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Author(s): Jerome J. McGann

Source: *ELH*, Autumn, 1981, Vol. 48, No. 3 (Autumn, 1981), pp. 555-572

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/2872913>

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THE ANACHRONISM OF GEORGE CRABBE

BY JEROME J. MCGANN

Hazlitt's revulsion from Crabbe's poetry epitomizes the attitude of most English Romantics—Byron only, as usual, excepted. Leavis said later, correctly, that "Crabbe . . . was hardly at the fine point of consciousness of his time," and we see what he meant when we read remarks like the following from Coleridge and Wordsworth:

in Crabbe there is an absolute defect of the high imagination.

I am happy to find that we coincide in opinion about Crabbe's *verses*; for *poetry* in no sense can they be called. . . . After all, if the Picture [given in his work] were true to nature, what claim would it have to be called Poetry? . . . The sum of all is, that nineteen out of twenty of Crabbe's Pictures are mere matters of fact. . . .¹

These Romantic judgments upon Crabbe eventually became normative, not merely for those who agreed with their assessment of Crabbe's *value*, but even for those who—like Leavis himself—saw Crabbe as "a living classic." It is a commonplace of criticism to say of Crabbe that he was "the last of the Augustans." Leavis himself reproduced such a view when he said that Crabbe's "sensibility belongs to an order that those who were most alive to the age . . . had ceased to find sympathetic." In short, Crabbe was an anachronism, and was recognized as such by the most advanced of his contemporaries.²

We may obtain a sharper understanding of these critical judgments, however, if we place them in a more generous historical context. We must see, first of all, that the Romantic judgment was part of a more general ideological struggle in which various parties engaged. Coleridge's and Wordsworth's views corresponded to those set forth in, for example, the *Quarterly Review*, but they were vigorously contested by many others—most notably in the series of articles on Crabbe written for the *Edinburgh Review* by Jeffrey. Indeed, Jeffrey's hostility to Wordsworth and the Lake School, and his approbation of Crabbe, constitute one of the most important local manifestations of the various cultural struggles which marked the entire period. We may glimpse the complexity of these strug-

gles if we simply recall that Hazlitt—no champion of Crabbe’s work—had reluctantly to grant not only his artistic power, but his surpassing originality among the poets of the early nineteenth century.

Coleridge’s and Wordsworth’s judgments, then, must be seen for what they are: part of a polemic on behalf of certain poetical criteria. The fact that their programs largely prevailed—we now call the period which nurtured Jane Austen and Crabbe The Romantic Age—establishes the proper measure of the truth of their judgments: that is to say, they measure a relative truth, a partisan view.

From our present perspective, however, the Romantic judgment upon Crabbe’s poetry must be forced to yield up its specific historical shape. We may begin to define precisely what the Romantics took their stand upon by turning to Crabbe himself, who contested, in a most illuminating way, the very issues which his own work has raised into view.

In his “Preface” to the *Tales* (1812) Crabbe shows himself well aware of the charges brought against his work (its matter-of-fact and anti-imaginative qualities, its gloomy and even depressing effect). More than this, Crabbe understands that these specific issues represent a more fundamental argument over the nature of poetry.

Nevertheless, it must be granted that the pretensions of any composition to be regarded as poetry will depend upon that definition of the poetic character which he who undertakes to determine the question has considered as decisive.³

Crabbe then begins his counter-argument with an ironic attack upon Romantic premises and authorities. His antagonists found their “definition of the poetic character” upon “the words which the greatest of poets, not divinely inspired, has given to the most noble and valiant Duke of Athens.” Crabbe quotes the relevant passage from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (V, i) and explicates the Romantic concept of Imagination. The visionary poet captivates

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

(p. 217)

Crabbe's argument is empirical and quietly ironic. In the first place, he attacks the Romantic "definition" by exposing its lack of inclusiveness. The received facts of the matter belie the definition, which necessarily excludes "a vast deal of what has been hitherto received as genuine poetry." Chaucer, Dryden, and Pope are Crabbe's most prominent instances, but his most trenchant and subtle is Shakespeare himself. Indeed, Crabbe's use of Shakespeare constitutes a brilliant piece of ironical argumentation. Though the author of one of the most famous statements on behalf of the inspirational theory of poetry, Shakespeare is "not divinely inspired." Far from being a visionary poet, Shakespeare is the creator of an array of human creatures some of whom—like Duke Theseus—believe that poets are "of imagination all compact." But Crabbe's Shakespeare overlooks the opinions of his various fictional creatures.

Crabbe's ironic point, then, is not merely that the world displays many different sorts of poets and poetry—some of them "divinely inspired" in the Romantic sense—but that the *measure* of what constitutes poetry is human, social, and historical rather than divine, inspired, and transcendent. Crabbe's prime exemplar of the "poetic character" is Shakespeare, who is at once "the greatest of poets" (as all agree), but who is also "not divinely inspired," and who does not measure poetry in inspirational terms. Shakespeare's fictional Duke proposes such a measure, and in so doing he aligns himself with a particular theoretical tradition; but Crabbe, following Shakespeare, argues the limited nature of such a view.

Crabbe's position follows upon his different "definition of the poetic character." According to Coleridge, for example, the immediate object of poetry is "pleasure, not truth," but its ultimate object is "a species of Revelation" akin to a religious experience. In its balance and reconciliation of opposite and discordant qualities, poetry elevates the human mind into contact with the whole truth of existence: with the transcendent Idea, the Truth of the One Life.⁴ This definition of poetry derives from the general tradition of Christian Humanism epitomized earlier in Sidney. It ultimately connects with the classical idea that poetry should teach and delight, but it changes the pragmatic and operational character of those ancient concepts into philosophic categories (pleasure and truth). This alteration follows directly on the method of Kantian aesthetics as it was set forth in the third *Critique*.

Rather than dealing with poetry in terms of pleasure and truth,

however, Crabbe's definition is based upon functional notions much more akin to the ancient classical concepts. In the "Preface" to *Tales of the Hall* (1819) he speaks of "the entertainment or the instruction" which poetry produces, and of the author's obligation "to please or to instruct" the audience (p. 338). This formulation in fact supports Crabbe's own poetic practise, which does not aim for a Kantian/Coleridgean aesthesis, and does not aspire to the revelation of a final Truth. Rather, Crabbe's field of poetic "pleasure" contains a variety of less totalizing pleasures: it gratifies, entertains, and pleases (in many different local and particular ways). As for its "truth" content, once again Crabbe takes a human, non-transcendent approach. Crabbe wants to teach and to instruct, not to deliver a new (or old) revelation.

In all these respects Crabbe obviously differs sharply from Coleridge, but the ways he differs from Wordsworth are perhaps even more instructive. The clearest *locus* of their differences will be found in Wordsworth's 1802 "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads*, in the famous discussion of the relative prerogatives of science and poetry. When Wordsworth says that poetry's "object is truth, not individual and local, but general, and operative," he specifically means to separate the scientist and historian—those dealers in mere "matters-of-fact," in Wordsworth's view—from the poet, whose commitment to the expression of "passion" allows him a direct and "natural" contact with the universal human truth that Wordsworth called "sympathy." Because poetry's object is to reveal, directly and immediately, that primary truth of a universal sympathy among persons and peoples and between mankind and nature (Coleridge's One Life), it differs from the seriatim and processive truths of empirical science (whether history or natural philosophy):

To this knowledge [of universal sympathy] which all men carry about with them, and to these sympathies in which without any other discipline than that of our daily life we are fitted to take delight, the Poet principally directs his attention. He considers man and nature as essentially adapted to each other, and the mind of man as naturally the mirror of the fairest and most interesting qualities of nature. And thus the Poet, prompted by this feeling of pleasure which accompanies him through the whole course of his studies, converses with general nature with affections akin to those, which, through labour and length of time, the Man of Science has raised up in himself, by conversing with those particular parts of nature which are the objects of his studies. The knowledge both of the Poet and the Man of Science

is pleasure; but the knowledge of the one cleaves to us as a necessary part of our existence, our natural and unalienable inheritance; the other is a personal and individual acquisition, slow to come to us, and by no habitual and direct sympathy connecting us with our fellow-beings.⁵

When Wordsworth speaks, later, of the “primal sympathy/Which having been must ever be,” and when he avers that “Nature never did betray/The heart that loved her,”⁶ he reasserts his faith in the One Life and the ultimate benevolence of history in a natural world. For Crabbe, however, though God may be—is—in his heaven, all may not be—rarely is—right with the world. Crabbe’s nature and history are fields of betrayal, places where one can and must expect adversity, disaster, even malevolence. Crabbe, Wordsworth, and Coleridge all agree that “man and the objects that surround him [are] acting and re-acting on each other,” but whereas this systematic complex is a benevolent One Life to the Romantics, it is a circumstantial field to Crabbe, who sees in it endless eventual possibilities, most of which will be hurtful and destructive rather than benevolent precisely because the eventualities—being unforeseeable—will rudely interrupt our projects and plans.

The difference between Wordsworth and Crabbe is interesting since both men wrote a number of narratives which deal with similar subjects. What Wordsworth represents in, for example, “The Brothers” or “Michael” or “The Ruined Cottage” has much in common with the typical Crabbe narrative. “The Ruined Cottage” is especially pertinent here, first, because the grim features of the story are so comparable to Crabbe’s tales of woe; and second, because those very similarities serve to highlight the final and decisive differences. The fact that Wordsworth’s is a framed narrative—with the author presenting himself as a dramatic figure in the story, and the reader’s surrogate for the poem’s moral lesson—reveals an important difference between a typical Wordsworthian narrative and Crabbe’s characteristically non-subjective method of tale-telling. Wordsworth wants, and proposes to deliver, a solution to the problem of evil in the world. Arnytage, a man tried and schooled in adversity, delivers that moral lesson to Wordsworth; and Wordsworth, in re-presenting that consolatory narrative, turns the lesson he received into an instruction of the poem’s reader:

“That what we feel of sorrow and despair
From ruin and from change, and all the grief

The passing shews of being leave behind,
Appeared an idle dream that could not live
Where meditation was. I turned away,
And walked along my road in happiness.”

(520-525)⁷

Such a lesson emerges from “a sense sublime/Of something far more deeply interfused” into the life of things than “sorrow and despair . . . ruin and . . . change.” Wordsworth’s characteristic view is that such a sense emerges from a person’s meditative interchange with “natural forms.” So it is at the end of “The Ruined Cottage,” where Armitage and Wordsworth are left sitting together in silence “beneath the trees . . . on that low bench”:

And now we felt,
Admonished thus, the sweet hour coming on:
A linnet warbled from those lofty elms,
A thrush sang loud, and other melodies
At distance heard, peopled the milder air.

(529-533)

When the two men leave their field of desolation and travel on, consoled, to a place of comfort (“A rustic inn, our evening resting-place”), they move in the “milder air” of Wordsworth’s benevolent Nature.

That Nature never betrays the loving heart because such a heart necessarily—by very definition—participates in its “primal sympathy”; and the latter is a permanent and universal reality, an ineradicable Idea to which we assent by virtue of actual experience (“having been must ever be”). Thus Wordsworth’s Nature “upholds and cherishes” suffering humanity “first and last and midst and without end.” Ecological nature is Wordsworth’s fundamental sign and symbol of his transcendent Nature because the objective natural world—the field of chemistry, physics, biology—contains for human beings, whose more immediate lives are lived in social and historical fields, the images of permanence which they need. Like Coleridge, however, Wordsworth translates those ecological forms into theological realities: nature as Nature, the Active Universe and manifest form of the One Life. When Wordsworth writes framed tales, then—his famous retrospective narratives—he uses a poetic form which itself represents the convenient existence of that something far more deeply interfused. Benevolence and consolation arrive when they are discovered, when we see that their authority has always been present, though

unseen. When M. H. Abrams describes the “Natural Supernaturalism” of Romanticism, with its characteristic “circuitous journeys,” this is the pattern he details for us.

The pattern is not Crabbe’s, whose orderly couplets marshal, paradoxically, a world “Sad as realities, and wild as dreams” (“The Parting Hour,” p. 230). Whereas Wordsworth’s symbolical method constantly offers the reader an anticipatory narrative—a tale whose benevolent ending is hidden in its beginning—Crabbe’s method is to move inexorably from point to point, couplet to couplet, building its features of grimness as “sorrow takes new sadness from surprise” (“The Parting Hour,” p. 225). Like Wordsworth, Crabbe knows that human beings are subject to unforeseeable events and circumstances; unlike Wordsworth, Crabbe does not see that a system of divine benevolence—to which both men gave official assent—provided anything more than an ideological solution to problems which were fundamentally social, psychological, and economic. Crabbe’s tale of Ellen Orford—so comparable to Wordsworth’s tale of Margaret—gives us a woman who has undergone intolerable sufferings, and who has yet remained in the end “true” to her religion and the social structures she was born to.

And as my mind looks cheerful to my end,
I love mankind and call my GOD my friend.

(p. 191)

These final lines in the poem, which in Wordsworth would be consoling, are in Crabbe perfectly shocking because nothing in the narrative justifies them. Ellen Orford’s final testament of faith comes to us as one last item in an empirical and seriatim narrative. God and mankind have not protected Ellen Orford from her miseries—on the contrary, in fact—but then she, quite rightly, does not look for such protection. Wordsworth too does not look directly to God or society for protection from misery, but tells us to trust to the “humanized” (Wordsworthian) imagination, which can generate tales and poetic devices which themselves create the consolations and the solutions which human beings need. “The Ruined Cottage” is the answer to the problems it raises up for us out of the world beyond the tale itself.

Crabbe’s story of Ellen Orford, however, vigorously forbids any solution that is grounded in the Romantic Imagination. Indeed, the poem is largely an indictment of such solutions via its attack upon those popular romantic narratives of Crabbe’s day which built up

tales of woe only to afford a final deliverance from their machineries of terror:

Till some strange means afford a sudden view
Of some vile plot, and every wo adieu!

(p. 189)

Wordsworth's stories do not reveal "some vile plot"; they involve, as it were, the apocalypse of "some kind scheme" which displaces the misery in a benevolent spiritual field. Crabbe's tales, however, involve neither vile plot nor benevolent scheme; rather they demonstrate what he called "realities." Ellen Orford is both subject to and aware of such "realities," but in terms of a functional knowledge she remains in darkest ignorance. Indeed, when Crabbe presents her, in the end, as helpless and literally blind, he gives the reader an objective correlative for the state of her human understanding. What "Ellen Orford knows"—*all* that she knows—is "That we should humbly take what Heaven bestows" (p. 189). Though he honors such piety, Crabbe is well aware how sadly inadequate it is to the whole of her case. Still, his sympathetic presentation of such piteous and fragile creatures contains the secret to the appalling power of his narratives, which are at once full of pity, yet (finally) pitiless.

When Ellen Orford calmly narrates her terrible story she calls her life "A common case" (p. 189) because it is, as she unprotestingly knows, typical of people who live in certain social and economic circumstances. Readers of her story, then as well as now, find her narrative peculiarly shocking for this very reason: she records a detailed history which the more comfortable reader, alienated from her social "realities," must acknowledge to be a generic story rather than a special case. In Crabbe's handling of such realities, no adequate preventions can be expected from God or society or imagination, which at best can promise to displace them within various ideological transformations. But the method of a Crabbe narrative resists a final displacement, and especially disallows that famous Romantic displacement we recognize in the Wordsworthian mode. Crabbe's couplets serve at once to fix our attention on specific matters, on a series of particular facts and ideas and events, and at the same time to accumulate their data in an additive scheme.

This additive method results in a poetry of truths rather than a poetry of Truth. In contrast to Wordsworth's and Coleridge's efforts to establish "general" Truth through their poetry, and to argue, in their criticism, for the centrality of "universal" and trans-historical

Truth, Crabbe's work is deeply time and place specific: in Wordsworth's terms, "individual and local." Each of his famous characters focus, as it were, a case-history of some important sort. Ellen Orford, Peter Grimes, Edward Shore: all are what Lukacs would later call "typical" characters, and their stories are illustrative instances. Most emphatically are they not "types and symbols" in either the Neo-Platonic or the Romantic sense. The problems they illuminate are social, psychological, and historical, which is why a Crabbe narrative must operate with "individual and local" matters—with specific details, and highly particularized representations of time, place, circumstance.

For the Romantics, Crabbe's work was a peculiarly depressing form of art. Written in the face of the same severe realities which Crabbe saw, Romantic poetry attempted to formulate a positive and, above all, a final solution to the recurrent problems of human change and suffering. Reading Crabbe, however, we clearly see that the Romantic solution—which Wordsworth and Coleridge call Imagination—is regarded as no more than *yet another* final solution; indeed, under the circumstances, is regarded as something worse, as a sort of final or grand illusion. The sign of Crabbe's attitude is to be traced in his "figures of imagination": in every case these are desperate and incapable figures, lost souls whose final place of refuge is with fantasm, pathetic dreams and memories, or mere nightmare visions.

The Romantic revulsion from Crabbe's poetry is entirely understandable, then, since the truths to which he is devoted institute a devastating critique upon the Truth which the Romantics sought to sustain. Crabbe's poetry takes up its traditional human materials but delivers them to us under the sign not of Imagination but of Science. He accumulates his material, he distinguishes it into various parts, he particularizes. Furthermore, he adds that last, crucial scientific dimension by historicizing his materials at all points. Finality, in the philosophic sense, does not govern Crabbe's tales, which emphasize relative creatures, human time, and a continuous movement of accumulation that marks out not a Romantic form of process but a scientific form of addition.

Thus Crabbe's is a poetry of science in a very particular sense: his work illustrates a modern scientific method not in its synthetic or theoretical phase, but at its fundamental inductive and critical stage, when the necessary data are being collected. "The Muses have just about as much to do [with Crabbe's poetry] as they have

with a Collection of medical reports, or of Law cases,” said Wordsworth when he dismissed Crabbe’s “verses.”⁸ The critique accurately reports the method of many of Crabbe’s poems; what may be disputed, then as now, is the comparative value of Crabbe’s method.

Crabbe and his contemporary defenders represented his “value” under two principal headings. First, his work dealt with the “truth” of certain important human “realities” which poetry did not normally examine. It was therefore important not merely for the *facts* of its content but for the originality of its subject matter. Second, Crabbe’s poetry offers the reader the pleasure of coming to such knowledge—the pleasure of learning new “realities”—rather than the pleasure of an imaginative aesthesis.

Because this last distinction is crucial for understanding Crabbe’s work, I must expand upon it in some detail. The Romantic—prototypically Coleridgean—concept of poetic pleasure is a philosophic category of human Being. Though a subjective experience, it is metaphysically transcendent; indeed, the individual’s experience of such an aesthetic pleasure is a felt apprehension (rather than an understood cognition) of the persistent reality of that transcendent Form of Being. Poetry is a vehicle which induces the experience of such pleasure, thereby reaffirming the reality of the ultimate Form of Pleasure in the act of reading the poem. What Crabbe called, in the “Preface” to the *Tales* (1812), the “painful realities” of existence are revealed, through Romantic Imagination, to be “passing shows” and temporal illusions. Romantic Imagination creates a “world elsewhere” which corresponds to whatever the heart desires; it substitutes an Eden of Imagination for the lost Edens of the past.

Crabbe does not undertake to offer such acts of final substitution. His poetic pleasures deal with more limited values in a world which, to Crabbe’s experience, seems more various, complex, and unknown than is often realized by himself or his middle and upper class readers. He is especially interested in the “painful realities of actual existence” among which he includes—indeed, emphasizes—the realities of the Romantic Imagination. His work endeavors to create, via the illusion of art, a peculiar place of disinterested “repose by substituting [for our “perpetually-occurring vexations” of life] objects in their place which [the mind] may contemplate with some degree of interest and satisfaction”:

for when it is admitted that they have no particular relation to

him, but are the troubles and anxieties of other men, they excite and interest his feelings as the imaginary exploits, adventures, and perils of romance;—they soothe his mind, and keep his curiosity pleasantly awake; they appear to have enough of reality to engage his sympathy, but possess not interest sufficient to create painful sensations. Fiction itself, we know, and every work of fancy, must for a time have the effect of realities.

(p. 218)

What is important about Crabbe's proposal is that the "pleasant effect upon the mind of the reader" which his poetry offers is conceived in very limited terms ("some degree of interest and satisfaction"). Crabbe's pleasure is a moment of repose whose local and particular character is defined by the systems of "painful realities" which his poetry uncovers. Crabbe speaks of "those every-day concerns . . . and vexations" of life, but he treats poetry in precisely similar terms, as if it too were an every-day matter, only a pleasant one. The pleasure we are to derive from his poems, then, is not conceived as "moments in the being of the eternal silence" so much as moments in the being of a recurrent bedlam.

To understand this interesting (and unromantic) theory of poetic pleasure we must grasp the importance which Crabbe attaches to his particularities. The "every-day concerns . . . and vexations" may nevertheless "lift the mind [of the reader] from the painful realities of actual existence" because the stories are "not [in literal fact] the very concerns and distresses of the reader." We sympathize with the characters and their stories because they detail commonplaces with which we are familiar; but we are distanced from the stories because the experiences are not, *in their particulars*, our own (something, as Crabbe says, "hardly to be supposed"). This apparently pedantic and fussy distinction points toward the crucial importance which matters-of-fact play in Crabbe's work. Indeed, it shows us the fundamentally scientific (rather than metaphysical) bent of Crabbe's mind. Distinctions for him can be made both categorically and empirically. Furthermore, empirical distinctions—the fact that Edward Shore's best friend was a certain age, or the fact that Dinah's aunt (in "Procrastination") lived longer than expected—may focus differences which, from a human (social and psychological) point of view, are every bit as important as any "fundamental" distinction in metaphysics, ethics, or epistemology. In the world of human experience it may be just these "insignificant" empirical differences which make *all* the difference in the lives of individuals, social groups, even kingdoms. Ultimately,

then, Crabbe's method subjects all higher-order syntheses, whether cognitive (philosophic) or non-cognitive (poetic), to an existential critique.

The empirical distinction Crabbe draws in the passage I have been discussing represents no small matter for him. The entire issue of poetic distance and sympathy for Crabbe rests on the differences that poems draw between particular readers and particular subject matters. These are, literally, differences in fact which signal important differences in (subsequent) poetic effects. By establishing the separation of the reader from the poem on this empirical basis, Crabbe emphasizes the very terms under which a reading of his work will take place. The "pleasure" of a Crabbe poem is not a matter of "seeing into the life of things," of experiencing a sense of the One Life or the "One Spirit's plastic stress"; it is rather the pleasure of a particular experience wherein the mind becomes an observer within a manifold of fascinating, highly specified details and differentials. Crabbe's reader is lifted above the poetic materials the way an observer gains distance on the objects brought before his view.

From this elevated vantage Crabbe fashions his critique of the Idealistic traditions of poetry and criticism. This argument is explicitly made not only in the "Preface" to the 1812 *Tales*; it appears in earlier works as well. *The Village* (1783) is famous for its attack upon idealized representations of country life, but a similar assault is mounted in the opening Letter of *The Borough* (1810). The basis for the attack lies in Crabbe's insistence upon factual accuracy in verse, a criterion which demands that poetic details be presented in contexts that are time and place specific. Such contexts, because they are empirically structured and elaborated, deliver poetry from the grip of abstract and idealized modes of perception.⁹

In addition to this critique, however, Crabbe's method opens up an entirely new poetic world. His verse is at once critique and revelation, for its novel subject matter represents the discovery that no subject lies outside the province of verse. This definitive break with a traditional (and increasingly threatened) rule of poetic decorum represents a far more important theoretical advance than has often been realized. In his new subject matter Crabbe defined the significance of his new aesthetic: that his was a poetry of discovery and investigation, of empirical research whose initial limits would be set in scientific rather than in ideological terms.¹⁰

Crabbe's method, then, is to train his readers in critical and ex-

ploratory observation. A concrete and “material” vantage is adopted because it alone provides an escape from received conceptions (and hence perceptions) of the world. Empiricism is, for Crabbe and his epoch, a sharp critical differential from received methods and categories of religious and philosophic thought. This materialist differential operates in *The Village*, as we know, but it loses none of its force or relevance in the later poetry, where it undermines that latest appearance of Idealistic ideology, Romantic displacement.

Crabbe’s poetic “originality,” then, which was universally acknowledged by his contemporaries (and which is generally forgotten by us), is a function of an aesthetic that made a fundamental break with traditional approaches. When twentieth-century scholars classify him as an Augustan or Neo-Classical throwback, a reactionary figure who somehow lived on to write verse in the proto-modern Romantic Age, some crucial distortions are being allowed to enter the analysis. *The Village* is a critique of Neo-Classical poetic standards as they were embodied in the traditional methods of pastoral verse. But the poetry which Crabbe wrote after *Lyrical Ballads*, precisely because it was published *when it was* (1807-19), has shifted the focus of Crabbe’s attack from Neo-Classical ideas to the new Romantic ones. Crabbe’s “Preface” to the 1812 *Tales* shows us quite clearly that he was aware of his new set of opponents; indeed, the remarks on Crabbe made by so many of the period’s leading Romantic figures, like Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Hazlitt, reinforce our sense of the gulf which divides Crabbe’s work from theirs.

The symmetry between the attack launched in *The Village* and the critique of Romanticism to be found in the later verse highlights an interesting, and neglected, aspect of Romanticism: that its ideologies share important attitudes with the ideologies of Neo-Classicism. Romantic aesthetics is based upon processive and historicist models, and these contrast sharply with, for example, the doctrines of Pope’s *Essay on Criticism* and *Essay on Man*. Furthermore, Romanticism espouses an interior geography which is far removed from the social parameters of Neo-Classical verse. Nevertheless, despite these (and other) important differences, Neo-Classicism and Romanticism emerge as symmetrical ideologies when we compare them with the antithetical position adopted by Crabbe. The latter’s empiricism—praised and, in some respects, elaborated by Byron—exposes the common Idealism which Pope’s aesthetic shares with Wordsworth and Coleridge.

The famous conclusion to the first Epistle of Pope's *Essay on Man* might well be set out as an epigraph to *The Prelude*, or *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*:

All Nature is but art, unknown to thee;
All chance, direction, which thou canst not see;
All discord, harmony not understood;
All partial evil, universal good:
And, spite of pride, in erring reason's spite,
One truth is clear: Whatever is, is RIGHT.

The instance of Crabbe, then, brings an important fact about the early nineteenth century into sharp relief: that it has been denominated The Romantic Age not because all its significant art products are Romantic, but because the ideology of Romanticism came to dominate the period. The age's actual field of human productive activity incorporated a diversity of work far richer than what we know as the Romantic. The lesson that Crabbe teaches could as well be learned by studying, in their historical contexts, those other antithetical positions marked out by Austen, Scott, and Peacock.¹¹

I began this paper by contrasting Wordsworth's and Crabbe's poetical theories in order to illuminate the special character of Crabbe's work, and to revise our estimate of the significance and value of what he did. I want to conclude with another set of comparisons and contrasts in order to clarify certain aspects of Wordsworth's poetry which bear re-examination.

Crabbe's attack upon Romantic ideas in *The Borough* (especially Letters I, XXIII, and XXIV), in his 1812 "Preface," and in any number of the tales (like "Delay Has Danger"), focusses on what he sees as the illusionary character of Romantic attitudes. His exemplary argument is functional rather than theoretical or aesthetic in its method. When individual desires or perceptions or feelings are made standards of judgment, false views and perilous circumstances ensue.

Wordsworth himself developed a similar (though more subjectively based) argument in his great poem on Peele Castle, a work widely regarded as—in one influential critic's term—a "palinode"¹² to Wordsworth's early Romantic faith. This view responds to Wordsworth's explicit rejection of what he calls "the fond illusion of my heart," his sense that Nature is ruled by "A steadfast peace":

I could have fancied that the mighty Deep
Was even the gentlest of all gentle Things.

(11-12)

But “A deep distress” forces Wordsworth to confess how “blind” such a view is; and George Beaumont’s “Picture of Peele Castle, in a storm” provides him with the vehicle for expressing his revisionary statement:

O ’tis a passionate Work!—yet wise and well,
Well chosen is the spirit that is here;
That Hulk which labours in the deadly swell,
This rueful sky, this pageantry of fear!

And this huge Castle, standing here sublime,
I love to see the look with which it braves,
Cased in the unfeeling armour of old time,
The lightning, the fierce wind, and trampling waves.

(45-52)

Because Wordsworth can “commend/This sea in anger, and that distant shore,” these great lines measure the distance between Crabbe’s grim and fearful pageantries, and Wordsworth’s way of dealing with similar matters. Both men chasten “the fond illusion” of the benevolent heart, but whereas Wordsworth can say that he “loves to see” “Such sights, or worse, as are before me here,” Crabbe narrates his tales of woe with no will or pleasure or hope. Nothing in Crabbe’s ideology can offer a deliverance from the evils he portrays once the characters and events of the stories are set into their circumstantial courses. Edward Shore, Abel Keene, Allen Booth, Benbow, Grimes, Ellen Orford: the disasters of these lives take place in this world, where they lie so far beyond a material redemption that Crabbe will not even raise—is too humane to argue—the issue of a compensatory (spiritual or imaginative) redemption.

For Wordsworth, however, “The feeling of my loss” generates a demand for some compensatory justice, and produces those patterns of Romantic displacement for which his work is so justly celebrated. Whereas Crabbe must force himself to tell, and us to hear, his fearful stories, Wordsworth’s celebration of disaster is the certain sign of his Romanticism, the “fond illusion” of Wordsworth’s heart that some uncertain hope presides over all disastered things. Wordsworth finally rejects the illusion of “A steadfast peace,” but he embraces another: that the awful “Characters of the great Apocalypse” are in fact the benevolent and redemptive “types and symbols of Eternity” (*Prelude* VI, 638, 639).

Displaced hope—interiorized justice, an Ideal of hope, spiritual

and imaginative redemption—these are the certain marks of a Romantic sensibility. This fact explains why “Peele Castle” is no palinode to Wordsworth’s original Romantic faith, for the argument in the poem is the same as the argument in “Michael” and “The Ruined Cottage.” Wordsworth’s grim Romantic pleasure in seeing the fearful picture of Peele Castle is precisely analogous to his melancholy Romantic thankfulness in hearing Armitage’s terrible story of Margaret:

The old Man ceased: he saw that I was moved.
From that low bench rising instinctively,
I turned aside in weakness, nor had power
To thank him for the tale which he had told.
I stood, and leaning o’er the garden gate
Reviewed that Woman’s sufferings; and it seemed
To comfort me while with a brother’s love
I blessed her in the impotence of grief.

(493-500)

This symmetry between “Peele Castle” and “The Ruined Cottage” helps to explain the apparent discrepancy between the two poems. The “fond illusion” in the former is called “A steadfast peace,” whereas in the latter, when Wordsworth rejects an “idle dream,” he seems to embrace a position that is antithetical to “Peele Castle”: for it is “ruin and . . . change, and all the grief” which is declared to be an illusion. In fact, however, the “idle dream” and the “fond illusion” are the obverse and reverse of what Wordsworth regards as a single error: the belief that ultimate reality, whether for good or ill, can be found in the social and material world of time, place, and circumstance. Reality is interior, the geography of the meditative mind; and the imagination’s re-creations of the world (i.e., poetical works) are themselves what compensate for the losses we sustain in our every-day lives.

This Romantic displacement, this interiorized standard of reality, is very different from Crabbe’s. The latter defines poetry as a recreation, not a re-creation. Furthermore, poetry and meditation in Crabbe are not acts of spiritual displacement but of materialistic and socialized revision. His religious ideology remains completely and explicitly socialized just as his critical presentation of the world refuses to accept transcendental compensations. The consequence of his procedures, from a twentieth-century vantage, is that his fearful stories escape what must inevitably seem to us the pitfalls and compromises of Romantic resolutions.

In the historical triumph of Romantic ideology, later commen-

tators found it convenient to treat Crabbe as a Neo-Classical anachronism in a Romantic age. Anti-Romantic Modernists, like Pound and Leavis, sought to “save” Crabbe from his age by calling him an Augustan, whereas Neo-Romantic critics merely ignored Crabbe as an insignificant glacial deposit. Both of these views, however, are seriously inadequate, as we may now begin to see. More than that, however, we may also begin to see how later historical imperatives transform our sense of the place of certain writers. A critical view of Romantic ideology in our day inevitably makes Crabbe seem not an Augustan throwback but a writer whose true historical period has yet to arrive.

The Johns Hopkins University

FOOTNOTES

¹ See Hazlitt's *Spirit of the Age* (London, World's Classics, 1960), pp. 270-7; F. R. Leavis, *Revaluation* (London, 1936), p. 128; S. T. Coleridge, *Table-Talk and Omniana*, ed. T. Ashe (London, 1884), p. 276; Wordsworth's letter to Samuel Rogers, 29 Sept. 1808, in *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, 2nd ed., rev. by Mary Moorman (Oxford, 1969), II, i, 268.

² For good summaries of the critical history of Crabbe's work see *Crabbe: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Arthur Pollard (London, 1972), and *Romantic Perspectives*, ed. Patricia Hodgart and Theodore Redpath (New York, 1964), pp. 85-124 *passim*. See also Walter E. Broman, "Factors in Crabbe's Eminence in the Early Nineteenth Century," *MP*, 51 (1953), 42-9.

³ *The Poetical Works of George Crabbe*, ed. A. J. Carlyle and R. M. Carlyle (Oxford, 1908), p. 216. All subsequent quotations from Crabbe's prose and poetry will be taken from this edition, and page number citation will be made in the text. For a good discussion of Crabbe's aesthetic see Peter New, *George Crabbe's Poetry* (New York, 1976), pp. 3-9. The best book on Crabbe's verse in general is probably still Lilian Haddakin's *The Poetry of Crabbe* (London, 1955).

⁴ For a convenient summary of Coleridge's aesthetic views see John Spencer Hill, *Coleridge on Imagination* (Totowa, N. J., 1978); see especially pp. 83, 169.

⁵ *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Lyrical Ballads*, ed. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (New York, 1963), pp. 252-3.

⁶ In the "Intimations Ode," 182-3, and "Tintern Abbey," 123-4. Well-known passages from various Wordsworth poems are quoted throughout the discussion without specific citation.

⁷ "The Ruined Cottage," in *The Ruined Cottage and The Pedlar*, ed. James Butler (Ithaca, N.Y., 1979), pp. 41-76.

⁸ See note 1 above.

⁹ I trust that my use of terms like "fact," "particulars," "empirical details," etc. will not be taken in some crudely positivist sense. "Facts" and "details" and the like may refer to physical objects and conditions, but they may equally refer to social or psychological events (e.g., the *fact* of a person's class). Furthermore, "facts" are by no means static quantities, though humanists often misunderstand the term and its referents in this positivist way. Within their own defining heuristic systems—e.g., chemical facts or social facts postulated and gathered within the respective systems of a chemistry or a sociology—they are conceptually fixed. But such "facts" are systematically fixed for specific investigative purposes; their dynamism in the field

of reality is not altered, and is always recognized. Indeed, the scientific act of defining and fixing “facts” is a research performance which is itself dynamic in character. Crabbe’s “matters-of-fact” are precisely of this sort, for they function in his work as highly critical materials. Crabbe uses them to demystify, to explain, and, finally, to raise up serious human problems which lie hidden in the situations he wishes to investigate.

¹⁰ I take it that science, as a critical method of dynamic research, transcends ideology by definition (just as poetry, in virtue of its transhistorical character, also transcends ideology). Of course, both science and art are, in another sense, always involved with the ideology of their particular milieux, for both science and poetry are historical phenomena. Wordsworth’s poetry is committed to certain ideological positions (which are localized, initially, through Wordsworth himself, and which are later defined and redefined by his various readers and critics); and so is Crabbe’s poetry. But whereas Wordsworth’s poetry seeks to escape its own ideology along paths laid out by the dominant traditions of past poetic practise (Idealistic), Crabbe’s poetry aims to establish its practise upon models developed in the traditions of science, and especially of modern (Baconian) science. Because it does this, Crabbe’s poetry finds itself compelled to struggle with the ideology of traditional poetic practise since, in Crabbe’s day, the principal ideological state apparatuses—i.e., the Church, the schools, and the artistic media—operated in terms of the humanism of non-scientific disciplines.

¹¹ Some excellent work in these fields has already been done; one particularly notes Marilyn Butler, and especially her books *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford, 1975) and *Peacock Displayed* (London, 1979).

¹² See Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company* (New York, 1961), p. 179.