

57. Raynbird, 'On the Farming of Suffolk', p. 266; William Wickett and Nicholas Duval, *The Farmer's Boy: the Story of a Suffolk Poet Robert Bloomfield, 1766-1823* (Terence Dalton, Lavenham, 1971).

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Criticism: Roger Sales (essay date 1983)

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[In the following essay, Sales remarks on Crabbe's reputation for factual representations of society, arguing that the poet actually produced an idealized and elitist view of his community.]

MATTERS FACTUAL

Historians, travelling helpfully on official sources, tend to arrive at the 'shocking realism' fallacy. These sources reflect a perspective from above, in which the agricultural labourer is not a person but a problem that needs solving. The full horror of the problem may be shockingly exposed, but it is fallacious to take this approach as the realistic one. It is also dangerous to assume that a poet who shares this *de haut en bas* perspective is more realistic than one who does not. William Hazlitt provides an important warning against the easy equation of shocking fact with realism in his *Lectures on the English Poets*. He rightly saw that Crabbe was often as official and officious as rubber stamps, or rubber bullets:

He describes the interior of a cottage like a person sent there to distrain for rent. He has an eye to the number of arms in an old worm-eaten chair, and takes care to inform himself and the reader whether a joint-stool stands upon three legs or upon four. ... If Bloomfield is too much of the Farmer's Boy, Crabbe is too much of the parish beadle, an overseer of the country poor. He has no delight beyond the walls of a workhouse, and his officious zeal would convert the world into a vast infirmary. He is the kind of Ordinary, not of Newgate, but of nature. His poetical morality is taken from Burn's Justice, or the Statutes against Vagrants.

(pp. 190-2)

Richard Burn's *The Justice of the Peace and Parish Officer* (1755) gave beaky magistrates an A to Z of whom to send down, together with a fistful of heavy hints about how to do it. He knew how to deal with idle apprentices, blasphemers, buggers, dissenters, poachers, Roman Catholics, servants and vagrants. He also cast a stern glance at the poor in general. Hazlitt very rarely missed his target, particularly if it was a ponderous, slow-moving one like Crabbe. He appears to be referring specifically to the inventory which Crabbe laboriously draws up towards the end of his letter on 'The Poor and Their Dwellings' in *The Borough* (1810). Such inventories certainly give the appearance of realistic documentary as they deal with matters factual. Yet Crabbe is playing one of the oldest tricks in the empiricist's cooked book. He tells us whether a stool has three legs or four. We feel unable to argue with facts like these. By the time that Crabbe has measured everything from side to side, we may well be too tired to distinguish between fact and opinion. Crabbe collects facts because he is 'an overseer of the country poor'. Empiricism itself is not a neutral position. It needs, as Hazlitt suggests, to be associated with beadles, gaolers, magistrates and all those set in authority over us. The collection of facts must not be divorced from their abuse.

Historians, then, tend to mistake *an* official version of rural England for *the* official, or accurate, account. This is probably why they often quote Crabbe's famous description of the workhouse in Book One of *The Village* (1783) as an example of what conditions were really like. This description may tell us what 'overseers' like Crabbe felt about workhouses, but it does not provide evidence about what conditions were really like for the overseen or observed. Clare, like Hazlitt, felt that Crabbe should not be allowed to fool most of the people for most of the time into believing that his descriptions were documentary or realistic ones:

Crabbe writes about the peasantry as much like the Magistrate as the Poet. He is determined to show you their worst side: and as to their simple pleasures and pastoral feelings, he knows little or nothing about them. ...¹

Clare's idea of hell on earth was to be shut up for a week with Crabbe and to have to listen to him moralizing about the poor. It must have been like wading through crude oil trying to talk to Crabbe. His poetry, as Clare suggests, is at best one-sided and highly selective. Mrs Gaskell, who was disposed to be more charitable towards him, also felt that he was unable to perceive that life need not necessarily always be 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short'. His concentration on the 'worst side' of rural society does provide information about and insights into the bureaucratic mind. The full horror may be exposed, but this is not necessarily the full story. There are a number of pictures of country life in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Crabbe's is just one of them. They have all been shot from different angles, and the camera's eye altering, alters all. Crabbe's obsession with the 'worst side' of rural society was just as selective, polemical and distorting as, say, what John Constable used to refer to as opera-house pastoral. Like Clare, D. H. Lawrence resented the way in which the overseers palmed off opinions as facts. He took the French artist Jules Bastien Lepage to task for failing to appreciate that a realistic portrayal of rural society did not necessarily have to be stern and grim:

Grey pictures of French peasant life—not one gleam, not one glimmer of sunshine—that is speaking literally—the paint is grey, grey-green, and brown. The peasant woman is magnificent—above all things, capable: to work, to suffer, to endure, to love—not, oh Bastien Lepage, oh Wells! Oh the God that there isn't—to enjoy. ... Surely, surely Bastien Lepage and Wells are not the Truth, the whole Truth, and Nothing but the Truth.²

Parson Crabbe saw life as an assault course or endurance test. The thought for the day from the pulpit at the beginning of *The Borough* is that endurance and submission should be the order of the day. That was an order. As Hazlitt noticed, he had all the subtlety of an elephant's foot. His grim picture should never be taken for the whole truth. The very notion of the whole truth is itself a legal fiction, which is used by magistrates when sending the buggers and the gypsies down.

READING THE REGISTER

Crabbe maintained in his Preface to 'The Parish Register' (1807) that his picture of rural society was a balanced one, yet it has all the balanced arrogance and bias of a school report. Crabbe's theme is one that still continues to fall on the stony floors of the school assembly room:

How pass'd the youthful, how the old their days;
Who sank in sloth, and who aspired to praise;
Their tempers, manners, morals, customs, arts;
What parts they had, and how they 'mploy'd their parts;
By what elated, soothed, seduced, depress'd,
Full well I know—these records give the rest.

(I, 9-14)³

He took care to point out that only those who conformed to his image of the deserving poor would be receiving prizes on speechday:

Toil, care, and patience bless th' abstemious few,
Fear, shame, and want the thoughtless herd pursue.

(I, 29-30)

This pupil will go far, perhaps even as far as me, if he tries to be exactly like me. If he refuses to conform, then the further away he goes from me the better for all concerned. There are a limited number of teacher's pets, but the vast majority are merely a herd of real swine. They do not even deserve sham pearls of wisdom. Crabbe's poetry, like the school report, is a peg on which a number of prejudices are hung. He certainly believed that there was considerable room for improvement as far as the majority of the rural poor was concerned. There were extreme cases, however, when even his own brilliant teaching could not make any impression. He hoped that the ground would cover these rogues. He liked what he knew or understood. Despite the illusion of balance and objectivity, his reports on rural England were reports on his own schoolmasterly prejudices, which were written for the parent rather than the pupil. After a description of the undeserving poor which makes Victorian temperance tracts appear restrained, he comments:

Ye who have power, these thoughtless people part,
Nor let the ear be first to taint the heart!

(I, 210-11)

'The Parish Register' was written by one who had power for others in the same fortunate position. It appeals to 'the true physician' to walk 'the foulest ward' (I, 213). It urges the schoolmaster to be abroad:

Whence all these woes?—From want of virtuous will,
Of honest shame, of time-improving skill;
From want of care t' employ the vacant hour,
And want of ev'ry kind but want of power.

(I, 226-9)

An hour a day keeps the devil at bay. It is no accident that the village 'schoolmarm' is singled out for particular praise. She adopts an orphan and sets the child exactly the right example:

Then I behold her at her cottage-door,
Frugal of light,—her Bible laid before,
When on her double duty she proceeds,
Of time as frugal, knitting as she reads.
Her idle neighbours, who approach to tell
Some trifling tale, her serious looks compel
To hear reluctant—while the lads who pass,
In pure respect walk silent on the grass.
Then sinks the day; but not to rest she goes,
Till solemn prayers the daily duties close.

(I, 599-608)

The moral of Crabbe's story is that frugality and piety are virtues which society ought to be taught to respect.

Crabbe attempts to authenticate his descriptions in two ways. First, he can personally and knowingly vouch 'full well' for their accuracy. Second, if anybody should doubt the validity of his personal experience, 'these

records give the rest'. The argument is, of course, dangerously circular. If you object to the prejudices in the school report, then the mark book is produced with a flourish. You are told that you are unable to object to facts or 'records'. Yet these 'records' enshrine the same prejudices as the reports. When a historian wants to reconstruct the history of a particular parish, he certainly has to rely quite heavily on the damp or dusty registers of births, marriages and deaths. The Annalists and the demographers have shown that, if questions are asked and assumptions and classifications challenged, these 'records' are of historical rather than purely antiquarian interest. If Wordsworth often writes about rural society like a fussy folklorist, Crabbe exhibits all the faults of the fusty antiquarian. This does not just mean that, as Hazlitt noticed, he accumulated detail. It also means that he tended to accept existing classifications. His society is divided into God's poor, the Devil's poor and the poor devils. He always found it difficult to unbuckle the bible belt.

Crabbe suggests that he offers us a realistic description of 'the simple annals of my parish poor' (I, 2) in 'The Parish Register'. He makes the same claim at the end of the poem as well:

Thus, as the months succeed, shall infants take
Their names; thus parents shall the child forsake;
Thus brides again and bridegrooms blithe shall kneel,
By love or law compell'd their vows to seal,
Ere I again, or one like me, explore
These simple annals of the Village Poor.

(III, 965-70)

It is true that he does offer some individual portraits of the agricultural labourer. Isaac Ashford is presented as 'a wise good man, contented to be poor' (III, 307). He is an instructive example of what God's, and therefore Parson Crabbe's, poor ought to be like. Even his criticism of parish relief has its place in Crabbe's neat and orderly scheme of things. It is cautiously advanced and meant to suggest that those 'who have power' ought to put their various workhouses in order. Crabbe, the sternest of markers, gives full marks to Reuben and Rachel for prudently postponing their marriage until they could actually afford to live together. The Devil's poor are also referred to. The 'rustic infidel' is as black as Ashford is white:

But he, triumphant spirit! all things dared,
He poach'd the wood, and on the warren snared;
'Twas his, at cards, each novice to trepan,
And call the wants of rogues the rights of man;
Wild as the winds, he let his offspring rove,
And deem'd the marriage-bond the bane of love.

(I, 812-7)

Like Hannah More, Crabbe did not draw shades of grey. The labourers were either 'noble', or else they were gamblers, infidels, poachers and radicals to a devil. Crabbe's society is not just a black and white one, it is also a static one. Samuel Smiles might have presented Richard Monday, the workhouse orphan who makes good, as an encouraging example for all those on the self-help ladder. Yet Crabbe is concerned to show that Monday only makes his way in the world through low cunning and obsessive selfishness. The virtues of patience, perseverance and frugality, which Smiles offered as social passports to the mid Victorian artisans, were used by Parson Crabbe to make the labourers content with their station in life. If Isaac Ashford made the mistake of trying to quit both social and geographical place, he would realize pretty soon that we are all poor devils. The rich have their trials and tribulations as well. There is, as Crabbe put it in 'The Parish Register', 'one fate' (I, 508), which catches up with the rich as well as the poor. This was also a constant theme in his sermons.

'The Parish Register' gives rise to two expectations, neither of which is fulfilled. First, despite the way in which the 'records' are referred to, the labourers are presented as stereotypes. They would not have been out

of place in counter-revolutionary tracts. Second, despite the emphasis on the fact that this is a poem about the poor, it is by no means concerned exclusively with them. It deals extensively with farmers and tradesmen. Crabbe was a better observer of the rural professional and commercial classes than he was of the poor. This may have been because the Crabbe family had always been, according to his son, only 'somewhat above the mass in point of situation'.⁴ George Crabbe therefore found it psychologically essential to continually assert and affirm his own distance from this 'mass'. His obsession with 'records' may be seen as part of this distancing process. He had been forced to work as a labourer on Slaughden Quay, near Aldeburgh, for a few months in 1767. He did not want to repeat or remember the experience. This was his blacking factory. He therefore attempted to keep the labourers at arm's length by hiding their individuality behind a series of rigid classifications and pious homilies. He was, however, in something of a social no-man's-land himself. He became a respectable pillar of society, in other words a clerical magistrate and a pluralist. Yet he had his fingers trodden on as he ascended his own self-help ladder. This was particularly true of the period when he was the Duke of Rutland's domestic chaplain. Crabbe remained at Belvoir, even though most of the household had followed the Duke to Ireland on his appointment as Lord Lieutenant. Those that stayed amused themselves at the expense of the self-made, self-important chaplain. Crabbe was partially to reopen the wounds inflicted by the patronage system when he came to write 'The Patron' for his *Tales* (1812). It was inevitable that he should have felt, and been made to feel, insecure when he was attached to one of the great aristocratic families. The values of Estate entailed a rigid sense of place. Crabbe experienced the same insecurities and tensions, in less dramatic forms, throughout his life. This made him prone to satire, but seemed to restrict his subject matter to the group into which he had risen. He wrote about the labourers like a magistrate, but was able to point out the private vices that lurked behind the public virtues of the magistrates themselves.

'The Dumb Orators' in *Tales* illustrates both the strengths and weaknesses of Crabbe's social vision. It deals with the rivalry between Justice Bolt and a radical orator named Hammond. Although Bolt is a true blue church-and-king Tory, he is also presented as being a somewhat overpowering one. The causes he championed were close to Crabbe's pocket, but the way he did so left a certain amount to be desired. He is both proud and vindictive. While he is touring the Midlands, he drops into a debating club. It is there that he is forced to listen to Hammond's radical polemic against church and state. Although he is a bully-boy in his own backyard, his courage fails him when it comes to playing his part in foreign parts. The roles are, however, reversed a few years later. Hammond is forced to endure Bolt's heady rhetoric and extravagant gestures. He is taunted into trying to make a reply:

By desperation urged, he now began:
 'I seek no favour—I—the Rights of Man!
 Claim; and I—nay!—but give me leave—and I
 Insist—a man—that is—and in reply,
 I speak'.—Alas! each new attempt was vain:
 Confused he stood, he sate, he rose again;
 At length he growl'd defiance, sought the door,
 Cursed the whole synod, and was seen no more.

(454-61)

Bolt basks in the glory of his triumph. It is a hollow one, since all that has been proved is that radical orators are also unable to preach to the unconverted. Crabbe's apologists might claim that such poetic narratives should not be interpreted ideologically. This particular one is a satire on the presentation of ideologies of both right and left. It points to universal human failings, which lie behind the accidents of social position. That is certainly Crabbe's theory, but in practice the dice are loaded against Hammond. He is used primarily as a foil to probe and expose Justice Bolt's double standards. Crabbe writes about other magistrates satirically, but treats the labourers and their representatives like a magistrate. He registers their presence, but is quite willing to throw the book at them if they start being naughty behind his back.

OFFICIOUS DOCUMENTARY

Jessica Mitford described in *The Making of a Muckraker* (1979) how honourable rebels ought to treat noble causes, when she outlined the way in which she approached an investigation of the American deep south. She regarded it as essential to

slide into the daily lives of people, to soak up their ordinary conversation, to savor their manner and manners, to achieve an oblique rather than a direct look was my plan. Slightly easier said than done, I found; people are always shoving you off to talk to community leaders or to meetings where the Problem is under discussion.

(p. 61)

This technique may be described as radical documentary. It is crucial to bypass official versions of events. The direct highway, the straight and narrow path, is always going to be blocked by people who want to hit you over the head with rubber stamps, rubber truncheons or some other version of the reality principle. They are the real problem. It is therefore essential to take the eyes and ears into the byways to record impressions about 'the daily lives of people'. These impressions should not be presented in the form of a voice-of-God narration, but rather as your own personal assessment. The documentary ought, in other words, to be signed. Official documentary is much safer and more predictable. You do not waste time, nervous energy and expensive footage attempting to discover something as elusive and abusive as the voice of the people. It is much better to arrange a series of interviews with the great and the good. They will then suggest whom you ought to interview. You then present your conclusions in a form appropriate to the whole truth.

Crabbe does take to the byways in *The Borough*, but only after an exhaustive and often exhausting plod around the corridors of power. It is only after he has been shown representatives of 'The Poor and Their Dwellings' that he decides it is time to extend the official guided tour:

Farewell to these; but all our poor to know,
Let's seek the winding lane, the narrow row—

(242-3)

Crabbe is too professional a reporter merely to report verbatim what the spokesmen say, but he usually likes to call on them first. His approach is essentially institutional and bureaucratic. The borough is broken down into its constituent parts relatively easily: the church, the professions, the trades, the hospital, the schools, the prison, the almshouse and so on. The poem does encroach upon the guide-book's privilege. It is, however, also concerned with probing the weaknesses of such official positions and statements.

Crabbe was too busy proving that he had slid out of the 'daily lives of the people' to want to slide back. One of the ways in which he attempted to confirm his laboriously acquired professional status was by reminding such as cared to attend that ethics should never be dropped. Converts are usually a little too zealous about principles and standards. Crabbe attacked contemporary lawyers for preying on the community like the spider on the fly. He felt that quack doctors, who gambled on the people's gullibility, were letting the professional side down. His satire on the professions is lame and tame when compared with those of William Hogarth and Thomas Rowlandson. Yet it still has to be seen as the focal point of the poem. It serves two functions. First, as suggested, it is meant to keep the professionals on their toes. Second, it is used to support the 'one fate' argument and thus to argue in favour of the *status quo*. The 'weary rustic' is moved along with all the firmness of a local policeman when he begins to question his station of life in Letter IX:

Ah! go in peace, good fellow, to thine home,
Nor fancy these escape the general doom;

Gay as they seem, be sure with them are hearts
 With sorrow tried; there's sadness in their parts.
 If thou couldst see them when they think alone,
 Mirth, music, friends, and these amusements gone;
 Couldst thou discover every secret ill
 That pains their spirit, or resists their will;
 Couldst thou behold forsaken Love's distress,
 Or Envy's pang at glory and success,
 Or Beauty, conscious of the spoils of Time,
 Or Guilt, alarm'd when Memory shows the crime—
 All that gives sorrow, terror, grief, and gloom:
 Content would cheer thee, trudging to thine home.

(179-92)

The labourer ought to be whistling all the way to his hovel, since there is always bound to be somebody worse off than him. Material wealth brings its own trials and tribulations. Crabbe may try to suggest that *The Borough* is a slice of documentary realism, yet the social doctor is dishing out the prescriptions. The labourers ought to be content with the simple life because they do not have to be concerned with the doubts and difficulties that apparently lie in wait for those with large bank accounts. The 'one fate' argument sounds plausible enough in theory, but in practice there appears to be one fate for the poor and another one for the rich. Crabbe sets out an official code of conduct for the rich in general and the professions in particular, but sternly reminds the labourer that, as few can really live up to these ethical standards, they are bound to suffer pangs of remorse and guilt. If the labourer actually follows the equally rigid social code which is prescribed for him, then he really will be better off.

Crabbe's reputation as a realistic poet of the poor is an unrealistic one. 'Peter Grimes' is one of sketches of 'The Poor of the Borough'. It is, thanks in part to Benjamin Britten's adaptation of it, perhaps Crabbe's best known piece. As many approach it through anthologies, it is worth stressing that 'The Poor of the Borough' only make their appearance at the end of the poem itself. Official documentary always starts at the top. Like so many of Crabbe's other characters, Grimes is no stranger to the bureaucratic machinery of local government. Indeed, Crabbe's treatment of this particular story ought to confirm his reputation as the official poet of officialdom, the poet laureate of red-tape. Grimes's father 'seem'd that life laborious to enjoy' (3). He knew when he was well off. Grimes himself does not accept this social prescription. He rejects his father's authority and inevitably that of the paternalist society as well:

With greedy eye he look'd on all he saw,
 He knew not justice, and he laugh'd at law;
 On all he mark'd he stretch'd his ready hand;
 He fish'd by water, and he filch'd by land:
 Oft in the night has Peter dropp'd his oar,
 Fled from his boat and sought for prey on shore;

(40-5)

Slaughden Quay was threatening to destroy Crabbe's professional world. It was being allowed to do this as local government turned a blind eye to the dangers of social anarchy. The local community do not pay any attention to Grime's use and abuse of his first apprentice:

But none inquired how Peter used the rope,
 Or what the bruise, that made the stripling stoop;
 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:

Consider, Peter, let the child have bread,
He'll serve thee better if he's stroked and fed.'
None reason'd thus and some, on hearing cries,
Said calmly, 'Grimes is at his exercise.'

(69-78)

Crabbe's approach is similar to that adopted by the great American journalist Lincoln Steffens in his *The Shame of the Cities* (1904). Steffens argued that the investigative journalist ought to try to make his readers aware of two related facts. First of all, that a 'shock, horror, probe' exposure of corruption in high places is too easy. It is also bad journalism, since it usually displaces the blame from the community as a whole. The people are seldom as pure and innocent as they pretend to be. Thus, secondly, the real story ought always to be how much corruption they actually accept as part and parcel of everyday life. The inhabitants of Crabbe's Borough accept the ill-treatment of apprentices as a fact of life.

The local community is unable to police itself, so magistrates like Crabbe have a crucial part to play in the maintenance of law and order. There is an inquest after the death of the second apprentice. Although the jury suspected Grimes of foul play, they were prepared to give him the benefit of the doubt. The moral of Crabbe's story is that wet liberalism causes more problems than it solves. You have to be stern to be kind. It is only after the third apprentice has met a sticky end that local government finally begins to flex its legal muscles. Grimes is summoned to the Moot Hall to 'tell his tale before the burghers all' (156). Mr Mayor forbids him to have any more apprentices and warns him that he will feel the full weight of the law if he disobeys this command. Such chastisement is too little and too late. Crabbe believed that an abuse of, or a loophole in, any part of the professional structure of local government was bound to diminish its effectiveness and credibility. Grimes is able to get the apprentices in the first place because the workhouses in London do not maintain high administrative and professional standards. He is able to exploit these apprentices because magistrates and burghers reflect rather than set standards. Slaughden Quay can only be controlled and repressed through ruthless attention to professional codes and conduct.⁵ Crabbe listened to official spokesmen, but was often rather impatient with them. He saw himself as the true spokesman for the magistrate, the doctor, the priest and the rural professions generally. His poetry, far from being a realistic treatment of the rural poor, is a polemic for officialdom, as it ought to be rather than as it was.

VILLAGE FATES

Crabbe suffered from many ailments. The physician attempted to heal himself by taking doses of opium. Stiff or pastoral neck was the least of his problems, for he was not given to gazing back at the good old days of rural England. His dog collar was a little too new and tight for this kind of backward glancing. He did uphold the old-fashioned virtues of plain speaking and honest dealing against the modern vices of ostentatious wheeling and devious dealing when he dealt with the professions, in *The Borough* and elsewhere. Yet such pastoralism was not as explicit in his presentation of rural society. It is Benbow, rather than Crabbe himself, who indulges in the traditional lament for the good old ways of rural England in *The Borough*. Benbow dwells fondly on the memory of Asgill, an eighteenth-century wenching and trenching squire, but Crabbe implies that such nostalgic reflections ought to be treated more soberly than Benbow himself is ever capable of doing. *The Village* also takes a sober look at pastoral refreshment. Crabbe suggests that rural society represents economic pain rather than emotional or aesthetic pleasure for the vast majority of its inhabitants:

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 feeblers hands and fainter hearts,

Deplore their fortune, yet sustain their parts:
Then shall I dare these real ills to hide
In tinsel trappings of poetic pride?

(I, 39-48)

Pastoral needs to be countered by the exposure of 'real ills'. The tight close-up on real people and real places should replace blurred shots of imaginary landscapes. Crabbe's rural wasteland has few saving rustic graces. The village green is as bare and barren of people as it is of vegetation. Smuggling is the only sport the 'wild amphibious race' (I, p. 85) are interested in. The young men have become smugglers and poachers every one. Crabbe's later poetry may smack of antiquarianism, but in Book One of *The Village* his perspective appears to be closer to that of the social anthropologist. He explores relationships between the bleak environment and the 'race' who are doomed to inhabit it. This perspective is still that of an 'overseer', but it seems to be a more sensitive one than that of the stern magistrate. It appears to support an environmental interpretation of poverty. Like Gilbert White and a whole host of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century parsons, Crabbe was an accomplished natural historian. He includes the rural labourers in his natural history of an English village. He uses the techniques of the natural historian as another way of distancing himself from his subject matter.

Crabbe's satire on pastoral perspectives is certainly sharp and to the point, yet, as in his later poetry, his main concern seems to be that 'those that have power' should exercise it according to the rules and regulations. Quack doctors and negligent priests make the labourer's stern existence even worse than it should be. The quack is actually protected by the very people who have the power to expose him:

A potent quack, long versed in human ills,
Who first insults the victim whom he kills;
Whose murd'rous hand a drowsy Bench protect,
And whose most tender mercy is neglect.

(I, 282-5)

The magistrates are also indirectly responsible for the sour charity which is doled out grudgingly in the workhouse. The priest adds the final insult to the injury of a labourer's life and death:

The busy priest, detain'd by weightier care,
Defers his duty till the day of prayer;
And, waiting long, the crowd retire distress'd,
To think a poor man's bones should lie unblest'd.

(I, 343-6)

This priest prefers his pack of hounds to his flock of sheep. Crabbe certainly lays on the detail about the misery of agricultural life as thickly as possible, but it would be wrong to assume that he is arguing in favour of a fundamental change in the economic relationships of rural society. The poem is addressed to the leaders of this society. Its language of 'them and us' is very explicit. Crabbe appears to be accumulating the counter-pastoral detail as a way of trying to shock magistrates, priests and doctors back into an awareness that they have duties and responsibilities as well as privileges.

If this is so, then it may be possible to challenge the view that *The Village* contains two distinct and very different poems. It is often maintained that Book One offers realistic counter-pastoral, while Book Two reverts to more familiar pastoral idioms. First of all, as already suggested, *de haut en bas* counter-pastoral should never be regarded as realistic. Second, the two parts of the poem are linked by the controlling perspective of the overseer. Crabbe can certainly be accused of licking the hand which fed him when he came to write the panegyric to Rutland's brother, Lord Manners. The parson does indeed know enough who knows a

Duke. Although Crabbe could not accept the back-handers of aristocratic patronage fast enough, such grovelling may not have caused quite such a rupture in the poem's message as has often been assumed. He continues to explore the same themes in Book Two. He describes rural slums and suggests that the labourer's brutish existence needs to be related to the breakdown of responsible authority. The justice of the peace who finally puts down the drunken riot on the village green is yet another local official who wants privilege without responsibility. He uses the law to cow the local inhabitants and does not practise what he preaches. He takes a stern line with the 'country copulatives', but enjoys seducing country girls himself. This justice likes his piece on the side. Crabbe follows this description of the breakdown of law and order with the 'one fate' argument:

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)

Such pessimistic theorizing should not disguise the fact that in practice Crabbe prescribes two fates. The labourer must reconcile himself to the fact that life is an endurance test. If he complains, then he ought to be made to realize that everybody else, regardless of their social position, is having their dismal score totted up by that stern marker in the sky. Those higher up the social scale might score very badly, since they are required to discharge certain social functions. As they are only human, their performance is always bound to fall short of the desired effect. The labourer's fate is to endure passively. Such endurance ought to be supported by the activity of the professional classes in providing a responsible paternalism.

Crabbe uses the examples of Manners's devotion to duty at the end of Book Two to encourage all local officials to play their bureaucratic parts. Manners is the solution to the local corruption which Crabbe exposes in Book One. He uses the oak tree to symbolize the potential power and authority of the territorial aristocracy:

As the tall oak, whose vigorous branches form
 An ample shade and brave the wildest storm,
 High o'er the subject wood is seen to grow,
 The guard and glory of the trees below;

(II, 119-22)

Manners may also be seen as the solution to the problems that the labourers have in suffering and being still. Their lives are symbolized by blighted or withered trees. The re-establishment of responsible paternalism will get the sap rising again. The stables of corruption will be cleansed and the tall oak will protect the smaller trees from blight. Although there are tensions and inconsistencies between the two books of *The Village*, it is important to remember that Crabbe is always the 'overseer of the country poor'. It is then perhaps inevitable that the poem should end with a tribute to the aristocracy as the natural overseers of the overseers. This is part of Crabbe's polemic for officialdom as it ought to be rather than as it was.

Notes

1. Quoted by J. Wilson, *Green Shadows: The Life of John Clare* (London, 1951), p. 146.
2. H. T. Moore (ed.), *The Collected Letters of D. H. Lawrence* (London, 1962), 2 vols., I, pp. 51-2.
3. All quotations from A. W. Ward (ed.), *Poems by George Crabbe* (Cambridge, 1905), 3 vols.

4. E. Blunden (ed.), *The Life of George Crabbe by His Son* (London, 1947 edn), p. 10.
5. Grimes appears to have broken almost every rule in Richard Burn's book [*The Justice of the Peace and Parish Officer* (1755)]. See I, pp. 45 and 51-3.

Criticism: Gavin Edwards (essay date 1987)

SOURCE: Edwards, Gavin. "Crabbe's So-Called Realism." *Essays in Criticism: A Quarterly Journal of Literary Criticism* 37, no. 4 (October 1987): 303-20.

[In the following essay, Edwards addresses previous criticism that focuses on the concept of realism in Crabbe's poetry and asserts that the subject is more complex than is traditionally acknowledged.]

George Crabbe, Hazlitt insisted, 'is a *fascinating* writer',¹ but the books written about Crabbe have not been fascinating. All the good things on him are short: essays, chapters or paragraphs. When Crabbe's critics venture beyond brevity something depressing happens, and that something is 'realism' or its associates, 'truth', 'fact', 'the actual', 'the literal'. The concept of realism has dominated and depressed the discussion of Crabbe not only by literary critics but also by social historians, who from Dorothy George to Lawrence Stone have rifled his poetry for descriptions of English life in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It is a powerful habit partly because it is picked up from Crabbe himself who announced at the very beginning of his career, in *The Village* (1783), that he would present 'the real picture of the poor' (l. 5). A central feature of all strands of post-Saussurian literary theory has been the refusal to accept realism—whether as a literary project or a critical concept—on its own terms. Realism can only ever be 'realism', an effect of realism, so-called realism.

One of the things which is now repeatedly said is that the claims of realism are always circular. That is, a text successfully appears to represent a prior reality only because that reality is already, covertly, conceived as a text. The pretextual realities always turn out, when you get to them, to be textual. It's a game of hunt-the-referent which you always lose. Some people enjoy losing; some people find the circles vicious.

A good example of critical circularity is to be found in Frank Whitehead's comments on the poem 'Advice, or The Squire and the Priest' from the 1812 volume *Tales in Verse*. 'The Squire in the poem', he explains,

combines in his own person all the traits most commonly found in members of his particular social class. In fact this tale, "Advice," taken as a whole, epitomises in a quite remarkable way a whole chapter of English history. All the salient aspects are there, and each is given its due weight—the manners, morals and outlook of the eighteenth century squire, the relationship between the church and the aristocracy, the impact of the Evangelical movement, even the eventual outcome of the conflict.²

Whitehead's argument is certainly circular. He can assert that Crabbe's narrative accurately represents a historical reality only because he has already attributed to this reality the characteristics of a narrative text: past reality is a book, divided into 'chapters' and populated with genre figures such as 'the eighteenth century squire'. Whitehead then continues:

It is, no doubt, a perception of this quality in Crabbe that has led the social historians to take more interest in his work than most literary critics have done.

At this point we are referred to a footnote which reads:

See, for instance, the Hammonds' tribute in *The Village Labourer*: to 'Crabbe, to whose sincere and realist pen we owe much of our knowledge of the social life of the time'.

The reference to J. L. and Barbara Hammonds's *Village Labourer* is presumably supposed to provide external corroboration for Whitehead's assessment of Crabbe but in fact it does the opposite. Insofar as the two historians 'owe much of their knowledge' to Crabbe in the first place, Whitehead's argument for Crabbe's accuracy is undermined rather than, as he believes, underlined. Whitehead's own circularity is now extended so that he and the Hammonds in effect collude together to mount a further circular argument again fuelled by the concept of realism. Whitehead depends on the historians' judgement; the historians depend on a prior literary critical or formal judgement—Crabbe's 'sincere and realist pen'.

However, it doesn't do to be too superior, since it is easy to find oneself moving in the same circles, as I did in my reading of another 1812 poem, 'The Frank Courtship'. This tale is about a family named Kindred, leading members of a small Congregationalist or Independent sect, described as

... a remnant of that crew,
Who, as their foes maintain, their Sovereign slew;
An independent race, precise, correct,
Who ever married in the kindred sect;
No son or daughter of their order wed
A friend to England's King who lost his head;
Cromwell was still their Saint, and when they met,
They mourn'd that Saints were not our Rulers yet. ...
Neat was their house; each table, chair, and stool,
Stood in its place, or moving moved by rule;
No lively print or picture graced the room;
A plain brown paper lent its decent gloom;
But here the eye, in glancing round, survey'd
A small Recess that seem'd for china made;
Such pleasing pictures seem'd this pencil'd ware,
That few would search for nobler objects there—
Yet, turn'd by chosen friends, and there appear'd
His stern, strong features, whom they all rever'd;
For there in lofty air was seen to stand,
The bold Protector of the conquer'd land;
Drawn in that look with which he wept and swore,
Turn'd out the Members and made fast the door,
Ridding the House of every knave and drone,
Forc'd, though it griev'd his soul, to rule alone.
The stern still smile each Friend approving gave,
Then turn'd the view, and all again were grave.(3)

(ll. 33-40, 47-64)

This did not sound to me like something which Crabbe had invented so I spent some time looking in history books for evidence of curious practices and devices of this kind among late eighteenth century dissenting communities. I could find very little evidence that Cromwell was a significant ancestor for them, let alone anything as specific as what I was looking for until I read Christopher Hill's biography of Cromwell, *God's Englishman*. Hill says that there is not much evidence available about Cromwell's posthumous reputation but that 'the poet George Crabbe in 1812 described in moving lines "a remnant of that crew, ..." and so on, concluding that 'it is hard to believe Crabbe is inventing'.⁴ Searching for a referent for Crabbe's text I only succeeded in discovering Crabbe's text again. My hunch that Crabbe is describing something that really existed was put in question by the first piece of evidence that seemed to support it.

But if circularity inevitably accompanies realism, that circularity can take a variety of forms. The claims

which Frank Whitehead is making for 'Advice' are rather different from the claims which I and Christopher Hill are making for 'The Frank Courtship'. Hill and I believe that Crabbe has a specific family, or house, or concealed picture of Cromwell in mind, or at least that he is combining elements from one or two such people or things. We suspect that Crabbe is writing non-fiction in all but name—writing, that is, about people and things as real and specific as Cromwell himself and leaving out only the name of the place and family. Whitehead on the other hand is not suggesting that 'Advice' is non-fictional; indeed if it is to 'epitomise' a chapter of social history it will probably need to be fictional in a thoroughgoing way.

One objection to the concept of realism is simply that it is rather vague, too inclusive, and does not encourage us to make important distinctions between, say, fiction and non-fiction. Indeed this over-inclusiveness often infects the semiological critique of realism as well. Common sense would insist, with some justification, that my search for a specific referent for those lines from 'The Frank Courtship' was naive not on philosophical grounds but on empirical ones. The problem was not that I had confused signifieds with referents but that I had not looked for referents hard enough or in the right places. I should have looked not in modern history books but in old diaries, dissenting records, old houses, museums, antique shops. The only systematic attempt I know to discover specific referents for Crabbe's poems has been conducted by W. K. Thomas in a series of essays on the earlier poems, *The Village*, "The Parish Register" and *The Borough*. In 'Crabbe's *Borough*: The Process of Montage' Thomas sets out to investigate the common assumption that the borough is based on Crabbe's home town, Aldborough. He soon discovers that the poetic borough is much larger than Aldborough was. It has far too many inns, with the wrong names. It has substantial shipbuilding operations which Aldborough, in Crabbe's time, didn't. The tombs and bells in the poetic borough's church don't correspond to those in the church at Aldborough, and so on. None of this may seem surprising: Crabbe is, we tell ourselves, constructing and 'epitomising' what he believes to be a typical sea-port borough to contrast with a typical inland borough. He is aiming at the kind of realism attributed to him by Frank Whitehead. But the case is not so clear as that. Thomas also discovered that Crabbe did not invent those features of the poetic borough which cannot be traced to Aldborough. Having searched through East Anglia, the towns and villages of East Suffolk in particular, Thomas reports as follows:

... it would appear conclusive that when Crabbe came to enlarge on Aldborough, he did so, not from invention, but from his varied experience. All kinds of bits and pieces of observations he had made in scattered places he brought together, and from them constructed the Borough ... we can trace the site and natural scenery of the borough to Aldborough; the size of the borough, the general number and appearance of its streets, and its shipbuilding docks to Woodbridge; most of its inns to Ipswich; its various schools to Aldborough, Woodbridge, Framlingham, and possibly any of Bottesford, Saxmundham, and Beccles; and its church to several places. In fact the borough's church is a mosaic in miniature, with the number and 'solemn sound' of its bells coming from Beccles, Grantham, Bury St. Edmunds, and Leicester; and inside the church, the tombs and effigies from the church at Bottesford. Undoubtedly, if the evidence were available, we would find that many other aspects of the borough are likewise composites drawn from several different sources, and that the borough as a whole is, even more than we can now realise, a vast montage, the product of an active compounding imagination working with the memory of observed facts.⁵

This evidence of Crabbe's commitment to specific real-life raw materials does tally with my own experience of reading the verse, even though I know nothing about these raw materials. The description of the church, like the description of the Kindred's room in 'The Frank Courtship', does not produce a clear overall picture. Instead detail is added to contiguous detail in what is often a self-defeating attempt to construct an exhaustive picture. It is as if the details have been removed from various original contexts but haven't quite made themselves at home together in their new context.

But what are these details made of? To ask the question is to realise that common sense has once again lost at hunt-the-referent. Are these details, lifted from Crabbe's experience, *real* church bells and effigies on tombs or are they *descriptions* of church bells and effigies on tombs? Thomas's analysis must mean either that the poem is made of bells and effigies rather than language or that the Beccles bells and the Bottesford effigies are made of language rather than of metal and stone. Thomas says that the poem is constructed out of 'bits and pieces of observations Crabbe has made'—an evasive formulation in which the word 'observations' is conveniently ambiguous. It can mean sights, perceptions, things seen, but also statements and propositions. It is ambiguous in much the same way that Frank Whitehead's use of the word 'history' was ambiguous, and Thomas's argument has turned out to be similarly circular. The phrase 'bits and pieces of observations he has made' is crucial to his argument, but so are the two metaphors from other arts which Thomas uses: *mosaic* (the borough's church is 'a mosaic in miniature') and—a metaphor from film-making—*montage*. Each metaphor, in its own way, obscures the relationship it appears to illuminate: the relationship between the poem and its supposed referents. The bits and pieces of glass and stone which are physically transferred from various previous contexts to form the elements of a mosaic can only be accurately compared to the bits of *language* which go to make up the poem: the relationship between the language and its supposed referents remains unresolved. As for the film-making analogy, the raw materials reassembled in montage are reels of still-photographs. Roland Barthes argued that in photography humanity encountered for the first time in its history messages without a code.⁶ If this is true, then photographs are direct traces of the physical realities which they also, in various respects, resemble. Since it is precisely these direct traces and elements of resemblance—these indexical and iconic signs—which are not normally present in language, the feeling, with Crabbe's language, that in some way they almost are present is something which remains to be explained.

The feature of Thomas's analysis which points to an answer is his use of proper names. The paragraph quoted is full of them: Woodbridge, Framlingham, Bottesford, Aldborough, and so on. One characteristic of proper names is that they are tied to specific referents more tightly, more compulsorily, than most other elements of language. For instance, there are numerous different ways of talking about George Crabbe but they all involve mentioning George Crabbe. George Crabbe is not just what I or you call him, it's what he is called. Furthermore, it's not what any other poet is called; it's not really a category. And it's what he is called in French as well as in English: proper names resist translation more successfully than any other element of language. It is therefore understandable and indeed inevitable that Thomas's arguments should be full of proper names. How else could he identify the specific referents of Crabbe's descriptions except through their use? And one implication of his doing so is that he is simply reversing Crabbe's own procedure. In order to construct the descriptions of the borough's church Crabbe obviously had to remove the identifying names from his descriptions, if he was to avoid turning his church into a sale-room or a museum.

The phenomenon of the proper name may help us to redefine Crabbe's so-called realism. His language breaches the border we now normally presume to exist between the characteristics of the proper name and of other elements of language such as the common noun. It is *like* the proper name while paradoxically making us feel its *absence*. What kind of language can it be in which the proper name seems to be everywhere and yet is nowhere to be found?

Various other uses of language could be mentioned in this connexion. A riddle, for instance, equals or is an elliptical substitute for that name which is absent and which it is the purpose of our reading or listening to discover. A phenomenon close to the riddle and equally pertinent to the present case is mentioned by Roman Jakobson who cites an aphasic patient suffering from a 'similarity disorder' who, when presented with the picture of a compass could only respond 'Yes, it's a ... I know what it belongs to, but I cannot recall the technical expression ... Yes ... direction ... to show direction ... a magnet points to the north'.⁷ I shall now try to show that the special kind of 'realism' Crabbe's poetry seems to exhibit does have to do with its special relationship to the proper name.

The 1812 tale 'The Confidant' tells the story of a woman (Anna) who is desperate to conceal from her husband (Stafford) a guilty secret from her past (the secret is that she gave birth to an illegitimate child many years before; the child subsequently died). Anna is being blackmailed by a 'friend' (named Eliza) from that secret past who has discovered Anna's whereabouts and makes herself at home with the previously happy couple. Determined to discover the cause of his wife's increasing discomfiture Stafford conceals himself behind a curtain in

The Guest with care adorn'd, and named her Home.
To please the eye, there curious prints were plac'd,
And some light volumes to amuse the taste;
Letters and music, on a table laid,
The favourite studies of the fair betray'd;
Beneath the window was the toilet spread,
And the fire gleam'd upon a crimson bed.

(ll. 420-27)

This passage is part of a lengthy narrative which, like all the tales in the 1812 volume, has no named or foregrounded narrator at all. I have felt able to summarise part of the tale precisely because the narrative seems to be 'objective'. The authority of the narrative does not of course imply that the guest's room could only be described in the actual words and phrases which are in fact used here to describe it. If we read the tale as non-fiction we must believe that the room could be described in somewhat different terms as well as these ones. If we read it as fiction—as if the mind's eye is the only eye that could ever see this room, as if these actual words conjure the room into the only existence it can ever have—it is nevertheless quite possible that at another point in the narrative the same room could be described from a rather different point of view and remain, clearly, the same room. In both cases of course there would almost certainly be some overlap in the descriptions—words like 'and' and 'room' would probably have to recur—but the overlap could well be quite limited. In short, the willing belief that this room exists depends on the assumption that it is distinct from this particular representation of it.

Later that same evening, having discovered the truth, Stafford tells the two women a story about a Caliph, an Eastern Tale whose plot closely resembles Anna's secret life, the blackmail and his own discovery of the facts. Then Stafford says:

'My tale is ended; but, to be applied,
I must describe the place where Caliphs hide:'
Here both the Females look'd alarm'd, distress'd,
With hurried passions hard to be express'd.
'It was a closet by a chamber plac'd,
Where slept a Lady of no vulgar taste;
Her Friend attended in that chosen Room
That she had honour'd and proclaim'd her Home;
To please the eye were chosen pictures plac'd,
And some light volumes to amuse the taste;
Letters and music on a table laid,
For much the Lady wrote, and often play'd;
Beneath the window was a toilet spread,
And a fire gleam'd upon a crimson bed.'

(ll. 566-79)

This passage is likely to surprise us as much as the two women. They are surprised by the similarity between the friend's room and Stafford's ironic description of the room where Caliphs hide. We are surprised by the uncanny similarity between the husband's description of the room and the poet's description of the room

earlier in the poem, and in particular by the final couplet of each passage.

What Stafford says is uncanny because of the reciprocal effect which his description of the guest's room and the containing narrative's earlier description of the room have on each other. The very close resemblance between the phrasing of the two descriptions is surely supposed to guarantee the objectivity and authority of Stafford's description by aligning it with the authority of the containing narrative. But the actual effect is to suggest either that Stafford has overheard the containing narrative (just as he overheard the two women talking), or that Stafford is a ventriloquist who actually spoke the narrative in which his own narrative is supposed to be contained. In any case, the impersonal containing narrative comes to seem, retrospectively, like somebody talking, a narrator who has a speaking part in his own narrative. Stafford's lengthy narrative is supposed to be contained within the narrative which is the poem, as a subordinate element of it. The effect of the repetition is to suggest an impossible turning inside out of this subordination, or rather to undermine any relationship of subordination in this respect.

But why should it be odd for Stafford to repeat the narrative's description so closely? It is odd because it radically alters the relationship we had earlier presumed to exist between the description and what it describes. A relationship which we had assumed was relatively optional (so that the room could have been described in quite other phrases without becoming a different room) now seems to be substantially compulsory. The earlier description is no longer simply a description of how the room can be described or was described; it is the room's proper description, its name, what it *is called* (in the sense that a town is called Aldborough if that is its name). But although the first description of the room is retrospectively impregnated with the status of a proper name, the fact that neither description really is a proper name makes the effect seem odd, uncanny. It is as if the room has no real identity without these phrases being attached to it, just as a town does not have a full existence as a town without its name. A repetition which is supposed to prove the absolute independent reality of the room in fact suggests that the room may only exist as the words which ostensibly describe it.

If the room had originally been described as 'the guest-room' and Stafford had used some phrase like 'Caliphs hide in guest-rooms', the two women would still have got the message, but the effect would not have been uncanny for the reader—or at least any momentary surprise we might feel at the repetition would have been easily explained away. A guest-room would be the accepted designation for a certain type of room and we could believe that everybody in that household might refer to that room as 'the guest-room'. 'Guest-room' may not be a proper name in itself but in the context of its use between members of a household where there is only one example of such a room the phrase would function as one. It is evident then that the idea of truth which the poem espouses and which proper names embody equates truth with consensus: the true identity of a person is what they 'are called', the truth about a room is how it 'is described'. But it is not possible to believe that

Beneath the window was a toilet spread,
And a fire gleam'd upon a crimson bed.

is a compulsory designation of this kind. To do so would involve believing that the three people in the poem regularly used this sentence in conversation, or that the room was furnished with phrases rather than with furniture or that the poem is made of furniture rather than with phrases.

If this reading of these passages from 'The Confidant' is correct it would seem that Crabbe is not in full control of what his poetry is doing: its logic escapes him. But it does not completely do so. He is certainly interested in the relation between proper names and other aspects of life and language since this interest is explicit in those very passages from 'The Confidant'. The containing narrative describes

The Guest with care adorn'd and named her Home

making it clear that for Eliza naming her room her 'Home' was an integral part of her campaign to dictate terms to the rest of the household. She wants Anna and Stafford to think and speak of the room as 'Eliza's Home', and thus turn her description into the room's proper name. The fact that the human battle waged in the household had been partly a linguistic battle of this kind, a battle which Eliza has now lost, is indicated by the word 'proclaim'd' which Stafford substitutes for 'named' in his description:

That she had honour'd and proclaim'd her Home.

that ch

Only heads of households can make such proclamations effective, Stafford implies. Crabbe shows a keen interest here in the politics of naming, its performative character, naming as the successful or attempted establishment of a consensus. If the poem's logic escapes Crabbe it is simply because his own language—apparently authoritative because apparently disinterested—is revealed as having a particular interest, the interest of the head of the household, at heart.

Once you see one example of semi-proper naming you start to see others. For instance, whom does the title 'Peter Grimes' name: the father or the son? Obviously the son, we may say; but we wouldn't have said that when we had only read the poem's first lines which tell us that

Old Peter Grimes made Fishing his employ,
His Wife he cabin'd with him and his Boy,
And seem'd that Life laborious to enjoy:

At this early point in the poem the title seems to name the father, not the son. It is as if in this poem there is a battle for the name itself, father and son driven apart by being forced to live under the same linguistic roof. The name, so it seems, will become a common noun rather than a proper name if it belongs to more than one person. It threatens to become a category of which father and son are substitutable examples.

But it is another 1812 tale, 'The Frank Courtship' which most insistently problematises the proper name. This is how the beginning of the poem (already quoted above) is actually set out:

“THE FRANK COURTSHIP”

Yes, faith, it is my Cousin's duty to make a curtsy, and say, 'Father, as it please you;' but for

(*Much Ado About Nothing*, Act II, Scene 1.)

He cannot flatter, he!
An honest mind and plain—he must speak truth.

(*King Lear*, Act II, Scene 2)

God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another; you jig, you amble, you nick-name G

(*Hamlet*, Act III, Scene 1)

What fire is in mine ears? Can this be true?
Am I contemn'd for pride and scorn so much?

(*Much Ado About Nothing*, Act III, Scene 1)

Grave Jonas Kindred, Sybil Kindred's sire,
Was six feet high, and look'd six inches higher;

Erect, morose, determin'd, solemn, slow,
Who knew the man, could never cease to know;
His faithful spouse, when Jonas was not by,
Had a firm presence and a steady eye;
But with her husband dropp'd her look and tone,
And Jonas rul'd unquestion'd and alone. ...

They were, to wit, a remnant of that crew,
Who, as their foes maintain, their Sovereign slew;
An independent race, precise, correct,
Who ever married in the kindred sect;
No son or daughter of their order wed
A friend to England's King who lost his head;
Cromwell was still their Saint, and when they met,
They mourn'd that Saints were not our Rulers yet. ...

Neat was their house; each table, chair, and stool,
Stood in its place, or moving moved by rule;
No lively print or picture graced the room;
A plain brown paper lent its decent gloom;
But here the eye, in glancing round, survey'd
A small Recess that seem'd for china made;
Such pleasing pictures seem'd this pencil'd ware,
That few would search for nobler objects there—
Yet, turn'd by chosen friends, and there appear'd
His stern, strong features, whom they all rever'd;
For there in lofty air was seen to stand,
The bold Protector of the conquer'd land;
Drawn in that look with which he wept and swore,
Turn'd out the Members and made fast the door,
Ridding the House of every knave and drone,
Forc'd, through it griev'd his soul, to rule alone.
The stern still smile each Friend approving gave,
Then turn'd the view, and all again were grave.

(ll. 1-8, 33-40, 47-64)

Most people who can read the epigraphs and the titles of the plays from which they have been extracted will automatically supply the proper name of their real-life author. It is almost as easy, reading the poem that follows, to see how each epigraph fits neatly into a new context as a compact little analogy for one of Crabbe's own characters or situations. The status of these epigraphs—lines that have been taken from one context and put into another—therefore seems unproblematic. But this situation changes once we realise that Crabbe's poem is preoccupied with the ironies and complexities of quotation, both literal quotation and the kind of behavioural quotation involved in Jonas Kindred's modelling himself on Abraham and Cromwell. If we then look up the references provided by Crabbe and re-attach the lines to their fictional speakers and their interlocutors we discover that all but the first are spoken as or about an act of dissimulation. Our previous reading of the epigrams can only be sustained so long as we read them out of (their original) contexts; their face value turns out to be only one of their values. Most people who visit the Kindreds' sitting room see a recess that 'seem'd for china made'; but a 'chosen few' know how to make a picture of Cromwell appear. Similarly, the Shakespearian epigraphs attached to their old contexts only by the name of author and play fit neatly into their new surroundings; attached more tightly to their old contexts, they still fit into their new one but in a more complex and problematic way.

Crabbe presents the life of his Independent (or Congregationalist) sect as an anachronism both in relation to the present in which they live and to the past which they mimic. Their life is a quotation-out-of-context which nevertheless does make a curious kind of sense in relation to the contemporary 'world' they affect to despise. To a considerable extent Crabbe analyses this through a problematisation of the proper name.

I have referred to the sect as Independents, thereby identifying them with a real-life historical sect, but Crabbe himself does not do so. He calls them 'an independent race'. Putting this lower-case adjective together with the description of the sect's customs I have felt justified in supplying the upper-case proper name and attaching the poem to a real-life referent more tightly than the poem itself does.⁸ Again the language both points us towards the absent proper name and also makes us see that finding the proper name is not a simple or conclusive process. We are led through the text to historical problems rather than to historical facts. After all, the word 'independent' is one of the most complex and shifty words in English history. Crabbe seems to suggest that the continuity of the signifier through conflicts and alterations in the signified may allow users of the word to believe in a degree of semantic and ideological continuity that does not in fact exist. If this is true of 'independent' it may be even more true of 'Independent'—one of the continuities (like their clothes and their deportment) which allow the sect to blind themselves to the decline or alteration of their independence. This is one of the ways in which language and naming play an integral part in real history.

The poem frequently separates people from their proper names: the real-life Cromwell is named, but his visual representation appears elliptically as 'the bold Protector of the conquer'd land'. As the picture of Cromwell appears from the Recess his proper name disappears. Cromwell's antagonist only appears as 'England's King who lost his head'—the most explicit of a number of examples linking the proper name to patriarchal headship.⁹ Another is the juxtaposition of the family-name Kindred and the lower-case adjectival 'kindred (sect)'. To name a family 'Kindred' is almost like naming it 'Family', thus converting the common noun for the category into the proper name of an individual example of that category. And then the real but minute difference between the signifiers 'Kindred' and 'kindred' suggest a conflict between the incest taboo and sectarian endogamy. For Sybil Kindred, as for Peter Grimes junior, the Father is everywhere. But the nature of the problem facing Sybil is clear to her and to Crabbe: she must marry within the kindred sect without marrying her close kin.

These juxtapositions of upper-case and lower-case forms must be deliberate even if they provoke us into kinds of historical and theoretical investigations Crabbe may well not have had in mind himself. But other examples are more doubtful. For instance, the picture of Cromwell is 'turn'd by chosen friends', but when they see it 'The stern still smile each [upper-case] Friend approving gave'. I can see no particular point in this alteration. And it may be worth noting that this is the first example I have given in which two forms of a noun are juxtaposed (rather than, say, a proper noun and an adjective). The poem was written and printed during the lengthy transition between two conventions with respect to the capitalisation of the initial letters of nouns; between a period in which most nouns began with capital letters and our own practice which restricts the capital to the proper name. This historical transformation at the level of the (handwritten and printed) signifier certainly coincides historically with a transition at the level of the signified. For instance, the practice of general capitalisation lent itself to the habitual reification and ready personification of abstract qualities. But the two levels of transition were nevertheless distinct, a fact which added to the uncertainties of each. Alterations in the treatment of the initial letters of common nouns within the same text in this period are always likely to be puzzling. We may often be unable to say who is responsible for the alteration and what, if anything, that person intended by it. In the case of 'The Frank Courtship' Crabbe, perhaps through his printer and publisher, is caught up in the confused history he is so fascinated by. The elliptical 'bold Protector' of the 1812 edition became the even more elliptical 'bold protector' in the 1826 edition. The lower-case 'protector' provokes questions about Cromwell's true role and the function of his assumed title to a degree that the upper-case 'Protector' does not: and this is so even if it was 'only' an alteration in printing-practice—between 1812 and 1826, or between the publishers J. Hatchard and John Murray, or between the printers J. Brettell and Thomas Davison—which produced the change.

The relationship between Crabbe's poetry and historical reality is thus far more complex than the concept of realism allows critics or historians to see, even if the concept of realism has a special attraction in Crabbe's case. We still need to know whether Cromwell-concealing devices such as Crabbe describes really existed and if so how many there were and who had them, because we still often feel, possibly with justice, that Crabbe's

poetry is referring to real and specific people and things in all but name. But we also need to understand what it means to talk about things 'in all but name'.

Notes

1. William Hazlitt (May 1821), quoted in *Crabbe: The Critical Heritage*, ed. A. Pollard (1972), p. 300.
2. Frank Whitehead, *George Crabbe, Selections from his Poetry* (1955), quoted from the Introduction. I have used this example in a discussion of *The Parish Register* in 'Crabbe's *Parish Register*: The Parson-Poet in Practice', *Social Roles for the Artist*, ed. A. Thompson and A. Beck (1979), pp. 58-66.
3. All quotations from Crabbe are from the first edition of the poem in question unless otherwise stated.
4. Christopher Hill, *God's Englishman: Oliver Cromwell and English History* (1970), pp. 271-2.
5. W. K. Thomas, 'Crabbe's *Borough*: The Process of Montage', *University of Toronto Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (Jan. 1967), pp. 181-192.
6. Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, ed. S. Heath (1977), p. 17.
7. In Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle, *Fundamentals of Language* (1971), pp. 55-82.
8. For an interesting view of Crabbe as a 'lower-case poet' see L. J. Swingle, 'Late Crabbe in Relation to the Augustans and Romantics: The Temporal Labyrinth of his *Tales in Verse* 1812', *ELH* 42 (1975), pp. 580-594.
9. Crabbe's analysis of this link recalls Hazlitt's later and better known analysis of the 'levelling' Lake School for whom 'capital letters were no more allowed in print, than letters-patent of nobility were permitted in real life; kings and queens were dethroned from their rank and station in legitimate tragedy or epic poetry, as they were decapitated elsewhere'. See *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe (1930-34), 5, p. 161.

Criticism: Frank Whitehead (essay date 1989)

SOURCE: Whitehead, Frank. "Crabbe, 'Realism', and Poetic Truth." *Essays in Criticism* 39, no. 1 (January 1989): 29-46.

[In the following essay, Whitehead responds to Gavin Edwards's ideas about realism in Crabbe's poetry, presenting his own interpretation of the relationship between realism, the truth, Crabbe's poetry, and the environment in which it was created.]

It was pleasing to find Gavin Edwards's essay 'Crabbe's So-Called Realism' in the pages of *E in C*¹, despite its preoccupation with the post-structuralist project of demolishing 'realism' both as a critical term and as an authorial practice. Less agreeable to me personally, however, was his misrepresentation of some of the views I put forward more than 30 years ago in the introduction to my selection of Crabbe's poetry.

Edwards clearly implies that my critical comments on the poem 'Advice' belong among those he describes as 'dominated and depressed' by the concept of 'realism'. In fact I did not attribute 'realism' to 'Advice, or The Squire and The Priest', nor did I assert that 'Crabbe's narrative accurately represents a historical reality'. The sentences of mine which he quotes form part of a moderately complex argument about the relationship between Crabbe's fictions and the world in which he lived. Edwards seems here over-eager to find support for that quaint Derridean version of intertextuality which holds that a text can have its existence *only* as reference to or commentary on other texts, so that any presumed relationship to a 'pre-textual reality' outside this closed hermetic world is necessarily illusory and will, if followed up, turn out to be 'circular'. The circularity which he claims to have detected in my argument rests on his discovery of an imaginary 'narrative text' (an unwritten history book) behind my incautious use in a single sentence of the phrase 'a whole chapter of English history'. Even in post-structuralist discourse this is surely a heavy weight for one not-uncommon figure of speech to carry. Perhaps out of awareness of this, he adduces in further support my footnoted

reference to the Hammonds (wrongly presuming that it was 'supposed to provide external corroboration' for my own assessment). It is true that these eminent historians generously attributed *much* of their 'knowledge of the social life of the time' to Crabbe's 'sincere and realist pen'; but *much* is not the same as *all*. Edwards's charge of 'circularity' could only be made to stick if he were able to show that they (and I) had gained our *whole* stock of such knowledge from Crabbe's *Tales* or from similar fictions.

Scarcely less dubious, it seems to me, is the procedure whereby Edwards seeks to saddle Crabbe himself with responsibility for the alleged preoccupation of his subsequent critics with the concept of realism. Did he not (Edwards would have us notice) announce at the beginning of *The Village* (1783) that part of the subject-matter of that poem would be 'the real picture of the poor'? But the highly abstract and generalised texture of this early Crabbe poem (wholly characteristic of its period yet far removed from the detailed specificity of Crabbe's mature poetry from *Poems 1807* onwards), makes it not only inappropriate to take the word 'real' out of context but also anachronistic, since although realism was current as a technical term in philosophy during Crabbe's lifetime, it was not until the mid-nineteenth century that the word was first used to denote fidelity of representation in literature and visual art.

Of course the recognition that 'realism' is a treacherous concept predates by some decades the post-structuralist assault upon it. As long ago as 1948 Ortega y Gasset described it as an 'involved term', which he had always been careful to 'use in quotation marks to render it suspect'. In writing about Crabbe I have myself preferred to avoid using it except as a way of drawing attention to a specific feature of the poet's descriptive writing, namely its ability to evoke in the reader, by an accumulation of meticulous detail, an illusion of precisely-visualised reality. I am clearly not alone in feeling this quality to be present in Crabbe's descriptive passages. Edwards himself quotes a lengthy description of the household of the fictional Kindred family in 'The Frank Courtship' with the comment that this did not sound to him 'like something Crabbe had invented'—a comment which he found had been anticipated, in relation to the same Crabbe passage, in almost identical words by Christopher Hill. The feature Edwards had fastened on in Crabbe's description of the Kindreds' living-room was that of the 'small recess' for the display of china. When turned round this revealed a portrait of 'the bold Protector' who was still reversed as their 'Saint' by the small Independent sect to which the Kindreds belonged; and it was Edwards's frustrated search for a real-life original, a 'prior reality', for this which led him to Hill's biography of Oliver Cromwell². However, in a footnote to the 1834 edition (reproduced in the notes to my own 1955 selection) Crabbe's son had vouched for the authenticity of this episode of Cromwell's portrait: 'Such was the actual consolation of a small knot of Presbyterians [sic] in a country town, about sixty years ago'. Of course this testimony might not be regarded as conclusive by the social historian; since the son was not born until 1785 he cannot be doing more than retail his father's version of the incident as told to his family some years later, and it is unclear whether this version was in any case based on anything more than hearsay. What it does seem to establish is that the poet *believed* himself to be basing his description on an actual event.

Why should this question of a 'prior reality' have assumed such importance for Edwards? The explanation seems to be that he was looking for evidence to support his suspicion that Crabbe's writing is 'non-fiction in all but name'—a suspicion for which there were already precedents in Crabbe's lifetime in, for instance, Hazlitt's complaint that 'literal fidelity serves him in the place of invention' and Wordsworth's slightly sour observation that 'nineteen out of twenty of his pictures are mere matters of fact'. It is my contention that such responses are an unwitting tribute to Crabbe's artistic achievement in fusing details from a variety of different sources into vividly-imagined descriptions which do indeed evoke in his readers an illusion of reality. At this distance in time it will seldom be possible to identify these sources with certainty, nor does it seem likely that such identification, if achieved, would prove particularly rewarding. Edwards cites W. K. Thomas's painstaking detective work into certain rather minor features of *The Borough* such as numbers of church bells, names of inns and layout of streets; and it does appear that Thomas has established beyond serious question that Crabbe was here offering a portrayal not just of Aldborough but rather of a composite sea-port borough (*The Borough* of the poem's title) and that he drew the details from his remembered observation of many

places with what Thomas calls ‘an active compounding imagination’.³ Surely most readers have always supposed as much.

More central to an understanding of Crabbe's artistic procedures than his descriptions of places is his approach to the depiction of people, in which, understandably enough, description of physical appearance plays only a part. Here as elsewhere what should never be underestimated is the enduring strength of his Augustan roots, not only in his handling of verse-forms and textures, but also in the values and purposes which they serve. To bring home the relevance of this point I quote at greater length the passage in my Introduction from which Gavin Edwards wrenched four sentences:

In general, the assumption that literature should teach useful lessons which are widely applicable led eighteenth-century writers and critics to prefer those characters and situations which could be seen to be ‘general’ rather than ‘particular’. Thus Dr Johnson held that: ‘Nothing can please many and please long, but just representations of general nature’; and what he meant by ‘general’ here is made plain by his further comment that whereas ‘in the writings of other poets a character is too often an individual’, in those of Shakespeare (whom he found pre-eminent in this respect) ‘it is commonly a species’. Now Crabbe's characters are certainly not ‘types’ in any derogatory sense; in fact, they are likely to strike us at first as highly detailed, particularised and individual. Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that they are at the same time quite deliberately representative on two levels. In the first place, they are socially typical. Arabella's accomplishments are those of the typical bluestocking of the period. The ‘Squire in “Advice” combines in his own person all the traits most commonly to be found in members of his particular social class. In fact, this tale “Advice,” taken as a whole, epitomises in a quite remarkable way a whole chapter of English social history. All the salient aspects are there, and each is given its due weight—the manners, morals and outlook of the eighteenth-century squire, the relationship between the Church and the aristocracy, the impact of the Evangelical movement, even the eventual outcome of the conflict. It is no doubt a perception of this quality in Crabbe that has led the social historians to take more interest in his work than most literary critics have done. But over and above this, Crabbe's characters are also representative on a second and more fundamental level. They typify permanent traits in human nature, so that the moral issues and conflicts which they embody have a universal and timeless significance. Thus, in the case of “Advice,” we can readily think of parallels in the modern world to the dilemma of the young priest, caught between his devotion to his ideals and his preference for a comfortable life untroubled by conflict with the powers that be, yet sufficiently sensitive to be made uncomfortable in the event by the excesses of some of his own party.

To this train of thought I would now want to enter some qualifications. It does seem exaggerated to suggest that any human traits can be regarded as ‘permanent’ or that the depiction of them (even by a Shakespeare or a Tolstoy) could have a significance that is ‘universal and timeless’. My excuse must be that Crabbe, with his lifelong partiality for Latin poetry, would hardly have thought it so, and would surely never have felt at all inclined to question, for instance, the explicit assertion by Fielding (one of his favourite authors) of the constancy and universality of human nature in the person of the lawyer in *Joseph Andrews* who ‘is not only alive, but hath been so these four thousand years’.

In virtually all his poetry Crabbe sets out to ‘instruct by pleasing’, and, with characteristically Augustan confidence in Divine providence, believes he can do so by ‘imitating’ a nature which embraces the whole of the created universe including mankind and which has inherent in its workings an objective and universal moral law. Nevertheless, I would now lay more stress on the changes, over the years, in the poet's conception of the ‘instructive truth’ which he seeks to convey. In his early and highly generalised anti-pastoral poem *The Village*, the ‘Truth’ which is to ‘... paint the Cot ... as Bards will not’ is an abstract personification, as indeed

befits the wholly unspecific depiction of 'the hoary swain' with whose portrayal Burke opened his extract from the poem in *The Annual Register* in 1782. In his mature poetry from "The Parish Register" on, however, Crabbe clearly sets himself the task not only of representing in each character some universal aspect of human nature but also of achieving in addition a more local typicality—a development foreshadowed in *The Village* by the two brief outline-sketches of the apothecary and the parish-priest, but now fleshed out with much greater wealth of detail, detail selected in such a way as to 'represent' (or 'epitomise') the members of a specific group or class recognisably present in the England of the poet's day. This increased resort to 'minute particulars' (which had been tolerated only in a modest subsidiary role by the Augustan critical theory of Johnson and Reynolds) is undoubtedly innovatory for its period, but it cannot rightly be seen as an early manifestation of nineteenth century 'realism'. In his Preface to *Tales*, 1812 Crabbe does certainly insist that 'a fair representation of existing character' is a proper activity for a 'true poet'; but he is here engaged in rebutting claims of exclusive poetic status for the kind of writing (about enchanters, spirits and monsters) which lifts its readers 'above the grossness of actual being'. Moreover, his argument is that whether the characters and occurrences are 'actually copied from life' or invented by a 'creative fancy', it is only through the poet's art (his judicious management of 'the manner in which the poem itself is conducted') that they can have the requisite 'effect of realities' in the reader's mind. In the context of this authorial credo the game of hunt-the-referent to which Edwards is so powerfully, if reluctantly, drawn, can have little relevance to Crabbe's poetic intentions.

Nor, I believe, will it prove very illuminating in regard to his actual poetic practice. It is true, of course, that, when asked, Crabbe willingly agreed that 'really existing creatures' had formed the 'originals' on which he based almost all his characters; and in the intimacy of his family circle he was evidently prepared to name a number of them. In his son's notes (those appended to the 1834 edition of the poems together with the additions written down in 1854 or 1855 at the request of Edward Fitzgerald) we find asserted a real-life 'original' for some twenty-five characters in "The Parish Register," *The Borough* and *Tales*, 1812. However, comparison between the son's information and the poet's verse-portraits strongly suggests that Crabbe's poetic art was less closely tied to 'existing character' than he himself believed, and that in many cases the real-life character can have served as no more than an initial stimulus. Thus the 'infidel poacher' in Part I of "The Parish Register" is said to have been

a blacksmith at Leiston, near Aldborough, whom the author visited in his capacity of surgeon in 1779, and whose hardened character made a strong impression on his mind. Losing his hand by amputation, he exclaimed with a sneer, 'I suppose, Doctor Crabbe, I shall get it again at the resurrection!'

One can well see that this seasoned scepticism may have set the poet's imagination to work to produce the sardonic closing lines of his character-sketch:

By night, as business urged, he sought the wood,—
The ditch was deep,—the rain had caused a flood,—
The footpath fail'd,—he plunged beneath the deep,
And slept, if truth were his, th'eternal sleep.

But the transformation has been a far-reaching one.

Other instances compel doubt as to the truth of Crabbe's own (indubitably honest) conviction that 'he seldom takes anything from books but all from what he sees and hears'. Thus in Part III of "The Parish Register" the poet's son confidently identified the active and overbearing Widow Goe with Mrs Tovell, the aunt of the poet's wife. Consider, however, the telling and memorable lines which record her last words:

Bless me! I die, and not a warning giv'n,—
With much to do on Earth, and ALL for Heav'n!;

No reparation for my soul's affairs,
No leave petition'd for the barn's repairs;

Accounts perplex'd, my interest yet unpaid,
My mind unsettled, and my will unmade;—
A lawyer haste, and in your way, a priest;
And let me die in one good work, at least.

It is hard to doubt that here Crabbe has also been influenced by Richardson's account of the dying Widow Sinclair:

And here, she said—Heaven grant me patience! (clenching and unclenching her hands)—am I to die thus miserable—of a broken leg in my old age! Self-do! Self-undone! No time for my affairs! No time to repent! and in a few hours ... etc.

(*Clarissa*, Vol. 4, Letter CXXXVIII)

There are enough detectable examples of a similar confluence of a real-life with a literary source to suggest that at this intermediate (or socially typical) level of characterisation much of Crabbe's particularised descriptive detail must have been taken partly from observation and partly from remembered reading. But in either case what he both aims at and achieves is undoubtedly (to borrow Roland Barthes' way of putting it) 'vraisemblance' (whose implicit motto is 'Esto ... Let there be, suppose ...') and not 'realism' (or 'discourse which accepts statements whose only justification is their referent').⁴

The genuinely problematic aspect of the relationship between Crabbe's poetry and the environment in which it arose relates not to the provenance of specific details, whether from life or literature but rather to the degree of congruence we can plausibly suppose to exist between his characters and communities as portrayed in their entirety, and the underlying social reality they seem clearly designed to epitomise. Here we can perhaps identify two main areas of difficulty.

In the first place we need to take into account the extraordinary diversity of the rural England of Crabbe's day. Not only was it a thinly populated countryside of small villages isolated by appallingly bad roads from contact with a wider world; it was also (as the study of local records has revealed over the past half-century) a country with an almost inconceivable variety of difference between its village communities according to their size, geographical location, past history of land settlement, crop cultivation, land use, and traditional custom. Yet until his removal to Trowbridge in 1814 Crabbe, despite having travelled more widely than most of his fellow-clergymen, had had intimate experience, apart from his native town of Aldborough and the nearby town of Woodbridge, of only three small parishes in Leicestershire and four in Suffolk. His personal experience would not have told him what a hard task he was setting himself when he aimed, as his use of the definite article in his titles certainly implies, at 'the common idea and central form' (in Sir Joshua Reynolds's phrase) underlying the various individual forms which go under the heading of village, parish and borough. In respect of certain rather unimportant features of rural life (most notably those which are countable, such as the church bells, schools and inns studied by W. K. Thomas) we are now in a better position than Crabbe was to check the representative quality of his fictional institutions or personae. For such aspects Crabbe's communities seem to fall well within the bounds of the possible; thus there *were* churches (though not at Aldborough) with as many as ten bells, some bells *were* engraved with intriguing Latin mottoes, and so on. A more interesting example is provided by the parish workhouse, which Crabbe's readers might well have assumed to be an unvarying feature of every village, dreaded alike by 'the hoary swain' in *The Village* and by the Noble Peasant Isaac Ashford in "The Parish Register." However, the official returns of expenditure on poor relief for the year 1802-3 show that less than a third of the nearly-1500 parishes possessed a workhouse, and that these workhouses maintained less than one-twelfth of all those receiving poor-relief at some time during that year. Conversely, the parliamentary enclosure of open fields and commons which affected many

villages between 1740 and 1832, particularly in the Midlands, has been thought by most historians to have had far-reaching social and economic consequences. Yet there is no instance of any such event being mentioned in Crabbe's verse—in part perhaps because in the Midland parish he knew best, Muston in Leicestershire, enclosure had taken place by agreement early in the 17th century, and the only parliamentary enclosure whose effects he might have observed at first hand occurred at Stathern in 1792 three years after he had ceased acting as curate there.

Secondly, Crabbe's lifetime covered a period of unprecedentedly rapid economic and social change, very little of which is shown at all explicitly in his poetry. It is true that the most dramatic developments, particularly in regard to growth of industry, large towns and population, took place in the North and the West Midlands, so that the impression we gain from "The Parish Register" of a stable countryside in which change takes place only slowly if at all may have been more tenable in relation to those counties in which he had lived up till then. Nevertheless, in the portrayal of his world there is in general an absence of that sense of historic time which is an important element in our modern consciousness.

Two examples may be given here. In Book III of "The Parish Register" the displacement in her old age of the village midwife Leah Cousins by the science-minded Doctor Glibb is rendered with convincing concreteness; yet few modern readers can have recognised it as an instance of a change in social practice to which an approximate historic date can be assigned. In fact, external evidence reveals from the mid-eighteenth century onward a widespread shift from untrained woman-midwives to male doctors equipped with new techniques which included the use of forceps; thus the details Crabbe uses in his fictional anecdote cannot be faulted historically. Leah is a typical old-style midwife, virtually untrained, relying for help therefore on Heaven (to which she 'prays in danger's view'), and licensed (if at all) by the bishop of the diocese on the basis of her moral character; while Doctor Glibb, although the poet is discreetly inexplicit about the 'art' he delights to use to win his way against Nature and 'act in her despite', is recognisably a follower of Doctor William Smellie whose 3-volume *Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Midwifery* enjoyed great success when it was published between 1752 and 1764. The charges bandied against each other by Crabbe's two contestants reflect quite closely, moreover, the bitter antagonism of the debate between male and female midwives in the 1750s and 1760s. For all that, there is a distinctly a-historic tone to the poet's use of this material, and indeed his closing reference to 'this our changing world' seems almost to relegate it to the category of yet one more case of the eternal mutability of fashion.

Our second example concerns the illegitimacy rate. It is widely acknowledged that around the end of the eighteenth century betrayed and forsaken young women made their appearance with exceptional frequency both in English life and in literature, and indeed recent studies have concluded that the bastardy rate as a percentage of baptisms rose from around 3 in the 1750s to a consistent 5 above between 1785 and 1814.⁵ The incidence of 'yielding maids' in Crabbe's poetry does not therefore seem to be unduly high, although undoubtedly his two most celebrated examples (Phoebe Dawson and Lucy the Miller's daughter) are exceptionally memorable. Their circumstances, moreover, do on the whole typify precisely those in which most illegitimacies are now believed to have arisen—circumstances, that is, very similar to those of first births in marriages, in that 'bastards tended to be born of persons of an age and condition to marry each other, but who were prevented ...'.⁶ It is noticeable, however, that Crabbe does not give any place in his account to those *changing* features of rural life which social historians now postulate as having intensified the force of the 'temptation' from which the poet repeatedly urges youth to 'refrain'. The marked reduction by the end of the eighteenth century in the average age at which men, and even more so women, contracted their first marriage is thought to have been caused in large part by the diminution of female work in agriculture, the effect of enclosure in ending prudential motives for delaying marriage, and the decline of farm service.⁷ These pressures leading to earlier marriage must also have led to an increase in the proportion of young people engaging in courtship, and at the same time to an increase in the number thereby incurring a risk of pre-nuptial pregnancy or illegitimacy. It would be absurd to suggest that Crabbe *ought* to have mentioned factors of this kind, but there is surely a certain significance in the extent to which, by contrast, the conflict between

temptation and prudent self-restraint as he presents it seems to be an ageless one—a conflict to which by its very nature the only possible response is reiterated (and largely fruitless) moral exhortation.

If we now return to *Advice* we shall do so with an enhanced awareness (owed in part at least to developments in historical sociology over recent decades) of how difficult it must always be to evaluate the degree of congruence between a writer's imagined world and the world it purports to represent.⁸ I still find it impossible to doubt that, in this fine example of his mature verse-tales, the representation of a socially-typical moral conflict formed a significant part of Crabbe's goal, and I strongly suspect that he would indeed have accepted without question my comment that the 'Squire (who is after all quite a close re-working of the ironically-commended 'good Squire Asgill' in Letter XVI of *The Borough*) 'combines in his own person all the traits most commonly to be found in members of his particular social class'. (Would not his contemporary readers have thought the same?) And yet how, we have to ask, could it have been possible for Crabbe to *know*? Even if we leave out of account those village communities which never had a resident squire (perhaps a fifth of the total number in England according to a recent estimate), it is clearly inconceivable that he should have had enough direct experience of village squires to validate a judgment (which must in the last analysis be numerical) as to just what could rightly be regarded as 'typical' of them as a class. Nor indeed would a social historian today see much prospect of unearthing reliable evidence for or against the 'typicality' of those traits which the poet has chosen to use in his portrayal. Thus while individual instances could undoubtedly be found of hard-drinking and sexually-licentious squires, including some whose proclivities brought them into open conflict with the rector of the parish, this would still leave open the question of whether they were as preponderant in real life as the fiction of the period often implied.

At a time when about half the livings in England and Wales were in the gift of one of the landowning families, moral conflict between parish incumbent and squire as patron would doubtless be found no more surprising than its opposite—the moral subservience which also became, after Fielding's *Parson Supple*, a fictional stereotype. However, the conflict in 'Advice' has been located in historic time with a particularity unusual in Crabbe, and (far from being there for any effect of adventitious 'realism') the details⁹ which point to a date in the late 1790s are surely highly functional. By fixing the action at time when the Evangelical campaign against moral laxity launched a decade earlier by Wilberforce was reaching its floodtide, such details intensify the emotional charge attaching to the clash between old squire and young priest, and at the same time give it a more representative significance. Yet for the modern reader the social reality underlying the poem remains ungraspable except in bare schematic outline, nor can we hope to reconstruct the response of Crabbe's contemporary readers to the particulars he has built into his narrative (the squire's hopeful advice about sermons, for instance, or the young preacher's over-zealous performance in the pulpit), or guess at the extent to which they may have sensed in such particulars a 'social typicality' which worked to secure in them a 'suspension of disbelief'.

In the absence of any external source of validation, the historical sociologist seeking to assess literary evidence as a source of accurate information can find little to go upon other than the common sense principle of credibility, and this seems in effect to reduce itself to an intuitive judgment, essentially a-historical, about 'truth to [an unchanging] human nature'.¹⁰ There is more than one way, however, in which intuition may be swayed, and even controlled, by poetic art; and the literary critic with a similar set of interests might want to ask not only, do these characters ring true to human nature? but also, do they seem to be living humans rather than mere conventionalised types? In the case of Crabbe more of his characters than one at first realises turn out to be variants on standard patterns available to him in the pages of eighteenth century novels and therefore open to the suspicion of 'representing' what his contemporary public was willing to believe rather than what actually was. Nevertheless, his repertoire covers a wide range: from the wholly stereotyped (the rapacious lawyer Swallow in Letter VI of *The Borough*), through the type-figure to which the poet has added some small but telling detail that lends a touch of individuality (the Curate in Letter III, poor, learned and polyphiloprogenitive, harassed by debts and duns, and distinctive only in the compassionate concern for his ailing wife which has stranded him in his seaside backwater), right down to the highly individualised portrayal

in which the type has been transformed into a sentient breathing human being through the accumulation of concisely-phrased detail, often neatly ironic (Andrew Collett or the Widow Goe in “The Parish Register”).

In characterisation of this latter kind there is a recognisable continuity with Augustan poetic theory as modified in the later decades of the eighteenth century under the influence of such writers as Kames and Blair, and set out in more popularising form by Craig in an essay in *The Lounger* in 1786 commending ‘this last improvement ... in the representation of human characters; when not only their general features, under certain great classes, are exhibited, but when writers descend to, and are able at the same time to point out the smaller discriminations into which those general classes subdivide themselves and appear in different men ...’. In ‘Advice’ the credibility readily accorded to Crabbe’s characterisation is accounted for in part by the weight given, in each of the two protagonists, to traits which run counter to type. In the reprobate Squire we recognise as a convincing notation of human complexity the mind sufficiently ‘conscious of its own excess’ to feel at the opening of the poem the unspoken reproach of his neighbours and capable therefore, at the close, of uneasy longing for the wholehearted effort of reform which he knows himself to be too weak to accomplish. Similarly, his young nephew, though self-righteously ‘zealous still’, feels distress at the discord he has created within a once-harmonious parish, and well-bred embarrassment at the vulgar and self-conceited enthusiasm of his more ardent followers. Is it truth to human nature (‘wholly or partly permanent’) that we are responding to, or the creation of individual human beings? And does an author’s success on one or both of these levels engender the belief, perhaps illusory, that what has been represented must at the same time be accepted as socially typical? Whether or not these questions seem answerable, we can doubtless agree that these ‘levels’ are too closely intertwined to be seen as anything more than an occasionally-useful heuristic device.

My final point is more conveniently made in relation to Crabbe’s descriptions of place. In his influential 1968 essay ‘L’effet du réel’ Roland Barthes separated out from the semiotic structure of narrative (which he had analysed two years earlier as ‘a sort of grammar’) a structure for ‘description’ which by contrast has ‘no predictive aspect’ and is ‘purely additive’. This line of thought had been prompted by his desire to account for the seemingly inevitable presence in narrative of ‘useless details’ which appear to have no function of any kind, however indirect. (An example which he quotes is the barometer on the wall of the room occupied by Madame Aubain in Flaubert’s *Un Coeur Simple*.) His argument culminates in an assertion that in ‘modern realism’ (as opposed to the ‘vraisemblance’ of classical poetic theory) the insignificant ‘concrete detail’ may owe its presence to the existence of something ‘real’, but all it is doing is to signify reality, not denote it; what such details say, in the last analysis, is only ‘we are the real’. ‘All this demonstrates,’ writes Barthes, ‘that the “real” is assumed not to need any independent justification, that it is powerful enough to negate any notion of “function”, that it can be expressed without there being any need for it to be integrated into a structure, and that the *having-been-there* of things is a sufficient reason for speaking of them.’¹¹

If, then, Crabbe really deserved to be called (in defiance of the probabilities of literary history) a ‘realist’ there ought surely to be present in his descriptions similar lumps of undigested (or non-significant) ‘reality’; and some such notion seems to underlie these comments by Edwards:

The description of the church, like the description of the Kindreds’ room in ‘The Frank Courtship’, does not produce a clear overall picture. Instead detail is added to detail in what is often a self-defeating attempt to construct an exhaustive picture. It is as if the details have been removed from various original contexts but haven’t quite made themselves at home together in their new context.

This, I suggest, is a sad example of the way a commitment to a literary theory can cripple the ability to read what is actually there in a text. It is true that the leisurely discursive argument of Letter II in *The Borough* is rather loosely-knit, but it is surely clear even at a cursory reading that there is absolutely no intention ‘to construct an exhaustive picture’ of the church. If one attempts to follow at all carefully the successive patterns of thought in the poet’s mind (helpfully laid out in note-form in the author’s synopsis at the head of the Letter),

it becomes evident that each descriptive section has been carefully and appropriately meshed-in to the developing discourse in both its intellectual and its emotional aspects. The choice of detail has in fact been determined thematically, for poetic and not topographic effect. This is even more patently true of the description of the Kindreds' room in 'The Frank Courtship', where every single detail mentioned plays its part in defining for us the character of the family living in it—prosperous, austere, devout, orderly, self-satisfied. The single-mindedness with which the description has been subordinated to setting the emotional tone required by the narrative is even more striking if we start reading at the beginning of the paragraph, thus including the half-dozen lines which Edwards left out of his quotation:

Fix'd were their habits; they arose betimes,
Then pray'd their hour, and sang their party-rhymes:
Their meals were plenteous, regular and plain;
The trade of Jonas brought him constant gain;
Vendor of hops and malt, of coals and corn—
And, like his father, he was merchant born:
Neat was their house, etc

The concealed portrait of Cromwell is now seen to be central to this poetic purpose, with its unobtrusive underlining of the self-deceiving nature of Jonas Kindred's stern domestic tyranny. The description's 'effect of realities' is realised with just that amount of particularised detail needed for the narrative context, and no more, and it is the product of a very considerable verbal art—what Crabbe called 'the manner in which the poem is conducted'. There may be a few passages in the series of portraits in "The Parish Register" where an excessive proliferation of detail lends some countenance to Jeffrey's complaint about 'Chinese accuracy'¹², but in almost all the subsequent tales there is an impressive economy in the way the descriptions are tailored to fit the emotional needs of the context; so that, as with Cromwell's portrait in 'The Frank Courtship', each 'minute particular', whether or not it had its origin in some pre-textual reality, is fully integrated into a narrative structure whose thrust is directed not towards a spurious 'realism' but towards 'poetic truth'.

Notes

1. Gavin Edwards, 'Crabbe's So-Called Realism', *E in C [Essays in Criticism]* XXXVII, No. 4 (Oct. 1987), pp. 303-320.
2. He has, as a matter of fact, rather exaggerated Christopher Hill's failure to find other precedents. In addition to two examples from earlier in the 18th century Hill mentions that the father of the Chartist poet Ebenezer Elliott had a portrait of Cromwell.
3. W. K. Thomas, 'Crabbe's *Borough*: The Process of Montage', *University of Toronto Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (Jan. 1967), pp. 181-192.
4. Roland Barthes, 'The reality effect' in *French Literary Theory Today* ed. T. Todorov, 1982, pp. 11-17.
5. Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost Further Explored*, (1983), p. 159.
6. Peter Laslett, op.cit., p. 178.
7. K. D. M. Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor: Social Change and Agrarian England 1660-1900*, (1985), p. 345.
8. See in particular Peter Laslett 'The wrong way through the telescope: a note on literary evidence in sociology and in historical sociology', *British Journal of Sociology*, 27 no. 3, (September, 1976), pp. 319-342.
9. The 'patriot's zeal', for example, with which the 'squire claims to have persisted in churchgoing in face of the old rector's denunciation of him from the pulpit irresistibly recalls the account in *The Annual Register* for 1793 of the unwonted queues of carriages outside churches by means of which 'the upper ranks of society' manifested their hostility to 'the irreligious and profligate doctrines' of the French Revolution, while the resemblances between James's Evangelical preacher and the Cambridge clergyman Charles Simeon also suggest a date in the 1790s.

10. Peter Laslett, *op.cit.*, p. 321.
11. Roland Barthes, *op.cit.*, p. 15.
12. Francis Jeffrey in *Edinburgh Review*, April 1808, quoted in *Crabbe: The Critical Heritage*, ed. A. Pollard (1972), p. 58.

Criticism: Frank Whitehead (essay date 1995)

SOURCE: Whitehead, Frank. "Biographical Speculations." In *George Crabbe: A Reappraisal*, pp. 209-18. Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1995.

[In the following essay, Whitehead explores how Crabbe's personal life is revealed in his poetry, and how facts about his life can be used to understand his writing.]

Although contemporary literary theory has increasingly ignored or devalued the role of the author in literary works, the reading public at large has continued to show a lively interest in the individual author's life, his personality, and his psychology. In recent years, for example, there has been a flood of new biographies of distinguished poets, novelists, and dramatists, and these have often achieved massive sales. This appetite for intimate personal revelation cannot find a great deal to feed on in Crabbe's published work. His tales are built upon observation rather than self-analysis or self-display; and although he often enables the reader to enter vividly into the feelings of the characters, the poet's own relation to these characters remains for the most part notably detached and objective. This continues to be the case even where we have reason to believe that he is drawing upon his own life experience in a more than usually direct way. Thus in "The Patron," tale 5 in *Tales* (1812), it cannot be doubted that much of the convincing detail is taken from Crabbe's own experience at Belvoir from 1782 to 1785 as domestic chaplain to the duke of Rutland, or that the inspiration for the poem was fueled by resentment at some of the treatment he received during that period; yet no one could sensibly suppose that the tale is in any sense a direct transcription from his own life. Crabbe clearly made good use of his memories of both country mansion and townhouse (the cold and empty waiting room at the latter is rendered with evident authority); but the aspiring young poet (son of "A Borough-Bailiff, who to law was train'd") is equally clearly not a surrogate for Crabbe's youthful self but a character in his own right. In a similar way, although the route traversed by Orlando in "The Lover's Journey," tale 10 in *Tales* (1812), was unquestionably one well known to Crabbe in his own person, the narrative in this case is carefully detached from personal resonances, the better to concentrate on the poem's more generalized and near-philosophical theme.

There are a few poems and fragments of poems, principally ones published posthumously, that invite a more personal application. And we can turn also to the attractively written *Life*, compiled by his son around the time of the poet's death and first published as part of the 1834 edition of the *Poetical Works*. Although this was toned down and softened in certain respects, partly out of filial devotion, partly in deference to the advice of Moore, Rogers and others, it does within its limits give a credible and lively impression of the poet's personality; and it can be supplemented by reference to some of the poet's letters that have survived. The material is too scanty to be made into a convincing psychobiography, but there is enough of it to provide some interesting personal background relevant to our understanding of the poetry.

As has already been mentioned, the bulk of this poetry has an ambience that is calm, level-headed, and somewhat undemonstrative. The characteristic tone gives the impression of a carefully controlled utterance—controlled not only in its patterning of the versification and its organization of the verbal texture but also in its publicly modulated presentation of facts and feelings. It is here, above all, that we sense a continuance of the Augustan poetic tradition, recalling that, as Ian Watt has phrased it: "The adjective Augustan surely evokes a special way of speaking—precise in syntax, elegant in diction, and very detached in its attitude to the subject, to the audience, and even to the self and its feelings."¹ (Watt goes on to describe the

“most characteristic mode” of the Augustan voice as “ironic”; and although in Crabbe's tales irony surfaces only intermittently, the ironic note is seldom far away.) The poetic persona suggested by this “way of speaking” is one that sets out to trace, behind the multifarious idiosyncrasies of human behavior, a rational moral order governing the whole of the created universe; and if there is any sense of strain generated by the difficulties of this enterprise, it shows itself as a rule only in the vitality and energy of Crabbe's narrative and character drawing. Yet the characteristic poetic tension that guarantees his avoidance of shallow complacency must have had its source in some degree of internal conflict; and it is elsewhere than in the tales themselves that we are forced to look for this.

The most obvious starting point is the shortish autobiographical poem entitled “Infancy,” written between 1814 and 1816, and first published, posthumously, in the 1834 edition. In its avowed concern with personal reminiscence, these 141 lines, though shaped into heroic couplets, are unlike anything else in Crabbe's poetic output; among other things, they differ in being unusually bleak and gloomy in their outlook upon life. The general proposition set out in the early part of the poem is that the “pleasure” that we all seek is essentially no more than relief from pain or discomfort.

For what is Pleasure that we toil to gain?
'Tis but the slow or rapid Flight of Pain.
Set Pleasure by, and there would yet remain,
For every Nerve and Sense, the Sting of Pain:
Set Pain aside, and fear no more the Sting,
And whence your Hopes and Pleasures can ye bring?

(23-28)

This austere doctrine is illustrated for us first by the observation that the Lover's “Rapture” results from removal of the “Grief” caused by his mistress's absence—a causal relationship said (a little cynically) to be proved by the fact that it soon dissipates once marriage has removed the cause. Second, there follows Crabbe's more overtly personal testimony that in looking back over his memories he finds that “Grief” both struck early and remains long in the mind, whereas “Joys” are ephemeral and evanescent “like phosphoric light / Or Squibs and Crackers on a Gala Night.” The most memorable part of the poem, however, is an extended account of a single childhood day that Crabbe describes as “Emblematic” of his life—an oft-repeated pattern which began with ardent anticipation and enjoyment and ended in dissatisfaction and disillusionment.

Sweet was the Morning's Breath, the inland Tide,
And our Boat gliding, where alone could glide
Small Craft and they oft touch'd on either Side.
It was my first-born Joy. I heard them say,
“Let the child go; he will enjoy the day.”

(85-89)

But the enjoyment soon evaporates when the boating party reaches a town, and the adults, “on themselves intent,” forget about their infant companion:

I lost my Way, and my Companions me,
And all, their Comforts and Tranquillity.
Mid-day it was, and as the Sun declin'd,
The early Rapture I no more could find.
The Men drank much, to whet the Appetite,
And growing heavy, drank to make them light;
Then drank to relish Joy, then further to excite.
Their Cheerfulness did but a Moment last;
Something fell short or something overpast.
The lads play'd idly with the Helm and Oar

And nervous Ladies would be set on Shore,
Till Civil Dudgeon grew and Peace would smile no more.

(100-111)

These few lines of shrewd social observation offer a good example of what Lilian Haddakin justly calls Crabbe's characteristic "sardonic astringency." Immediately following this human discord the climate takes a hand in order to add its own contribution to the day's mortifications.

Now on the colder Water faintly shone
The sloping Light—the cheerful Day was gone;
Frown'd every Cloud, and from the gather'd Frown
The Thunder burst and Rain came pattering down.
My torpid Senses now my Fears obey'd
When the fierce Lightning on the Water play'd.
Now all the Freshness of the Morning fled,
My Spirits burden'd and my heart was dead;
The female Servants show'd a Child their fear
And Men, full wearied, wanted Strength to cheer;

(112-21)

Crabbe now returns to his original proposition about the nature of "Pleasure":

And when at length the dreaded Storm went past,
And there was Peace and Quietness at last,
'Twas not the Morning's Quiet—it was not
Pleasures reviv'd but Miseries forgot:
It was not Joy that now commenc'd her Reign,
But mere relief from Wretchedness and Pain.

(122-27)

The deep pessimism with which Crabbe extends the pattern of this childhood day to cover that of all his later experience has no parallel in the tales, though it may underlie the more spirited passages in a few of them.

Crabbe wrote this unpublished and unrevised poem in the aftermath of his wife's death, and some of the concluding lines have an explicit reference to the disappointments of his married life:

Ev'n Love himself, that Promiser of Bliss,
Made his best Days of Pleasure end like this:
He mix'd his Bitters in the Cup of Joy
Nor gave a Bliss uninjur'd by Alloy.
All Promise they, all Joy as they began!
And these grew less and vanish'd as they ran!
Errors and Evils came in many a Form,
The Mind's Delusion and the Passions' Storm.
The promised Joy that, like the Morning, rose,
Broke on my View, grew clouded in its Close;
Friends who together in the Morning sail'd
Parted ere Noon, and Solitude prevail'd.

The extent to which the evident distress in these lines should be applied specifically to the disappointments of his marriage may not be wholly certain, but they clearly send us to an aspect of Crabbe's experience that must have had a central importance for him. We have little certain knowledge about it, however. In 1783 Crabbe was married to Sarah Elmy after a lengthy engagement during which his future wife had given him much

moral support in his hard struggle to become established as a poet. In its beginnings their marriage seems to have been a happy one, but only two out of the seven children born to them survived into adulthood, and after the death in 1793 of an infant son, Mrs. Crabbe began to show signs of a nervous disorder that was to last, with some fluctuations in its severity, until her death in 1813. Crabbe's son limits himself to the following rather tight-lipped account:

[The nervous disorder] proved of an increasing and very lamentable kind; for, during the hotter months of almost every year, she was oppressed by the deepest dejection of spirits I ever witnessed in any one, and this circumstance alone was sufficient to undermine the happiness of so feeling a mind as my father's. Fortunately for both, there were long intervals, in which, if her spirits were a little too high, the relief to herself and others was great indeed. Then she would sing over her old tunes again—and be the frank, cordial, charming woman of earlier days.²

For the rest there are some indications in Crabbe's correspondence suggesting that his wife's illness made it difficult for him to keep up the friendly contacts that his naturally sociable disposition inclined him towards; and certainly his domestic difficulties seem to have become known among his friends and acquaintances from about 1803 onwards. Southey wrote to a friend in 1808:

It was not long before his [Crabbe's] wife became deranged, and when all this was told me by one who knew him well, five years ago, he was still almost confined in his own house, anxiously waiting upon this wife in her long and hopeless malady. A sad history! It is no wonder he gives so melancholy a picture of human life.³

Other rumors, such as Mitford's report that Mrs. Crabbe had formed a "prodigious" collection of Bath stones, should perhaps be treated more cautiously. For the most authoritative testimony we have to turn to a letter written by Crabbe to Mrs. Alethea Lewis, a friend of long standing, on 25 October 1813, a few weeks after his wife's death.

She has been dying these ten years: more I believe & I hope I am very thankful that I am the Survivor. ... I cannot weigh Sorrows in a Ballance or make Comparisons between different Kinds of Affliction, nor do I judge whether I should have suffered most to have parted with my poor Sally, as I did part (if indeed such was parting) or to have seen her pass away with all her Faculties, feelings, senses acute & awake as my own. When I doubt of our parting (a conscious feeling on both sides that we were separating) you will judge of the propriety of such Expressions, for with Respect to Intellect & the more enquiring & reasoning of the Faculties, she, dear Creature, had lost these even years since: The will sometimes made an Effort, but Nature forbad: the mind was veiled, clouded & by Degrees lost. Then too were the Affections wrecked: No I was no more than another! not so much as the Woman who administered to the hourly Calls for small Comforts. The senses remained & even too acute but I hope, I believe there was not pain with the Restlessness which preceded the Evening of the 20th of Sepr & for her, there was no Morning after that.

Appetite & Strength had been decaying for 2 or 3 years, but very gradually. ... Medical Men could do nothing: my poor Mrs Crabbe only lived to the present: we could not speak of the past. We could not hope together for the future: all was centred in the Moment's feeling & when I stood over her & carried my thoughts backward to the Mind that was, the Intelligence that might have been gained, the Improvement, the Communication that we should have made if—but it is not in Men to foresee nor to repine but to submit. God almighty grant me a Spirit of absolute and total Resignation.⁴

This moving firsthand account brings home both the extent and the depth of the anguish caused by his wife's manic-depressive illness, and may suggest that this misfortune must have played a large part in leading him to wrestle in his poetry with those aberrant areas of human experience that his Augustan predecessors had tended to leave out of their reckoning. Perhaps it accounts also for the remarkably compassionate understanding that he extends not only to the mentally deranged but to sinners as well.

Crabbe's son gives a more muted account of his mother's death. "During a long period before her departure," he tells us, "her mind had been somewhat impaired by bodily infirmities; and at last it sank under the severity of the disease." He does, however, provide his own confirmation of the intensity of Crabbe's regret at the disappointments of his marriage by quoting the following comment written in his father's hand upon the outside of an old letter of his wife's: "Nothing can be more sincere than this, nothing more reasonable and affectionate; and yet happiness was denied."

Two days after his wife's death Crabbe was afflicted by an alarming illness, which, his son tells us, "bore a considerable resemblance to acute cholera without sickness." For a time his life was thought to be in danger, but an improvement, followed by a very gradual recovery, was effected by the administration of emetics—a "species of medicine" to which, according to his son, Crabbe had always had "a great aversion." If this laconic comment is taken in conjunction with the lines in part 2 of the early poem *Inebriety* describing in rather unpleasant detail the drunken vomiting of the young fop Fabricio, we may perhaps hazard the conjecture that Crabbe suffered from a somewhat phobic attitude toward vomit, such that the compulsion toward control that we have already noted in his poetic utterance either extended to or was rooted in a neurotic concern about control over bodily function. This guess (it is little more) would certainly be consonant with what little we know about the ailment for which he was prescribed opiates from middle age onwards. His son tells us that Crabbe at first thought the vertigo to which he was subject was "indicative of a tendency to apoplexy"; but after an "alarming attack" that took place in Ipswich around 1790 he was examined by a Dr. Clubbe, whose diagnosis was, "[L]et the digestive organs bear the whole blame: you must take opiates." The biographer continues:

From that time his health began to amend rapidly, and his constitution was renovated; a rare effect of opium, for that drug almost always inflicts some partial injury, even when it is necessary: but to him it was only salutary—and to a constant but slightly increasing dose of it may be attributed his long and generally healthy life.

From this, and from another comment elsewhere in the biography, we may reasonably infer a psychosomatic illness with its main symptoms affecting the digestive system. Relevant in this connection are his son's comments on the improvement in spirits enjoyed by Crabbe after his removal to Trowbridge in 1814:

But a physical change that occurred in his constitution, at the time of the severe illness that followed close on my mother's death, had, I believe, a great share in all these happy symptoms. It always seemed to be his own opinion that at that crisis his system had, by a violent effort, thrown off some weight or obstruction that had been, for many years previously, giving his bodily condition the appearance of a decline,—afflicting him with occasional fits of low fever, and vexatiously disordering his digestive organs. In those days, "life is as tedious as a twice-told tale," was an expression not seldom in his mouth; and he once told me, he felt that he could not possibly live more than six or seven years. But now it seemed that he had recovered not only the enjoyment of sound health, but much of the vigour and spirit of youthful feelings.

It is hard to doubt that the "weight or obstruction" referred to here was the physical correlate of a psychic oppression resulting from the painful and probably conflicting feelings induced by Mrs. Crabbe's illness, and that the crisis that followed her death was a mental as well as a physical one.

affecting passage is one in which the dreamer is reunited with the image of his late wife only to have her snatched away again by the malevolent sprites who control his dreaming. The other (unfinished) poem, "Where am I now?," is much less powerful, and its interest relates more to the further light it casts upon Crabbe's mental processes than to any intrinsic poetic merit. These three atypical poems (all written in stanza form and not in heroic couplets) do, however, provide insight into the existence of a turbulent and tension-ridden inner life that could not easily have been guessed at from the reading of Crabbe's most characteristic poems and tales.

As has already been suggested, this characteristic work leaves behind above all the impression of a quest for control—an objective to be attained, first of all, by the controlled understanding and controlled representation of a known world, but also, more centrally, by the confident marshaling of all the evidence for the presence in that world of a just and divinely ordained moral order. Now there can be little doubt that in this endeavor Crabbe saw himself as engaged simply in conveying "th'instructive truth" about human nature and the human lot, and that consciously he would have experienced no sense of strain about matching his imagined world with the tenets of his Christian faith. Yet the poetic energy that gives continuing life to the best of his verse-narrative does seem to suggest that underneath the calm surface there may lurk unacknowledged and unsuspected tensions. In addition to the challenge (already discussed) from new manifestations in the intellectual and cultural sphere, this chapter has pointed up some indications that in his personal life, too, Crabbe was subject, during his most productive period, to considerable strains. In the light of our more recently acquired understanding of the way unconscious forces operate in the human mind, we may perhaps speculate that in Crabbe there can be observed at work the archetypal Freudian poet who, like a child at play, "creates a world of his own or, more truly, rearranges the things of his world and orders it in a new way that pleases him better."⁷

Notes

1. See Watt, "Ironic Voice," 101.
2. *Life*, chap. 7, 155-56.
3. See Southey, *Selections from the Letters*, 2:90-91.
4. Crabbe, *Selected Letters and Journals*, 117-18.
5. A reference to Andrew Baxter (1686-1750), who had suggested in his *Enquiry into the Nature of the Human Soul* (1733) that dreams are caused by the action of spiritual beings. The allusion is taken up again in the phrase "Baxter's sprites" in the second stanza of the poem "The World of Dreams."
6. Abrams, *Milk of Paradise*, and Hayter, *Opium*.
7. Freud, *Collected Papers*, 4:174.

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Criticism: Gavin Edwards (essay date 1998)

SOURCE: Edwards, Gavin. "Scott and Crabbe: A Meeting at the Border." *Essays in Criticism* 22, no. 1 (February 1998): 123-40.

[In the following essay, Edwards analyzes the relationship between Crabbe and Sir Walter Scott, including their meetings, their impressions of each other, how they influenced each other, and how they dealt differently with similar themes.]

Walter Scott (1771-1832) and George Crabbe (1754-1832) met twice, first in London at John Murray's in Albemarle Street, in 1817, then in August 1822 when Crabbe was Scott's guest in Edinburgh. But although a guest, Crabbe did not see much of his host, who was busy stage-managing the state-visit of George IV.¹ Scott and Crabbe, Lockhart tells us, had "but one quiet walk together, and it was to the ruin of St. Anthony's Chapel and Muschat's Cairn, which the deep impression made on Crabbe by *The Heart of Midlothian* [1818] had given him an earnest wish to see" (4:57). It is not surprising that *The Heart of Midlothian* made a deep impression on Crabbe since, as Tony Inglis notes, he "steps in and out of the novel from beginning to end."² It is the literary relationship between the two men, the meeting of minds, that I want to explore here: a relationship that can be followed through their correspondence, through the biographies by Lockhart and George Crabbe, Jr.,³ and, above all, through allusions in the poems and novels themselves.

Different as the two writers were in important respects, their regard for each other was high. In fact, it was probably the special compound of similarity and difference that made each so significant to the other and caused each to some extent to work out what he was doing by measuring himself against what he thought the other was doing. A study of their literary relationship must, therefore, have a double focus and look at the influences running in both directions.

Crabbe's son records his father's first encounter with Scott's poetry. One day in 1805,

casually stepping into a bookseller's at Ipswich, my father first saw the *Lay of the Last Minstrel* [1805]. A few words only riveted his attention, and he read it nearly through while standing at the counter, observing, "a new and great poet has appeared!"⁴

Sharply different as Crabbe's own poetry is from Scott's—the one antiromantic, the other ultraromantic—Crabbe seems to have felt there was also an affinity. "Peter Grimes" (in *The Borough* [1810]) begins with an epigraph from *Marmion* (1808), and the "Preface" to *The Borough* makes an explicit comparison between Grimes and "the ruffian" in Scott's poem.⁵

Scott's admiration for Crabbe's poetry went back much earlier, to Scott's late teens, when he read extracts from *The Library* (1781) and *The Village* (1783) in Dodsley's *Annual Register*. These two poems, together with *The Newspaper* (1785), were the poems of Crabbe's eighteenth-century literary career. When he appeared again, over twenty years later, with *Poems* (1807), *The Borough* (1810), and *Tales* (1812), Scott's earlier enthusiasm was renewed. This is the story Scott told in his first letter to Crabbe, written on 21 October [1812] after reading *Tales*. "It is," wrote Scott,