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CRABBE'S *VILLAGE* AND TOPOGRAPHICAL POETRY

"ORIGINAL, vigorous, and elegant,"¹ Dr. Johnson called Crabbe's *Village*. And it is original, to be sure, in the directness and force with which the people and the setting of the village are pictured. But in form *The Village* is not original at all: it is a topographical poem, like hundreds and hundreds of others in the eighteenth century.² And this fact explains the seeming formlessness of the work, its odd combination of discordant elements.

The Village is highly uneven; it is remembered for certain striking sections, vividly and precisely rendered: the portrait of the clergyman, the attack on pastoralism, the descriptions of the poorhouse, of the pauper's burial, of the heath "with withering brake grown o'er."³ But out of keeping with these are the vague moralizing, the dull cumulative similes, the uninteresting address to Crabbe's patron. The reader is startled as the focus of Crabbe's indignation shifts from the landed oppressors and poetical idealizers of the Village to the vicious and shiftless villagers themselves. These, as the standard biographer of Crabbe, René Huchon, maintains, are serious imperfections. "Can anything," he writes, "be more out of place than the conclusion of the poem, than the funeral oration on Lord Robert Manners?"⁴ However, neither he nor other scholars have suggested any explanations for these defects other than Crabbe's personal deficiencies in taste and in architectonic skill, and *The Village* has been valued only as a storehouse of admirable bits.

The conventions of the topographical poem are not to our taste, but the funeral oration and the other discordant elements in *The Village* can be explained—if not justified organically—in terms of these conventions. Even within the genre, Crabbe was undoubtedly injudicious in grouping together such incongruous materials. But this,

¹ *Letters of Samuel Johnson*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill (New York, 1892), II, 287.

² Robert A. Aubin, *Topographical Poetry in XVIII-Century England* (New York, 1936), gives almost a hundred pages of bibliography of topographical poems "of some importance" (p. ix).

³ George Crabbe, *The Village, Poems*, ed. A. W. Ward (Cambridge, England, 1905), I, 119-35. All citations of *The Village* are to this edition.

⁴ René Huchon, *George Crabbe and His Times 1754-1832*, trans. Frederick Clarke (London, 1907), pp. 166, 167. Lord Robert Manners was the brother of the Duke of Rutland, whose chaplain Crabbe was. Crabbe would not have damaged his poem to flatter a patron; as a staunch Whig, he drank salt water when the Duke and his friends offered Tory toasts.

his most famous work, can be better understood if it is seen as belonging to a genre highly popular in his time, one which was practised by even the greatest of eighteenth-century poets. We must understand the attack on the clergy in *Lycidas* in terms of the pastoral, and the invective against luxury in *The Deserted Village* in terms of the topographical poem. So we can understand the anomalies of *The Village* only in terms of the topographical poem.

Huchon describes Crabbe's *Newspaper* and *Library* as georgics, and Aubin, in his study of topographical poetry, points out that "Belvoir Castle" belongs to a subspecies of this genre.⁵ But it has not been noted, by students either of Crabbe or of local poetry, that *The Village* is topographical.⁶ Possibly the connection has been overlooked because Crabbe's realism—explicitly stated in his attack on the pastoralism both of the formal eclogue and of *The Deserted Village*—is strongly at variance with the idealization of country life usually seen in topographical poetry.⁷ And more than this, *The Village* has, to use Crabbe's phrase, an "actuality of relation, . . . nudity of description, and poetry without an atmosphere,"⁸ which make it unique, so that we tend to think of it as separate from tradition.

The topographical poem, by Aubin's definition, is a kind of georgic which aims "chiefly at describing *specifically named actual localities*."⁹ The eighteenth-century georgic gave information on specific subjects—usually rural, as in Grainger's *Sugar Cane* and Smart's *Hop-Garden*, though often enough nonrural, as in Ramsay's *Health* and Elphinston's *Education*. Just as important as the information given in a georgic was its "pleasing dress," to use Addison's phrase; the expository matter had to be "set off with all the Beauties and Embellishments of

⁵ *Crabbe and His Times*, pp. 116–17, 176; Aubin, *Topographical Poetry*, p. 360. Crabbe's son and biographer says that *The Library* and *The Village* "are framed on a regular and classical plan,—perhaps, in that respect, they may be considered more complete and faultless than any of his later pieces"; he does not specify what the "regular and classical plan" is (George Crabbe [son], *Life of the Rev. George Crabbe, LL.B.*, I, *Life and Poems of the Rev. George Crabbe* [London, 1834], p. 121).

⁶ Dwight L. Durling, *Georgic Tradition in English Poetry* (New York, 1935), in a number of places associates Crabbe's work with local poetry, but he does not make the connection explicit or clearly classify it as local poetry.

⁷ The pastoral form and the pastoral attitude were gradually giving way in the eighteenth century to greater realism and freedom in dealing with the country. For a study of the place of *The Village* in this shift see Varley Lang, "Crabbe and the Eighteenth Century," *ELH*, v (1938), 305–13.

⁸ George Crabbe, "Preface" to *Tales, Poems*, ed. A. W. Ward (Cambridge, England, 1905), III, 10.

⁹ *Topographical Poetry*, p. vii.

poetry."¹⁰ So, when the poet described his place or his process, he naturally enough stopped to describe the surrounding scenery, to give genre sketches and brief histories of the people concerned. And he did not hesitate to take the next step and draw a moral from his subject, to preach at his readers, to talk about politics, to eulogize the owner of the castle he was describing or the patron who was enabling him to write the description. Pope in *Windsor Forest* praised Lord Lansdowne and celebrated the Peace of Utrecht; Thomson in *The Seasons* discussed prison reform and England's commercial glory. And other poets generally did the same kind of thing, strayed as gracefully as possible from the main topic. The poem was held together by a formal statement of the theme and occasional recapitulations, but no particular verse form was necessary, nor any particular ordering of the parts. All that was needed to make a poem a georgic was the accumulation of a good many of the usual georgic elements; all that was needed to make a georgic topographical was its description of a place.

Like the picaresque novelist, the topographical poet could wander where he would. He could describe places and things that poets had not talked about before: thus Crabbe went to the Village. He could deal with diverse topics, so long as the associations of his mind provided a link between them; Pope did this in *Windsor Forest* and the effect was harmonious. Crabbe tried the same thing in *The Village*; the result seems disorganized—partly because he misread his map. But it is worth knowing that he did have a map, the patternless pattern of the topographical poem.

Unlike most topographical poets, Crabbe does not name his Village.¹¹ But the fullness and particularity of the detail and the unusual characteristics of the place point to its individuality and actuality rather than to typicality. The "famish'd land" of the Village was beside the ocean "whose greedy waves devour the lessening shore" (I, 132, 126). That the Village is in fact Aldborough, Suffolk, we know from Crabbe's son and biographer, who used sections from the poem

¹⁰ *The Miscellaneous Works of Joseph Addison*, ed. A. C. Guthkelch (London, 1914), II, 4. This section is generally indebted to Aubin, *Topographical Poetry*, and Durling, *Georgic Tradition*.

¹¹ Aubin admits the fictitiously named *Deserted Village* to the genre. "Assuming that 'sweet Auburn' stands for Lissoy, county Westmeath (or some other actual locality), we may consider it topographical" (*Topographical Poetry*, p. 178). Throughout the century poems describing villages were being published; they range in interest from *The Deserted Village* and John Scott's *Amwell* to James Henderson's "Description of the Town and Improvements of Hillsborough." See the bibliography of Town-Poems in *Topographical Poetry*, pp. 333-50.

to describe his father's birthplace.¹² The identification of the Village with Aldborough has always been accepted and often substantiated.¹³ The poem, then, is certainly about an "actual locality."

And it describes that locality in the manner of the topographical poem, that is, through a series of passages, each a unit in itself, dealing with the appearance of the place or with its people in action. Approximately sixty per cent of the poem is taken up with these descriptive units. There are passages dealing with the unproductive fields and with the ocean. Genre sketches, each serving a descriptive function, show the villagers engaged in smuggling; overworked, hungry, and unhealthy laborers; the people after church on Sunday; peasants who exemplify the "village vices"—drunkenness, slander, lust, poaching; the inn; the local magistrate on the bench. There is a somewhat longer history of an old roundsman, and another of a man who dies in the poorhouse; the story of the latter involves description of the doctor and the clergyman¹⁴ and the famous passage about the poorhouse. All of these add up to give us a good idea of the Village, and of the Village in action, with its people seen very concretely if not individually. And this method of presenting the place by a series of scenes and stories is typical of the topographical poem.

All of this is held together in the loose, and often associative, fashion of the topographical poem.¹⁵ Crabbe uses the topographical

¹² George Crabbe (son), *Life of the Rev. George Crabbe*, pp. 10, 12, 46-47.

¹³ See, for example, E. M. Forster, "George Crabbe and Peter Grimes," *Two Cheers for Democracy* (New York, 1951), pp. 171-78, and Thomas Wright, *The Life of Edward FitzGerald* (New York, 1904), I, 52-55.

¹⁴ Crabbe's clergyman is directly contrasted to the clergyman in *The Deserted Village*.

And doth not he, the pious man, appear,
He, "passing rich with forty pounds a year"?
Ah! no; a shepherd of a different stock,
And far unlike him, feeds this little flock. (I, 302-305).

There are many illuminating points of comparison between *The Village* and *The Deserted Village*; but Crabbe's poem should not be construed merely as an answer to Goldsmith's but as an attack on the "pastoral" spirit—the habit of simplifying and idealizing humble people. In addition to Goldsmith, Crabbe singles out the writers of formal eclogues (I, 7-62); the account of the pauper's funeral (I, 318-46) certainly suggests Gray's "Elegy." But his chief concern is with an attitude, not individual poets or poems.

¹⁵ The miscellaneous contents of *The Village* are evident in its Argument:

Book I. The Subject proposed—Remarks upon Pastoral Poetry—A Tract of Country near the Coast described—An impoverished Borough—Smugglers and their Assistants—Rude Manners of the Inhabitants—Ruinous Effects of a high Tide—The Village Life more generally considered: Evils of it—The youthful Labourer—The old Man: his Soliloquy—The Parish Workhouse: its Inhabitants—The sick Poor: their Apothecary—The dying Pauper—The Village Priest. [p. 110]
Book II. There are found, amid the Evils of a laborious Life, some Views of Tran-

device of theme restatement to unify *The Village*; he gives his theme at the beginning—"the real picture of the poor" (I, 5)—and he repeats it in I, 53-54 and II, 1-2. The corollary of the theme, that rural life is falsified in poetry, is the strongest organizing device (it takes up almost half of the two hundred nondescriptive lines). It is fully discussed at the opening of the poem (I, 7-62), and it reappears to introduce genre sketches. For instance, Crabbe asks,

Where are the swains, who, daily labour done,
With rural games play'd down the setting sun? (I, 93-94)

And then he shows his Villagers smuggling instead of playing rural games.¹⁶

Except for links between parts of the poem made by theme restatement, the only connections are those mildly plausible ones which can be devised by the didactic mind. The moralizing, a notable topographical characteristic, is at once a digression and a link. Crabbe interposes an abstract paragraph about the frailty of joy between his very concrete description of Sunday recreations and his exemplifications of the village vices. And, as in a bad sermon that could logically end long before it does, the moralizing leads to the irrelevant last 120 lines of the poem. After discussing the village vices, Crabbe stops short to say,

Yet, why, you ask, these humble crimes relate,
Why make the poor as guilty as the great?
To show the great, those mightier sons of pride,
How near in vice the lowest are allied. (II, 87-90)

He urges the rich to reflect on this: then he goes on to exhort the poor to "forbear to envy those you call the great. . . . They are, like you, the victims of distress." And to exemplify the distresses of the rich, he tells about the death of Lord Robert Manners; then he eulogizes him and addresses the Duke of Rutland, praising him and offering him the comfort of further moralizing.

Not only are there separate paragraphs of moralizing in *The*

quillity and Happiness—The Repose and Pleasure of a Summer Sabbath: interrupted by Intoxication and Dispute—Village Detraction—Complaints of the 'Squire—The Evening Riots—Justice—Reasons for this unpleasant View of Rustic Life: the Effect it should have upon the Lower Classes; and the Higher—These last have their peculiar Distresses: Exemplified in the Life and heroic Death of Lord Robert Manners—Concluding Address to His Grace the Duke of Rutland. [p. 129]

¹⁶ Genre sketches are introduced by references to literary misrepresentation of rural life in I, 94-101, 140-41, 172-74, 250-61; II, 1-2, 49-50.

Village, but its manner is magisterial, didactic throughout, and this again is typical of the topographical genre. Crabbe does not suggest; he tells people what to think, what to feel. He makes statements positively, dogmatically; his evidence is presented as illustration rather than proof. And Crabbe talks at people, as a preacher does; he has lines of direct address to the villagers, to rich readers who think rural life is pleasant, to a hypochondriac, to Death, to readers in general, to peasants, to the rich, to the Duke of Rutland.

And finally, *The Village* contains stylistic adornments common to topographical poems, such as references to the Muse (I, 6, 21, 22, 51) and lengthy cumulative similes (I, 79-84, 119-21, 208-15; II, 119-26, 199-207).

Such a strange aggregation of material is here, and such a flat conclusion! The description of the Village is conveyed well enough, as are the sketches and narratives and the literary discussion that come from it. The preaching in every direction is tolerable when it is worked into other sections. But the last part of the poem has no real relevance to the earlier material. However, all these things happened in the topographical poem. That they happen in *The Village* indicates that Crabbe was working within the familiar topographical pattern.

If to some extent the topographical form can be blamed for the defects of *The Village*, yet the popularity of the genre must have suggested to Crabbe the subject which he knew best and felt most deeply about, and its freedom enabled him to treat the subject in his strongly individual manner. In his handling of some of the material Crabbe may have been like the "sleepy bards" he attacks in the poem, but certainly he did describe Aldborough "As Truth will paint it, and as Bards will not" (I, 54). Other local poems are greater than *The Village*, but not as poems-about-places. Pope and Gray leave Windsor Forest and Eton College to talk magnificently about other things, and even sweet Auburn is seen not immediately but through transforming memory. But Crabbe calls into existence a village that is probably the most individual and concrete spot in all of eighteenth-century poetry.

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