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The Fake by A Biographer

--- The Imaginary Letter of Oliver Goldsmith

Tosuke Tamai

*The Collected Letters of Oliver Goldsmith* edited by Katharine Balderston, 1928 (hereafter *Letters*), contained eight letters which the editor judged as forged. Among those there is one quite different from the other seven. It is exceptionally long, with no date and the original has not been found. It was only defined as a letter by James Prior when he first published it in his *The Life of Oliver Goldsmith, M.B.* in 1837 (hereafter Prior’s *Life*).

The content of this ‘letter’ is the story of the short trip to Cork which Goldsmith took just after he had graduated at Trinity College, Dublin. At that time he lived with his mother in her small house in Ballymahon. After he had failed to take holy orders, his uncle obtained for him a post as tutor with a gentleman’s family where he remained for a year. However, he never liked confinement; he always preferred to travel so at the end of that year, having earned some money, he bought a good horse and, with thirty pounds in his pocket, set out, probably towards Cork.

After that, nobody heard of him for some time. His family and friends concluded he had left the country, but eventually, six weeks later, he returned to Ballymahon, penniless and upon a poor little horse which he had called Fiddleback because of its shape. His good horse and the thirty pounds were gone. Being pressed to account for where he had been, he began, “My dear Mother, if you will but sit down and calmly listen to...” and then described his adventure on Fiddleback as follows:

He travelled as far as Cork where he sold his horse and paid for his passage to America. Unfortunately, for three weeks the winds were unfavourable, so he spent the days in sight-seeing. But on the day the wind proved fair, he was in the country and so missed the ship. However he
continued to stay in Cork until he had only two guineas left. He bought Fiddleback and started his return to Ballymahon with only two half-crowns in his pocket. This was too little for a journey of a hundred and twenty miles. He suddenly recalled that a college friend, who had often pressed him to spend a summer with him, lived near Cork, so he decided to visit him. On his way to this friend, he met a beggar to whom he gave one of his last two half-crowns.

At his friend’s house he was not so warmly treated as he expected; but he did get board and lodging. The next morning, he asked his host to lend him a guinea for his journey. The friend declined and suggested that, if Oliver sold his miserable horse for the money on the road, he would furnish him with another horse for the journey. When asked to show the horse, the friend offered him an oak stick as a horse.

Oliver was so angry that he was about to beat his friend on the head with the stick, when a loud knock at the front door was heard. A neighbouring gentleman had come to see the friend. Being introduced to the gentleman, Oliver was invited with his friend to join the visitor at his house for dinner.

After having stayed for three days in this kind gentleman’s house, Oliver borrowed some money and started for home. Then he concluded, “And now, dear mother, after having struggled so hard to come home to you, I wonder you are not more rejoiced to see me.”

As above mentioned, it was in Prior’s Life that the ‘letter’ was first published in the form of a letter, but its content, the brief outline of which we have just followed, was already well known to readers of Goldsmith as a story told by himself, if not in the form of a letter. The story of his trip to Cork was first introduced in Bishop Thomas Percy’s Memoir of Dr. Oliver Goldsmith, in 1801 (hereafter Percy’s Memoir). The concluding words, “And now, dear mother,...” quoted above, are from Percy’s Memoir. It appears, therefore, that Oliver’s story had been changed into the form of a letter during the period between Percy’s Memoir and Prior’s Life.

If it is so, who is responsible for this change? To answer this the respective material facts of these two biographies must be examined. What
is the original material of Percy's *Memoir*? What is the reason for Prior's publication of the story as a 'letter'?

As for the original material of Percy's *Memoir*, it is presented by Katharine Balderston in her book *The History and Sources of Percy's Memoir of Goldsmith* 1926. Through this work it is learned that a considerable number of people were engaged in the making of Percy's *Memoir*. Among those, the following two are to be noted.

One is Oliver's eldest sister Catherine, later Mrs Hodson, who wrote an account of her brother's boyhood. This account was used as the important biographical evidence in Percy's *Memoir*. The other is Rev. Thomas Campbell who wrote the original draft of Percy's *Memoir* using material which Percy had prepared, including Mrs Hodson's account.

Mrs Hodson's account itself, in the style as it was told by her, had not been known to the public until later, when its manuscript was found. This was published in 1928 as *Mrs Hodson's Narrative of Goldsmith's Early Life* (hereafter Hodson's *Narrative*) as an appendix in *Letters*.

Percy wrote in his *Memoir* as follows:

> Of our poet's early life and character, and of some remarkable adventures at school and at college, we have a curious account by his eldest sister Catherine, wife of Daniel Hodson, Esq. which in some measure corrected and abridged, we shall present to the reader.

(Percy's *Memoir* pp.2-3)

Then the quotation of her 'curious account', which included the Fiddleback episode, lasts for twelve pages, with 'some corrections and abridgement'.

The original draft of Percy's *Memoir* by Campbell, too, had not been known to the readers until in 1933 it came into the British Library as the Additional Manuscript 42517 (hereafter Campbell's MS.). So the readers of Prior's *Life* at the time of its publication could read neither Hodson's *Narrative* nor Campbell's MS.

Prior, upon writing his *Life*, must have read Campbell's MS. as is clear from a passage of his Preface. It reads:
A Life [Life of Goldsmith], however, was to be written; and the Bishop [Percy], although best qualified for the purpose by long intimacy and thorough knowledge of Goldsmith, added to his acknowledged talents, was too busy or too indolent to supply. In compliance with his wish, however, a memoir, now in the possession of the writer, was drawn up by Dr. Thomas Campbell,...

(Prior's Life I, pp.xii-xiii, Italics by Tamai)

'A memoir, now in the possession of the writer', must be a reference to an early version of Percy's Memoir which Campbell drew up for Percy in compliance with his wish. Prior must also have seen Hodson's Narrative.

Then Prior writes about the 'letter':

In reply to the anxious inquiries of his friends, he gave the following account of his adventures; first verbally, and then in a letter to his mother, who had expressed some doubts of its truth, and to whom he said with characteristic simplicity on observing her coolness, "And now, my dear mother, after having struggled so hard to come home to you, I wonder you are not more rejoiced to see me."

The original of this letter is not to be found; but a copy seems to have been in the possession of Mrs. Hodson, who communicated the material facts in the memoranda furnished of the early portion of her brothers' life. It [the copy] is now in the possession of the gentleman who holds the original manuscripts memoir [Campbell's MS.], and was probably sent by her at a subsequent period. (Prior's Life I, p.119. Italics by Tamai)

The same concluding words of Oliver's, "And now, my dear mother,..." that I quoted above in page 4 are cited in the above paragraphs of Prior's too, which clearly shows he has followed Percy's Memoir. But he deliberately removes the cited passage from its original place at the end of the account, to the position here, before the 'letter' in question, to the place just after he has written 'first verbally, and then in a letter';—then he
quotes the 'letter'.

However, Prior's argument that Oliver 'gave the account of his adventures, first verbally and then in a letter to his mother' does not convince the reader. He says nothing about 'the gentleman' who has the copy of the letter. He should have made it clear whether he had seen the copy or not should he reprint it here.

Balderston, who could read Hodson's Narrative, was the first scholar who doubted the authenticity of this 'letter'. She examined this problem very closely and ingeniously in Letters pp.xxiii-xxix. She quotes the final part of the Fiddleback episode from Hodson's Narrative.

And now Dr Mother says he since I have struggeld so hard to come home to you why are you not better pleas'd to see me, and pray says the Mother have you ever wrote a letter of thanks to that dear good man since you came home, no says the Dr I have not then says the Mother you are an ungratefull Savage a Monster in short the whole boddy of his Friends which ware present up braid'd him for which he for a full half hour sat listning to with grate composure and after they had vented their Passion he beg'd they wod sit down and compos themselv's for what he told them was only to amuse them and that there was not one word in it; how ever he afterward assur'd me of its veracity. (Letters p.xxvi. The spelling and punctuation exactly reproduce the original.)

And then she develops her theory. The points of her argument are as follows:

(1) The absurdity of supposing that Goldsmith went off and wrote a minute account of the adventure which he had already told at length, and which he had later declared before the whole family to be an invention of his own to amuse them, is obvious. Furthermore, the style of Mrs Hodson's narrative shows no evidence of being derived from the letter. Rather, the letter shows every evi-
dence of being a polished and reconstructed version of her narrative.  

(Letters p.xxvi.)

(2) Mrs Hodson knew very well the value of her brother’s letters, and if there had actually been a letter to draw upon here, she would certainly have quoted it explicitly. One would have to suppose, in order to believe Prior, not only that she deliberately concealed the existence of the letter, but that she actually falsified the account to make it appear a verbal one.  

(ibid. p.xxv.)

(3) Since the letter’s history is so obscure and difficult of acceptance, and since all the internal evidence militates against it, the only conclusion to be drawn is that Prior was deceived about the letter’s authenticity, either by deliberate hoax, or by accident.  

(ibid. p.xxvii.)

Her theory concerning (3) is that “some one who had access to the manuscript of Mrs Hodson’s narrative deliberately constructed the letter on the basis of her account...” and she goes on reasoning:

The most probable agent is Henry Boyd, Percy’s last collaborator in the Memoir,...Boyd died in 1832, five years before Prior’s Life appeared, and it is perfectly possible that when Prior saw the “copy” it had fallen into the hands of Boyd’s heir, or some purchaser who really did not understand the nature of the document, and supposed in good faith that was a genuine transcript of an early letter.

(Letters p.xxviii)

I agree with Balderston on (1) and (2), but not (3). I do not think that Prior was deceived. Rather I believe he deceived us.

Here we must reflect again on the passage from Prior’s Life quoted above in page 6. A reliable biographer should have made it clear what was the source of the ‘letter’ even if ‘the original is not to be found’. He did say that its “copy is now in the possession of the gentleman who holds the original manuscripts memoir, and was probably sent by her [Mrs Hodson]
at a subsequent period”.

Still these sentences are extremely ambiguous. Who is this gentleman? And Prior does not tell us whether he saw the ‘copy’ in the hand of the gentleman whoever he was, to publish it in his ‘Life’. However, quite abruptly, following this unintelligible passage, the ‘letter’ is quoted without any reference at all to its source. If that is the case, I cannot help concluding that Prior’s passage is made purposely ambiguous to conceal something he does not like to disclose.

Balderston made no comment on the ambiguity of this passage of Prior’s. Rather, she tried her best to interpret these unintelligible sentences in her way, and reached the conclusion quoted above. Campbell’s MS. was not available to Balderston, with the result that she reached such conclusion.

Then her argument turns from the subject of the doubtful authenticity of the ‘letter’ to another point, the veracity of Goldsmith’s Fiddleback story. She finishes, “It seems safe to conclude that the surprising story of Fiddleback was Goldsmith’s first fiction”. Again I agree with Balderston on this. But still the riddle of the ‘letter’ remains unsolved.

To us, who can read Campbell’s MS., it is perfectly natural that we could not believe Prior when he asserts that Oliver wrote the ‘letter’ after he had told the story. When he came back to Ballymahon, “His poor mother, sadly mortified at these repeated indiscretions of her favourite son, refused to be reconciled to him, but...” the MS. goes on:

but his brother’s and sister’s intercession soon prevailed on her to forgive what she could not remedy. In hopes, however, of correcting him in future, she gave him many cool reprimands, and insisted upon knowing how and where he squandered his money, sold his horse, his shirts &c. having brought nothing home but the single suit of clothes he wore and his gallant steed Fiddle back. Oliver, for some time, declined giving her satisfaction in any of these points, but at length he addressed her to the following effects: “My dear Mother, if you will but sit down and...
The flow of the sentences in the MS. is quite natural. It clearly says that “he[Oliver] addressed her[Mother] to the following effects.” He ‘addressed’, not ‘wrote’ a letter. And the following account, beginning with “My dear Mother, if you will but sit down and calmly listen to what I shall say,...” is almost exactly the same with Prior's ‘letter’. As Balderston asserts (Letters, p.xxvii, note 1.), this phrase “if you will sit down and...,” is both impudent and pointless when transferred to a letter.

Nevertheless, Prior split this natural flow of the passage in the MS. by saying “he[Oliver] gave the following account of his adventures; first verbally, and then in a letter to his mother” as we have seen above. And in order to justify his ‘letter’ theory, he inserted his ambiguous sentences, beginning with “The original of this letter is not to be found”. Then he introduces the ‘letter’ which is in fact nothing more than Oliver's account in Campbell's MS.

Furthermore to strengthen his ‘letter’ theory, Prior asserts that Oliver gave the account of his adventure first verbally, and then in a letter because Oliver’s mother “expressed some doubts” after she had listened to her son’s account. However, there is no such mention in the MS. as we see in the following extract. On the contrary, she was impressed in spite of herself by his account and asked whether he wrote a letter of thanks to the hospitable gentleman. Campbell’s MS. reads as follows:

"...and only took a guinea to my necessary charges on the road."

We may easily conceive that this narrative must have excited strong emotions in the mother’s breast but her indignation, against her son’s sordid acquaintance, was soon succeeded by a glow of gratitude to the hospitable Barrister [kind gentleman]. She therefore said to his son, --Oliver, have you after receiving all these civilities from this worthy man wrote him a letter of thanks since you came home? And upon his answering, no! she severely upbraided him for his neglect. Oliver felt the full force of this rebuke, and, to excuse himself,
he, with a strange versatility of mind, declared, that all he had said was but a fiction; devised, on the spur of the occasion to amuse her. Yet he afterwards assured his sister that what he delivered was all matter of fact. But be it fiction or be it fact it strongly marks an excentricity(sic) of character.

(Campbell’s MS. pp.27-28 Closed quotation mark by Tamai)

This passage is quite natural and understandable to make Prior’s assertion seem all the more doubtful.

Ralf Wardle also made a comment on this ‘letter’ in his Oliver Goldsmith 1957. He noted:

---As for the “improved” version of the story given in Prior, I, pp.119-25, and reprinted by Miss Balderston among “Forged Letters” (Letters, pp.148-54), the manuscript life of Goldsmith now in the British Museum provides the explanation: Thomas Campbell, first author of the Memoir, apparently composed it from Mrs. Hodson’s Narrative and inserted it in his text, presumably thinking that the story would be more vivid if told in the first person. For some reason, though, he placed the first three words, “My Dear Mother,” on a separate line as if they were the salutation of a letter. Someone, perhaps Prior himself, assumed that the story was actually a letter, copied it off, and added Goldsmith’s signature; and it so appeared in Prior’s Life.

(pp.302-3, note 7. Italics by Tamai)

If we read Campbell’s MS., we totally agree with Wardle about the genesis of the letter. But he, as well as Balderston, presumes that Prior innocently believed the story to be a letter. The cause which has made him think in that way is that he mistook a line of Campbell’s MS., where the words ‘My dear Mother’ do not appear on the separate line as he noticed. Richard L. Harp, the editor of Thomas Percy’s Life of Dr. Oliver Goldsmith 1976, also pointed out this mistake by Wardle (ibid. p.132 note 37), but he did not say that Prior intentionally made the narrative into
the 'letter'.

If one skims through Campbell's MS. and Prior's letter, it seems self-evident that the latter is a copy of the former. However, in order to declare that Prior copied off the MS. and made it appear like a letter, some more decisive evidence must be provided.

As a clue in looking for such evidence, I have come upon a strange combination of words, 'deep study', in the Prior's 'letter' in question. To me, deep and study, somehow, do not seem to join happily together. Who is responsible for this strange expression? This question has led me to compare Prior's letter, word for word, with Campbell's MS.

As we have already seen, Prior put the first three words, "My Dear Mother" (he silently changes 'dear' into 'Dear'), on a separate line, and added one line at the end of the letter bearing Goldsmith's name. Not only that, though neither Wardle nor Harp mentioned it, following this line, Prior inserted still another line which reads "To Mrs. Anne Goldsmith, Ballymahon" without making any reference at all as to whence he had derived these words to make most readers believe that it is a letter.

Apart from these alterations, there are nine other differences excepting several minor changes in punctuations. Among those nine, eight are mere omissions or additions of a single word, mostly an epithet, to polish up the style.

But the one difference that remains seems to be the conclusive evidence that we were looking for. That is the very expression, deep study, which has been commented on above. It is found in the line describing Oliver's inhospitable friend. Prior's letter reads:

,...rubbing his hands, as one in deep study.

(Prior's Life I, p.122 Italics by Tamai)

whereas the corresponding line in Campbell's MS. reads:

,...ringing his hands as one in deep distresses.

(Campbell's MS. p.24. Italics by Tamai)
As I mentioned above, I felt strange about the combination of deep and study. There is for me no natural meaning for such an expression in the context of ringing or rubbing ones hands. This has led me to discover this difference. By comparing these two lines an interesting fact has been revealed. The word distresses in the MS., when read in haste, can be taken as study, as shown in the photo copy below:

If he had not taken it as 'study', no reason could be found for changing 'distresses' into 'study'. As for the difference found in rubbing and ringing, Prior probably referred to the text of Hodson's Narrative and Percy's Memoir. The corresponding part of the respective texts read as follows:

(Hodson)...& rubd(sic) his hands
(Percy) ...rubbing his hands, and deeply lost in thought,

The fact that the only striking difference between Prior's letter and Campbell's MS. is the change from deep distresses to deep study appears to show that Prior certainly copied off this MS. All the other paragraphs are almost exactly same as each other, and the only difference is found in the part where the deviation is likely to occur.

It is evident that Prior read Campbell's MS.. If so, it must have been obvious to him that Oliver's account can not have been a letter. As we have considered above, there is no room for mistaking the story for a letter. Then we cannot help concluding that Prior purposely made Oliver's story appear like a letter and published it in his Life. The fact that he added Goldsmith's name, and the line, "To Mrs. Anne Goldsmith, Ballymahon", strengthens this theory. And it also explains why he wrote such an ambiguous passage before quoting the 'letter'.

Prior was so firmly determined to be the first major biographer of Goldsmith in the nineteenth century after Percy that he seems to have had too strong a sense of rivalry with Percy's Memoir. From the way he
writes his preface, he seems to be rather excited. It reads, as we have seen, "[Percy] was too busy or too indolent to supply [Life of Goldsmith]". The word 'indolent' seems to be a little too strong. I can suggest this competitive spirit urged him to make up an imaginary letter to enrich his Life of Oliver Goldsmith with something new and attractive.

Furthermore Goldsmith's remarkable character as an innocent story teller had also prepared the foundations for Prior on which to build this imaginary letter. Goldsmith's surprising story of his adventure on Fiddleback, which had contained several embryonic characters of his later works, would have tempted Prior to make it appear like a letter.

In An History of the Earth and Animated Nature 1774, while he is describing the ichneumon, Goldsmith writes:

---and, as fable usually goes hand in hand with truth, it is said that the ichneumon sometimes enters the mouth of the crocodile,---

(Vol. III, Chap. 9)

Actually his story always went hand in hand with truth. If it affected Prior and urged him to tell his story, the rashness of what he had done is surely to be pardoned.