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Actuality and realism in the poetry of George Crabbe

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ACTUALITY AND REALISM IN THE POETRY OF GEORGE CRABBE

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INTRODUCTION

It is a generally accepted fact among critics that George Crabbe was a realist. It will be the purpose of this paper to examine this conclusion for its validity. More exactly, I shall compare the poetry of Crabbe with the historical records of his era and measure how closely Crabbe came to reproducing, realistically, his own times. The paper is really a study of Crabbe's realism as reflected in his poetry with a view toward questioning the verdict of the critics.

In this work I have attempted to dispel several misconceived notions about Crabbe's poetry, but the general conclusions will not cast any revolutionary new light on it.

In this study of Crabbe's realism the answers to many questions are not always explicit; some I have left to the observation of the reader.

There is very little said about the mechanics of his style, but the quotations were chosen with the view that a representative sampling of Crabbe's poetry would speak for itself on these matters. Only the details of the poet's life which I felt had a direct and major influence on his realism are included.

If we may take a note from René Huchon, the standard biographer of Crabbe, in the study of Crabbe's realism, we may find that instead of being a realist, Crabbe is actually a "naturalist." Admittedly, the terms are similar; even Huchon has difficulty with them. Huchon first says,

> Crabbe and Balzac are "realists," firstly because they are opposed to romanticism and secondly because they isolate and exaggerate passion or vice in order to study them in themselves; Flaubert in the first place, and still more the Goncourts and Zola, are "naturalists," because with true scientific intent they try to "explain" their personage, to exhibit him as a product of heredity and the social environment.[1]

Undoubtedly Huchon has a good point when he places Crabbe among the realists. But when one considers the qualifying characteristics of the naturalist, Crabbe seems to fit into this category as well. We may accept the fact that the "naturalists" isolate and exaggerate passion or vice as much as the realists do; so, this is not a point

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[1] René Huchon, George Crabbe, His Life and His Times, (London; 1907), page 304.

of difference but one of similarity. In a different way but, nevertheless, faithfully, Crabbe examines and explains with "true scientific intent." Perhaps Crabbe is not much concerned with the point of heredity, but he is very intent on explaining his "personage" as a product of social environment. At the same time, it is not so certain that Crabbe can be classed as one being opposed to romanticism. Crabbe was one of the men who paved the way for romanticism and used many of its techniques before the romanticist claimed them as his own.[2] A decade before the Lyrical Ballads and its famous preface, Crabbe had employed the simple language and life of man. He was a member of the group of poets who led the revolt against the Augustans, and it was this group who planted the seed of romanticism.

It is not my contention that Crabbe was a romantic; there is, in Crabbe, little of the poetry of passion and "impassioned reflection,"[3] but there are humor and pathos mixed with the satirical and didactic. In this respect Crabbe is very much a transitional poet. But can he be said truly to oppose Romanticism or Classicism?

It is also not my intention to portray Crabbe as a naturalist. Naturalism is a sub-class of realism.

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[2] Charles E. Vaughan, The Romantic Revolt, (New York: 1907), page 6.

[3] Ibid, page 7.

"Naturalism is less selective, more all-inclusive, than realism," say Thrall and Hibbard;[4] add to this the fact that it is also less subjective, and it becomes even less applicable to Crabbe. My reason for bringing up the point is nonetheless well taken for there are many things in Crabbe's poetry which should exclude him from the title of realist as well, but they are not so vital as the objections to naturalism. The fact is that Crabbe is very difficult to place, but his realism is a type which incorporates many of the aspects of the naturalist, and this is a fact which may be very significant in a thorough discussion of Crabbe's realism.

Let us return to Huchon's statement in which he says that Crabbe and the realists "isolate and exaggerate passion or vice in order to study them in themselves." While this is generally true of all of Crabbe's poetry after The Village, it is especially true of his three best works, The Village, The Borough, and The Parish Register. In his later works Crabbe becomes more mellow in his treatment and in his choice of subject matter.

When one compares a personage in Crabbe's poetry with that figure's real-life counterpart, the exaggeration

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[4] William F. Thrall and Addison Hibbard, A Handbook to Literature, (New York: 1936), page 267.

becomes obvious. Edward Fitzgerald, a great admirer of Crabbe's works, knew the actual circumstances behind many of Crabbe's stories and has written them in the margin of a copy of Crabbe's poetry opposite the story to which the note refers. Through these notes we find that the "Blaney" of The Borough was a retired officer, a Major Dade, who most certainly did not pay for his crimes by spending his last days in an almshouse. The real-life "Clelia," also of The Borough, was Miss Rebecca Carter, and she never went through the adventures which Crabbe attributes to her. "Peter Grimes" was really Tom Brown, whose apprentices did die in a suspicious manner, but it is very unlikely that he ever saw their ghosts. Huchon sums up these deliberate deceptions by saying, "In order that the history of these unfortunates may serve us better as a lesson, the punishment of their misdeeds must terrify us, even at the expense of the truth."[5] But Crabbe has not lied to us; he has bent the truth to its exigencies, but he has done it to teach a moral truth and to create moral improvement. Crabbe has taken the sombre gray tones of Defoe's picture of beggar-boys in London and added a new note of indignation, passion, and protest. Much of Crabbe's protest is directed at certain institutions for the poor and the laws which

[5] Huchon, op. cit., page 169.

govern the poor. How truthfully he has depicted these social structures is what we hope to obtain from this work.

REALISM AND LITERARY REPUTATION

The question which this paper tries to answer is simply, "Was George Crabbe a realist?" Was he a realist as opposed to Wordsworth, who is considered a romantic. Is his realism merely verbal photography, exact verisimilitude? Is he a realist by today's standards or only by the criteria of his own times? What do we mean by realism? To avoid any future misunderstanding with regard to semantics, let us first undertake to define realism.

No one definition of this word will be likely to satisfy all readers. The following, however, seem to cover most of the major aspects of the term. The Dictionary of World Literature says:

> In literary criticism the term is applied to those works of literature that are fashioned in close imitation of "real" life and which have their subject matter taken from the real world. The realist writer is one that attempts to assume an objective, "photographic," "reportorial," or "artless" standpoint in treating his material, and to avoid introducing into his work his own subjective opinions and feelings.[1]

The definition then goes on to include a list of characteristics of realism.

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[1] The Dictionary of World Literature, ed., Joseph Shipley, (New York: 1943), page 470.

a. the introduction of local scenery and milieu.

b. the reference to contemporary events and customs.

c. the minute descriptions of places and persons, however trivial to the theme.

d. the frank and exact reproduction of dialect and vulgarity.

e. the use of words and technical terms taken from business and science.

f. the inclusion of documents, letters, memoirs, so as to give an air of circumstantiality to the events described.[2]

A Handbook of Literature gives a very complete discussion and, with the above definition, will complete the definition for the purposes of this paper.

> ...Usually realism is considered simply as a manner of writing, a manner relying very largely on the use of infinite detail, honestly and truthfully interpreting life, and as free as possible from subjective writing and prejudices. It has been called the "truthful treatment of material" by one realist. Its purpose, William Dean Howells has said, is "to widen the bounds of sympathy" through the faithfulness to the conditions of human existence. ... Realism is, to quote Howells again, "robust enough to front the every day world and catch the charm of its work-worn, care-worn, brave, kindly face." ... Action and incident are subordinated to people and motives from which they act ... it presents the individual rather than the type character, it should be interested in George Babbitt who may be a "realtor" rather than in George Babbitt as a representative of all realtors ... it follows almost necessarily that realism should be psychological in its approach to character ... he [the realist] resorts frequently to details which create sense impressions, details which play on the reader's sense of smell and taste, of hearing, seeing, and feeling.[3]

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[2] Ibid.

[3] Thrall and Hibbard, op. cit., pages 357-358.

Realism is a word which we all use now in speaking of the arts, but, like many words in constant use, it is not easy to define. It is a kind of art which attempts to convey an impression of truth without idealizing or caricaturing or excluding anything, regardless of how common or unclean, if it can be made to strengthen the impression of life. With this interpretation we may well be ready to approach the arts of painting and fiction, but how to approach poetry? It may well be objected that poetry is a field quite apart from the province of fiction and painting. One may quote, for example, Sir Philip Sidney, who says in his Defense of Poesy,

> Only the Poet ... lifted up with the vigor of his owne invention dooth growe in effect into another nature, in making things either better than Nature bringeth forth, or quite anewe, formes such as never were in Nature, as the Heroes, Demigods, Cyclops, Chimeras, Furies and such like .... Nature never [put] forth the earth in so rich tapistry as divers Poets have done, neither with so pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet smelling flowers, nor whatsoever else may make the too much loved earth more lovely. Her world is brazen, the Poets only deliver a golden.[4]

How much great English poetry may be characterized by the three words, mythology, romance, and idealism? A great deal, certainly, but by no means all. The poetry of realism is an essential and characteristic part of the English heritage which has been commonly ignored.

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[4] Sir Philip Sidney, Defense of Poesy in Tudor Poetry and Prose, Hebel and others, eds., (New York: 1953) page 805.

Wordsworth is a realist with prophetic powers; Byron is temperamentally a realist but lacks the mystic element of Wordsworth and has instead more of the epic and mock-heroic power. Then there is the rational, amused detachment of Pope, Goldsmith, and the rest of the Augustans, which is still a realism. Close on the heels of the Augustans comes Crabbe -- described by Smith in Rejected Addresses as a "pope in worsted stockings." He has often been considered a mere imitator of Pope. Actually, Crabbe -- with his eye always on the popular preference -- linked his work to Pope's by the use of the Augustan style and metre and then proceeded along his own development of realism quite different from that of Pope, as it is from that of Wordsworth and Byron.

Realism as a term in the arts was unknown to Crabbe, but he, nevertheless, makes a very billiant defense of its principle in the "Preface" to the Tales. Here we do not see the rebellion of a Wordsworth or a Whitman demanding recognition for a self-conceived mode, hitherto unknown. Crabbe bases his argument as firmly on textual references as did Sir Philip Sidney, and, with the skill of a polished orator, he sets up and knocks down such illustrious strawmen as Shakespeare himself.

It would be perhaps unwise to attribute to Shakespeare's personal philosophy of composition the words of the Duke of Athens, but we may assume, at least, that they express a

popular belief of their times, indeed, for most of the history of literary criticism.

> The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling
> Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
> And as imagination bodies forth
> The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
> Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
> A local habitation, and a name.[5]

Crabbe must then defend his still unnamed child (i. e. realism) against such words as these. For certainly, Crabbe's eye has never rolled in a "fine frenzy."[6] He must isolate the poetic character and then work his way into the definition. There is to be no attempt to circumvent the tradition but merely to stretch it sufficiently to include such works as his own. Crabbe makes it quite clear that he will use only the established requisites of poetry to defend his style. He says,

> Nevertheless, it must be granted that the pretentions of any composition to be regarded as poetry will depend upon that definition of the poetic character which he who undertakes to determine the question has considered decisive.[7]

Now Crabbe establishes the popular poetic character. He

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[5] William Shakespeare, Midsummer's Night Dream, Act V, Scene I.

[6] In "Sir Eustace Gray," and "World of Dreams," Crabbe achieves a highly polished and impressive poetic frenzy, which is frequently attributed to opium. See Milk of Paradise by Meyer H. Abrams, Cambridge, Harvard Honors Thesis, 1934.

[7] George Crabbe, "Preface" to Tales in The Poetical Works of George Crabbe, A. J. and R. M. Carlyle, eds. (London: 1914) page Hereafter this work will be referred to in footnotes as Crabbe.

is one who

> ... taking captive the imagination of his readers, ... elevates them above the grossness of actual being into the soothing and pleasant atmosphere of supra-mundane existence: there he obtains for his visionary inhabitants the interest that engages a reader's attention without ruffling his feelings, and excites that moderate kind of sympathy which the realities of nature oftentimes fail to produce, either because they are so familiar and insignificant that they excite no determinate emotion, or are so harsh and powerful that the feelings excited are grating and distasteful.[8]

One may suspect that a wry smile crossed the lips of Crabbe as he wrote these last words. Now he has the character of poetry. Does he fit? No. How does one manage to work into an already established understanding which by its very existence excludes one? First Crabbe says that what he does is not a matter of personal volition.

> ... with me the way I take is not a matter of choice, but of necessity: I present not my Tales to the reader as if I had chosen the best method of ensuring his approbation but as using the only means I possessed of engaging his attention.[9]

Such humility is soon reinforced as Crabbe places all other poets above himself and argues that if he cannot be called a poet and his works poetry, then neither can the works of others.

> ... Still, that these poets should so entirely engross the title as to exclude those who address productions to the plain sense and sober judgement of their readers, rather than to their fancy and imagination, I must repeat that I am unwilling to

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[8] Ibid., page 217.

[9] Ibid., page 215.

> admit -- because I conceive that by granting such right of exclusion, a vast deal of what has been hitherto received as genuine poetry would no longer be entitled to that appellation.[10]

After a brief catalogue of poets with whom he feels a kinship of style, he brings the matter to the most eminent of writers of that period. Says Crabbe,

> ... it will be found that Pope himself has no small portion of this actuality of relation, this nudity of description and poetry without an atmosphere.[11]

Here, for the first time, Crabbe voices the theory of his own realism. It is a definition that will be found lacking in several rather important points when compared with the ones quoted above, but one must not forget that Crabbe was not trying to present a new definition of poetry but to be accepted by the old. He has naturally minimized the difference wherever possible. But in a letter to his friend, Mrs. Leadbeater, he explains his philosophy of composition less guardedly; it is one which is much closer to what we know today as realism.

> I will tell you readily about my 'creatures' ... There is not one of whom I had not in my mind the original; but I was obliged, in some cases, to take them from their real situations, in one or two instances to change even the sex, and, in many, the circumstances. The nearest to real life was the proud, ostentatious man in The Borough; who disguises an ordinary mind by doing great things; but the others approach to reality at greater or less distances. Indeed, I do not know that I could paint merely from my own fancy; and there is no cause why I should.[12]

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[10] Ibid., page 217.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Huchon, op. cit., page 309.

Thus, privately if not publicly, to the charge of his detractors that realism has no proper place in poetry, Crabbe replies that poetry has no proper range outside realism. Crabbe is, of course, too subtle to run the risk of offending his readers by saying so in an outright way, but he manges to imply as much in his tongue-in-cheek, obsequious manner.

> I most cordially assent to their opinion who assert that his (the poet's) principal exertions must be to engage the attention of his readers; and further, I must allow that the effect of poetry should be to lift the mind from the painful realities of actual existence, from its every day concerns, and its perpetually occurring vexations, and to give it repose by substituting objects in their place which it may contemplate with some degree of interest and satisfaction: but what is there in all this, which may not be effected by a fair representation of existing character?[13]

Crabbe concludes his argument by pointing out that so long as the troubles of the characters have no particular relation to the reader, but are the anxieties of other men, then they will produce the same interest as they would if they were the perils and adventures of a romance. Since fiction must assume the role of reality to be effective, then it is not illogical to allow realism to don the characteristics of fiction. Lastly, it is not so important to the nature of poetry whether the events related are based on truth or purely the product of imagination; it is how the poem is conducted that must decide if it be poetry or not.

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[13] Crabbe, page 218.

There are two points of particular interest in this "Preface" which must be taken into account when considering Crabbe's realism. In the last quoted passage from the "Preface," he stresses the 'painful realities' that a poet can reveal which may please and interest his readers, if they are the concerns of others and not those of the reader. Such an idea is a rather new concept and actually embodies a theory of tragedy, which in some ways resembles Aristotle's but includes an element of realism with which the Greeks were not much concerned. We might call Crabbe the first "tragic realist" in English poetry.[14] But Crabbe does not have much of a following in the next period of literature. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Byron, and Shelly were all to eclipse him, and Victorian poetry intended to follow the idealism of Shelly and the romanticism of the others rather than Crabbe's realism.

The other point which should be noted in the end of the "Preface" appears in the last paragraph, where Crabbe writes,

> Nothing will be found that militates against the rules of propriety and good manners, nothing that offends against the more important precepts of morality and religion.[15]

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[14] V. de Sola Pinto, "Realism in English Poetry," in Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association, XXV, (Oxford: 1940) pages 81-100.

[15] Crabbe, page 218.

This is a statement which is indeed at variance with the popular concept of realism as it stands today. Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine the early French realist or the twentieth century realistic novelist excluding something on the grounds of impropriety or bad taste. That which "offends against the more important precepts of morality and religion" is now rather to be desired than avoided. Crabbe may not be dismissed from the ranks of realism on this count, however. Crabbe was a minister and a truly religious man; it would be inconsistent with life as he saw it to offend these precepts. He does not avoid writing of those who do, but when he does, his moralistic intent is quite clearly pointed out, as in "The Village,"

> Yet why, you ask, these humble crimes relate,
> Why make the poor as guilty as the great?
> To show the great, those mightier sons of pride,
> How near in vice the lowest are allied;
> Such are their natures and their passions such,
> But these disguise too little, those too much:
> So shall the man of power and pleasure see
> In his own slave as vile a wretch as he; [16]

It is hardly necessary for such an obvious moral to be pointed out to any intelligent reader, but Crabbe cannot leave the interpretation to chance. He has a lesson to teach, and he does it by moralizing, example, and repetition.

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[16] Crabbe, page 39.

The major points of Crabbe's realism are his description without atmosphere, subject-matter confined to actuality, and narrative without exaggeration. This was Crabbe's system of poetry or philosophy of composition, and it was as challenging as any of his time. It is on this "poetic system" that Crabbe's reputation has fluctuated from a position among the most prominent of his times to one of almost complete obscurity. A few examples will serve to illustrate this point. From a magazine of his own times comes the following:

> ... he is not only the first poet now living of his kind, but ... he is likewise the first, of his kind, of any that the country has ever produced. He is at the head of a new species of poetry, the comic descriptive. Taking the pen of a comic writer, and the fancy, the images, the spirit of poetry, he presents the public with a poetical comedy, or comic poem, in which humour, character, and even plot ... are portrayed with the effect of a dramatist, and with the vigor of poetical feeling and expression. [17]

One may, of course, feel that this reviewer did not much understand the true purpose of Crabbe's satire, but his understanding of Crabbe's position as a poet seems to be quite accurate, for we see elsewhere such remarks as this:

> This distinguished and powerful writer has traced for himself a path, which is, to the best of our knowledge, new in poetry. He has assumed for his

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[17] La Belle Assemblée, new ser., II, (July, 1810) 36.

> subject, the middling and lower ranks of life; their ordinary pursuits, pleasures, cares.[18]

These are words of high praise from the leading critical reviews of the time, and many more could be cited, but Crabbe's reputation was not to remain so untarnished for long. It was to sink, and he was to be almost forgotten, so nearly forgotten, indeed, that the editors of a new edition of his poems in 1914 wrote:

> It is not so much to be wondered at that Crabbe has been almost forgotten as that he should still be remembered; for he wrote in the first years of the splendours and glories of the Romantic Movement, and it is not strange that his sober, uninspired voice should almost have been forgotten. Had his poetry appeared a few years earlier, it would have marked a great and almost revolutionary crisis in literature, but it was just a little too late, and his "ineffectual fires" paled before the dawn of a new day.[19]

The problem which has bothered so many literary historians when dealing with Crabbe is, why was Crabbe so highly regarded in his own day and so soon forgotten thereafter? It might be pointed out that while Crabbe was very much publicized by the reviews and the critics, he was never very popular with the people who bought the books of poetry. One publisher lost a great deal of money for paying too dearly for an edition of Crabbe's works, and this was at the peak of his popularity.

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[18] "Of Living Poets of Great Britain," in Edinburgh Annual Register, I, (1802), 435.

[19] A. J. and R. M. Carlyle, "Introduction," in Poetical Works of George Crabbe, page 5.

Crabbe was popular; he had made an enduring impression, but it was not to be compared with the popularity of Moore or Byron.

Crabbe's poetry received much criticism during his life. Whereas most of the leading critics, including Johnson and Jeffrey, were supporting Crabbe and his realistic poetry, William Hazlitt in his Contemporary Portraits voiced the opinion of the opposition. Hazlitt compares the poetry of Cambell with that of Crabbe and says,

> If the poetry of one is like the arch of the rainbow, spanning and adorning the earth, that of the other is like a dull, leaden cloud hanging over it. Mr. Crabbe's style might be cited as an answer to Audrey's question, 'Is poetry a true thing?' There are here no ornaments, no tinsel of words. His song is one sad reality, one unraised, unvaried note of unavailing woe. Literal fidelity serves him in the place of invention; he assumes importance by a number of petty details; he rivets attention by being tedious. He not only deals in incessant matters of fact, but in matters of fact of the most familiar, the least animating, and the most unpleasant kind. But he relies for the effect of novelty on the microscopic minuteness with which he dissects the most trivial objects, and for the interest he excites, on the unshrinking determination with which he handles the most painful... He takes the most trite, the most gross and obvious, and revolting part of nature, for the subject of his elaborate descriptions; but it is nature still, and nature is a great, mighty Goddess ... Mr. Crabbe is one of the most popular and admired of living authors. His muse is not one of the "Daughters of Memory," but the old, toothless, mumbling dame herself, doling out the gossip and scandal of the neighborhood, recounting to tidem verbis et literis what happens in every place of the kindom every hour of the year, and fastening always on the worst as the most palatable morsels. [20]

To a generation brought up on The Rats, The Lower Depths, Pére Goriot, and The Egoist, the truth rather than the

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[20] William Hazlitt, The Spirit of the Age, or Contemporary Portraits, (London: 1935) pages 243-244.

ugliness of Crabbe's poetry is outstanding; we see him as the subtlest psychologist of his time and the forerunner of modern psychological fiction, but this generation has little patience with heroic couplets.

CRABBE'S WORLD

All of his early life George Crabbe was in an excellent position to observe the life of his times and report this life as a realist. Of the many themes treated by Crabbe in his poetry, there is abundant evidence to indicate that he had a first-hand knowledge of almost all. At his birthplace in Aldborough, Crabbe saw, lived with, and was one of the poor farmers and seamen of the "bold, surly, savage race," about whom he writes in his poetry. His early association with the sea, for example, left an indelible impression on the young boy which was later to manifest itself frequently in the poetry of the man. The Borough is a good example.

> Turn to the watery world! -- but who to thee
> (A wonder yet unview'd) shall paint -- the sea?
> Various and vast, sublime in all its forms,
> When lull'd by Zephers, or when roused by storms,
> In colours changing, when from clouds and sun
> Shades after shades upon the surface run;
> Embrown'd and horrid now, and now serene,
> In limpid blue, and evanescent green;
> And oft the foggy banks on ocean lie;
> Lift the fair sail and cheat the experienced eye.[1]

Medicine was Crabbe's first field, and he worked at it, more or less regularly, from the time he was fourteen until he was twenty-five. As a doctor's apprentice Crabbe had the opportunity to study the medical profession

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[1] Crabbe, page 109.

with unusual closeness. It was a field of study quite different from the highly technical one which we know today. There was much to criticise, and much superstition was entangled with some little scientific knowledge.

> As late as 1748 Dr. Mead, one of the most celebrated physicians of his day, published a treastise "concerning the influence of the sun and the moon upon the human bodies, and the diseases thereby produced," showing that the old belief in astrology was by no means abandoned, even by men of education.[2]

Even though he detested his profession and the laxity with which it was practiced, Crabbe tried to go beyond the small amount of knowledge required of a doctor.

> Later he became quite successful at prescribing for his parishioners at Muston, though he failed as surgeon apothecary. His learning was on a broader plain than many successful doctors, but it was very shallow in any given field. He might still have attained success if he had had a more sympathetic clientele.[3]

Crabbe was fully aware of his limitations and had worked earnestly to overcome them. One may rest assured that when he did set up practice as surgeon-apothecary in Aldborough, there was nothing missing in the legal requirements for the position even though Crabbe felt personally inadequate. Rosamond Bayne-Powell points out,

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[2] Rosamond Bayne-Powell, English Country Life in the Eighteenth Century, (London: 1937) page 132.

[3] F. J. Foakes-Jackson, Social Life in England 1750-1850, (New York: 1916), page 59.

> A man could set up as an apothecary with very little or no experience and no sort of examination. It was not till 1815 that an act of Parliament obliged men to qualify before setting up as a doctor... William Read, who is described as, "mountebank, occulist, and sworn operator for the eyes," could not read, his detractors said, but he managed to get a knighthood and to keep his own chariot.[4]

It was, perhaps, William Read, or some other member of the same school, that Crabbe had in mind when he wrote the lines in the seventh letter of The Borough,

> How strange to add, in this nefarious trade,
> That men of parts are dupes by dunces made;
> That creatures, nature meant should clean our streets,
> Have purchased lands and mansions, parks and seats;[5]

or the earlier and stronger lines in The Village,

> All pride and business, bustle and conceit,
> With looks unaltered by these scenes of woe,
> With speed that, entering, speaks his haste to go,
> He bids the gazing throng around him fly,
> And carries fate and physic in his eye:
> A potent quack, long versed in human ills,
> Who first insults the victims whom he kills;
> Whose murd'rous hand a drowsy Bench protect,
> And whose most tender mercy is neglect.[6]

At the same time Crabbe did not forget those who, though their knowledge was small, like his own, tried faithfully to help the poor patients who came for help.

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[4] Bayne-Powell, op. cit., page 133.

[5] Crabbe, page 137.

[6] Ibid., page 37.

He describes them:

> Helpers of men they're called, and we confess
> Their's the deep study, their's the lucky guess.[7]

Hospitals outside of London were almost nonexistent; the great majority of the people had to depend upon these "potent quacks" for life. This then was a subject well worth the treatment of a realist who knew it intimately and George Crabbe did.

As the son of a poor man, as a worker of the Quay, as an inhabitant of a rural village which depended for its livelihood on both the sea and the soil, Crabbe had a life which revealed to him the suffering and hardship of the poor people. As a doctor and apothecary, he was able to see the people from the position of a professional man, a man of science and medicine. Crabbe was then offered another opportunity -- that of seeing the spiritual side of this seamy existence. It is the position of the clergyman, which also introduced him to the courtly way of life. As the chaplain to the Duke of Rutland, he was able to compare the morals and thoughts of the nobility with those of the pauper -- only to find the evils of one as great as those of the other.

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[7] Crabbe, page 36.

As a physician of the soul Crabbe was as realistic as he was in the execution of his poetry. In the same manner that the doctor ascertains the health of the body by external symptoms, so Crabbe, the preacher diagnosed the condition of the spirit. He was distrustful of the pious conversions that came suddenly after a lifetime of crime and sin. Faith can be sincere only if it is supported by heartfelt repentance and good deeds. In his sermons as in his poetry Crabbe dwells on the actual sins of real people -- usually people in his congregation -- rather than dilate on the abstract and the general qualities of the evils of mankind. In speaking of Crabbe's theology Huchon says;

> It admits that human actions, however virtuous they may be, cannot ensure salvation without the act of faith, and that the justice of the Redeemer, imputed to believers is alone capable of rendering their conduct meritorious and acceptable to God. But "we must endeavor to cooperate with the assisting grace. God worketh in us and with us not without us." Faith must be "fruitful" and be known by certain signs, as "a tree is known by its fruits." "Let it be the Faith," exclaims Crabbe, "which turns us from our sins, and I am sure it will have one great sign of being the true Faith."[8]

Apart from Crabbe's theology, the thing that interests us most in his career as chaplain and preacher is that in this field as in his others he is most concerned with searching into the soul of his people.

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[8] Huchon, op. cit., page 211.

It is understandable that one with such a close view of the people as Crabbe's should wish to inform the world of their misery, and that he must have felt their pain. I cannot agree with Huchon, who says:

> Crabbe always, instead of making himself one with his heroes by force of sympathy, stands aside from them and loads them with reproaches, like a judge delivering a pitiless sentence.[9]

Varley Lang says of this statement,

> This is a misleading statement, for his Crabbe's unfailing humor, his sympathy, even tenderness, and his shrewd, kindly understanding leave no such total impression.[10]

I should go even further. I feel that Crabbe very definitely felt a kinship with his creations. He is didactic and moralistic, but he is one of them, whether he wishes to be or not. A strong argument can be made from the facts of Crabbe's life to support the idea that his poetry has a very definite, protean, and personal identification with his own life. As one reviewer has worded it:

> He is a physician who has assiduously walked from bed to bed through the wards of a vast infirmary... he has plunged into the infection of the hospitals;

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[9] Huchon, op. cit., page 481.

[10] Varley Lang, "Crabbe and the Eighteenth Century," in Journal of English Literary History, V, (1938), page 325.

> surveyed the mansions of sorrow and of pain; taken the gauge of depression and misery, and compared and collected the distress of all men.[11]

The protean character of Crabbe's poetry, however, concerns us only to the extent of its relevancy to realism.

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[11] "Review of John Webb's 'Haverhill'" in Christian Observer, X, (April, 1811), page 5.

CRABBE'S DEPICTION OF COUNTRY LIFE

When Crabbe returned to London, intent on making a name for himself as a man of letters, he very probably did not know what type of poetry would suit him best. Up to this time the only poem he had published which gave any indication of the bent his major works were to take was "Inebriety." Written in 1775, it was one of the longest works of his "Juvenilia" period, but certainly the most frequent style was merely an imitation of Pope. If Crabbe had written no more, he could very appropriately have been called a "Pope in worsted stockings," but, if he had written no more, it is doubtful that he would have been recognized at all.

Crabbe's first printed poem after he reached London was "The Candidate." This certainly did not exhibit any originality, but perhaps the criticism given him by The Monthly Review stimulated his thinking along original lines. The Monthly Review criticized Crabbe "for want of a subject... proper and forceful."[1]

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[1] "Review of 'The Candidate'" in The Monthly Review, LXIII, (September, 1780), pages 226-227.

To a man of Crabbe's experience there were certainly many subjects which were forceful and towards which he had a natural predeliction, but were they proper subjects for poetry? Crabbe knew nature; he knew men. He would have to write about that small section of life which was best known to him, and that meant writing about the humblest heroes of the borough. Certainly there was nothing original in writing poetry about the humble swains and blushing maidens of England's verdant countryside. For centuries poets had exalted the simple beauty and tranquillity of the shepherd and his maid sitting lovingly together on a gentle, green hill, while the lush meadows stretched away into soft mist. But Crabbe knew that such a life was not real. Crabbe had not taken his view of the country from a speeding coach or through the window of a gentleman's country house. He had seen it as the farmer himself sees it. If one did but dare to set to rhyme the life of the poor rustic as Crabbe had seen it, he would, indeed, have an original and forceful subject. With this aim in mind, Crabbe was about to become England's most forceful realist.

Crabbe knew the peasant eclogues which had prattled on for years about the country. Some of them had utilized

realism in their characters and settings though generally only for comic effect. This type of poem as written by Swift, Gay and Pope had remained popular up to the seventies, the decade before the publication of The Village. It was a type of falseness which Crabbe found very objectionable, and he wished to correct an old misconception and, at the same time, produce an original treatment of truth. "Ardenna" by Richard Jago is an example of the type of eclogue against which Crabbe rebelled.

> When o'er the western world fair Science spread
> Her genial ray, and Gothic darkness fled,
> To britain's Isle the Muses took their way,
> And taught her listening groves the tuneful lay.
> 'Twas then two swains the Doric reed essay'd,
> To sing the praises of a peerless maid.
> On Arden's blissful plain her seat she chose,
> And hence her rural name, Ardenna, rose.
> In sportive verse alternately they vied;
> Thus Damon sang, and Lycidas replied...
> Here, gentle swain, beneath the shade reclined,
> Remit thy labours, and unbend thy mind.
> Well with the shepherd's state our cares agree,
> For nature prompts to pleasing industry:
> 'Tis this to all her gifts fresh beauty yields,
> Health to our flocks, and plenty to our fields.
> Yet hath she not imposed unceasing toil,
> Not restless ploughshares always vex the soil.
> Then, shepherd, take the blessings Heaven bestows,
> Assists the song, and sweeten our repose.[2]

To this Crabbe makes an adequate reply.

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[2] Richard Jago, "Ardenna," in The Poems of Gray and Jago, (Chiswick: 1822), pages 227-228.

Yes, thus the Muses sing of happy swains
Because the Muses never knew their pains:
They boast their peasants' pipes; but peasants now
Resign their pipes and plod behind the plough;
And few amid the rural tribe, have time
To number syllables, and play with rhyme.[3]

The poets may indeed be enraptured, but they little know or understand the peasant's care or the labors of the field. To these poets Crabbe readily admits that the rural scene is a thing of beauty, and to others besides the poet.

I grant indeed that fields and flocks have charms
For him that grazes or for him that farms,
But when amid such pleasing scenes I trace
The poor laborious natives of the place,
And see the mid-day sun, with fervid ray,
On their bare heads and dewy temples play;
While some, with feebler heads and fainter hearts,
Deplore their fortune, yet sustain their parts...
By such examples taught, I paint the Cot
As truth will paint it and as Bards will not.[4]

What examples will he use? They will be the sombre, unhappy ones; Crabbe enjoys tracing the gradual decline and death of all hope but is not prompted by sadism. Crabbe has seen suffering too often; to him it is life. He will choose also the vicious stories whose lamentable ends may serve as a moral to all. Corruption, degeneration of minds, the anatomy of failure, and the psychological

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[3] Crabbe, page 34.

[4] Crabbe, pages 34-35.

study of pain -- these are what Crabbe will use almost entirely from this time on. Rene Huchon in writing of Crabbe's devotion to realism says,

> To escape from the atmosphere of illusion which Goldsmith had thrown over the first part of his Deserted Village, Crabbe sat down in front of reality, copied it with all the energy and impartiality in his power, and divided it into a series of little pictures taken from life and transported unchanged into verse.[5]

What is it like, this life "transplanted unchanged into verse"? The best way to find out is to accept Crabbe's invitation.

> Let's seek the winding lane, the narrow row,
> Suburbian prospects, where the traveller stops
> To see the sloping tentment on props,
> With building yard immix'd, and humble shed
> and shops;
> ... Yet now neglected, more offend the eye,
> By gloom and ruin, then the cottage by:
> Places like these the noblest town endures,
> The gayest palace has its sinks and sewers.[6]

Regretful as it may be, we need no more proof of this statement than to visit the nearest slum district of a large city today, or the poor rural areas. Fortunately the amount of such poverty is considerably reduced by humanitarian activities on all levels, but we may well imagine the abject poverty which confronted Crabbe.

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[5] Huchon, op. cit., page 165.

[6] Crabbe, page 181.

There are also descriptions of such intimate scenes as the interior of a poor family's home which social historians do not generally bother to record. Such a one is given in the Parish Register.

> See on the floor what frousy patches rest!
> What nauseous fragments on yon fractured chest!
> What downy dust beneath yon window seat!
> And round these posts that serve this bed for feet;
> This bed where all those tattered garments lie...
> Beds but ill parted by a paltry screen
> Of paper'd lath, or curtain dropt between;
> Daughters and sons to yon compartment creep,
> And parents here beside their children sleep,
> Ye that have power, these thoughtless people part,
> Nor let the ear be first to taint the heart.[7]

The last two lines indicate, in part, what Crabbe wished to accomplish with his verses. He wished to show those in power the true situation of the farm and village life, thus dispelling any illusions they may have had that it was a quiet and beautiful existence. He wished also to move the aristocracy to mercy and understanding and, by doing so, stir the wealthy into some plan to alleviate the unnecessary suffering of the poor.

The validity of the sordid description can be easily verified by consulting almost any of the novels of the day and even later. Charles Dickens, for instance, gives

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[7] Ibid., page 53.

many examples of the type of filth in which the English poor lived. Dorthy Marshall in English Poor in the Eighteenth Century observes that the people generally lived in a squalor and filth which would completely disgust the tender appetites of today.[8]

The state of the poor was a subject which could not help attracting the attention of such an investigating and kindhearted person as Crabbe. In his youth he had lived with poverty, and he had seen it grow as he grew. But Crabbe in his writing of the poor avoids the one thing which seems to have prompted all others to write; that is the cause and cure of poverty. Crabbe merely presents the picture and does it in such a manner as to stir the heart. Then he leaves the solution to his reader.

In 1773 John Scott published his Observations on the Present State of the Vagrant and Parochial Poor. In this pamphlet, he attributes much of the misery in the rural and village areas to the Acts of Enclosure.

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[8] Dorothy Marshall, English Poor in the Eighteenth Century, (London: 1926), passim.

This we cannot ignore if a true picture of the causes of suffering is to be obtained. It is to this system of enclosing the small farms into larger ones that Crabbe refers in The Village.

> But yet in other scenes more fair in view,
> Where Plenty smiles -- Alas! she smiles for few --
> And those who taste not yet behold her store,
> Are as the slaves that dig the golden ore, --
> The wealth around them makes them doubly poor.[9]

If the reader of the idyllic pastoral elogue still has any illusions left, Crabbe would have done with them all.

> Yet grant them health, 'tis not for us to tell,
> Though the head droops not, that the heart is well;
> Or will you praise that homely, healthy fare,
> Plenteous and plain, that happy peasant share!
> Oh! trifle not with wants you cannot feel,
> Nor mock the misery of a stinted meal;
> Homely, not wholesome, plain not plenteous, such
> As you who praise would never deign to touch.[10]

How true this picture of utter despair is, it is difficult to prove at this late date, but we may rest assured that there were many such scenes, and it is highly probable that Crabbe not only saw many of them but was himself involved in many.

The enclosure system which he attacks was obviously the cause of much of this suffering. From 1760 to 1844

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[9] Crabbe, page 36.

[10] Crabbe, page 36.

under the enclosure acts were enclosed about 4,276,868 acres of commonfields and wastes; more was to be enclosed in the future. What was the effect of this tremendous undertaking, and how did it bring such havoc to the village laborer? In order to answer this question we must first understand the rural economy.

In 1773 the population of England and Wales totaled about 5,450,000. Of this number only 1,400,000 lived in urban areas. The rest of the population lived on the farm land, many as small farmers. Small scale farming was never a lucrative way of life; only farming on a large scale paid any considerable sums, but the small farmer, after he had harvested his meager crop, was glad enough to help the larger farmer get his in. In this way, he was a landholder and a farm laborer, and by such duel employment it was possible for the small farmer to live.[11]

Throughout Crabbe's life there remained a considerable amount of waste land, (i. e. land which was not incorporated into large farms and could be used by the villagers as common grazing land) but enclosure was going on rapidly. The waste-lands and commons, which were now being lost, had long been a mainstay to the rural poor.

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[11] Bayne-Powell, op. cit., page 8.

> ...the churchwardens and overseers were authorized to build cottages on the waste for paupers, without the statutory four acres of land being attached. Also in certain cases poor persons were allowed by Quarter Sessions to build themselves cottages on the waste.12

If such a sweeping general measure as enclosure were to be tried today, it would include a long and involved investigation by government committees; such committees were also set up in England to study the advisability of enclosure. To these committees were written reports by men who had made a study of one particular area. Middleton, the writer of The Report on Middlesex, wrote the following as his opinion of the common fields:

> ...they are, in many instances, of real injury to the public: by holding out a lure to the poor man -- I mean of materials wherein to build his cottage, and ground to erect it upon: together with firing and the run of his poultry and pigs for nothing. This is, of course, temptation sufficient to induce a great number of poor persons to settle upon the boarders [sic] of such commons. But the mischief does not end here: for having gained these trifling advantages, through neglect or convenience of the lord of the mannor, it unfortunately gives their minds an improper bias, and inculcates a desire to live, from that time forward, without labour, or at least with as little as possible.13

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12 Marshall, op. cit., page 108.

13 J. L. Hammond and Barbara Hammond, The Village Labourer 1760-1832, (London: 1924), page 38.

If the truth were to be known, it is probable that the writers of such reports were more afraid of having to pay higher wages than they were of the paupers becoming too lazy. Laziness, among the upper classes at least, seemed more a virtue than a vice and was practiced religiously by most.

One of the witnesses who appeared before the Select Committee of Commons Inclosure was a Mr. Carus Wilson. Readers of Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre may remember Mr. Wilson as the original of Mr. Broklehurst. In the novel the pious Mr. Broklehurst reprimanded Miss Temple for being too generous to the pupils at Lowood.

> Oh! Madam, when you put bread and cheese, instead of burnt porridge, into these children's mouths, you may indeed feed their vile bodies, but you little think how you starve their immortal souls.[14]

In view of this account of his literary counterpart, it is not surprising to find that Mr. Wilson thought that the system of open commons encouraged misconduct, and "hardens the heart, and causes a good deal of mischief, and at the same time puts the person in an unfavorable position for the approach of what might be serviceable to him in a moral and

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[14] Charlotte Brontë, Jane Eyre, (New York: 1943) page 152.

religious point of view."[15]

The villagers, of course, did not sit by idly and let their lands, or what they had come to consider their lands, be taken away from them. To the best of their limited ability to respond, they did. The most effective way to make themselves heard was by petition. In order to give a short picture of the villager's view, I quote from a petition sent to the Committee in 1797 from the people of Rounds in Nothamptonshire.

> ... the cottagers and other Persons entitled to Right of Common of the lands intended to be inclosed, will be deprived of an inestimable Privilege... a Privilege that enables them not only to maintain themselves and their Families in the Depth of Winter when they cannot, even for their money, obtain from the Occupiers of other Lands the smallest Portion of Milk or whey for such necessary Purpose... a more ruinous Effect of this Inclosure will be the almost total Depopulation of their Town, now filled with bold and hardy Husbandmen.[16]

One may well imagine that such men as Cyrus Wilson rejoiced at the prospect of forcing these "bold and hardy Husbandmen" into industrial towns where they would have to work for slave wages. It might also be mentioned that the people of Northamptonshire lost their commons despite their petition. This was the usual case. This was not the only cause of poverty and not the only cause of grief to the pauper.

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[15] Hammond, op. cit., page 38.

[16] Ibid., page 39.

Back in the borough, Crabbe has more to say about the evils and pitfalls of the poor. Let us listen as Ellen Orford recounts her tragic tale. Crabbe describes a widow's cottage; in front of it sits blind Ellen Orford, old and bent. First Crabbe delays long enough to ridicule the fairy-tale type of fiction with which he had wasted many of his hours, and then Ellen relates her own tragedy. Once beautiful and pure and innocent, she has come to a lamentable end.

Ellen begins her story by telling of her early life with doting parents, which ends abruptly with the death of the father. Ellen's mother remarries a merchant and has several children by him. The merchant, vexed by constant business troubles, becomes surly and disagreeable. Ellen is wooed by a man who is her social superior, and is deserted with an idiot baby. Expelled from her home, she lives with a poor sister in near starvation for four years. Finally she marries and has five children, but her husband, persuaded by religious motives against the bastard child, forsakes her and then dies.

> With him died all our prospects, and once more
> I shared th' allotments of the parish poor;
> They took my children too, and this I know
> Was just and lawful, but I felt the blow:[17]

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[17] Crabbe, page 190.

Ellen is left with her idiot maid and one unhealthy boy. Three of her sons die, and one, the most promising of all, is led into evil ways and dies in prison. Her oldest boy is drowned -- 'a seaman in a hoy' -- leaving a number of children to Ellen's care. The idiot maid is seduced and dies in childbirth. With the death of her last child Ellen becomes a teacher as a last means of support. Now, old, blind, and penniless, she again becomes the subject of the poor relief.

Not even Crabbe can sustain such tragedy longer than he has done here. Regardless of how poorly I have retold this story, Crabbe never crosses the line into the ridiculous. The reader is made to feel the horror of poor Ellen's situation but never questions the probability of these misfortunes striking a single person. Crabbe is at his best when writing about just such a tragic downfall as Ellen Orford's. There is little resemblence between Crabbe and Pope here. Varley Lang points out,

> It must be emphasized that Crabbe's claim to originality rests largely in his masterly treatment of character in his psychological realism. There is nothing in the Eighteenth Century verse which approaches his skillful depiction of men and women; the nearest thing is the character portrait which, being satirical, is usually only a caricature, however brilliant. Crabbe, unlike his predecessors in the century, does not approve of personal satire.[18]

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[18] Lang, op. cit., page 313.

The question of how realistic is the story still remains. Are the events depicted by Crabbe probable, and are they consistent with the attitudes and laws of the day?

Little can be said to support the first part of the story until Ellen meets her lover. The situation up to this point is quite probable and puts no tax on the reader's sense of reality. What then of the lover? We know of this young man only that he was of the local gentry and in social status well above the farm girl Ellen.

The lover might be a squire or the son of a squire, or he might be a large farmer. From Richardson's "Mr. B " to George Eliot's "Captain Donnithorne," the country squire is portrayed as an overly amorous gentleman who is held at his country estate only by the prospect of inveigling the rustic maids into the master bedroom. The farmer, however, is a much more likely candidate.

Before the enclosure acts the farms varied in size from four or five acres to hundreds of acres. The only class system dividing these farmers was occasionally one of birth. Under this custom the farmer quite frequently married a rural maid whose station, economically, was below his and no one thought the worse of him. But as the

enclosure system began to incorporate the commons, there were no small farmers left. In all respects the "Great Farmer" considered himself above the villagers. Generally he was the squire who had discovered that farming could be profitable. Hammond points out in The Village Labourer,

> The change in the status of the farmer came at a time of a general growth of luxury. All classes above the poor adopted a more extravagant and ostentatious style and scale of living.[19]

It is not too important, however, that the reader see the lover as a farmer; a squire would do as well, and the evil done by this class system is just as great.

It is characteristic of Crabbe that he does not agree with the realistic novelist of his time. His treatment of character is always moral and is generally confined to the lower and middle classes. No such promiscuity as that found in Tom Jones is allowed to go unheeded in Crabbe's poems. Where evil is done, it pays the price of justice, and sometimes we must feel that it is a rather hard justice. This, of course, is what Crabbe wishes us to feel.

The line in which Ellen laments, "I shared the allotments of the parish poor," may have little tragic significance to the reader in the twentieth century, but to those

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[19] Hammond, op. cit., page 214.

of the nineteenth it did, for they knew what a pitiful allowance this was. Roger North, commenting on the state of the poor, wrote,

> When a poor person or Family is maintained by the Parish, it is done so grudgeingly by an extreme strait, that life is scarce maintained by it. This Parish Poverty is a condition devoid of all comfort. For to be deprived of Alms (as mostly upon that account they are) and to be left to Overseer's Allowances, and having no other means to assist, is little better than a slow starving; a short life with less pain were to be preferred to this pining Death with Parish Allowance.[20]

And another writer notes "that the inadequacy of the parish pensions was one of the chief causes of begging." To put a halt to the begging, the parish poor were required to wear a badge and, while doing so, could not beg on pain of losing their allowance. They were, however, allowed to go from house to house at set hours to ask for food.[21]

If Ellen were in difficult straits at this point of her misfortunes, one may well imagine the dire prospects she faced when thrown out of her home with a bastard child. The laws covering this crime were unusually harsh and strict. Dorothy Marshall states:

> In the execution of the bastardy laws, parochial officers appear to have been bereft of both humanity and decency, and nothing in the old poor

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[20] Marshall, op. cit., page 33.

[21] Ibid., page 102.

law presents a more disgusting spectacle of callous inhumanity.[22]

It was the usual custom to try to drive the mother out of the parish if possible; the second step, if the first failed, was to force the mother, by any means possible, to reveal the name of the father. If the mother asked for relief, the overseers could take her before the nearest magistrate and make her swear under oath the name of the father.

No word other than brutal can adequately portray the actions of the parish overseers towards such women. Women were moved from any parish if they had not lived almost their complete lives there. Certainly they had to be natives of the place. Frequently such removals were so close to the confinement period as to cause the death of the mother. An entry in the records of one parish reveals the typical action of the parish.

> 1723 for removing of four bige belly'd women [sic] out of ye parish when like to bee chargeable...16-00;
> 1724 Gave hir to go with hie Great Belly...16-00;
> 1731 for maintaining a Poore women found in the forest in Labour who afterwards Died ...2-0...
> 1722 to a big belly'd woman several days and nights at nursing at Robinsons and conveying her to Chigvile after she had gathered strength to prevent her lying in here, she fell to pieces in 2 or 3 days there...[23]

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[23] Ibid., page 212.

Another thing which added to Ellen's misery when she is for the second time at the mercy of the parish, is the loss of her children. Here is the part of the "just and lawful" act which made this possible.

> Churchwardens and Overseers or the greater Part of them, by the Assent of any Two Justices of the Peace aforesaid, to bind any such children, as aforesaid, to be Apprentices, where they shall see convenient, till such man-child shall come to the Age of four and twenty Years, and such Women-child to the age of one and twenty Years, or the time of her Marriage.[24]

In 1758 William Bailey reviewed the law and condemned it.

> The present state method of putting out poor Children Apprentices is very well-known to be attended with great Inconveniences, as it lays an Encumbrance on Estates and Families. Few of these poor Children now serve out their time, and many of them are driven, by neglect and cruelty, into such Immoralities as to frequently render them the objects of Public Justice. Many of those who take Parish Apprentices are so inhumane, as to regard only the pecuniary considerations; and having once received that, they, by ill usage and undue severity, often drive the poor creatures from them; and so leave them in a more destitute Condition and at a riper Age for Mischief.[25]

Another result of the mistreatment was that when a child was quite young, as we may assume several of Ellen's children were, they very seldom lived for more than two or three weeks; the most frequent cause of death was starvation or some disease resulting from lack of proper

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[24] Ibid., page 182.

[25] Ibid., page 203.

nourishment. The nurses generally used the money for their own employment. This deplorable condition was commonly known by the parish overseers and actually, in some cases, encouraged.

Our actual knowledge of the pauper apprentices is limited, particularly in rural areas. A young boy or girl had very little opportunity to voice his grievances, but, even worse, there were few to listen and few who cared. Crabbe relates just such a story in the twenty-second letter of The Borough. Peter Grimes is a fisherman with a very obvious sadistic tendency. He has had three apprentices, whom he has tortured and killed. The story is one horror after another, but to the reader of a humane civilization the attitude of the town seems as horrible as the crimes perpetrated by Grimes.

> None could the ridges on his back behold,
> None sought him shiv'ring in the winter's cold;
> None put the question, -- 'Peter, dost thou give
> The boy his food? -- What, man! the lad must live!..
> None reason'd thus -- and some, on hearing cries,
> Said calmly, "Grimes is at his exercise."
> Pinn'd, beaten, cold, pinched, threaten'd, and abused --
> His efforts punished and his food refused, --
> Awake tormented, soon aroused from sleep, --
> Struck if he wept, and yet compell'd to weep,
> The trembling boy dropp'd down and strove to pray,
> Received a blow and trembling turned away,
> Or sobb'd and hid his piteous face; -- while he,
> The savage master, grinn'd in horrid glee:[26]

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[26] Crabbe, page 197.

In an age when a woman had been released after being proved guilty of beating her apprentice to death, public opinion was not easily aroused; there were many such cases.

However, if an apprentice should run away from his master, he was liable to arrest. If he were caught and punished, the overseers might try to induce him to run away again, thus lightening the burden on the parish treasury. As a result, the roads were filled with beggars: some were runaway apprentices; some women who had been seduced and deserted and driven from the parish to wander and steal; some were children, forced by their parents to beg, or just deserted. This explains Ellen's words,

> Three sons I follow'd to the grave and one --
> Oh! can I speak of that unhappy son?

He is the son, the runaway apprentice, who is executed. Only one reaches maturity, the sailor who drowns at sea. The last ugly little story is that of the idiot maid become pregnant. Ellen suspects the sick-pale brother who dies, seemingly of sympathy, when the idiot maid dies of childbirth. Such a story seems only to add to the picture of utter abandon which the poor felt, and, indeed, such cases of incest were not unknown. Crabbe has Ellen in remarkably good mental condition, however, when she enforces the moralistic theme in the last lines.

> My senses fail not all; I speak, I pray;
> By night my rest, my food I take by day;

And as my mind looks cheerful to my end,
I love mankind and call my God my friend.[27]

Crabbe gives other pictures of country life in The Village, The Parish Register and more in The Borough. The Village is the shortest and most condensed and gives a small picture packed with the people and cares of the rustic scene.

But these are scenes where Nature's niggard hand
Gave a spare portion to the famished land:
Hers is the fault, if there mankind complain
Of fruitless toil and labour spent in vain:

Obviously, he is writing about his own home Aldborough, where the sand and waste lands made very poor farm land. It is a seacoast town, and Crabbe knows the people. He has known them from childhood. Now, he will paint them in his poetry. The figures are sketchy and very brief: the doctor, "whose most tender mercy is neglect," farmers, and cottagers who ask,

Why do I live, when I desire to be
At once from life and life's long labour free?

and there is the parish poor house that holds

The lame, the blind, and far the happiest they!
The moping idiot and the madman gay.

and lastly

The busy priest, detain'd by weightier care,
Defers his duty till the day of prayer;[28]

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[28] Ibid., pages 34-38.

but for this stab at the procrastinating priest, Crabbe apologizes in a footnote which admits that it does not happen often, but that it has happened at all is "sufficient reason for its being reckoned amoung the evils which may happen to the poor."[29] Then he paints the pleasures of the town: the quiet talk after church, the brief hours of leisure free from toil.

> Their careful masters brood the painful thought,
> Much in their mind they murmur and lament,
> That one fair day should be so idly spent.[30]

Then comes the evening, and the village vices take charge of the street; drinking and slander they are, and "at her approach domestic peace is gone." Crabbe presents his people; no handsome swain who whiles away the leisure hours writing poetry is here,

> Nor are the nymphs that breathe the rural air,
> So fair as Cynthia's, nor so chaste as fair:[31]

This is the Village, and there is little reason to question the authenticity with which Crabbe speaks. The picture is clear and quite believable.

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[29] Ibid., page 38.

[30] Ibid., page 36.

[31] Ibid., page 37.

WORKHOUSES AND POOR LAWS

In the abstract generalities of life -- government, wars, diseases, poverty, toil, and hunger, -- in any of these larger generalities, Crabbe showed little interest; it was the smaller whirlpool of the individual within the greater storms that he was fond of following. It was only on rare occasions that Crabbe allowed himself to be related to the larger movements of mankind. It was not poor men that Crabbe wished to depict but a poor man, and always a very definite man with a story which was his own. When Crabbe struck out at an institution, he did it by giving an example of the ill that that institution had produced.

It was by such pictures as the following that Crabbe unleashed his verbal attacks on the poor laws in England. Speaking of the poorhouse in The Borough Crabbe wrote,

> Who govern here, by general rules must move,
> Where ruthless custom rends the bond of love.
> Nations we know have natur's law transgressed,
> And snach'd the infant from the parent's breast;[1]

To the poet of rural England no problem was of greater urgency than the improvement of the life of the agricultural

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[1] Crabbe, page 180.

laborer. The few shillings he could earn as a hired hand on the large farms were scarcely enough to keep him alive, not to mention provide for his old age. There was a law which required the parish to provide for the old and poor. This law dated back to 1601.[2] The provisions of the Poor Law of 1601 stated that every pauper had a right to subsistence at the expense of the parish. Soon after this law was passed, parish houses were built which provided a place for the "old, lame and impotent, blind, etc.," with a roof and four walls and usually very little else.[3] In 1697 Parliament allowed parishes in the same district to build a single large house to supply lodging for the several parishes surrounding it. By this consolidation, the rate payers' money was spared, and the "workhouse" was created.[4]

Crabbe's treatment of the "houses" deserves special study in our consideration of his realism. In The Village Crabbe was writing of the parish house when he said,

> Their's is yon house that holds the parish-poor,
> Whose walls of mud scarce bear the broken door;
> There, where the putrid vapours, flagging, play,

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[2] Sir Frederick Eden, The State of the Poor, (London: 1797), page 135.

[3] Ibid., pages 135-136.

[4] Ibid., page 183.

> And the dull wheel hums doleful through the day; --
> There Children dwell who know no parents' care;
> Parents, who know no children's love, dwell there!
> Heartbroken matrons on their joyless bed,
> Forsaken wives and mothers never wed,
> Dejected widows with unheeded tears,
> And crippled age with more than childhood fears;
> The lame, the blind, and far the happiest they!
> The moping idiot and the madman gay.[5]

It is to be noticed that Crabbe had nothing to say about the system of government which allowed these parish-houses and little to say about the houses themselves. He was concerned with the poor wretches who lived inside, with the old who were brought here to die, "amid the scenes of grief to grieve."

> Here sorrowing, they each kindred sorrow scan,
> And the cold charities of man to man:
> Whose laws indeed for ruin'd age provide,
> And strong compulsion plucks the scrap from pride;
> But still that scrap is brought with many a sigh.
> And pride embitters what it can't deny.[6]

In this passage Crabbe declared his true purpose in poetry. Perhaps it is not so impressive as Milton's "To justify the ways of God to man," but it is a worthy calling to show "the cold charities of man to man."

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[5] Crabbe, page 36.

[6] Ibid., page 37.

The history of these houses is quite long, and their history is black. Crabbe, it seems, felt that perhaps the coloring he had given the parish house was too strong, but if we look elsewhere, the picture seems even worse. Sir Walter Besant describes a dwelling place of the poor in London:

> On one side of the steps was a water tank, on the other side a dust heap, in the corner the common latrine for the whole court... The pavement consisted of broken stones which had formerly been flat slabs; the court contained eight rooms in front and two at the back, and was inhabited by fifty-four persons ... There are no bedsteads, chairs, or tables, a few ragged clothes are drying before a little fire in the grate, above the mantel are a looking glass about three inches high and some torn prints of the crucifixion, etc.; in the cupboards, without doors, are pieces of broken crockery; a kind of bed in one corner, with children asleep; the floor rotten in many parts.[7]

The list of sordid details goes on and on. If Crabbe was too much in love with the squalor of this world to spare us the slightest detail in his poetry, there were others who did the same thing in prose. Oliver Twist, for example, gives an account of Field Lane which is as detailed as anything in Crabbe.

If Crabbe's picture is dark, it is understandably so. He had gone to London toward the close of the eighteenth

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[7] Sir Walter Besant, London in the Nineteenth Century, (London: 1902), page 268.

century and had lived in one of the less expensive parts of town. Writing of this same period, Besant says, "the lowest class touched a depth of degradation never before reached... by human creatures."

> At the close of the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth, there were quarters of London which could only be visited or traversed by a posse of constables; there were no schools for children; the churches were empty; there was no respect for law; every other house was a tavern, and the house between stood open for the receipt of stolen goods.[8]

After such an experience, one might expect Crabbe to write of the horrors of the city and the misfortunes of the city people, but he did not. His interest was with the village and not the city; it was the world of his childhood and youth which he wished to portray.

For some reason which has not been recorded by his biographers, Crabbe seems to grow more mellow in his treatment of the poor houses, for in <u>The Parish Register</u> Isaac Ashford was made to say,

> Kind are your laws, ('tis not to be denied,)
> That in yon house, for ruin'd age, provide,
> And they are just, -- when young, we give you all,
> And for assistance in our weakness call. --
> Why then this proud reluctance to be fed,
> To join your poor, and eat the parish-bread?

But yet I linger, loth with him to feed,
Who gains his plenty by the sons of need;
He who, by contract, all your paupers took,
And gauges stomachs with an anxious look:[9]

Even taking into account the mild temper of the character of Isaac Ashford, the mild rebuke of the man paid to feed the poor is a conciliatory treatment in comparison with the lines of The Village. Crabbe's handling of the parish house seems to continue along this same line, and in The Borough his treatment is in sympathy with the poor, but, also, he strives to give an explantion of the malcontent found in the house which is not in keeping with the former vigor of his protests. But still he was not willing to admit that the parish house is a worthy institution; he said,

Your plan I love not;-- with a number you
Have placed your poor, your pitiable few;
There, in one house, throughout their lives to be,
The pauper-palace which they hate to see:
That giant-building, that high-bounding wall,
Those bare-worn walks, that lofty thundering hall!
That large loud clock, which tolls each dreaded hour,
Those gates and locks, and all those signs of power:
It is a prison, with a milder name,
Which few inhabit without dread or shame.[10]

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[9] Crabbe, page 75.

[10] Crabbe, page 179.

Now, if we consider Huchon's statement, we might decide that in The Village, and here in The Borough, Crabbe has exaggerated. Huchon says, speaking of the lines in The Village,

> Without sharing the poet John Dyer's blissful and ridiculous enthusiasm for these "delightful mansions," without forgetting that, in spite of all precautions and improvements, life in these workhouses is still monotonous and repellent from its sordid surroundings and associations, one may yet believe that the poor, even of the eighteenth century, enjoyed more comfort in them than in the sordid "parish houses" which Crabbe describes to us.[11]

Oddly enough, the idea expressed here by Huchon seems to be the same idea that Crabbe tried to express in his greatly modified views of the parish house in The Parish Register and The Borough. Yet, if we look elsewhere, we find no such leniency toward these places. Hammond in The Village Labourer says,

> The workhouses were dreaded by the poor, not only for the dirt and disease and the devastating fevers that swept through them, but for reasons that are intelligible enough to anyone who has read Eden's descriptions ... There is no doubt that in most parishes the workhouse accommodation would have been quite inadequate for the needs of the parish in times of stress. It was quite common to put four persons into a single bed.[12]

With such this seems definitely to suggest again The Village.

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[11] Huchon, op. cit., page 162.

[12] Hammond, op. cit., page 123. See also Eden, op. cit., pages 269-283, and Sir George Nicholls, A History of English Poor Law, (London: 1898) pages 152-154.

contrasting views of the workhouse life, it is difficult to know whether Crabbe had exaggerated or treated the subject with too much toleration. Perhaps the best we can surmise at this point is that, to the best of his limited knowledge at the time of writing the three poems mentioned above, Crabbe depicted the workhouse realistically. Perhaps, too, in this time of great suffering, even the poor house was an improvement on the lot of the common poor. At the same time we cannot deny that as Crabbe grew older he exhibited a definite tendency to less severe criticism of those phases of life which he first criticised most.

What Crabbe was trying to achieve with his pictures of the village poor was an awareness in the minds of the wealthy of the existence of this misery. Crabbe, if we may draw conclusions from his poetry, would have preferred a patriarchal government with each village taking care of its own paupers with the local clergyman as supervisor. If his idea seems unrealistic when applied to the great masses of London, one must remember that he knew very little about the great cities, for even Trowbridge, the largest of his places of residence, was no more than a market-town.[13]

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[13] Huchon, op. cit., page 164.

If the workhouse was the last home of some, it was the first of others. The lot of a child left to the care of a workhouse was a very sorry one. One such child's story was related in The Parish Register. An orphan child is christened Richard Monday, because there was no one in town named Richard, and Monday was the day of the naming.

> There he was pinch'd and pitied, thump'd and fed,
> And duly took his beatings and his bread;
> Patient in all control, in all abuse,
> He found contempt and kicking have their use:
> Sad, silent, supple; bending to the blow,
> A slave of slaves, the lowest of the low;
> His pliant soul gave way to all things base,
> He knew no shame, he dreaded no disgrace.[14]

Richard's talents were well fitted for a grasping and ruthless world. He was clever and had the desire to make money by any means. At this point Richard disappeared from the story, and we again hear of him only on his death. He is now Sir Richard Monday.

> He gave reforming charities a sum,
> And bought the blessings of the blind and dumb;
> Bequeathed to missions money from the stocks,
> And Bibles issued from his private box;
> But to his native place severely just,
> He left a pittance bound in rigid trust; --
> Two paltry pounds, on every quarter's day...
> A stinted gift, that to the parish shows
> He kept in mind their bounty and their blows![15]

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[14] Crabbe, page 59.

[15] Ibid., page 60.

This is the story of but one of the many produced by the workhouse, and the fact that Richard is able to raise himself above his humble beginnings is further evidence of Crabbe's increasing leniency towards the poor houses. Perhaps in Crabbe's village the lot of the parish children was not so bitter as that of the children in London. In London, writes Dorothy Marshall,

> Such children were either nursed carelessly in the parish workhouse by a woman often totally unfit to have the charge of children, and under conditions which would have taxed the skill of any nurse to rear the child, or they were boarded out by the parish officers to be reared outside the workhouse. This, however, was no alleviation of their fate, for the women who undertook the charge were ignorant and for the most part greedy -- actuated solely by the desire for the two shillings or two-and-six paid weekly in recognition of their services.[16]

Under such a system as this it is rather remarkable that Richard achieved manhood, let alone knighthood.

Of the poor who did not live in the poor houses Crabbe had much to say:

> 'Our poor, how feed we?' -- To the most we give
> A weekly dole, and at their homes they live; --
> Others together dwell.[17]

And what of the houses in which the poor lived? Let Crabbe show us these scenes he delighted in showing.

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[16] Marshall, op. cit., page 98.

[17] Crabbe, page 58.

Then I will lead thee down the dustry row;
By the warm alley and the long close lane,--
There mark the fractured door and paper'd pane,
Where flags the noon-tide air, and, as we pass,
We fear to breathe the putrifying mass:[18]

If the outside of these wretched cottages offends our senses, the inside offers no improvement.

Here by a curtain, by a blanket there,
Are vaious beds conceal'd but none with care;...
Each end contains a grate, and these beside
Are hung utensils for their boil'd and fried --
All used at any hour, by night, by day,
As suit the purse, the person or the prey
Above the fire, the mantel-shelf contains
Of China-ware some poor unmatch'd remains;
There many a teacup's gaudy fragment stands,
All placed by vanity's unwearied hands;[19]

And certainly if we are shocked by Besant's description of the home of the poor in London, we must feel a similar horror at the deserted business establishment, now in ruin and decay, which is rented to the poor.

'Tis his-What cares he for the talk of town?
'No! he will let it to the poor;-- a home
Where he delights to see the creatures come:
In this vast room, each place by habit fix'd
Are sexes, families, and ages mix'd,--
To union forced by crime, by fear, by need,
All in morals and in modes agreed;[20]

Crabbe had a subject here that had not been much treated by the reformers of his time. They had gone to the workhouse and the slums of London, and, in some small

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[18] Ibid., page 182.

[19] Ibid., page 183.

[20] Ibid., page 182.

way had cleared up these nests of infection, But of the borough,

> Here our reformers come not; none object
> To paths polluted, or upbraid neglect;
> None care that ash heaps at doors are cast
> That coal-dust flies along the blinding blast;
> None heed the stagnant pools on either side,
> Where new-launched ships of infant sailors ride;[21]

The reasons, in part, for the poverty displayed in the poetry of Crabbe have been treated in the previous chapter, but little has been said about the attempts of the government to deal with this problem.

A poor law had existed in England since the days of Elizabeth. When the charity of the Roman Catholic Church had been destroyed by Henry VIII, the poor had only the government to depend upon. The workhouse soon became the answer for all social ills, and poverty and crime were treated as equal offenses. The poor law was still in existence for those who would not enter the poor house. One aspect of this law provided a supplement from the parish if the wage a man might get from his master was not up to the recognized minimum to sustain life. Many laborers could not find permanent employment and were hired alternately by one master and another.[22] It was to

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[21] Ibid., page 181.

[22] Crabbe, page 36.

this system that Crabbe alluded when he wrote

> Alternate masters now their slave command,
> Urge the weak efforts of his feeble hand.
> And when his age attempts its task in vain
> With ruthless taunts of lazy poor complain.[23]

Crabbe's character is an old man caught in what was called the "roundman system," and it is again depicted by Wordsworth in "Simon Lee." It was not, however, always the lot of the old, but many able-bodied men were also employed by the parish in this manner. Although this practice was designed to be a shelter for the poor and unemployed, it soon became a hindrance to the poor and a burden to the tax payers. Many looked upon it as a genuine evil, and Daniel Defoe wrote of it, "It seems strange to me from what grounds we now proceed, upon other methods and fancy that it is our Business to find them work and to employ them, rather than to oblige them to find themselves work and go about it."[24] Not all, fortunately, looked so coldly upon the wants of the poor. Dorothy Marshall quotes Thomas Firman as saying,

> There are many thousands whose necessities are very great, and yet they do what they can to live by their own honest Labour to keep themselves and many times would do more than they do, but for want of employment. Several that I now have

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[23] Hammond, op. cit., page 123.

[24] Marshall, op. cit., page 47.

> working to me, do spin, some fourteen, some sixteen hours in twenty-four and had much rather do so than be idle.[25]

Other than the roundman system, poor relief included the paying of monthly pensions, the gift of clothing, and provision of room and fuel. This was outdoor relief and was generally kept up with a fair degree of dependability. Critics of the poor laws protested that the parish poor received excessive pay but seldom attempted to suggest what would be an adequate amount.[26]

Crabbe, who much objected to the "doles" in relief to the poor, would have been very much opposed to the reforms of 1834, which attempted to correct the abuse by making presence in the workhouse proof of their need.[27]

Crabbe, however, is not to be deemed a radical in his pursuit of improvement. He was not an early Cobbett; it was not the luxury or the social superiority that caused Crabbe to rebel but rather that the wealthy refused to open their eyes to the real situation of the rural poor. He was in love with the truth, but he did not hate the falseness and pomposity of the privileged. He said,

> That robes and titles our respect excite;
> Order requires it; 'tis by vulgar pride
> That such regard is censured and denied.[28]

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[25] Ibid., page 28.

[26] Ibid., page 88.

[27] Huchon, op. cit., page 457.

[28] Crabbe, page 122.

Crabbe was one of those, like the Wesleys, the Raikeses, the Howards, and the Wilberforces, who was devoted to the improvement of the condition of the outcasts of society. Huchon says,

> He shares with Goldsmith and Langhorne the glory of having introduced philanthropy not only into poetry, but also into literature, and of having anticipated by half a century those who, like Ebenezer Elliott and Mrs. Gaskell, drew attention of their contemporaries to the destitution of the workers in field and factory.[29]

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[29] Huchon, op. cit., page 172.

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

"Smugglers and Poachers" is probably Crabbe's greatest artistic achievement with respect to plot; the story, the Twenty-First Book of Tales of the Hall, is, in fact, almost a Greek tragedy in miniature. We need only to be told the twin orphans are lost sons of the country squire to heighten the classical effect. This, however, would sacrifice realism.

The title of the present chapter may call to mind a line by Dostoyevsky which might well be applied to the tragic conclusion of "Smugglers and Poachers." It is the impassioned cry, "Fathers and teachers, I ponder, 'What is Hell?' I maintain it is the suffering of being unable to love." This same vein of thought is reflected by Erich Fromm,

> The deepest need of man is the need to overcome his separateness, to leave the prison of his aloneness. The full answer to the problem of existence lies in true and mature love.[1]

The tragedy of "Smugglers and Poachers," insofar as the brothers are concerned, is the traditional one

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[1] Erich Fromm, The Art of Living, (New York: 1956) page 189.

of death. Yet the reader is left with a pity and a compassion for the heroine, Rachel, which is tantamount to the Aristotelian concept of purgation. Who can hear the sad, still conclusion without compassion?

> As men will children at their sport behold,
> And smile to see them, though unmoved and cold,
> Smile at the recollected games, and then
> Depart and mix in the affairs of men:
> So Rachel looks upon the world, and sees
> It cannot longer pain her, longer please,
> But just detain the passing thought, or cause
> A gentle smile of pity or applause;
> And then the recollected soul repairs
> Her slumbering hope, and heeds her own affairs.[2]

As our interest in this poem is more with the scenes of crime than with the philosophy of tragedy, let us investigate the crimes.

In this poem Crabbe gives as clear a picture as he does in any of his poems of his own feelings toward the common crimes of the time. The twin brothers present an interesting contrast: Robert is impetuous and eager; James is serious and slow. It is a combination which must eventually produce a clash. James becomes the game keeper for the local lord, and Robert, who will be no man's slave, becomes involved with a gang of smugglers. The picture we are given of the smugglers comes as something of a surprise to the reader not acquainted with this period of history.

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[2] Crabbe, page 492.

He saw connected with the adventurous crew
Those whom he judged were sober men and true;
He found that some, who should the trade prevent,
Gave it by purchase their encouragement;
He found that contracts could be made with those
Who had their pay these dealers to oppose;
And the good ladies whom at church he saw
With looks devout, of reverence and awe,
Could change their feelings as they change their place,
And, whispering, deal for spicery and lace: 3

Such an opinion is not to be taken only as the rationalization of the criminal mind, for, a little further on, we hear of the chaste and virtuous Rachel,

Of guilt she thought not, -- she had often heard
They bought and sold, and nothing wrong appear'd; 4

Throughout the poem Crabbe mildly chastised the evil of smuggling, and then

--The smuggler cries,
"What guilt is his who pays for what he buys?"
The poacher questions, with perverted mind,
"Were not the gifts of heaven for all designed?"
This cries, "I sin not - take not till I pay;" --
That, "My own hand brought down my proper prey:" --
And while to such fond arguments they cling,
How fear they God? How honour they the king? 5

If these be perverted minds, then so was that of Sir Frederick Eden, who in 1797 used the same arguments to excuse the poor people of England. 6

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3 Ibid., page 487.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Eden, op. cit., page 414.

Smuggling had always been a great problem to England. In the thirteenth century wool merchants began smuggling their product to the more lucrative markets of France, Holland, and Sweden. In the seventeenth century, the high taxes and prohibition laws greatly increased the import of illegal goods. As a result both in England and overseas, great hordes of smugglers arose. And in the eighteenth century drastic legislation by Parliament and instructions from the Board of Customs waged a full-scale warfare on the growing impudence of these smugglers. Despite the increased efforts of the port authorities, smuggling continued on the rise until virtual anarchy existed in some coastal areas.[7]

The most frequent offenders were the French and the English themselves; foreign ships lacked the cooperation with the onshore gangs which was necessary for a successful run. The laws passed between 1699 and 1765 were ineffective in curtailing the action of these offenders, mainly because the laws were not enforced. In 1783 a committee was appointed to make an exhaustive inquiry into this illicit action. No less than three voluminous reports were the result of this investigation. These reports reflect the

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7 William E. Masterson, Jurisdiction in Marginal Seas, (New York: 1929), pages 1-5.

general temper of the day. Some of the reports are day-by-day records of communications.[8] For example, on November 28, 1719,

> The officers have been insulted and obstructed in the execution of their duty within the lymitts of a port by French Vessells, with numbers of armed men, who carry on the smuggling trade to the great loss of Revenue and ruin of the fair Traders.[9]

The Board of Customs at Southampton was informed on November 20, 1733,

> There are now at Dunkirk no less than 30 vessells on the smuggling account, taking in goods to run on to your coasts ... give it in strict charge to all officers belonging to your port to be very deligent.[10]

From Aldborough to France was a fairly short distance, and certainly Aldborough was a port of call for these illegal merchants. One such transaction is recorded in The Village,

> What now are these? -- Beneath yon cliff they stand,
> To show the freighted pinnace where to land;
> To load the ready steed with guilty haste,
> To fly in terror o'er the pathless waste,
> Or, when detected, in their straggling course,
> To foil their foes by cunning or by force;
> Or, yielding part (which equal knaves demand),
> To gain a lawless passport through the land.[11]

Aldborough, however, was only rarely used in comparison with the towns of Robinshood Bay and Straiths, where the larger ships, cutters and luggers, landed their cargos. All

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[9] Ibid., page 16.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Crabbe, page 35.

along the shore the word was spread by some secret network of communication, and armed bands of men would assemble to receive the merchandise, which was often brought ashore by local fishing cobles, a flat bottomed boat. Over eleven million pounds of tea, not to mention numerous other commodities, were smuggled into England every year in this manner.[12]

Such large scale operation could never have taken place without the support of the population. The general attitude toward smuggling is summed up by Adam Smith, who wrote of the smuggler as

> A person who, though no doubt highly blamable for violating the laws of his country, is frequently incapable of violating those of natural justice, and would have been in every respect an excellent citizen had not the laws of his country made that a crime which nature never meant to be so.[13]

To Robert and his friends the trade is not so prosperious and after several perilous adventures,

> Their traffic fail'd -- and the adventurous crew
> No more their profitless attempts renew:
> Dig they will not, and beg they might in vain --
> Had they not pride, and what can then remain?[14]

What remained? The 'adventourous crew' next took up poaching, and now the brothers are avowed enemies. James, the game keeper, has announced his love for Rachel,

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[12] Masterson, op. cit., page 52.

[13] "Smuggling," Encyclopaedia Britannica, (Chicago: 1958), XX, page 845.

[14] Crabbe, page 488.

and Robert, the poacher, must keep his love for the same girl hidden, as he does his occupation. That is to say that to the world, Robert kept his activities secret, but the town knew and so did James and Rachel. While both of these worthy people expressed Crabbe's own feeling of horror mixed with pity for such crimes, the great majority of their countrymen found it no crime at all. Stern penalties prohibited the sale of game and the procuring of game through poaching. Yet every rich man in London enjoyed game at his meal and served it on public occasions.[15] There was no secret as to how the game was procured, and the police politely turned their backs on the trade. It was commonly agreed that poaching was an "innocent practice."

The lords of manors and the Parliament, however, officially frowned of such practices as poaching. Sir George Nicholls in his History of the English Poor Law quotes numerous laws enacted during the reigns of George the First, Second, and Third which made poaching an increasingly dangerous offense. If the legislation of a period indicates the nature of the most prevalent offenses at that time, then poaching was a very common crime.

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[15] Hammond, op. cit., page 172.

Finally, in 1741, 14 George II. cap. 7 was passed, which made poaching a crime punishable by "death, as in the cases of felony without benefit of clergy."[16]

The brothers in "Smugglers and Poachers" met for the last time, and it was in mortal combat in which both were killed, Robert in the act of poaching, and James in protecting his lord's estate. Once again Crabbe voices the common opinion when he has one of the game keepers say,

> "Two lives of men, of valiant brothers lost!
> Enough, my lord, do hares and pheasants cost!"
> 'So many thought, and there is found a heart
> To dwell upon the deaths on either part;
> Since this their morals have been more correct,
> The cruel spirit in the place is check'd;
> His lordship holds not in such sacred care,
> Nor takes such dreadful vengence for a hare;[17]

To see what else Crabbe has to say of crimes and their punishments, let us go back to The Village, and see what the clerk has written in The Parish Register. Night now has come to the village,

> And hark! the riots of the Green begin,
> That sprang at first from yonder noisy inn;
> What time the weekly pay was vanish'd all,
> And now the hostess scored the threat'ning wall;
> What time they ask'd, their friendly feast to close,

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[16] Nicholls, op. cit., page 30.

[17] Crabbe, page 492.

> A final cup, and that will make them foes;
> When blows ensue that break the arm of toil,
> And rustic battle ends the boobies' broil.[18]

The pleasures of the poor, as Crabbe sees them, are drunkenness, gambling, and vice, the evils which are faithfully learned from the debauchery and riot of the upper classes.

Bishop Benson, writing about the middle of the eighteenth century, declared,

> These accursed spirituous liquors, which to the shame of our government are so easily to be had, and in such quantities drunk, have changed the very nature of our people. There is not only no safety in living in towns, but very little in the country, now robbery and murder are grown so frequent.[19]

And George Trevelyan, in writing of the effects of drinking, noted,

> The drinking and gambling habits of society, and the fierceness of political faction, led to frequent duals of which many ended ill. The survivor, if he could show there had been fair play, was usually convicted of manslaughter and imprisoned for a short time; or haply 'pleaded his clergy,' was 'touched with cold iron,' and so set free.[20]

So it happened in The Village, and so it happened all over England. The reports of death and drinking are too numerous

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[18] Ibid., page 39.

[19] Bayne-Powell, op. cit., page 223.

[20] George M. Trevelyn, Illustrated English Social History, (London: 1951), page 23.

to cite, even if it were possible. Men drank and quarreled, and then they fought; if manslaughter were not committed on the spot, the company adjourned to a quiet place where the belligerents could fight it out. Where the city gentleman dueled with swords, the country laborer fought with fists, bottles, and clubs. The result was pretty much the same. It was their amusement, and very nearly the only amusement many had. The reader may see very little connection between crime and amusements, but the two are almost irretrievably enmeshed in eighteenth and nineteenth century England.

In the country cockfighting seemed rather to increase the thirst and the tempers, and it is said that a foreigner coming into the pits would have thought the entire assembly insane by their shrieked bets. The only other amusement of such interest was horse racing, and this seemed, at once, to equalize the squire and the peasant and quiet the temper of all.[21]

Our parish clerk, however, writes of a subject more grim than the sports of the country, which though dangerous have, at least, a genial side to them. He has walked the dark streets and looked into the bold faces of savage men

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[21] Ibid., page 23 and passim.

and seen where they dwell.

> Here are no wheels for either wool or flax,
> But packs of cards -- made up of sundry packs;
> Here is no clock, nor will they turn the glass,
> And see how swift th' important moments pass;
> Here are no books but ballads on the wall,
> Are some abusive, and indecent all,
> Pistols are here, impair'd; with nets and hooks,
> Of every kind, for rivers, ponds and brooks;
> An ample flask, that nightly rovers fill
> With recent poison from the Dutchman's still;
> A box of tools with wires of various size,
> Frocks, wigs, andhats, for night or day disguise,
> And bludgeons stout to gain or guard a prize.[22]

The riotous robbers who inhabited the black dens of the parish and the city were much more widely known than perhaps even Crabbe realized. Sir George Nicholls, writing at the end of the nineteenth century, noted;

> ... robberies and violence still prevailed, and confederacies were formed in various parts of the country, exciting terror, exacting contributions, and committing various illegal Acts; for preventing which, 9 George I. cap. 22 was passed.[23]

This particular law, which seems to have been prompted by the action of a group of confederates called the Blacks, made poaching on the king's lands a felony to be punished by death and the forfeiture of two hundred pounds by the hundred (i. e. the local government).[24] The additional

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[22] Crabbe, page 53.

[23] Nicholls, op. cit., page 18.

[24] Ibid., page 18.

fine on the town was intended to provide an incentive to the town to stop such crimes. The crown evidently felt that the local authorities were intentionally ignoring much misconduct.

In 1734, 7 George II. cap. 21 was passed, which made armed robbery punishable by transportation to the colonies for seven years, and if the culprit returned before the expiration of that time, he was to suffer death.[25] Frequent laws were passed to curb the wandering poor, classified as "rogues, vagabonds, and incorrigible rogues." One night every quarter a "privy search" was conducted to seek out the poor vagabonds, who, more frequently than not, were transported like common criminals. Three acts were passed under the reign of George the Second which made poverty a crime punishable by transportation for up to seven years or a sentence in prison.[26]

> To damp prison, where the very sight
>
> Of the warm sun is favour and not right;
> Where all we hear or see the feelings shock,
> The oath and groan, the fetter and the lock?[27]

We can not much doubt the horror of the jails and prisons of this time when we consider the vast number of

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[26] Ibid., pages 345 ff.

[27] Crabbe, page 201.

laws which made almost everything a crime.

Crabbe's treatment of the prisons, in the Twenty-Third Letter of The Borough, bears a resemblence to the philosophy expressed by Byron in the final lines of "Prison of Chillon,"

> In quiet we had learn'd to dwell --
> My very chains and I grew friends,
> So much a long communion tends
> To make us what we are: -- even I
> Regained my freedom with a sigh.[28]

And Crabbe says he will show how "the mind of man accommodates itself to all situations; Prisons otherwise would be intolerable."[29] Byron may have been indirectly influenced by Crabbe's poem, but Crabbe is certainly not the immediate source of inspiration, and the two differ in their interpretation of the mind's adaptation. Nevertheless an interesting similarity exists.

Crabbe goes on to describe the details of the prison and its occupants. We see here all that one may expect to see: hardened criminals, robbers, murderers, and

> To these we add a miscellaneous kind,
>
> By pleasure, pride and indolence confined;
> Those whom no cells, no warning could divert,
> The unexperienced and the inexpert;

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[28] Lord Byron, The Poetical Works of Lord Byron, (New York: 1853), page 152.

[29] Crabbe, page 201.

The builder, idler, schemer, gamester, sot,--
The follies different, but the same their lot;
Victims of horses, lasses, drinking, dice,
Of every passion, humour, whim and vice.[30]

As was his usual manner, Crabbe enforced the horror of prisons by relating a tale of one of the inmates, who, like Byron's "Prisoner" finds an escape, a felicity, in madness and deterioration of the mind. But unfortunately, for Crabbe's prisoner, the felicity is but a dream which ends as the call of the guard le ts in "truth, terror, and the day."[31]

Prisons, and the utter disregard for the circumstances of commitment, were a problem which remained a source of concern to Crabbe to the end of his life, and, in his Posthumous Tales, are found the following lines,

Thousands who must be fed,
Yet ne'er were taught to earn their daily bread;
Whom crimes, misfortunes, errors only teach
To seek their food where'er within their reach,
Who for their parents' sins, or for their own,
Are now as vagrants, wanders, beggars known,
Hunted and hunting through the world, to share
Alms and contempt, and shame and scorn to bear;
Whom Law condemns, and Justice, with a sigh,
Pursuing, shakes her sword and passes by, --[32]

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[30] Ibid., page 202.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid., page 510.

DESCRIPTIVE POETRY

One may have realized now that Crabbe is a poet who constantly improves as he grows older. While The Village stands out as his greatest work, it is marked with many imperfections which gradually disappear in the poet's later works. There are certain failings in rhyme and grammar which remain with him to the end, but when one compares his early Augustan imitations with The Village, the advancement is quite evident. In philosophical outlook, moral attitude, realism, and in the mechanics of poetry Crabbe develops steadily, but nowhere is this development more obvious than in his handling of nature in his descriptive poetry.

Undoubtedly The Village broke upon the literary world as quite a surprise and, from the time of its first publication, critics have tried desperately to place it in a class. Just as obstenate as the critic was desperate The Village has refused to be classified. One of the most recent attempts is that of Rose Marie Thale, who has attempted to classify The Village as a topographical poem. Her argument

is good and almost convincing. Using the lack of continuity of the poem as her point of departure, she says,

> The reader is started as the focus of Crabbe's indignation shifts from the landed oppressors and the poetical idealizers of the village to the vicious and shiftless villagers themselves. These, as the standard biographer of Crabbe, René Huchon, maintains, are serious imperfections. ... However, neither he nor other scholars have suggested any explanation for these defects other than Crabbe's personal deficiencies in taste and in architectonic skill, and The Village has been valued as a storehouse of admirable bits.[1]

Miss Thale thus sets out to show that The Village is a topographical poem, but she immediately admits that even within the limits of that genre, Crabbe was "injudicious in grouping together such incongruous materials."[2]

She mentions Robert A. Aubin and his Topographical Poetry in XVIII Century England, but she neglects to say that Aubin does not list The Village, in his extensive bibliography, as a topographical poem. Indeed, the only poem by Crabbe to be so listed is "Belvoir Castle," which is a topographical poem in all respects.

The next piece of reasoning used by Miss Thale is her statement that all that is needed to make a Georgic a topographical poem is description. Aubin does not seem to be in agreement on this point; he says, "'topographical'

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[1] Rose Marie Thale, "Crabbe's Village and Topographical Poetry," Journal of English and Germantic Philology, LV, 1956, page 618.

[2] Ibid.

poetry aims chiefly at describing specifically named actual localities."[3] Aubin goes into some detail in delineating topographical poetry, which he differentiates from Dr. Johnson's "local poetry," and, in order to make his point most clear, he gives numerous examples, including Drayton's Polyolbion and Jonson's Penhurst and, most clearly illustrative, Denham's Cooper's Hill. In Crabbe's own time this style of poetry was quite popular, (Darwin's "Botanical Gardens," 1798; The Reverend Luke Booker's "The Hop Gardens," 1799; W. H. Ireland's "The Angler," 1804; and James Grahame's "British Georgics," 1809 are a few.)[4]

Aubin draws a clear line of demarkation between what he calls "topographical" poetry and descriptive poetry. "Topographical poetry in almost all of its manifestations teaches facts about the definite scenes of which it treats and is so far intrinsically didactic."[5] A descriptive poem, on the other hand, is "a genre-of-trades, it may embrace topographical, pastoral, didactic, narrative, political,

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[3] Robert Arnold Aubin, Topographical Poetry in XVIII Century England, (New York: 1936), page

[4] Ibid., page 45.

[5] Ibid., page 39.

and practically every sort of stock poetic interest, but its primary function is to depict scenes, more frequently rural than urban."[6] Our major difficulty with this is that the descriptive poem, of which the topographical is a subclass, is defined as having no connection with human character or "any department of social life." However, it must be noted that the descriptive poem was frequently concerned with some aspect of human society. (John Gay's Pastorals and John Dyer's "Grongar's Hill" and "The Fleece" are examples in which Crabbe's realism may be anticipated.)

In view of the above considerations, it is much safer to place The Village in the group known as "Descriptive" poems without trying to place it in an exact category. The Village was in its time a unique poem and does not properly belong to any of the conventional classes. Crabbe took as his subject the reality of a town; and if it is disconnected and lacks organization; it is because reality, to Crabbe, lacked organization. It is the "stream-of-consciousness" technique of the twentieth century realistic novelist, and no reader of James Joyce or Thomas Wolfe can be "startled" by the shift of Crabbe's focus of indignation. No critic familar with the juxtaposition of phrases in the poetry of T. S. Eliot can doubt that Crabbe was utilizing

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[6] Ibid., page 40.

the same device a hundred years before its poetical maturity.

Myra Reynolds suggests that Crabbe's descriptive poetry can be separated into two periods; the first is from 1783 to 1785 and the occasional poems before this period; the second begins with The Parish Register in 1807 and includes the remaining works to The Posthumous Tales.[7]

The first period is none too well supplied with examples of nature, and those that we do see please us very little. To Crabbe, nature is an angry power who little respects the comforts of mankind.

> When winter stern his gloomy front uprears,
> A sable void the barren earth appears;
> The meads no more their former vendure boast
> Fast bound their streams, and all their beauty lost;
> The herds, the flocks, in icy garments mourn,
> And wildly murmur for the springs return,
> From snow-topp'd hills, the whirlwinds keenly blow;
> Howl through the woods, and pierce the vales below;[8]

There is no Shelleyan prophecy of a spring not far behind, and the next time Crabbe gives a long description of nature, he has gone from dreary winter to cheerless summer.

> Lo! where the heath, with withering brake grown'er,
> Lends the light turf that warms the neighboring poor;
> From thence a length of burning sand appears,
> Where the thin harvest waves its wither'd ears;
> Rank weeds, that every art and care defy,

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[7] Myra Reynolds, The Treatment of Nature in English Poetry, (Chicago: 1909), page 181.

[8] Crabbe, page 2.

Reignoo'er the land, and roll the blighted rye:
There thistles stretch their prickly arms afar,
And to the ragged infant threaten war;
There poppies nodding, mock the hope of toil;
There the blue bugloss paints the sterile soil;
Hardy and high, above the slender sheaf,
The slimy mallow waves her silky leaf;
O'er the young shoot the charlock throws a shade,
And clasping tares cling round the sickly blade;
With mingled tints the rocky coast abound,
And a sad splendour vainly shines around.[9]

Crabbe sees nature as pitiless and anti-human, but he also sees nature with the mind of a scientist. Though he did not actively take up the study of botany until his old age the above quotation reflects an already avid interest in the subject, part of which he may have gained through his study of pharmacy. He loves the tiny, he ignores mountains and forests, and he is excited by what other men would not notice. For now, his interest is in the destructive power of nature. Even the ocean, which was later to fascinate him in a very different way, was a monster from which he fled,

And cried, Ah! hapless they who still remain;
Who still remain to hear the ocean roar,
Whose greedy waves devour the lessening shore;
Till some fierce tide, with more imperious sway,
Sweeps the low hut and all it holds away;[10]

Had Wordsworth been faced with the violent face of nature which presented itself to Crabbe, he might not have waited

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[9] Ibid., page 35.

[10] Ibid., page 35.

so long to find it had a destructive side, and he might never have developed the pantheism which he did. Just how awful was the aspect of the sea as Crabbe saw it can be judged from a picture given us by E. M. Forster, who visited the area in 1948.

> The situation of this place is curious. A slight rise of the ground ... projects from the fenlands of Suffolk towards the North Sea. On this hill stands the church ... at the foot of the hill lies the town -- a couple of long streets against which the sea is making an implacable advance. There used to be as many as five streets-- three of them have disappeared beneath the shallow but violent waters, the house where Crabbe was born is gone, the street that has been named after him is menaced ... huge glassy waves coming in regularly and quietly, and each exploding when it hit the shore with the sound of a gun.[11]

Forster's description tells us much about why Crabbe depicted nature in so stern a garb. Can a writer be a realist and see only bad in nature? He can if he depicts nature as he sees it; and if he sees it only as a power of destruction, it would be unrealistic to present it as anything else.

One might at this point refer to Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode," in which is found the line, "In our life alone does nature live." This leads us, as almost any discussion of nature must eventually, to Ruskin's "pathetic fallacy,"

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[11] E. M. Forster, "George Crabbe and Peter Grimes," Two Cheers for Democracy, (New York: 1951), page 171.

for criticism has bound nature and "the pathetic fallacy" into so close an association than one can hardly think of one without thinking of the other.

In her fine book, Pathetic Fallacy in the Nineteenth Century, Josephine Miles did not consider the works of Crabbe. This is really to be regretted, because no writer can claim to use the pathetic fallacy much more than Crabbe. Though his specific, detailed use may not be as great as that of Blake, Darwin, or Burns,[12] the general atmosphere of almost all of Crabbe's poems reflects the tendency to credit nature with the emotions of human beings. And, surely, no one enjoyed the exaggerated, satirical effect of the "Pathetic Fallacy" as did Crabbe. Witness, for example, the disappointed lover in "Delay Has Danger" in Tales of the Hall. Not long before the lover has seen the world as beautiful and all aspects of nature were pleasing to him but now he sees a very different world.

> Early he rose and looked with many a sigh
> On the red light that fill'd the eastern sky;
> Oft had he stood before, alert and gay,
> To hail the glories of the new-born day;
> But now dejected, listless, languid, low;
> He saw the wind upon the water blow,
> And the cold stream curl'd onward as the gale
> From the pine hill blew harshly down the vale.
> On the right side the youth a wood survey'd,
> With all its dark intensity of shade;

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[12] Josephine Miles, Pathetic Fallacy in the Nineteenth Century, (Berkley and Los Angeles, 1942), page 295.

Where the rough wind alone was heard to move,
In this, the pause of nature and of love,
When now the young are rear'd and when the old,
Lost to the tie, grow negligent and cold:
Far to the left he saw the tents of men,
Half hid in mist that hung upon the fen;
Before him swallows, gathering for the sea,
Took their short flights, and twitter'd on the lea;
And near the bean sheaf stood the harvest done,
And slowly blackened in the sickly sun;
All these were sad in nature or they took
Sadness from him, the likeness of his look.[13]

In the second period of Crabbe's poetry there is a decided change, There is in The Borough essentially the same subject matter as will be found in The Village, but there is a leisureliness found in The Borough which is not exhibited in the earlier poem. One gets the impression that Crabbe had slowed down from the passionate race through The Village, and there is also seen here a real appreciation for nature. Even in the bog, fen, and marshes there is an uncultivated beauty,

For there are blossoms rare and curious rush,
The gàle's rich balm, and sun dew's crimson blush,
Whose velvet leaf with radiant beauty dress'd,
Forms a gay pillow for the plovers' breast.[14]

Summer is no longer only a barren time when only parasites thrive in burning sand.

Now is it pleasant in the summer-eve,
When a broad shore retiring waters leave,
A while to wait upon the firm fair sand,
When all is calm at sea and still at land;[15]

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[13] Crabbe, page 436

[14] Ibid., page 111.

[15] Ibid., page 144.

The sea is calm, and even the most menial of its creatures, "Those living jellies which the flesh inflame," are things of great beauty to a poet who has become one of the most sensitive of naturalists,

> Figured by hand divine -- there's not a gem
> Wrought by man's art to be compared to them;
> Soft, brilliant, tender, through the waves they glow,
> And make the moonbeam brighter where they flow.[16]

A storm is not so ominous as before. First the porpoise comes, the precursor of the violence, and slowly the clouds gather to "o'ershroud the sky." We are pladed on the beach as the spectators of a grand phenomenon,

> All where the eye delights, yet dreads to roam,
> The breaking billows cast the flying foam
> Upon the billows rising -- all the deep
> Is restless change; the waves so swell'd and steep,
> Breaking and sinking, and the sunken swells,
> Nor one, one moment, in its station dwells:[17]

This, indeed, is "gloom in glory dressed," and no poet in English has given us the sea with more fullness and force.

With this new view of nature came new views of man, and we may believe that Crabbe was influenced by the ease of life which he enjoyed and by Wordsworth and the lake poets. All of Crabbe's poetry which reflects the new faith and beauty

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[16] Ibid., page 144.

[17] Ibid., page 112.

in nature came about ten years after the Lyrical Ballads. Crabbe's son tells us that his father at first had a cool admiration for the lake poets but later he came to read them more frequently than any other.[18] Nature is still not a thing of unremitting joy, but it is pleasant in many of its aspects and no longer a force inimical to man.

In general, up to the time of Crabbe, the sea had been ignored, and its realistic detail given in an unconvincing fashion. Most of the sea novels, which purported to be actual accounts of the sea, were a combination of the Greek romance and true voyages. Within the century this tradition produced such widely diverse works as Coleridge's Ancient Mariner and Dana's Two Years Before the Mast.[19] Crabbe's sea scenes, however, display a picture as true as words can make it. The sea fascinated him, and impelled by an irresistible instinct, he went back to the seacoast town which he hated as a child and painted the dreadful sea. He did not paint the Aegean Sea, and his ships are not the war ships of Homer

> Far other craft our prouder river shows:
> Hoys, pinks, and sloops; brigs, brigantines and snows:
> Nor angler we on our wide stream descry,

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[18] Reynolds, op. cit., page 184.

[19] Harold F. Watson, The Sailor in English Fiction and Drama, (New York: 1931), page 102.

But one poor dredger where his oysters lie:
He, cold and wet, and driving with the tide,
Beats his weak arms against his tarry side,
Then drains the remnant of diluted gin,
To aid the warmth that languishes within;
Renewing oft his poor attempts to beat
His tingling fingers into gathering heat.[20]

Huchon says, "We may be sure of the local correctness of his descriptions; copied from reality, they owe nothing to his imagination."[21]

Regardless of how minutely and carefully Crabbe paints the various aspects of nature, whether they are anonymous or not, he can still not be called a topographical poet, for always his interest is in mankind, and nature is always depicted as merely the background, the stage upon which walk the tragic and satiric figures of man.

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[20] Crabbe, page 110.

[21] Huchon, op. cit., page 268.

SOME GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

In my last chapter I attempted to sum up in a very short space the classification of Crabbe's poetry and his treatment of nature. If I seem to have devoted too little time to nature, it is because within the bounds of this paper nature has comparatively little importance except that it is described either realistically or otherwise. Certainly Crabbe had a style in his treatment of nature which was unique, and I cannot think of any other poet who describes so minutely the lesser known and smaller species of plants. But the treatment of nature is generally a matter of philosophical interpretation, and this is not closely related to realism since one may see nature as either good, bad, or indifferent and still depict it realistically.

In this chapter I must try to bring together what may seem at this point to be a rather desultory expostulation upon seemingly unrelated subjects. My one thread of continuity is Crabbe's realism. In this chapter even that will not always hold together the thoughts expressed, for

beyond the central objective of unifying the whole work, I wish also to introduce certain pertinent subjects which have not yet been covered and which do not fit into the normal order of the paper.

The first such subject is the matter of Crabbe's standard biographer, René Huchon. I find it difficult, in the first place, to understand why Huchon undertook to write Crabbe's biography. He has done an admirable job in his presentation of the facts and grouping of material, but he is not in sympathy with either Crabbe or his times. His interpretations are sometimes rather prejudiced against Crabbe. He calls Crabbe "unimaginative," and "standoffish," and his opinions are often inconsistent. Until he has reached the end of the volume, one is not sure that Huchon has formed any opinions except very vague ones. I find it lamentable that the only place to which one may turn to get a really comprehensive coverage of Crabbe is the place where he meets an attitude which is usually inimical to the poet. It is regretable that even so eminent a critic as E. M. Forster should be adversly influenced in his opinion of Crabbe by this book.

It is time to reappraise the poetry of Crabbe, and when the methods he used are compared to the literary art of today, he will be found the most forward-looking poet of

his time. He is a realist, and the name, though it was unknown in his own time, is properly applied to him. But Crabbe was more than a user of verisimilitude in poetry; he incorporated into his poetry the appearance of objectivity which glossed over the extreme subjectivity of the true realist of the twentieth and late nineteenth centuries. This is an aspect of Crabbe's poetry which is completely overlooked in Huchon's book.

In the preceding chapter I touched briefly on Crabbe's dislike for Aldborough. I would like now to take a moment to explain his attitude. Crabbe hated Aldborough, but it is a hatred that amounted to idolization. It is the hatred that Thomas Wolfe felt for Asheville and James Joyce felt for Dublin. It is the home which has rejected him and to which he can never return, but which spiritually he can never leave. This attitude is reflected in a passage quoted by E. M. Forster from a journal of Crabbe's,

> Beccles is the home of past years and I could not walk through the streets as a stranger. It is not so at Aldborough. There a sadness mingles with all I see or hear; not a man is living whom I knew in my early portion of life; my contempories are gone, and their successors are unknown to me and I to them.[1]

Throughout his writings his native town is referred to with a note of sadness, yet the town and the sea pervade

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[1] Forster, op. cit., page 172.

all of his works, and his best poems are those which deal directly with Aldborough (The Village, The Borough, and The Parish Register.)

The object of this paper was to consider Crabbe's realism in the light of comments on the same material by social historians. I have tried to show what Crabbe had to say on a representative choice of subjects, and beside the poetry to put down what the historian wrote so that a clear comparison may be made. To understand a writer's realism, it is necessary to know the social background of the man and his times and to remember always that no one can be realistic to the point of actuality. Actuality can not be reproduced in words, because no one sees the same incident in the same way as another, and no one can gain from a sentence exactly the same impression which the author had in mind when he wrote it. We can say only that a realist is one who describes accurately a thing as it is understood to be by a logical and normal observer. Therefore, our question might at this point narrow down to, "Was Crabbe an accurate, logical, and normal observer?" It has been my impression that Crabbe in his description has been extremely accurate, and I can think of nothing which will substanciate this conclusion more firmly than the fact

that Hammond, a social historian in The Village Labourer, and other historians have used Crabbe to illustrate references to history.

It may, perhaps, seem rather abrupt to devote a work of this length to the answering of so simple a question and then to dismiss that question with no more than is said above, but insofar as this aspect of the question is concerned, the individual chapters give their own answers as to Crabbe's treatment. But then we do not wish to know only that Crabbe is a realist but also what kind of a realist. This too I have endeavored to illustrate by the quotations used and by comments on these quotations. One aspect of Crabbe's realism which has received slight treatment from me is the matter of his characterization.

There is probably no character given in Crabbe's poems of a more complex nature than Peter Grimes, and for a study of Crabbe's characterization no other one person is so good an example. Grimes was probably a fisherman named Tom Brown, whom Crabbe knew very slightly or not at all.[2] The character and the story are woven upon a very thin web of actuality, but Crabbe must create a real man and place him in a logical dilemma. The artistic difficulty in this character is realized by Crabbe,

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[2] E. M. Forster, op. cit., page 172.

> The character of Grimes, his obduracy and apparent want of feeling, his gloomy kind of misanthropy, the progress of his madness, and horrors of his imagination, I must leave to the judgment and observation of my readers. The mind here exhibited is one untouched by pity, unstung by remorse, and uncorrected by shame: yet is this hardihood of temper and spirit broken by want, desease, solitude, and disappointment; and he becomes the victim of a distempered and horror-stricken fancy. It is evident, therefore, that no feeble vision, no half-visible ghost, not the momentary glance of an unbodied being, nor the half-audible voice of an invisible one, would be created by the continual workings of distress on a mind so depraved and flinty.[3]

It is in this manner that Crabbe treats most of his characters. He takes a skeleton of reality, and around it he molds a story which is different from actuality, but in every detail carefully drawn to make it as realistic as the original from which it is taken.

Along with Crabbe's strong and original characterization must be considered certain other phases. Why does Crabbe choose the subjects he does? He has answered for himself

> What I thought I could best describe, that I attempted:-- the sea, and the country in the immediate vicinity; the dwellings and the inhabitants; some incidents and characters, with an exhibition of morals and manners.[4]

Here we have Crabbe's philosophy of realism in a very concise definition. It has little resemblence to the concept

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[3] Crabbe, pages 106-107.

[4] Ibid., page 101.

of poetry as held by the Augustans. Crabbe will imitate nature directly, not through the classical poets. He was one of the first to forsake the imitation of poets for the direct imitation of nature, and he has walked abroad in the open fields of observation as freely as those who originally strolled there.

This short paragraph tells us something more of his realism. He wishes to describe "the sea, the country, ... some incidents and characters." These are not mere stock poetic devices. These are real people and real incidents. The sea he will paint for us is the inimical power which as a child he so greatly dreaded, and the country is the barren homeland to which his spirit is forever chained. Crabbe's writing is based upon reality; his passion has been experienced not just theorized.

This is not as true perhaps of his later works as it is of his early poems. In The Borough we see Crabbe stepping outside his field of intimate acquaintances and describing a prison. We can not be sure how well he knew the horror of a prison, but it is probable that he had never seen the inside of one for more than a few minutes. His powers of description are limited in this work because he is obviously unfamiliar with the surroundings. The story gains its strength not from the prison

but from the characterization of the prisoners. One such character isthe condemned highwayman who dreams he is free and has returned to his love only to be awakened by the prison guard announcing the dawn of his death-day. Nothing could be more true to life than just such a dream and nothing could touch the reader more than the strong contrast of the peaceful, estactic dream with the cold, heartless reality. Writing of this story Crabbe said,

> ... the dream of the condemned Highwayman, will excite in some minds that mingled pity and abhorrence, which, while it is not unpleasant to the feelings, is useful in its operation: it ties and binds us to all mankind by sensations common to us all, and in some degree connects us without degradation, even to the most miserable and guilty of our fellowmen.[5]

The attitude reflected in this quotation from the "Preface" to The Borough, one of Crabbe's most representative works, scarcely warrants Huchon's appelation of "Pessimistic." "Descriptive" and "satirical" he is, but I can not agree that he is "pessimistic."[6] He lacks Shelley's concept of a perfectible world perhaps, but it is a world which can be improved, and he has faith in the power of truth to sway the heads of government to that improvement.

Nothing has been said about Crabbe's satire, and the reason is, of course, that it has little place in a study

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[5] Ibid., page 107.

[6] Huchon, op. cit., page 287.

of realism. However, it seems to me that realism is a natural outgrowth of satire, that the two are closely related. We might say that realism is the first son and rightful heir of satire. As a single example of Crabbe's satire, here is a short paragraph from The Borough,

> 'Sects in Religion?' -- Yes of every race
> We nurse some portion in our favour'd place;
> Not one warm preacher of one growing sect
> Can say our Borough treats him with neglect;
> Frequent as fashions, they with us appear,
> And you might ask, 'How think we for the year?'[7]

In the manner of his satire, Crabbe is one with his times, and there is little to distinguish it from the satire of a dozen other writers. In several other respects as well Crabbe has an affinity for the poets who led the revolt against the ideals of the Augustan poets. Among the characteristics of these poets are an influence from external nature, feeling and sympathy with "the sadder side of man's experience," and the troubles which society brings to man.[8] In this respect Crabbe had much in common with the early Romantics. And with respects to pathos, terror, passion, and force Crabbe seems to be as much a part of the early nineteenth century literature as Scott or Byron, but his originality is more firmly based on Nature

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[7] Crabbe, page 122.

[8] Vaughan, op. cit., page 7.

than even Wordsworth's.

A final word on Crabbe's reputation might here be put in. Crabbe lived in a time when the acceptance of poetry depended as much on a "force-field" as it does today. Realism is the force in modern poetry, as it was in the time of Crabbe, and the atmosphere has been generated within our own times pretty much by T. S. Eliot. Crabbe did not create his own atmosphere, as Eliot has done. Crabbe had his created for him by Dr. Johnson. Crabbe is admired and held up by Burke, Fox, Johnson, Reynolds, Gifford, Jeffrey, Wilson, and Jane Austin in his youth, and Sir Walter Scott, Byron, Wordsworth, Rogers and Cardinal Newman in his old age. A man with such a group of admirers had to rank high in his time, but Crabbe's "force-field" has disappeared behind the Romantics' search for the ideal in nature and then the ornamentation of the Victorian period. A man who has been virtually forgotten for so long is not easily revived. Crabbe wrote a realism of his time, but that time is gone every bit as much as the time of Charles Dickens. Yet Dickens still is popular, and it is not inconceivable that Crabbe may again be popular one day himself. It was, perhaps, with this same hope that Edwin Arlington Robinson wrote his admirable tribute to George Crabbe,

Give him the darkest inch your shelf allows,
Hide him in lonely garrets, if you will, --
But his hard, human pulse is throbing still
With the sure strength that fearless truth endows.
In spite of all fine science disavows,
Of his plain excellence and stubborn skill
There yet remains what fashion cannot kill,
Though years have thinned the laurels from his brows.

Whether or not we read him, we can feel
From time to time the vigor of his name
Against us like a finger for the shame
And emptiness of what our souls reveal
In books that are as altars where we kneel
To consecrate the flicker, not the flame.[9]

THE END

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[9] Edwin Arlington Robinson, "George Crabbe," in Modern American and Modern British Poetry, ed., Louis Untermeyer, New York: 1955, page 26.

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VITA

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From September of 1956 to June, 1957, the author was a teacher of English at Douglas S. Freeman High School and left that position to fullfil a six month's obligation with the U. S. Army. In February of 1958 he took a job as teacher of the sixth grade at Highland Springs School, and the next summer he entered the Graduate School of the University of Richmond, where he is now a candidate for the Master of Arts degree in English Literature. During the writing of the thesis for this degree he has worked as a teacher at Battlefield Park School.

In August, 1956, he married Mary Lucille Burnett, who was graduated from Westhampton College in June, 1957, and hopes to receive her Master of Science degree in Chemistry in June, 1960. The author is now the father of Steven Meredith Garmon, who was born on March 16, 1959.