VILLAGE*: POSSIBLE GALLIC OVERTONES?

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The deserted village of Goldsmith’s 1770 poem has proved to be a lost village as well, for scholars have been unable to find an exact location for it. Many identify Auburn with the poet’s home of Lissoy in Ireland.¹ Professor Friedman allows that the name may have been suggested by a town in Wiltshire.² Others believe it to be an English village important more as a type than as a specific place.³ And Professor Wardle thinks the name and location to be irrelevant because Goldsmith probably conceived the place as a composite of his boyhood memories and his later observations of English villages.⁴

Whatever Auburn’s location, Goldsmith was no doubt mainly concerned with providing an emblem in *The Deserted Village* of a once idyllic place now forever abandoned that could also contrast with the horrific implications of life in the city and in America later in the poem. Whether Irish, English, or irrelevant on the map, in the poem, Auburn embodies Goldsmith’s explicit theme, stressed in his prefatory letter to Reynolds. That theme is the depopulation of the countryside,⁵ shown by history and the poem alike to be the result of the displacement of the poor from rural areas by wealthy landowners who wished to improve and expand their own farms, parks, and hunting preserves. In the letter, Goldsmith claims both to inveigh against this cause and to regret its effect. To augment his theme, I would suggest, Goldsmith may have selected the name *Auburn* for its rich and subtle merging of Gallic sound and sense.

By the eighteenth century, the adjective, *auburn*, had acquired the meaning of brown, a signification recorded by Johnson and Sheridan in their dictionaries.⁶ The autumnal connotations of this color are themselves appropriate to Goldsmith’s dying village. Yet the word may derive truer value, so far as the poem is concerned, from two French words listed in neither of these standard dictionaries. Because Goldsmith had travelled in France and translated at least three books and much of

¹ Following precedent set by Scott and Irving in the nineteenth century, such recent biographers as Oscar Sherwin (1961), Clara M. Kirk (1967), and A. Lytton Sells (1974) continue to equate Auburn with Lissoy. Compounding the confusion about Auburn’s identity is the fact that the Goldsmith house outside Lissoy has since been renamed Auburn.

² Arthur Friedman, ed. *Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith* (Oxford, 1966), IV, 287, note I. Yet the fifty-two volumes of the English Place-Name Society list no Auburn in Wiltshire or indeed in all of England (Cambridge, 1924-1977).

³ See, e.g., Ricardo Quintana and Alvin Whitley in their edition, *English Poetry of the Mid and Late Eighteenth Century: An Historical Anthology* (New York, 1968), p. 210.

⁴ Ralph M. Wardle, *Oliver Goldsmith* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1957), p. 313, note 9.

⁵ “To Sir Joshua Reynolds,” *Collected Work, of Oliver Goldsmith*, ed. Arthur Friedman (Oxford, 1966), IV, 285 and 286. Further references to *The Deserted Village* will be to this edition and will be cited in the text.

⁶ Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (London, 1755), I and Thomas Sheridan, *A General Dictionary of the English Language* (London, 1780), I.

Voltaire from the French,⁷ it is reasonable to suspect that his awareness of the nuances of that language influenced his choice of the name *Auburn*. These French words, certainly known to Goldsmith, are so closely tied to the theme of *The Deserted Village* that the sympathetic vibrations of the closely related word *auburn* may have set them into motion in Goldsmith's imagination and fixed his choice. Both words have since come to be listed in the *O.E.D.*, and a glance at these close neighbors of *auburn* therein may explain this possibility.

One is *aubaine*, "a right of French Kings, which existed from the beginnings of the monarchy, whereby they claimed the property of every stranger who died in their country" (I, 558). Verses such as "One only master grasps the whole domain" (89) and "Thy glades forlorn confess the tyrant's power" (76) echo this signification of *aubaine* in their allusion to the enclosure acts by which Parliament was allowing landlords both to displace yeomen from the common lands and to clear away whole villages to make room for improvements of their own realty. It is such men who, sanctioned by law, "Usurp the land and dispossess the swain" (63-64) to leave Auburn "in shapeless ruin" (47). Is it to be heard in Goldsmith's "inveighing" tone that English squires behave like French kings?

A second Gallic neighbor of *auburn* in the *O.E.D.* is *auberge*, "an inn, a place of accommodation for travellers" (I, 558). Its effect in the poem is less apparent than is that of *aubaine*, but it can be noticed in one of the poem's central motifs, hospitality. In a number of scenes Goldsmith details the ethos of Auburn past, but never so vividly as in those of the parsonage and the alehouse. Not only the longest scenes of the poem, but also the most dramatic, these two "mansions" and their vitality contrast with the desolation and wreckage of Auburn present. In the parsonage, the preacher's guests included "all the vagrant train" (49): the beggar, the ruined spendthrift, and the broken soldier. Each enjoyed the preacher's hospitality. And at the alehouse, the "careful" host presided over village types, their "nut-brown draughts" (221), old news, tales, and ballads. The recurring image of the fireside and the guests about it serves in the parsonage (156), the alehouse (233), and the speaker's dashed hope of retiring to Auburn "Around my fire an evening group to draw" (91) to specify the communal warmth of Auburn past. In short, Auburn, it seems, is dramatized as a cozy inn, a haven of rest and hospitality to which the speaker/traveller had hoped to retire. That he cannot, carries Goldsmith's promised tone of regret.

Knowing French well and being a meticulous craftsman with his poems,⁸

⁷ "Goldsmith's book-length translations from the French include Jean Marteilhe's *Memoirs of a Protestant* (1758), Charlotte Marie-Anne Charbonnier de la Guesnerie's *Mémoires de Milady B.* (1761), and Jean Formey's *Histoire Abrégée de la Philosophie* (1766).

Notice of Goldsmith's use of French is frequent. The main study is A. Lytton Sells's *Les sources françaises de Goldsmith* (Paris, 1924).

⁸ William Cooke in *European Magazine*, 24 (1793), 172 recounted Goldsmith's compositional methods. "His manner of writing poetry was this: he first sketched a part of his design in prose, in which he threw out his ideas as they occurred to him; he then sat carefully down to versify them, correct them, and add such other ideas as he thought

Goldsmith may well have heard the conflation of these two French words in *Auburn*. If so, his choice of the word may hint at its dual value connoting the landlords' usurping of the common lands and the resultant desertion of a hospitable place by the rural poor. Moreover, it may as well convey the double tones of "inveighing" and "regret" declared by Goldsmith in his prefatory letter. Harmonizing in "sweet" *Auburn*, *aubaine* sounds the proper disapproving note of the theme, while *auberge* carries its more sentimental melody.

Such a speculation becomes more compelling after a search of the fifty-two volumes of the English Place-Name Society reveals that the only "Auburn" in England is "Awburn" and is listed in the volume of *The East Riding of Yorkshire and York*.⁹ Its description is the more interesting because it had been literally a deserted village since 1731: "Depopulated. The site of the village is known (O.S. 6"). In 1731 the township of *Awburn* had been 'so washed away by the sea that there are only one messuage and two cottages left therein...' (1731, *Registers of the Archbishops of York*, 1872-1932, Fol. 113-114)." Yet scholarship on the location of the poem's village makes no reference to this place. Might Goldsmith the scholar/traveller have known about this depopulated *Awburn* and, because of the related and relevant sounds of the French words, transmuted its spelling to *Auburn* for tonal effect in *The Deserted Village*?

better fitted to the subject. He sometimes would exceed his prose design, by writing several verses impromptu, but these he would take uncommon pains afterwards to revise, lest they should be found unconnected with his main design."

Geoffrey Tillotson, Paul Fussell, Jr., and Marshall Waingrow in their edition of *The Deserted Village in Eighteenth-Century English Literature* (New York, 1969), p. 1252 note that Goldsmith "polished it slowly and conscientiously for almost two years before he published it...."

⁹ (Cambridge, 1987), p. 87.