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Mouthpiece for the Masses: The Power of the Individual in Joseph Addison's *The Spectator* and  
Oliver Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village*

Eighteenth-century English literature is associated perhaps most notably with its unwavering pursuit of political and social thought, as influenced by the Age of Enlightenment. The writings of scientists and philosophers such as Newton and Locke encourage the complete sovereignty of reason, while advocating for the importance of reflection and debate. Within Great Britain itself, the movement, alongside at times particularly polarizing historical developments, aids in the conceptualization and widespread use of the first-person speaker. Often described as an observer, the first-person speaker establishes its identity in the consideration and analysis of its surroundings. Rhetorically, it at times serves as a supposed authentic representative voice of the larger Britain, as established through the sweeping statements of support towards Britain's trade boom in Joseph Addison's *The Spectator* No. 69 (1711). However, in other works, such as Oliver Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village* (1770), the use of the individual as a speaker constructs a far more intimate argument against the growth of trade and urbanization made complex by the mosaic and nostalgic nature of human emotion. In this way, both the works of Addison and Goldsmith demonstrate the key role the eighteenth-century individual plays in offering a micro-scaled glimpse into the larger held social and political opinions of the time as well as presenting these beliefs and attitudes in a personal manner that satisfies the self-reflective spirit of Enlightenment thinking.

The first-person perspective of the observer in Addison's *The Spectator* No. 69 acts as an integral component in establishing the mood of the piece while conveying the perspective of the supporters of Great Britain's trade expansion. Addison assembles his exploration of the concept of trade around the thoughts of an attendee to the Royal Exchange, a bustling site of commerce and international merchant exchange located in London's financial district. The observer declares himself an Englishman "delighted in mixing with several ministers of commerce" (Addison 914). He views trade as an overwhelmingly positive institution and rejoices in its growth within Britain, declaring that without it, the country becomes "a barren uncomfortable spot of earth" (915). The speaker perceives the other participant nations of the trade exchange as simple suppliers of "convenient and ornamental" goods for Britain, rather than as defined countries of their own (915). For example, the spectator declares the "Persians [Britain's] silk weavers and the Chinese [their] potters," asserting the idea that every observation made by the speaker develops solely through the lense of Britain's profit (915). The exploitation of these countries is declared as secondary to the potential discomfort for Englishmen made to live without such goods, as made evident by the spectator's delight that Britain is "free from those extremities of weather which give [goods] birth" (915). In this way, the speaker asserts through a haughty and somewhat naive tone the dominance of Britain in the world market as well as the subservience of the countries that act as its suppliers.

Rhetorically, by declaring himself an Englishman, the spectator establishes his identity as a generalization, or perhaps even a satire, of the supporters of English trade. Blinded by nationalism akin to Thompson's "Rule Britannia," the spectator boasts of trade's effect on the country, stating that its presence has "multiplied the number of the rich" and "made [their] landed estates infinitely more valuable than they were formerly," assertions based solely on his

opinion formulated from his individual impression of The Royal Exchange and the discourse of his companions (916). His declarations are baseless and vague, contributing to the sense that the spectator is not truly aware of the complexities behind the trade or the fact that it is not a practice equally beneficial to all of England. By naming his speaker “spectator,” Addison defines him as just that, an outsider void of quantitative and complete truths and a simple observer representative of the masses in blind support of Britain’s trade boom. Thus, Addison utilizes the first-person speaker to represent the image of Britain its leaders and economic beneficiaries would have preferred it to embody, making the individual the mouthpiece of the masses.

On the other hand, the figure of the individual can be utilized to aid the opposite side of the spectrum in offering a private and personal contemplation of the effects of an occurrence like Britain’s trade boom. In Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Deserted Village*, the speaker identifies himself as a previous resident of Auburn, a small English village that has undergone a sad and slow degradation over the course of Britain’s urbanization and consequent emigration. He characterizes the hilly town much like he would pre-trade England as a whole, the picture of innocence, youth and prosperity captured by images such as “the smiling spring” and “summer’s lingering blooms” (Goldsmith 3-4). Illustrations of purity litter the poem’s introduction through figures such as “the bashful virgin” with her “sidelong looks of love,” communicating the feeling that Auburn, in its younger years, embodied the ideal spirit of an untouched land, pristine both in the figurative and literal sense (29). However, upon the arrival of the country’s trade boom, Auburn and each of its defining charms face devastating losses on multiple fronts. The impact is first noticed in the land itself, as “no more [its] glassy brook reflects the day, / But, choked with sedges, works its weedy way” (41-42). Subsequently, the soul of the land’s departure parallels an exodus of the residents themselves, as the speaker laments that “trembling, shrinking from the

spoiler's hand, / Far, far away, [its] children leave the land" (49-50). The children, as mentioned frequently by the speaker in the poem, represent both a physical departure of English residents in their migration to bustling, urbanized cities or America itself, as well as the departure of child-like innocence from the village. Vivid imagery in words such as "trembling, shrinking" and the use of lively alliteration in the phrase "works its weedy way" emphasize the deep-seated emotional connection the speaker possesses with Auburn and the severe degree to which its deterioration impacts him. As the speaker concludes the poem, his language becomes more severe and emboldens him to address the perpetrator of Auburn's woes directly in declaring that "Trade's proud empire hastes to swift decay" (427). He is left with the conclusion that, as an observer of Auburn's dawn and figurative death, trade and monetary greed can only result in the degradation of a land's purity and a people's morals.

Goldsmith's first-person speaker casts a light on the significance of the individual as a guiding rhetorical voice that capitalizes on personal experience and emotion to reap a profound sentimental response. His argument is guided by the careful surveillance of Auburn's people and its resources as opposed to inference or word of mouth. Likewise, the individual of Auburn is not merely an observer of the town's declination, but a community member invested in its survival and personally affected by its transformation. For as the speaker laments for the Auburn lost, he also laments for the personal future he lost in the process:

I still had hopes my latest hours to crown,  
Amidst these humble bowers to lay me down;  
To husband out life's taper by the close,  
And keep the flame from wasting by repose. (*The Deserted Village* 85-88)

From the speaker's perspective, Auburn is a place he at one time hoped to return to as a means of telling those he grew up with of all he had lived and learned. His power and authority derives from his personal experience and knowledge of the village he once recognized well. In this way, the individual takes on the role of providing a voice for the voiceless land of Auburn: He is both one of its children and one of its defenders.

Both as a child of Enlightenment thinking as well as a response to the economic, social and political changes of Britain, the eighteenth-century English individual serves ultimately the same purpose. Though acutely different, the narrative voices of Addison and Goldsmith seek to accomplish the same task: to convey, through a first-person voice and its establishment of familiarity, personality and trust the ideal image of England in the process of each change. In a time period of vast questioning and a higher development of understanding, a focus on the individual is perhaps the only means by which certainty may finally rear its head in English society. If the spectator's observations of The Royal Exchange and assertions of its benefits prove fruitful, to what extent is the economic exploitations of smaller nations acceptable to British citizens? On the other hand, if the negative impacts of Britain's trade boom rob from Auburn's people the bliss of purity and prosperity, at what cost may this economic development be maintained and fostered with a clear conscience? Both accounts in which the individual directs the conversation mirror the goals of the Age of Enlightenment: to take in one's individual life experiences, to accept the influence of outsiders and to allow such influences to penetrate thought and produce epiphanies with the hopes of stumbling upon certainty. Therefore, the individual narrator acts as a crucial force in the development of not only eighteenth-century English literature, but of English systems of morality and modes of certainty.

Works Cited

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