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George Crabbe and the Tenth Muse

RONALD B. HATCH

RECENTLY CRITICS have been adopting a more positive approach to the old complaint that many poets of the second half of the eighteenth century found difficulty in creating a "voice" for their poetry. Northrop Frye, for instance, has suggested that one way of looking at the writing of this period is to see the work of art, not as a "product" with a single voice, but as a "process" which incorporates moods and voices of the ever-shifting present.¹ Similarly Martin Price has argued of this period that "the very range of styles that are tried on makes one all the more aware of the nature of style itself."² One apparent reason why writers of the late eighteenth century experienced such difficulty in creating a voice was their growing awareness that both philosophy and science had revealed an undoubted if somewhat confused relation between the perceiver and the perceived. Blake's comment—"the Eye altering, alters all . . . And the flat Earth becomes a Ball"—declares that the most fundamental facts depend upon the mode of perception or the angle from which they are viewed. While the influence of the writings of Locke, Hume, and Montesquieu made increasingly apparent to writers throughout the eighteenth century that the choice of perspective was crucial to their themes, it was by no means clear which voice should be chosen. The poet George Crabbe is typical of many of the post-Augustan writers, such as Thomson, Shenstone, Goldsmith, and even Johnson, in that his work embodies alternate or antithetic visions of the world which result from a conflict between consciously held ideas and those created under the pressure of creative practice. That this is not an entirely unusual state of affairs confined solely to artists has been demonstrated in recent times by taxonomists in their important discovery

¹ See "Towards Defining an Age of Sensibility," *ELH*, 23 (June 1956), 144-52.

² *To the Palace of Wisdom*, Anchor ed. (New York, 1965), p. 387.

that most people generally use two or more unrelated principles of organization to describe familiar phenomena.³

Crabbe's growing awareness of the problems implicit in the choice of an appropriate perspective can be seen in his early poems loosely grouped together by Sir Adolphus Ward as "juvenilia" in the three-volume Cambridge edition of his *Works*. In "Midnight," written around 1779, Crabbe is already grappling with the problem of finding a "voice" for his view of the world. A partial imitation of the graveyard school, the poem permits Crabbe to use as his narrator a man of vision set aside from his fellowmen. Acutely aware of his skimpy formal education and his lower-class origins, Crabbe recognizes that he cannot write in the same tradition as that of most previous poets. Respectfully the young poet asks the men of learning to forgive him for tampering with their subjects, but in the seeming humility of this address to the "Wise" lies a Socratic irony. Quite obviously Crabbe has no faith in their type of wisdom:

Forgive me then, ye Wise, who seem awake,
A Midnight Song, and let your Censure sleep.⁴

Since the Wise only "seem" to be awake, their "wisdom" can be a knowledge only of other times and other places. Crabbe implies that the situation has changed, and that acknowledged men of letters are no longer competent to deal with new conditions. The great poets of the past—Homer, Virgil, Milton—all dealt with grand and beautiful themes; Crabbe feels the modern age needs poets to describe man's disappointments in everyday life. As he says, theirs was a "blest Task, a gloomier task is mine" (l. 111). Akenside, for instance, Crabbe feels, "led the soul thro' Nature, and display'd / Imagination's Pleasures to its Eye" (ll. 109–10). While recognizing the value of Akenside's themes, Crabbe feels that his own experience of the bleak Suffolk coast, and his continual struggle to earn enough to feed and clothe himself, have ill-equipped him to write poetry in the same grand style.

Akenside, it will be recalled, had maintained that a true poet would concern himself only with the greatest themes:

³ See Arthur Cronquist, "Taxonomic Principles," in *The Evolution and Classification of Flowering Plants* (Boston, 1968), pp. 3–47.

⁴ *Poems by George Crabbe*, ed. Adolphus W. Ward (Cambridge University Press, 1905–1907), I, 47 (ll. 12–13). Unless otherwise stated, all further quotations from Crabbe's poems are from this edition.

Who but rather turns
 To Heaven's broad fire his unconstrained view,
 Than to the glimmering of a waxen flame?
 Who that, from Alpine heights, his labouring eye
 Shoots round the wide horizon, to survey
 Nilus or Ganges rolling his bright wave
 Through mountains, plains, through empires black with shade,
 And continents of sand; will turn his gaze
 To mark the windings of a scanty rill
 That murmurs at his feet?⁵

Yet Crabbe wants to write about the very subjects Akenside thought poets should scorn; Crabbe wants to turn away from the grand and marvelous to detail the minute. As a consequence, he believes that he must begin a new style of poetry:

He, tyed to some poor Spot, where e'en the rill
 That owns him Lord untasted steals away,
 Hallows a Clod, and spurns Immensity. (ll. 126–28)

Not only are the themes and forms of the past insufficient to handle the new situations, they are obstacles to a clear presentation of the new problems.

In "Midnight," the youthful Crabbe had humbly requested his audience to permit his new perspective; by 1783, the time of *The Village*, Crabbe is adamant about the correctness of his view. Most of the previous poetry of the century about life in the country had strayed widely from the truth, he feels, because the poets themselves had been unacquainted with village life and had consequently looked to models from the past for their inspiration. By turning to authority or by relying on the "Muses" for their inspiration instead of referring to the empirical world for their evidence, the poets had distorted their descriptions. Crabbe notes:

. . . the Muses sing of happy swains,
 Because the Muses never knew their pains. (ll. 21–22)

Since the Muses, or the traditional sources of poetic inspiration, have nothing to say about the contemporary world, Crabbe takes upon

⁵ Mark Akenside, *The Pleasures of Imagination*, new ed. (London, 1806), p. 20 (Bk. I. 174–83).

himself to “paint the Cot, / As Truth will paint it, and as Bards will not” (ll. 53–54). In part Crabbe is claiming that complete verisimilitude to the ordinary facts of the world is antithetical to the more traditional concerns of poetry which had relied upon the Muses’ divine inspiration. But also he is suggesting that communication between the divine and the human, where it has been attempted, has led to misleading interpretations about the material world. Crabbe, it should be noted, is not running the risk of Thamyris, the Thracian bard who was deprived of sight when he boasted himself the equal of the Muses, since Crabbe is not competing with the Muses. Whereas in Homer and Hesiod, the Muses, around the altar of Zeus, had glorified the deeds of gods and heroes, Crabbe wishes to take over a new province of poetry that the Muses had never claimed; he is not inspired to write of divine harmony, but will attempt to deal with evidence manifest to the five senses.

Crabbe in a curious way resembles Keats in that both had a strong desire for concrete perception. In reading Keats one feels that man is rediscovering his body; and in reading Crabbe one feels as if man is rediscovering his social world. Of course the differences between Crabbe’s approach and that of the Romantic poets are almost total. Whereas Crabbe was attempting to discover *the* correct perspective from which man’s condition could be viewed, the Romantic poets were interested in showing that any given perspective of the world, no matter how powerfully rooted, was a product of man’s making. For Crabbe in *The Village* there exist “weighty griefs” and “real ills” which he scorns to hide “In tinsel trappings of poetic pride” (l. 48). In order to impress upon his readers that his descriptions of hardship were not merely poetic effusions, Crabbe felt it necessary, in later editions of *The Village*, to add a footnote to this passage explaining the circumstances of the peasant. The social evils described in the poem were to be read as documentaries, not poetic constructs. For Crabbe, a dangerous schism has grown up between the imaginative arts and the real world.

If Crabbe intended to give “the real picture” then there must also have been a false picture. This false picture, largely but not entirely a literary creation, rested on the assumption that a pastoral life of ease and pleasure existed in England. Crabbe’s first job was to demolish this pastoral myth. And just as Raleigh answered Marlowe’s “The Passionate Shepherd to his Love” by having the nymph reply to the

shepherd in his own style, so does Crabbe ensure that his criticism of the classical pastoral is formulated in a classical manner:

In fairer scenes, where peaceful pleasures spring,
Tityrus, the pride of Mantuan swains, might sing:
But charmed by him, or smitten with his views,
Shall modern poets court the Mantuan muse?
From Truth and Nature shall we widely stray,
Where Fancy leads, or Virgil led the way?⁶

Written in the formal style, with classical allusions, these lines appealed greatly to the Augustan sensibility,⁷ and led Johnson, to whom *The Village* was shown in manuscript, to interest himself in a rewording which Crabbe accepted.⁸ But the point is that in spite of their classical appearance, they are a repudiation of the classical aesthetic as practiced in the eighteenth century. Crabbe is claiming that Roman models will cause English poets to stray from the truth of English life. But it should also be noted that in claiming the Muses cannot give a better picture than that of the truthful documentary, Crabbe is consciously creating a parallel between his guiding model—empirical observation—and the inspiration of the nine Muses. Thus is he attempting to strike out a new path for poetry without appearing to overthrow traditional patterns. He has created for himself what could be called the “tenth muse.”

Also worthy of note is that Johnson’s revision, the lines now read, partially obscures Crabbe’s intention. Where Johnson declares that the poet would go astray if he followed Virgil and not his “Fancy,” in the original Crabbe had said that the poet would be mistaken if he followed either Virgil or his “Fancy.” Obviously what Crabbe wanted

⁶ Quoted from Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*, ed. G. B. Hill, rev. L. F. Powell (Oxford, 1934), IV, 175–76, n. 4.

⁷ For instance, see Scott of Amwell’s letter to James Beattie, August 1783, quoted in the 1834 edition of the *Poetical Works*, II, 99, n. 2. Crabbe’s son also emphasized the “classical” qualities of *The Village*. See *Life*, Ch. v, p. 121 (Vol. I of the 1834 *Poetical Works*).

⁸ Johnson’s accepted emendation is:

On Mincio’s banks, in Caesar’s bounteous reign,
If Tityrus found the Golden Age again,
Must sleepy bards the flattering dream prolong,
Mechanic echoes of the Mantuan song?
From Truth and Nature shall we widely stray,
Where Virgil, not where Fancy, leads the way?

As can be seen, Johnson retained Crabbe’s fifth line in his emendation.

was poetry which incorporated direct observation, and which did not attempt either “fanciful” or Virgilian commentary.

It is hardly necessary to observe that Crabbe was by no means the first to criticize the pastoral. The controversy between Phillips and Pope at the beginning of the century is well known, as is Gay’s burlesque in *The Shepherd’s Week* and Richard Jago’s in *The Scavengers*, satires of the pastoral based on the antipathy between character and situation, personality and environment.⁹ Johnson also had added his powerful voice against the pastoral, in *Ramblers* 36 and 37, and in his critique of *Lycidas*, which no doubt partially accounts for his admiration of *The Village*. However, Crabbe’s main argument is not with classical poetry per se, but with the inclusion of classical subject matter in descriptions of English country life. Crabbe no doubt realized as well as we do that the landscape of the traditional pastoral was meant to symbolize a state of innocence, and not to represent a physical environment. Yet the pastoral underwent some extremely curious changes in the eighteenth century, first when Pope altered the tradition by including “the best side only of a shepherd’s life,”¹⁰ and later when poets such as William Shenstone and his friend Richard Jago introduced classical shepherds into their poems of topographic description.¹¹ The result, a curious mixture of myth and geography, was neither symbolic nor naturalistic. It is this eighteenth-century development of the pastoral which Crabbe is denouncing.

Because *The Village* describes the harsh and unjust life of the villagers it has often been assumed that Crabbe was appealing primarily for the reader’s sympathy. Yet this is to misunderstand the tradition in which Crabbe was writing, for if he had simply asked his readers to pity the poor, he would not have been offering anything new, and he would not have been giving a faithful account of the “real picture.” To understand Crabbe’s attitude one should recognize that *The Village* was written in protest against a particularly obnoxious version of sentimentalized humanitarianism which was rife in the period 1740–1790. Very often throughout the century when the poor were discussed the emphasis fell not on the condition of the poor, but

⁹ For an account of Crabbe’s debt to the mock-pastoral tradition, see Varley Howe Lang, *Crabbe and the Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore, 1938).

¹⁰ See “A Discourse on Pastoral Poetry,” in *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt (London, 1963), p. 120.

¹¹ See especially Richard Jago’s *Edge-Hill* (London, 1767) and William Shenstone’s *Rural Elegance* (London, 1750).

on the feelings of the observer. This can be seen in Richard Steele's comment on the paupers of London: "Such miserable Objects affect the compassionate Beholder with dismal Ideas, discompose the Cheerfulness of his Mind, and deprive him of the Pleasure that he might otherwise take in surveying the Grandeur of our Metropolis."¹² One sees immediately that Steele is interested as much in the effect of poverty on the mind of the beholder as he is in poverty itself.

Had Crabbe made a simple plea for the reader's sympathy toward the poor, he would inevitably have fallen into a series of those stock epithets which one finds attributed to any member of the leisured class claiming to fulfill Shaftesbury's ideal of the man of taste, humanity, and culture. It was standard procedure to include in poems as widely different as Pomfret's *The Choice*, John Philip's *Cyder*, and James Thomson's *Winter* an acknowledgement that the true gentleman and humanitarian remembered and pitied the poor. Even when Richard Savage in *The Wanderer* (1729) wished to show his dislike for contemporary attitudes about the "lazy poor" by describing the vagrants being harassed by the wealthy, he found it difficult to escape sentimentality. In the following passage one can observe the slide from honest indignation to self-satisfied charity:

But soft! the Cripple our Approach describes,
And to the Gate, though weak, officious hies.
I spring preventive, and unbar the way,
Then, turning, with a Smile of Pity say,
Here, Friend!—this little, copper Alms receive;
Instance of will, without the Pow'r to give.¹³

The conjunction of "Friend" with "little, copper Alms" is particularly distasteful, and the debased coinage of charity is immediately apparent. Throughout the century countless poets retailed the pleasures of charity. No doubt they all had a genuine humanitarian feeling for the poor, but when they expressed these feelings in verse, the stress fell on the act of charity, on the way this act placed the "good man" in harmony with nature and God, rather than on the plight of the poor man.¹⁴ In Mark Akenside's *The Pleasures of Imagination*

¹² *The Spectator*, No. 430, 14 July 1712, ed. Donald F. Bond (Oxford, 1965), IV, 11.

¹³ *The Wanderer: A Vision*, Canto V, ll. 127–32, in *The Poetical Works of Richard Savage*, ed. Clarence Tracy (Cambridge, 1962), pp. 140–41.

¹⁴ See James McPhee, "Humanitarianism in English Poetry from Thomson to Wordsworth," Diss. Edinburgh 1962, pp. 129–73.

(1744), benevolence is admired because the act itself gives pleasure: nothing is so “fair” as “the graceful tear that streams for others’ woes” (Bk. I. 503–6). John Armstrong was to go one step further still when he equated charity with good taste: “Of all Taste the noblest and the best” was to “behold in Man’s obnoxious State / Scenes of Content, and happy Turns of Fate.” Armstrong believed that the “Man of generous Mould” exercises the most refined taste when he helps to bring content to the poor, and as proof, he cites how these are “generous Deeds as we with Tears admire.”¹⁵ If poverty is taken as the order of things, and even right, benevolence is the equivalent and social virtue. But acquiescence in the poverty leads to self-admiration and sentimentality in the benevolence. It becomes a kind of self-indulgence.¹⁶

One can understand better Crabbe’s vehement dislike of pastoral when it is realized that as a result of the emphasis placed on the feelings of the philanthropist, the poor were no longer described as distressed people, but pastoral shepherds idling in a green and merry land. Since poets wished to emphasize the beauty of the act of charity, they found it necessary to describe beautiful surroundings and not empty commons. The countryside in *The Pleasures of Imagination* contains “every charm.” Its beauty is an emblem of the good life nature intends for the villagers. All too frequently the idea of picturesque poverty is conjured up in order to feel a glow at the thought of relieving it. And since poverty is always there, the glow is always possible.

Once one sees the connection between the pastoral and humanitarian poetry, Crabbe’s attack on “sleepy bards” should be all the more understandable and his purpose in *The Village* easier to define. He is not developing the idea that the poor should be helped (the humanitarians had made this theme appear trite), but rather that one must learn to recognize the poor and their conditions before attempting to help them. In many ways, Crabbe’s *The Village* is anti-humanitarian, because in the 1780s “humanitarian” entailed a sentimental attitude to the poor. I am not saying that no genuine humanitarian poetry was written before Crabbe’s time. Obviously

¹⁵ [John Armstrong], *Of Benevolence: An Epistle to Eumenes* (London, 1751), pp. 5–7.

¹⁶ William Empson has suggested that the pastoral art form “is important for a nation with a strong class-system” because it “makes the classes feel part of a larger unity or simply at home with each other.” See *Some Versions of Pastoral* (London, 1935), p. 199.

sections of Pope's *Moral Essays* and Thomson's *The Seasons*, Johnson's *London* and Langhorne's *The Country Justice* show a genuine concern for the poor. The point which needs stressing, however, is that the great mass of humanitarian verse, especially from 1740 to 1780, tended to organize the facts of the material world to create a warmth in the observer. In order to avoid the dangers of a trite humanitarian appeal to the conscience of the rich, Crabbe decided that a true account of the state of the poor was required. Opinions can be easily disregarded; a statement of fact almost always stirs the conscience.

In attempting to distinguish the difference between Crabbe's treatment of the poor in *The Village* and that of earlier eighteenth-century poets, one is often driven to say that Crabbe's portraits are "realistic" or "naturalistic." Indeed, the demands by writers such as Johnson and Crabbe for a reformulation of the literary account of English country life can be seen exemplified in the "rise of the novel" as opposed to the old "romance." Yet terms such as "realism and naturalism" have become overused in recent years; what is required is an explication of Crabbe's technique of portrayal. The most obvious point is Crabbe's choice of his native Aldborough for his setting. The importance of this lies not so much in the way the features of Aldborough differ from, say Farnham in Sussex, but in the way the topographic details of a particular place give the poem a locus outside the customary poetic backgrounds. Beginning with the particular, and not with the universal or generic, Crabbe was creating his own world and its own values. In choosing to emphasize certain features of his own area, and thus giving them universal significance, Crabbe was one of the first of a long line of artists such as Thomas Hardy and Robert Frost who created their distinctive world from the particularized details of the surrounding countryside.

The choice of Aldborough as his setting supplied Crabbe with a host of details that could not easily be accommodated to the normal eighteenth-century picture of the world. Just as late eighteenth-century botanists were discovering vast numbers of new plants with new properties that were finally to overthrow their classification system and call into doubt the idea of special creation with each plant embodying its God-given logical essence,¹⁷ so Crabbe's introduction

¹⁷ See P. H. Davis and V. H. Heywood, *Principles of Angiosperm Taxonomy* (New York, 1963), pp. 15-30.

of plants such as the blue bugloss and the slimy mallow forced him (or perhaps “allowed” is a better choice of terminology) to offer an alternative structuring of the world from that ordinarily accepted at the time. In contrast to most eighteenth-century poetry of natural description where the background is meant to suggest benevolence and harmony,¹⁸ the setting of *The Village* creates a sense of inherent tragedy. Crabbe explains how he was born, not on an ordinary coast, but on a “frowning coast” where the countryside is filled with Manichean forces ready to thwart man’s efforts:

Lo! where the heath, with withering brake grown o’er,
Lends the light turf that warms the neighbouring 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,
Reign o’er the land, and rob 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 coasts abound,
And a sad splendour vainly shines around. (I. 63–78)

Endowed with human feelings, the threatening landscape is a good example of what Ruskin derisively termed the pathetic fallacy. Mrs. Haddakin has said: “The function of the passage as a whole is to demonstrate that if you look closely enough into a picturesque landscape you are led, by way of agricultural problems, to consider the welfare of human beings.”¹⁹ But even more than this, Crabbe’s description of “rank weeds” reigning over the land and defying all man’s efforts to cultivate anything but the scantest garden for pleasure and use creates the terms by which man inhabits the world. Images such as “clasping tares,” and the “slimy mallow” waving its “silky leaf,” have been carefully chosen to convey the impression that, on the most primeval terms, man has to combat forces of destruction. The inhab-

¹⁸ See John Arthos, *The Language of Natural Description in Eighteenth Century Poetry* (Ann Arbor, 1949).

¹⁹ Lilian Haddakin, *The Poetry of Crabbe* (London, 1955), p. 134.

itants of the village do not live in a “Happy Valley” where the design of nature is ordered to help man, but on a coast where the sea is swallowing the homes built upon the loose shingle.

The weeds may look splendid to the “sleepy bards” who do not see clearly, but they are a sad sight to the villager attempting to earn a living from the “thin harvest.” Crabbe’s own viewpoint is interesting, for unlike the laborers who can see only the sadness of the weeds and the sleepy bards who see only the splendor, Crabbe can see both sides. These weeds grow among the sustaining corn, and threaten it, but the principle of growth is there in both weed and corn. The thistles are noble in a way; the poppies are narcotics as well as pretty; the colors are striking; the leaves are “silky.” Everything is involved with its opposite: beauty and wastefulness, use and want. “Sad splendour” sums it up.

Crabbe of course is himself open to the same sort of criticism that he gave of the earlier “pastoral” poets; for just as they created an ethical universe in which man lives in harmony with nature, so Crabbe has created a universe in which an amoral force involves everything with its opposite to create “sad splendour.” But every artist (indeed everyone) must have some organizing principle of selection; what matters is how well the principle accounts for the observed facts and how successful it is in predicting as yet unobserved phenomena. Part of what gives the early parts of *The Village* so much power is the way the organizing principle that Crabbe posits in nature carries over into the people, or, to put it another way, the way the people are rooted in their milieu.

The transition between the landscape and the people is made with devastating understatement. Like the weeds, the people have a sturdy and unruly vigor. But they are not civilized, and in their wild actions they threaten to overcome the conventions and arts of society. The central notion of “sad splendour” evoked by the setting is seen to have a direct corollary in the people:

So looks the nymph whom wretched arts adorn,
Betray'd by man, then left for man to scorn;
Whose cheek in vain assumes the mimic rose,
While her sad eyes the troubled breast disclose;
Whose outward splendour is but folly's dress,
Exposing most, when most it gilds distress. (I. 79–84)

Crabbe was never greatly influenced by theories of the natural goodness of man, so that having once established in *The Village* the idea that man as a part of nature is moved by a principle of growth which has little respect for ends, he does not hesitate to draw the conclusion that the people of the village are rude and lawless.

Critics such as René Huchon have made much of the way Crabbe, in Book II, shows his villagers to be brawling drunkards, as if this controverted the intention of Book I.²⁰ But Crabbe's wish to show the real picture of the poor by no means implies that he wanted to show good villagers living in harsh surroundings; rather he shows how the villagers reflect their environment:

Here joyless roam a wild amphibious race,
With sullen wo display'd in every face;
Who far from civil arts and social fly,
And scowl at strangers with suspicious eye. (I. 85–88)

The village then is preeminently a place of hostility in which man's role is no different from that of other living things. Man's misery and his viciousness are explained as the counterparts of environment.

In choosing to describe villagers who live "far from civil arts and social," and showing them as a part of nature which has vigor and splendor, but which is amoral, Crabbe developed a view of man and nature which has little in common with the optimism of mid-century poets. Many eighteenth-century writers believed that the new science offered proof that one could see aspects of God through his harmonious and beautiful world. Thomson wrote of Isaac Newton:

All intellectual eye, our solar round
First gazing thro', he by the blended power
Of *gravitation* and *projection* saw
The whole in silent harmony revolve.²¹

An amateur scientist himself, Crabbe valued the principle of classification which Thomson praises so highly, but as Crabbe said in "Midnight," his was a "horizontal Eye" that saw "all things grey"

²⁰ René Huchon, *George Crabbe and his Times 1754–1832*, trans. Frederick Clarke (London, 1907), p. 168.

²¹ James Thomson, *A Poem Sacred to the Memory of Sir Isaac Newton*, ll. 39–42, in *The Works of James Thomson* (London, 1762), I, 210–11.

(l. 219). Whereas Thomson believed that Newton's "intellectual eye" gave man insight into the hierarchical laws by which God harmonizes the universe, Crabbe's "horizontal Eye" led to empirical observations that did not assume a moral universe. Thomson began with the assumption that Newton had been able to give a reason for everything, including, in his words, "the yellow waste of idle sands."²² This traditional view in which man was seen as a unique creation with an immortal soul participating in an ethically organized universe is implicitly challenged by Crabbe's "scientific" method, where he begins by describing the particular, the barren soil of Aldborough, and from this particular attempts to draw conclusions. The difference is crucial and it should be no surprise to find that Crabbe draws the conclusion that man, like all other living things, has to battle in order to live. As an amateur scientist, Crabbe has offered a picture of man in terms of his observed outward actions with no mention of the usual moral and spiritual dimensions.²³ He is explained in terms of natural phenomena.

Crabbe's use of environment serves yet another purpose, for nature, if it is an active force resisting man's attempts to sustain himself, must be a conditioning factor as well. Crabbe explains how he too had once lived in the village. But realizing that circumstances would defeat him if he remained, he seized the "favouring hour" and fled. Looking back at the neighbors he left behind, he holds out little hope for their welfare: "Ah! hapless they who still remain" (I. 124). In Crabbe's view, the people are helpless, because the ocean will sooner or later swallow them by sweeping "the low hut and all it holds away." When this happens, as Crabbe feels it inevitable, the only alternative for the poor villager is to weep from door to door and beg "a poor protection from the poor" (I. 130).

Crabbe is here in the process of formulating a tentative theory of the influence of environment on man, where man is not free to make himself what he wants to be, but is molded into the person he is by the physical and social forces around him.²⁴ Nature and society force

²² *To the Memory of Sir Isaac Newton*, l. 56.

²³ It is interesting to note that Crabbe's botanical interests led him to collect grasses and coarse plants. He was relatively uninterested in the "beautiful flowers." See *Life*, Ch. vii, pp. 164–65.

²⁴ Although Montesquieu in his *Esprit des Lois* (1748) relates government, law, and social conduct to physical and economic environment, in England one finds few references to a full-scale theory of environmental influence until the end of the

upon him a life of "Rapine and Wrong and Fear" (I. 111), about which he can do little.



The question then arises why Crabbe should want to add to his "real" descriptions of the early part of the poem his famous or rather infamous threnody on Robert Manners. To see this eulogy as a purely selfish attempt on Crabbe's part to win the favor of his new patron, the Duke of Rutland, would be uncharitable, but not unreasonable, if it were not that the pattern of *The Village* with its abrupt shift in emphasis is repeated in many of Crabbe's later poems. "The Hall of Justice" contains a similar disjunction; the poem turns suddenly from the question of earthly justice to that of divine justice. And the sketches of individuals in *The Borough* and *The Parish Register* clearly belie the public values enunciated by their narrators. In *The Village* the introduction of Robert Manners comes exactly at the point when Crabbe is face to face with the consequences of his empirical world. Significantly, Crabbe introduces Manners, not to show that he helped the poor, but because Manners' way of life demonstrates that "Life is not measured by the time we live" (II. 172). In this respect *The Village* resembles Wordsworth's *Resolution and Independence*. Both poems are concerned with the seeming futility of man's life and the way in which meaning can be found or given. Where Wordsworth speaks of the "cold, pain and labour" of a totally secular life, Crabbe speaks of "narrow views and paltry fears." And just as the old leech-gatherer gives Wordsworth new resolution so does Robert Manners provide Crabbe with hope. Manners is the noble "chief" who has accepted the fallen world, while still managing to experience joy.

Crabbe tells the poor that if such great men exist "then let your murmurs cease, / Think, think of him, and take your lot in peace" (II. 113–14). Caution is necessary at this point since at first sight it is unclear why the poor should cease complaining because one noble

century when it was popularized by such writers as Robert Owen. David Hume, for instance, in his essay "Of National Characters" rejects altogether the idea of physical causes having any great influence on national character. See however, Robert Wallace's *A Dissertation on the Numbers of Mankind* (1753) for a qualification of the Humean position.

man has been found. But assume the opposite to be the case; suppose it had proved impossible to find such a man. The conclusion would be that nothing anyone could do would have meaning. In rejecting the pastoral world in which man lives in harmony with nature, Crabbe developed a world in which nature is either indifferent or hostile to man. Such a "naturalistic" world places man on the same plane as other animals, and seems to make him the slave of his passions and instincts. In his early and very fine parody, *Inebriety*, Crabbe had already described a world in which men and women both descended to the level of brutes. In *The Village* when Crabbe looked closely at the "simple life that Nature yields" he found a Hobbesian world of "Rapine and Wrong and Fear." Instead of simple shepherds, he found poor villagers and villainous employers; in the place of harmony, he found class conflict. The summary of mankind in Book II shows men to have no values at all:

So shall the man of power and pleasure see
 In his own slave as vile a wretch as he;
 In his luxurious lord the servant find
 His own low pleasures and degenerate mind:
 And each in all the kindred vices trace
 Of a poor, blind, bewilder'd, erring race;
 Who, a short time in varied fortune past,
 Die, and are equal in the dust at last. (II. 93–100)

Whereas, at the end of Book I, the reader was moved to pity the poor worker, and feel that he should receive more aid, by the end of this vision of universal corruption in Book II, Crabbe has constructed a situation in which there seems no hope for anyone.

One might object that Crabbe's naturalism ignores man in society and holds true only for a small number of unrepresentative villagers on the Suffolk coast living in a Hobbesian state of nature. But this is to miss the main thrust of Crabbe's argument. Although *The Village* has as its foundation the amoral force of nature, Crabbe widens the poem to scenes "more fair in view" to show how the same type of existence is apparent there. In the more prosperous counties, nature is no longer so hostile, but the people who have tamed the countryside are themselves untamed. Laborers are still just as poor. And the reason is that they are now coerced by yet another unfriendly agent, employers:

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. (I. 135–39)

If on the “frowning coast” poverty was the “fault” of nature, then inland, where the country is rich, the blame must be placed on the unequal division of property. Here Crabbe introduces the idea that poverty is the result of exploitation by the landed class. As slaves dig the golden ore for their masters, so the English peasants till the fields of golden corn for the landlords. Crabbe is implying that an invidious type of slavery, economic slavery, as unjust as the physical slavery of the West Indies, could be found in England.

Although Crabbe admits the existence of some who, with “manly pride” attempt to hide the “fainting heart,” eventually all are beaten down. Man’s drive for existence—which Pope had correctly termed self-love—nowhere shows evidence of a metamorphosis into social love. Crabbe introduces Goldsmith’s priest, but he is no longer described as a selfless man seeking to aid others; he is very much the selfish individual performing public acts for personal benefit. Nor is Crabbe so naive as to claim that the world imagined by the pastoralists is completely false. Undoubtedly there exist houses for the care of the poor. The Statute 43 Eliz. c.2 established that “every poor, old, blind, lame, and impotent person, or other person not able to work” was entitled to relief. What Crabbe does is to point out the implications of including within a single room

The lame, the blind, and, far the happiest they!
 The moping idiot and the madman gay. (I. 238–39)

By questioning the motives behind such “benevolence,” he reorganizes the accepted “facts.” Moreover the poor themselves are not sentimentalized; they are no better than their “betters.” The old man caught up in the “roundsman system” has children who should help to care for him, but they refuse. The entire community is built upon the amoral energy that characterizes the natural world.

The poem, beginning with thistles and tares, widens to encompass the poor, and then expands further to apply to all men. The relation between rich and poor is evidenced when Crabbe describes how the

brutal poverty of the poor implies a poverty of mind in the farmers. The laborers enjoy their day of rest, not because of, but in spite of, the efforts of the middle and upper classes. The "careful masters" would like to see Sunday outlawed so that the laborers could work every day of the week:

Thus, as their hours glide on, with pleasure fraught,
Their careful masters brood the painful thought;
Much in their mind they murmur and lament,
That one fair day should be so idly spent;
And think that Heaven deals hard, to tithe their store
And tax their time for preachers and the poor. (II. 19–24)

It should be emphasized that Crabbe is not saying that the rich cause the poverty of the poor; he is not blaming the rich. Rather he seems to be pointing out the much more subtle implication that the existence of brutal servants necessitates the existence of brutal masters. Physical poverty in one class is inevitably linked to moral and spiritual poverty in other classes.²⁵

It is against this background that Crabbe's introduction of Robert Manners with his Christ-like associations should be viewed. In a world of self-interest, Manners, the one noble man, brings everyone of the village—rich and poor alike—the evidence that man can rise above himself. Manners, it should be stressed, is necessary not simply because he was generous or happy, or even virtuous, but because he did not bow down to circumstances. He chose to die for the cause he believed in. Thus Manners' way of death offers proof that man is not merely the product of outside forces, but can himself shape his own destiny. But the introduction of Robert Manners also signals that Crabbe is now interpreting the Hobbesian world of the earlier part of the poem in terms of the Christian view of history where man is in a fallen state to be saved only by the intercession of a man-god. It will be recalled that many writers since the time of Pascal have been motivated to a belief in God because a Godless world seemed so un-

²⁵ Laura Johnson Wylie has commented: "He conceived of no such thing as an isolated individual. His profound interest in the concrete led him to study men so closely that he saw them as part and parcel of the world to which they belonged. His people smack of the soil in which they have grown, and are intimately related to each other, as well as to that larger society whose creatures they are, however unconscious of the fact they may be." See "The England of George Crabbe," in *Social Studies in English Literature* (Boston & New York, 1916), p. 95.

bearable. Christ is not actually introduced into *The Village*, but Robert Manners is clearly an analogue. Crabbe's difficulty in managing the transition is seen most clearly in his imagery. While he does not forsake the nature imagery of the first part of the poem—Manners is likened to a “tall oak”—nature is no longer amoral, but ethical and protective. The “tall oak” is the “guard and glory” of the trees below.

Although this Christ-like figure, so suddenly and preposterously introduced, strikes almost all modern readers as vestigial, one can see how Crabbe's concern with “the real,” which generated a description of man's condition extraordinarily similar to that of the Christian view of fallen man, left him with only the Christian solution as a means of escape from the labyrinth of Hobbes' world. Crabbe has posited a static world where man and society do not change, where in fact man's behavior can be described in terms of unchanging natural phenomena. Under such conditions, the artist can describe man only as he was and always will be.

This contradiction or paradox in Crabbe's account of human nature is by no means unusual among eighteenth-century writers, and is intimately tied to the problem of “voice” mentioned earlier. For instance on the first page of his book, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, John Locke comments: “Men's Happiness or Misery is for the most part of their own making,” and on the next he confidently asserts that “of all the Men we meet with, Nine parts of Ten are what they are, Good or Evil, useful or not, by their Education.” In Lockean terms Crabbe's villagers are the manifest result of their education, or lack of it. Robert Manners, on the other hand, is clearly an example of someone whose life is of his own making. For the most part, philosophers and novelists refused to attempt a synthesis of these two opposed views.²⁶ Often it was simply a matter of choosing whichever of the two theories was the most applicable to the present need; the other was conveniently forgotten. By the end of the century, however, the contradiction between the two models of personality was rapidly becoming apparent. In *A New View of Society*, Robert Owen pointed out the dangers to society—especially with regard to concepts of punishment—arising from the conflict of these two views on the

²⁶ One reason for this was probably the enormous influence of orthodox Augustinian Christianity where man is seen as a victim of original sin doomed to inhabit a fallen world unless saved by God's grace. In this view there are two types of man: the saved, (therefore the free); and the fallen—those who remain causally determined.

formation of human character, and asked his readers urgently to reconsider the subject.²⁷

It would be as well to point out that in terms of the situation Crabbe created in *The Village*, he did not actually have to choose the Christ-like figure of Robert Manners as the solution to his “realist” dilemma. After all, as narrator, Crabbe himself escaped and changed, and his work presumably will help to further the changes already in motion. But Crabbe does not press this point; instead, he assumes the static world of his eighteenth-century forebears, which because it is now without value, is meaningless.

In his later work Crabbe often pursues this line of thought by describing in great detail the lack of meaning and emotional color in everyday life. Many of his later characters flee this type of life with its banal mediocrity by resorting to neurotic aberration—a technique used by many twentieth-century authors. In poems such as “Peter Grimes,” Crabbe, in a very Kafka-like way, is able to show how the typical details of everyday life, emptied of meaning, have a spectral character which evokes the sense of a disintegrating personality. Yet in a few of his later poems, such as “The Frank Courtship” and “The Natural Death of Love,” Crabbe does permit a modicum of change in his characters, and thereby creates some of his finest comic poems. In his dream poems, moreover, Crabbe goes on to explore the possibility of an earthly paradise as a counterpart to man’s fallen estate, but although intrigued, his inability to conceive of the material and political exertion necessary to effect the change leads him to conclude with unsatisfactory repudiations. In *The Village* Crabbe refuses to accept the imaginative logic of his environmentally described world, and since he does not introduce a sense of historical dynamic, he is left with the factitious Robert Manners in the abstract-idealist mode of thought to dispel the poem’s oppression.

Although the figure of Manners does not resolve the poem’s questions in the same empirical mode in which they are asked, his introduction carries its own poetic logic, and is by no means totally out of order. Ian Gregor has pointed out that the ending of Book II converts the poem into “a striking variation of a well-recognized ‘kind’—the elegiac pastoral.”²⁸ It clearly resembles the ending of such

²⁷ *A New View of Society*, Everyman ed. (London, 1966), pp. 71–72.

²⁸ Ian Gregor, “The Last Augustan,” *The Dublin Review*, 179 (First Quarter 1955), 40.

poems as John Philips' *Cyder* where Philips encourages the young Harcourt to return to England to follow his father's example: "See! how the Cause / Of Widows, and of Orphans He asserts / With winning Rhetoric, and well-argu'd Law!"²⁹ I would suggest that the classical elegy in Book II affords a counterpart to the classical opening of Book I. It will be recalled that Crabbe opened the poem in the classical style; in Book II he closes singing of the "pure stream" which still flows on, "and shall for ever flow." In effect the classical eulogy of the great man rounds out and completes the classical opening of the poem.

Yet since Crabbe employed the classical form at the beginning of *The Village* as an ironic device to contain anticlassical ideas, the classical ending coming as it does after so much abjuration of the classical also partakes of this ironic mode. Irony demands two points of view in conflict, and usually deliberate irony results when the author holds one of the views to be correct and the other false. What happens in *The Village* is that Crabbe introduces a conventional viewpoint—for instance, the "sweet repose" of the villager—pretends for a moment to argue its validity, and then turns round to show its falsity. From the beginning of Book II, versions of pastoral are suggested, and then rejected. At the end, the theme of the "great man" sweeps in and overwhelms the poem. Obviously the "great man" is a variant of pastoral just as was the "sweet repose" of the villager, but Crabbe bows to the inevitable, and permits himself a "pastoral" solution.

An illuminating biographical fact is Crabbe's personal experience of "the noble chief," the saving grace of the villagers: Edmund Burke actually rescued him from the threat of debtor's prison and perhaps even suicide.³⁰ Yet Crabbe, it must be said, was unfortunate in his choice of Charles, fourth Duke of Rutland, as his "great man" to carry on the example of his brother Robert Manners. The Duke died four years later, aged only thirty-three. Nathaniel Wraxall's comments on the Duke reveal him to have been a man who never "dis-

²⁹ *Cyder*, II. 18–20, in *The Poems of John Philips*, ed. M. G. Lloyd Thomas (Oxford, 1927), pp. 68–69.

³⁰ See *Life*, Ch. iv, pp. 89–97, and Huchon, *George Crabbe*, p. 114. Crabbe himself was temperamentally aristocratic. His son notes that Crabbe "had seen the submission paid to the opinions of Johnson and Burke; and he always readily followed the lead of any one whom he thought skilled on the topic in question" (*Life*, Ch. ix, p. 236).

played any eminent talents," a pleasant but rather decadent member of the aristocracy.³¹ Although today one tends to see the Duke's character as additional evidence of the untenability of Crabbe's solution, agreement or disagreement with the philosophy of Crabbe's ending should not blind us to the obvious conclusion that in poetic terms Crabbe is not offering the reader a felt response to an individual—Manners—but is depending on the ending's standard elegiac qualities to create in the reader an association with all the great men of the past—officers and poets alike—who have served their country.

Thus *The Village* combines Crabbe's perceptions of an empirically based world with his belief in man's ability to find values and goals. Fitting in with Crabbe's sense of things in his own life and concluding the classical manner of the poem, the elegiac ending informs the poem with those transcendent ideals for which Crabbe could find no place in the world of the village.

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³¹ Nathaniel Wraxall, *The Historical and Posthumous Memoirs of Sir Nathaniel Wraxall*, ed. Henry B. Wheatley (London, 1884), V, 33.