GEORGE CRABBE: POET AND SOCIAL CRITIC

by

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Vol. I

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CONTENTS

Vol. I

Acknowledgements
Summary
Introduction
1. "In Hard Affliction's School"
   (Juvenilia) 1
2. "Our British Juvenal"
   (The Village) 66
3. "By Want On Error Forced"
   ("The Hall of Justice") 146
4. "Their Tempers, Manners, Morals, Customs, Arts"
   ("The Parish Register") 181
5. "This Is The Life Itself"
   (The Borough) 251

Vol. II

6. "Upon Yourselves Depend"
   ("The Patron," "The Insanity of Ambitious Love," "David Morris") 373
7. "Enough, My Lord, Do Hares And Pheasants Cost"
   ("Smugglers and Poachers") 453
8. "And Gangs Came Pressing"
   ("Ruth") 526
9. "We Cannot All The Lovely Vase Restore"
   (Tales of the Hall) 546

Conclusion 624

Appendix 1 George Crabbe, The Duke Of Rutland And The Tories 633
Appendix 2 An Unpublished MS Poem: "The Squire" 674
Bibliography 677
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SUMMARY

My aim in this study has been to offer a detailed examination of Crabbe's poems in order to reveal Crabbe's complex treatment of social subjects. In each of the poems discussed, I have first investigated the background to Crabbe's delineation of particular social problems to show the contemporary social and literary influences. Some attempt has then been made to assess Crabbe's relationship to his contemporaries and the extent to which his portrayals of social problems are historically accurate. In many cases it was found that Crabbe managed to achieve remarkable accuracy. However, with some exceptions, the later poems tend to be descriptions of the England Crabbe knew in his youth. My second principal task has been to show how Crabbe used his social material for artistic purposes. Since Crabbe seldom wrote solely to comment on social problems, one cannot divorce his social criticism from his poetic achievement. One of the most characteristic features of Crabbe's poetry is his technique of including within a single poem a number of different and often contradictory attitudes to a social problem, without committing himself to one point of view. In many of the poems Crabbe employs a number of "voices" to represent different opinions. To some extent this technique may have been a subterfuge to allow Crabbe to gain a hearing for new ideas amongst his conservative readers. However since Crabbe's "intentional ambivalence" often radically affects the meaning of the poem, and is to be found
amongst both early and late poetry, it must be regarded as a central feature of his poetry. Unlike many poets who wrote about social problems, Crabbe was uncommitted to any one theory or solution. As a result his representations of social problems have a depth and richness of social and personal detail that is most uncommon. The processes by which Crabbe managed to forge into a poetic unity his own undetermined attitudes to social problems are particularly apparent in some of the poems which he withheld from publication. Certainly Crabbe's use of ambivalence results in some very fine and complex poetry.
INTRODUCTION

In 1834, two years after Crabbe's death, the reviewer for The Monthly Review summarized Crabbe's achievements by saying: "Mr. Crabbe is certainly entitled to the praise of a reformer."¹ By "reformer" the reviewer meant that Crabbe had brought about a reformation in English poetry by introducing "humble life" as a theme for serious poetry; he did not mean that Crabbe had attempted to reform social abuses. Indeed, most of Crabbe's contemporaries would have been greatly surprised by the suggestion that Crabbe was a social reformer, for his poetry dealing with social abuses was largely ignored. Even today, while it is generally accepted that Crabbe's early life — his poverty, and his struggle to succeed as an apothecary — gave him a lasting interest in the problems of the poor and underprivileged his social commentary is a subject more talked about than studied. I hope in this thesis to study in detail Crabbe's social commentary and criticism, and thus remove some of the vagueness surrounding the subject.

Modern critics, in so far as they have studied Crabbe at all,

and there still remain relatively few good critiques of Crabbe's achievement, have been interested in his psychological developments of character and his narrative techniques, rather than in the sociological aspects of his poetry. Like many other writers at the present time Crabbe is being sifted for his probes into the realm of the unconscious. While my own studies of Crabbe's social ideas owe little to this current trend of criticism, this study should reveal that Crabbe's social ideas contain a complexity and intricacy in keeping with his subtle portrayals of character.

Unlike many humanitarians, Crabbe did not play a major public role or express his social ideas through pamphlets or journalism, and therefore this thesis will necessarily deal primarily with Crabbe's ideas as they are expressed in his poetry. Yet wherever Crabbe's letters and journals have proved helpful in casting additional light on the development of his ideas, they have been consulted.

My aim then is to discuss Crabbe's social criticism in the context of the events, ideas and literary conventions of the day to determine what Crabbe wished to say and how he said it. No attempt has been made to explore exhaustively all of Crabbe's statements on social problems, but it is hoped that most of his major commentaries have been discussed. This method should give a clear idea of the development of Crabbe's ideas without tediously cataloguing every social issue mentioned.

In order to present Crabbe's social ideas, however, I have often found it necessary to determine obscure frames of reference
without which Crabbe's meaning can be understood only imperfectly, if at all. The interpretation of this background material is extremely complex, since it has been necessary to establish not only the social and economic conditions of late eighteenth century England, but also the type of literary presentation given to these social facts by Crabbe's predecessors and contemporaries. Moreover, ever since the time of Jeffrey, critics have remarked that "the pattern of [Crabbe's] Arabesque is so large, that there is no getting a fair specimen of it without taking in a good space." I have certainly found this to be true; a good deal of space must be devoted to explaining the context before Crabbe's views become clear. Crabbe's character portraits often contain considerable subtlety, and before one can determine the meaning of a particular section of social commentary, it is necessary to be clear where Crabbe himself stands and whether he agrees with the views his characters state. Although I have spent considerable time in explaining Crabbe's ideas in their context, my intention has been exegesis and not summary.

At the beginning I should perhaps emphasize that I do not regard Crabbe as a "social critic" in the conventional meaning of the term. Crabbe does not have a pet system of theories and values from which he sets out to attack social institutions. Only rarely can one find that he has attempted to utilize his poetry as a platform for ideas on social reform. Usually his discussions of

social problems are placed in the form of documentary rather than a call to change. Yet in spite of the differences between Crabbe's approach to social situations and that of the normal social critic, one can see that Crabbe was describing situations with the desire to make his contemporaries aware of the exigencies of social problems.

Several critics -- most recently Howard Mills in his Preface to a selection of Crabbe's poems\(^3\) -- have commented how Crabbe's poetry, especially his later poetry, does not resound to the great issues of the times. While this observation proves true in general, one should recall that Crabbe, unlike many socially conscious artists -- Fielding and Dickens, for instance -- did not live and work in London. Crabbe's poetry contains a great deal of observation and knowledge of the events of the country outside London, and especially the area of East Anglia in which he lived so much of his life. I would suggest that while Crabbe's poetry rarely deals with problems of industrialization or the factory system, it does resound to the tenor of life in the country. In comparison to London and the great industrial centres of the midlands, the country with its agrarian life changed relatively little. Some fifty years after Crabbe's death, Anthony Trollope in the Barchester novels was still able to describe country life in terms not so different from those of Crabbe's narrative.

That Crabbe's account of the East Anglian countryside was accurate can be seen from the way historians have used his verse as

\(^3\)George Crabbe: Tales, 1812 and Other Selected Poems (Cambridge University Press, 1967), pp. xvi-xvii.
evidence. Many illustrious historians of the past have cited Crabbe's account of East Anglian conditions as important supporting evidence. With today's insistence upon statistical rather than literary evidence few economic and social historians would now accept Crabbe's "literary" descriptions of social conditions as serious factual evidence. However even modern historians have found Crabbe's comments helpful. A.J. Peacock, in his account of the East Anglia bread riots, has recently used Crabbe's account of conditions amongst the poor; he commented that Crabbe "was a native of Aldeburgh, Suffolk, and so is particularly reliable as a commentator on conditions in East Anglia." Professor M.D. George has also accepted several of Crabbe's descriptions of country life as valid representations of customs and manners of the time. Crabbe's descriptions of country life are amongst the best "literary" evidence we possess.

Yet Crabbe's opinions must be scrutinized carefully; it is all too easy to fall into the common error of literary critics of assuming that because a writer interested himself in social conditions, he must always have been on the side of the angels, amongst the progressives. While Crabbe was interested in bettering conditions, labels such as "Tory" or "Whig," "liberal" or

"conservative" are generally inapplicable. He did not believe that any one political party or any one social theory held a monopoly on the means to effect change. He was known to have voted for both Whig and Tory candidates. As shall be seen in the following chapters, on some issues Crabbe was profoundly radical, while on others his ideas were clearly behind the times. And of course such variation is only to be expected. What is surprising, however, is the way in which, within a single poem, he can offer contradictory opinions about a particular social problem. For instance in Letter XVIII of The Borough he first claims that the poor are well taken care of and then proceeds to describe their terrible living conditions. This is only one example of many. No easy solution to these paradoxes is apparent, and at times I think we must accept that perhaps Crabbe was unsure of his own mind. But even if this is the case, I hope to point out that Crabbe is far more complex and ambiguous a poet than most people have realized. Furthermore these ambivalent attitudes are characteristic not only of one or two poems, but represent a consistent trait throughout all of Crabbe's poetry. One of the tasks of this thesis will be to explain the use Crabbe made of these ambivalent assertions. But at this stage clearly the emphasis must be placed on a description of the ambiguities, rather

7Life of the Rev. George Crabbe, LL.B. by His Son, Ch. vii, p. 177. This Life was published as volume I of The Poetical Works of the Rev. George Crabbe (London, 1834).

8D.N. Gallon has taken up this topic of "intentional ambiguity" in Crabbe's tale "Silford Hall or the Happy Day," but Gallon sees this tale's ambivalence as being uncharacteristic of Crabbe's poetry. MLR, LXI (1966), 384-394.
than on their explanation.

Although this thesis is concerned with Crabbe's social ideas, I would not have it thought that I believe Crabbe was principally a writer of social criticism. Some of his best work, notably Tales (1812), contains little if any social criticism, and consequently receives short shrift in this study. But since Crabbe's poetry is in the strange position of being generally admired but little studied, I have felt it worthwhile to examine in some detail one aspect of Crabbe's poetry, his social ideas, even at the risk of over-emphasizing the importance for his poetry of this social concern. Similarly in my various explanations of Crabbe's use of ambiguity, at times I may have been guilty of attributing to Crabbe too great a degree of conscious artistry. Yet I doubt whether this approach can be harmful at the present time when, with the exception of Lilian Haddakin's The Poetry of Crabbe, relatively little detailed analysis of his poetry has been offered.
CHAPTER 1

"IN HARD AFFLICTION'S SCHOOL"

I

To understand Crabbe's somewhat paradoxical, and certainly unusual treatment of social problems, it is helpful to know something of his early life and the experiences which moulded his characteristic approach to injustice. As is well known, Crabbe's early years in Aldborough were ones of poverty and disillusion, and these years left as deep an impression on the sensitive young poet as ever the experience of the "blacking factory" left upon Charles Dickens. As was the case with Dickens, Crabbe continually returned to these early days for the subject matter of his later poetry. When he needed a setting for his characters, his first impulse was to describe the flat salt marshes and stormy ocean of his native East Anglia. In The Village the description of the countryside: "Lo! where the heath, with withering brake grown o'er, / Lends the light turf that
warms the neighbouring poor,"¹ is clearly a portrait of the sandy coastal strip of Suffolk. A plan of "The Farewell and Return" (written in the last years of Crabbe's life), published recently from the John Murray archives, shows that even for his last poems Crabbe chose his material and characters from the days of his youth in the seaport of Aldborough:

Hampstead July 24th 1822
Characters known in youth, at the Entrance of Life
20-25. Take ALDBOROUGH, WOODBRIDGE, and other
Places, & Characters from any other.²

When in so many cases Crabbe's later tales are variations on his early themes, there is good reason for noting with particular care the early poems. Moreover this procedure offers a bonus, for several of Crabbe's early poems are of high quality, and one in particular is brilliant.

Not only did Crabbe's early experiences offer material for his poems, they were also instrumental in forming his attitudes to social problems. Shelley's belief, that men "are cradled into Poetry by wrong / They learn in suffering what they teach in song," holds especially true for Crabbe. The memorial plaque in the church at Trowbridge shows that even his friends and parishioners realized the importance of his early struggle with poverty in forming the man and the poet:

¹The Village I. 63-64, in Poems by George Crabbe, ed. Adolphus W. Ward (Cambridge University Press, 1905-1907), I, 121. Unless otherwise stated, all further quotations from Crabbe's poems are from this edition.

SAACRED TO THE MEMORY OF THE REV. D. G. CRABBE,
L.L.B. WHO DIED ON THE 3RD OF FEBRUARY 1832,
IN THE 78TH YEAR OF HIS AGE, AND THE 18TH OF
HIS SERVICES AS RECTOR OF THIS PARISH. BORN
IN HUMBLE LIFE, HE MADE HIMSELF WHAT HE WAS;
BREAKING THROUGH THE OBSCURITY OF HIS BIRTH
BY THE FORCE OF HIS GENIUS; YET HE NEVER CEASED
TO FEEL FOR THE LESS FORTUNATE: ENTERING,
AS HIS WORKS CAN TESTIFY, INTO THE SORROWS
AND WANTS OF THE POOREST OF HIS PARISHIONERS,
AND SO DISCHARGING THE DUTIES OF A PASTOR AND
A MAGISTRATE AS TO ENDEAR HIMSELF TO ALL AROUND
HIM. -- AS A WRITER HE CANNOT BE BETTER
DESCRIBED THAN IN THE WORDS OF A GREAT POET -- HIS CON-
TEMPORARY, "THO' NATURE'S STERNEST PAINTER,
YET HER BEST." 3

Many of the difficulties and ambiguities in Crabbe's later poetry
will seem less surprising if some attention is paid at the
beginning to the circumstances of his youth and the ideals he
formulated at that time.

That Crabbe rose from humble circumstances to become one
of the most important poets of his time has not escaped notice,
and indeed a parallel has been suggested between the lives of Crabbe
and Robert Burns. 4 While this comparison contains some truth, the
picture it conveys of Crabbe can be most misleading, for Crabbe was
certainly not a humble wage earner or a ploughman poet. He may
have been born of a humble family, but he was no proletarian.
Belonging to the poorest section of the lower-middle class, Crabbe's
family held all the assumptions of the middle class, while living in
conditions as bad as those of the day-labourer. However one might

3 Byron's comment should of course read: "Nature's sternest painter, yet the best."

wish to deprecate the importance of class in evaluating a man, there is no doubt that class background does play an important part in forming a person's ideas, especially his social ideas. Crabbe always aspired to the position of a "gentleman." Unlike William Cobbett or Francis Place he never identified his own interests with those of the labourer.

The Crabbe family appears to have been highly respected in Aldborough. Crabbe's grandfather had been a Collector of Customs with a salary of £60 per year, and for the last year of his life held the position of Mayor of Aldborough. 5 A man of substance, he had originally destined his son for a career in trade, but this plan had to be abandoned at his sudden death. Instead Crabbe's father became a schoolmaster in Orford, taking lessons in the porch of the church. 6 Later he took up the post of warehousekeeper and finally

5 Huchon, p. 6. To give some idea of where this salary placed the Crabbes in the social scale it may be of interest to compare it with some figures given by Gregory King in Natural and Political Observations and Conclusions upon the State and Condition of England (London, 1696). At the top of King's table is the family of a temporal lord with an average yearly income of £3200, but the table indicates that by far the greater number of families had a yearly income below £100. Eminent clergymen received £72; lesser clergymen £50; freeholders of the better sort £91; freeholders of the lesser sort £55; farmers £12. 10s.; artisans £38; labouring people £15; and the cottager and pauper £6. 10s. Naturally these figures must be used with the greatest caution. King's work was published by George Chalmers, An Estimate of the Comparative Strength of Britain during the Present and Four Preceding Reigns (London, 1804).

6 Most of the information about Crabbe's life derives from the biography written by his eldest son George. In many ways this biography is admirable; both E.M. Forster and Edmund Blunden in their introductions to the Life have praised it highly. But as the biography was written by a dutiful son at a time when biographies tended to be hagiographic, and as John Gibson Lockhart collaborated, the biography at times turns the very down-to-earth Crabbe into a

[Contd.]
rose to be collector of salt duties at a salary of £10 per year. This salary cannot be taken as his total earnings since he also owned an interest in a fishing boat and shares in local industry. Yet even with this additional income, his yearly earnings could never have been much, and certainly nothing like the £350 per year Jane Austen felt was the minimum for a respectable middle class family.\footnote{\textsuperscript{7}}

Bernard Barton reproduced a sketch by Stanfield of the house which he believed to be Crabbe's in Aldborough, and sent Crabbe a copy. This reproduction can be seen in the frontispiece to the first volume of the 1834 edition of Crabbe's works. Concerning this print, Crabbe wrote: "Bernard Barton's print is of my father's house many years after he left it; never very respectable, it was then a miserable building divided into three poor dwellings. I lived in it, as near as I recollect, on my return from school once or twice, when my father moved into that more southward, where we dwelled some years."\footnote{\textsuperscript{8}} Huchon has exaggerated its decay, by calling

\footnote{\textsuperscript{7}}Jane Austen comments that neither Edward nor Elinor was "quite enough in love to think that three hundred and fifty pounds a year would supply them with the comforts of life." See \textit{Sense and Sensibility} (III, xiii).

\footnote{\textsuperscript{8}}Unpublished letter to John Crabbe (no date). Quoted from Huchon, p. 15. Huchon has remarked that this letter indicates that Crabbe's real dwelling was "even far more humble." Could not this letter indicate the opposite?
it a "hovel," but undoubtedly it is a poor man's "cot." As an exciseman, an official of the government, Crabbe's father had considerable standing in the community, but his salary was incommensurate with his position.

As will be seen, this middle class poverty acted as an important influence in Crabbe's life. His early years were ones of continuous effort to establish himself in a respectable profession where he would be free from the stigma of poverty. As the following excerpt from his "London Journal" indicates, as late as 1817, he was still visited with nightmares of poverty:

Awake, I had been with the high, the apparently happy; we were very pleasantly engaged, and my last thoughts were cheerful. Asleep, all was misery and degradation, not my own only, but of those who had been. -- That horrible image of servility and baseness -- that mercenary and commercial manner! It is the work of imagination, I suppose; but it is very strange.

His later tales show Crabbe sympathetic towards attempts to rise above "class," but pessimistic about their success; his own experiences had showed him how rarely the success stories of "rags to riches" ended happily in England.

Although poor, Crabbe's father was by no means uneducated. In the evenings he read Milton and Young to his family. Moreover he appears to have been an enthusiastic mathematician, corresponding about mathematical puzzles in Benjamin Martin's Miscellaneous

9 Huchon, p. 15.
10 Entry for July 21, 1817. Quoted from Life, Ch. ix, p. 253.
Correspondence. Realizing that his son had inherited his own interest in books, Crabbe's father decided to give him the opportunity of what little education he could afford. Crabbe first attended a "dame school" in Aldborough, and then -- most unusual for a family of their means -- he was sent to a school in Bungay on the border of Norfolk. From Bungay at the age of eleven he went to yet another school in Stowmarket. As Burke was later to comment, this education, meagre though it was, proved a good investment, for it meant that Crabbe had learned enough Latin to allow him to take religious orders.

Like many other parents at this period, Crabbe's father attempted to improve his son's expectations by setting him out as an apprentice. After attending school at Stowmarket, Crabbe was apprenticed to a surgeon, a Mr. Smith, at Wickham Brook. But it seems that Mr. Smith, somewhat in the manner of Peter Grimes, took apprentices solely for their fees and labour. When not mixing medicines, Crabbe found that he was expected in the fields to help with the farm work. Worst of all, his master expected him to sleep with the ploughboy. Crabbe refused, and after two quarrels with his father, he was sent as an apprentice to another surgeon at Woodbridge. This little incident, trivial in itself, shows how firmly rooted was Crabbe's desire to succeed in a "profession" and his early awareness that he was designed for better things than farm labour.

In the famous first letter to Burke, he explained his condition and education in lucid terms: "I had a partial father who
gave me a better Education than his broken fortune wou'd have allow'd & a better than was necessary as he could give me that only." In comparison to the Slaughden quay-workers Crabbe was an educated man, and as a result he felt himself something of an anomaly. Intellectually he deserved the education he had received, but socially he did not; without the necessary money to gain a place, his education was a detriment.

Yet his years at Woodbridge as an apprentice were happy ones for Crabbe; he felt that at last he had found his proper place among people of education and substance. In this pleasant country town he met a group of young people interested in literary subjects, and under this stimulus began seriously to write poetry. As a result of his education, his surgical training and his developing interest in literary subjects, Crabbe felt himself quite at home in his new surroundings. If it had not been for his lack of financial support, he would have believed his future in such company to be assured for ever. Even Crabbe's friends took his status for granted; for soon after his arrival at Woodbridge a friend introduced him as a possible suitor to Miss Sarah Elmy, the lady destined to be his wife. Huchon's description of Miss Elmy is interesting: "Sarah Elmy belonged, through her father, to the manufacturing bourgeoisie of the place, and through her mother, Sarah Tovell, sister of John Tovell, of Parham, to the land-owning middle class." As Miss Elmy's father had died shortly after being declared bankrupt, 

11 First letter to Edmund Burke. Quoted from a facsimile inserted in Huchon after p. 112. This letter is undated, but Huchon suggests the end of February or beginning of March 1781.

12 Huchon, p. 46.
the family was forced to live in reduced, yet comfortable circumstances with the help of the wealthy John Tovell. Crabbe's education and friends had helped him to come a long way from the "miserable building divided into three poor dwellings" to claim his place among the middle class by seeking and winning the hand of Miss Elmy. Not long after their first meeting, Miss Elmy accepted Crabbe's proposal but the engagement was to be a long one since Crabbe was unable to support himself, far less "the niece of a Suffolk gentleman of large fortune."\textsuperscript{13} Thus from the time of this "serious connexion" Crabbe had yet another pressing reason for raising his position in the world.

Crabbe's first introduction to poetry had come through his father's family readings of the classics. Apparently he also took an early interest in the "Poets' Corner" of Benjamin Martin's magazine. It is highly unlikely that Crabbe would have found any wonderful models in this magazine, but it did enable him to see the type of poem appreciated by the fashionable world. His son notes that as a young boy Crabbe wrote much ephemeral trivia not now extant, but if the tidbits which have been preserved in the Life are any measure of the whole, this loss is hardly serious. Some confusion remains about Crabbe's earliest published poems,\textsuperscript{14} but of

\textsuperscript{13}The so called "Bunbury Letter," June 26, 1781. Quoted from Huchon, p. 497. This letter, Crabbe's fourth letter to Burke, gives a great deal of information about Crabbe's early life. Crabbe's son did not know of the existence of this document. It was first published in Correspondence of Sir Thomas Hanmer . . . and other Relicks of a Gentleman's Family (London, 1838), pp. 384-395.

\textsuperscript{14}See A. Ward's prefatory Note to Poems by George Crabbe, I, v-xi.
those from The Lady's Magazine which can be definitely assigned to Crabbe, "Solitude" is the earliest. As one might expect, Crabbe's earliest poetry is written in an imitative style, and professedly so. Since at this period Crabbe was well cared for by his master Mr. Page, and reasonably hopeful about his future, his poetry contains little of his own personal experience. Rather the poems show the young poet attempting to master the techniques and style of the Augustan masters. Naturally enough, since Crabbe was a young man in love, one also finds an assortment of love poems, many addressed to his beloved Mira, Crabbe's pet name for Miss Sarah Elmy.

"Solitude" (1772) is an example of eighteenth century "poetry of reflection"\textsuperscript{15} one of the most popular of all the eighteenth century genres. The opening stanzas:

\begin{quote}
Free from envy, strife and sorrow,
    Jealous doubts, and heart-felt fears;
Free from thoughts of what to-morrow
    May o'er-charge the soul with cares --

Live I in a peaceful valley,
    By a neighbouring lonely wood;
Giving way to melancholy,
    (Joy, when better understood)\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

describe the popular idea of a rural retreat, and firmly place the poem in the same tradition as Pomfret's The Choice and Pope's early

\textsuperscript{15}I mean by this phrase "poetry of reflection," discursive poems such as Charles Cotton's The Retirement, Denham's Cooper's Hill, Thomson's Hymn on Solitude and Shenstone's Rural Elegance. This type of poem, filled with the poet's reflections on the nature of man and the universe, was in vogue at the beginning of the century, and was widely imitated by poetasters throughout the century. See Norman Callan, "Augustan Reflective Poetry," in The Pelican Guide to English Literature, IV, 346-371.

\textsuperscript{16}Poems by George Crabbe, I, 1, lines 1-8.
poem, "Ode on Solitude." Pope composed his version of "Solitude" at the age of twelve, Crabbe when he was eighteen; fortunately, both men were soon to leave such bland "occasional verse" behind them. Although the emphases vary slightly, the last stanzas of Pope:

> Sound sleep by night; study and ease Together mix'd; sweet recreation, And innocence, which most does please, With meditation.

> Thus let me live, unseen, unknown; Thus un lamented let me die, Steal from the world, and not a stone Tell where I lie

differ little from those of Crabbe:

> Chuse some humble cot as this is, In sweet philosophic ease; With dame Nature's frugal blisses Live in joy, and die in peace (lines 49-52).

It is nowhere mentioned, but since Crabbe read Pope's poetry avidly during these years, Crabbe may well have received his inspiration from Pope's poem. This hypothesis is hardly necessary, however; the reflective poem, with its aim of a quiet life in a country manor, is ubiquitous in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Furthermore Crabbe's poem has absorbed some of the gloom and melancholy of the graveyard poetry, deriving its tone partly from poems such as Young's The Complaint or Blair's


18 In 1779, nine years after Crabbe's poem was written, a poet such as Ann Murry could publish "Ode to Contentment," which differs hardly at all from Crabbe's poem. See Ann Murry, Poems on Various Subjects (London, 1779), pp. 4-6.
The Grave. Crabbe's sentiment:

Here in midnight's gloomy terror
I enjoy the silent night;
Darkness shews the soul her error,
Darkness leads to inward light
(lines 13-16)

is obviously an echo from a poem such as Parnell's *A Night-Piece on Death* or may even have been suggested by his father's reading of Young to the family.

What is interesting in this early poem is the intellectual ease with which the struggling young medical apprentice took up the conventions of a poetic form which ultimately sprang from a bored leisure class. It is difficult to believe that Crabbe wanted to retire to some wretched cot to contemplate the enigma of life. Unlike Burns, Crabbe was never one to idealize the life of the poor who lived in "cots" -- even life on a Saturday night. Crabbe's "Solitude," although certainly not very wonderful poetically, is typical of much eighteenth century reflective poetry which, in its casualness of tone, implied an acceptance of the contemporary norms.

In the comparative security of his life at Woodbridge, Crabbe has convinced himself that he does not need success and wealth:

What, says truth, are pomp and riches?
Guilded baits to folly lent;
Honour, which the soul bewitches,
When obtain'd, we may repent
(lines 21-24).

Evidently Crabbe was attempting to make a virtue of necessity, for he had never enjoyed money enough to say with such certainty that riches were only "guilded baits to folly."

In addition to showing Crabbe's wide reading amongst eight-
eighth century poets, the poem also indicates how Crabbe, at an early stage in his career, found himself sympathizing with the poor who lived their days in obscurity. This sympathy for the poor is evident in the reason Crabbe gives for renouncing what he feels to be the values of the great and famous. Looking at a mansion of a famous man, he remarks:

This was once the seat of plunder,
Blood of heroes stain'd the floor;
Heroes, nature's pride and wonder,
Heroes heard of now no more
(lines 33-36).

And he concludes that he would rather live humbly than build monuments on the blood of others. I am not suggesting that Crabbe was here advancing a startlingly new idea. Quite obviously these lines owe much to Gray's *Elegy*, the thought that many villages possibly contain "some Cromwell, guiltless of his country's blood."

"Solitude" is interesting, not because of its innovative ideas, but because it shows how Crabbe's sympathies, even in his first imitative poetry, lay with the common man. No doubt the poet's search for a rural retreat amongst the simple verities of nature is, in essence, an aristocratic ideal. But like Gray, in his aversion to "the madding crowd's ignoble strife," Crabbe imparts to the poem a tinge of democratic spirit. After all, was not Gray the first poet to express this belief that the peasant was inherently equal to the peer? In imitating Gray, Crabbe was giving the first hint of his own loyalties.
While at Woodbridge Crabbe wrote under pseudonyms a number of poems all more or less in the imitative manner of "Solitude." Yet at the end of his apprenticeship, shortly before returning to Aldborough, he wrote and published anonymously Inebriety, a poem of great vigour and subtle insights. For some reason, critics have never appreciated the merits of this poem, generally dismissing it as a youthful indiscretion or an essay in bad taste. However "bad taste" is no longer the sin it once was, and I predict that Inebriety will soon become one of Crabbe's better known poems. As a whole it is very good, and in parts, brilliant.

Inebriety appeared in 1775, published by G. Punchard in Ipswich, at the time when Crabbe's apprenticeship finished, necessitating his return to Aldborough. The poem never reached a large audience, and was never reviewed by any of the important journals. The title of the poem seems somewhat incongruous when one recalls that only six years later, Crabbe was ordained in the Church of England. Certainly the poem as a whole suggests a very different picture of the youthful Crabbe from that given by his son's biography. In 1817 when Southey's Wat Tyler was surreptitiously published, proving the conservative Poet Laureate to have been a radical in his youth, one wonders whether Crabbe was apprehensive that he might be played

\[19\text{C}r\text{a}b\text{b}e\ \text{used\ such\ names\ as\ "G.\ EBBARE"\ and\ "G.\ EBBAAAC."}\]

\[20\text{R.L.\ Brett\ has\ said\ that\ inebriety\ is\ a\ "not\ very\ promising\ subject."\ See\ George\ Crabbe,\ British\ Council\ "Writers\ and\ their\ Work"\ series\ (London,\ 1956),\ p.\ 12.}\]
a similar trick with *Inebriety*.

When *Inebriety* was published as part of the 1834 *Poetical Works*, the editor appended an innocuous note: "In the following reprint some couplets are omitted, but nothing has been altered."\(^{21}\) This statement sounds innocent enough, and although Crabbe's admirers might have regretted the repressed couplets, they would have been grateful that the poem had been rescued more or less intact. Fortunately Canon Ainger possessed a copy of the original edition of the poem, and A. Ward has reprinted this text in the standard edition of Crabbe's poems. A comparison of the two texts revealed that not only were "some couplets" deleted in the 1834 edition, but that the entire third part of the poem, consisting of 333 lines, had been deleted as well. Naturally enough, this attempt at repression in the interests of Crabbe's reputation gives the poem an added interest.\(^{22}\)

Whereas "Solitude" contains little if any of Crabbe's own ideas and experiences, *Inebriety* reveals the young poet willing to experiment with the classical tradition, turning it to new account. Throughout the poem, Crabbe shows a healthy disrespect for established conventions, a disrespect which leads him to attack the law and the church, and openly to advocate women's rights. At this period the title "Inebriety" alone would have provoked the new breed of critics


\(^{22}\) Such silent deletion was widely practised at this period. In his introduction to Robert Tannahill's *Poems and Songs* the editor said: "The editor has done every thing in his power to remove whatever could hurt the feelings of individuals, the sensibility of the public, or the reputation of the author" (London, 1817), p. xxiv.
with their emphasis on a high moral tone. Since editors had become serious about their responsibilities to the "gentle readers," even the novels of Fielding and Smollett had fallen under suspicion. Crabbe's Preface, expressing his intention to jettison all the classical prescriptions for poetry, is as revealing and piquant as his title.23 The Preface states Crabbe's belief that the times have changed, that the public can no longer be bothered to read didactic verse:

Some grave Head or other may possibly tell me, that Vice is to be lash'd, not indulg'd; that true Poetry forbids, not encourages, Folly; and such other wise and weighty Sentences, picked from POPE and HORACE, as he shall think most appertaining to his own dignity. But this, my good Reader, is a trifle; People now a Days are not to be preach'd into Reflection, or they pay Parsons, not Poets for it . . . but a MAN reads a Poem for quite a different purpose: to be lul'd into ease from reflection, to be lul'd into an inclination for pleasure, and (where I confess it comes nearer the Sermon) to be lul'd -- asleep.24

Crabbe's weakness of preaching to his readers, which almost all critics have censured as a fault in his later poetry, is here

23 As an example of the lengths to which this "high seriousness" could be taken, compare Thomas Mathias' introduction to his poem The Pursuits of Literature (1794-1797): "But I may ask with confidence; Is there, in this work on the Pursuits of Literature, any sentence or any sentiment, by which the mind may be depraved, degraded, or corrupted? Is there a principle of classical criticism in any part of it, which is not just and defensible by the greatest masters of ancient and legitimate composition? Is there any passage which panders to the vitiated taste, or to the polluted affections and passions of bad men?" (London, 1801), p. 8. Mathias continues in this vein for an entire page.

24 Poems by George Crabbe, I, 12.
nowhere in evidence. Nor is the Preface decked out in circumlocution and special pleading, which Johnson was later to notice in the dedication to The Village. Bold and forthright, the Preface states Crabbe's intention to write an "unvarnished tale" describing men as they really are. The very freshness of this statement of endeavour is laudable, and much can be forgiven if, in the performance, Crabbe was unable to free himself (even if he wanted to) from the Horatian prescription of utile dulci.

The opening lines of Inebriety, a parody of The Dunciad, suggest that the poem is to be a mock-epic:

The mighty Spirit and its power which stains
The bloodless cheek, and vivifies the brains,
I sing . . .

(I. 1-3).

As such, it may seem unlikely that the poem will deal with serious social themes. Yet as soon as Crabbe asks: "How and why the sparkling ill is shed?" (I. 7) it becomes clear that the subject of inebriety interests him not only for its comic possibilities, but because inebriety is symptomatic of serious human problems. Crabbe never adopts the moralist's denunciatory attitude to wine; on the contrary he sees wine as one of man's natural supports.

25 See the letter from Samuel Johnson to Sir Joshua Reynolds, which Crabbe published as part of his Preface to Poems (1807), in Poems by George Crabbe, I, 92.

26 Crabbe was never caught up in the narrow-minded evangelicalism of the period. A few years after writing Inebriety, when he was in very straightened circumstances in London, he still enjoyed the occasional pint of ale. In the entry for May 10, 1780, of his "London Journal," he records cheerfully: "I don't think there's a man in London worth but fourpence-halfpenny -- for I've this moment sent seven farthings for a pint of porter -- who is so resigned to his poverty." See Life, Ch. iii, p. 64.
The reason he offers for the widespread inebriety is not that man is spineless, but that the physical and mental climates of the world are extremely inhospitable. As he says, the earth is in the grasp of "Winter stern":

The labouring Pulse a slower motion rules,  
The Tendons stiffen, and the Spirit cools  
(I. 29-30).

In such conditions it is only to be expected that, like Macheath in *The Beggar’s Opera*, all men should say:

Of all the friends in time of grief,  
When threatening death looks grimmer,  
Not one so sure can bring relief  
As this best friend, a brimmer  
(Act III, xiv).

Although critics have used the terms mock-heroic and mock-epic freely to describe *Inebriety*, actually the terms must be used with great care. In some cases Crabbe uses the mock-epic straightforwardly, as when he describes the drunken labourer returning home to his "buxom Quean." The heroic battle which ensues is told in a manner which would have done justice to Fielding or Pope:

'Tis war, and Blood and Battle must ensue.  
As when, on humble stage, him Satan hight  
Defies the brazen Hero to the fight;  
From twanging strokes what dire misfortunes rise,  
What fate to maple arms, and glassen eyes;  
Here lies a leg of elm, and there a stroke  
From ashen neck has whirl'd a Head of oak.  
So drops from either power, with vengeance big,  
A remnant night-cap, and an old cut wig;  
Titles unmusical, retorted round,  
On either ear with leaden vengeance sound;  
'Till equal Valour equal Wounds create,  
And drowsy peace concludes the fell debate  
(I. 81-93).

Undoubtedly Crabbe laughs at the drunken rustic, and it is this mockery of inebriety which gives the poem much of its humour. Yet at times this laughter has a Swiftian quality, a bitterness resulting from the knowledge that since wine is necessary to mankind it will never be given up. All classes of men are affected:

Champain the Courtier drinks, the spleen to chase,
The Colonel burgundy, and port his Grace;
Turtle and ′rrack the city rulers charm,
Ale and content the labouring peasants warm.
(I. 37-40).

Hypochondria or the Spleen was a "disease" which figured prominently in eighteenth century literature, and it seems obvious that Crabbe is harkening back to this early eighteenth century affliction, to give it new terms of reference. Whereas Mathew Green offered many remedies for curing the spleen, in Crabbe's view only one is consistently helpful, and that is inebriety.

While the mock-heroic is used to mock inebriety, Crabbe does not employ it in the conventional manner -- to make trivial incidents appear ludicrous -- but to describe what otherwise might be extremely ugly and repulsive. In the conventional mock-epic of Dryden's *MacFlecknoe* or Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* petty characters and trivial incidents are made to appear ridiculous by their presentation in an heroic style, bathos being the result. But Crabbe's technique differs in that many of the characters of *Inebriety*, such as the vicar, Curio and Torpio are not straw figures

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28 Mathew Green devoted an entire poem, *The Spleen* (1737), to remedies for melancholy.
which Crabbe has set up to knock down, but convincing descriptions of eighteenth century types. When Crabbe wishes to satirize the swinishness of the vicar, he does so by graphically portraying him in his cups over the table, adding a touch of the heroic to make him appear as gross as possible. Incidents and characters are not heightened in order to make them appear absurd, but portrayed in humorous detail so that the minute descriptions amuse rather than disgust. The vicar, for instance, appears Gargantuanly base.

The description of the old drunkard Torpio has touches of conventional mock-epic, and Torpio no doubt has his ancestors among the heroes of antiquity. But on the other hand, he is presented with such careful detail that one cannot help believing he has an independent existence, that Crabbe may even have sat over a glass or two with him. The device of mock-heroic allows Crabbe to describe scenes which otherwise would have been too repulsive:

Old Torpio nods, and, as the laugh goes round,
Grunts through the nasal Duct, and joins the sound;
Then sleeps again, and, as the liquors pass,
Wakes at the friendly Jog, and takes his Glass
(II. 31-34).

With Crabbe's careful and detailed description of Fabricio vomiting over his fine new clothes, the Chaucerian love of the grotesque returns to literature. Although we laugh at the drunken vicar and the sick Fabricio, it is not because we see their triviality, but because the inflated language does not allow us to take them seriously.

In her novel Patronage (1814), Maria Edgeworth introduced a similar element of comic bombast into her portrait of the gross Bishop Clay (Ch. x).
Where Pope used the mock-heroic to show how slight an offence was the theft of Belinda's lock of hair, Crabbe uses it in order to portray bestiality without affronting his readers. This alteration of dimension allows the reader to smile (as he does in Gulliver's Travels) at what otherwise might be coarse and frightening.

Crabbe's decision to take all aspects of life, the worthy as well as the sordid, for his subject matter, was in direct opposition to the leading canons of aesthetics in the late eighteenth century. Johnson, who was later to read Crabbe's The Village and recommend it highly, would certainly not have approved of Inebriety. On aesthetics Johnson's opinions may have varied, but his ideas on the morality of literature never changed:

It is justly considered as the greatest excellency of art, to imitate nature; but it is necessary to distinguish those parts of nature which are most proper for imitation: greater care still is required in representing life, which is so often discoloured by passion, or deformed by wickedness. If the world be promiscuously described, I cannot see of what use it can be to read the account: or why it may not be as safe to turn the eye immediately upon mankind as upon a mirrour which shews all that presents itself without discrimination.30

Yet in Inebriety, Crabbe has indulged in just this promiscuity of expression; the poem is a succession of scenes "deformed by wickedness." While the poem contains nothing obscene, Samuel Johnson, and many like him, would surely have found it distasteful. It is the sort of poem one might expect to find among fugitive pieces,

hardly the first major work of a poet who was later to be known for his quiet piety.

Many of the portraits of gross inebriety appear to be the result of the young poet's finding that the world was not so just and provident as he had imagined. From this poem alone, it is difficult to tell whether Crabbe was depressed or pleased by his discovery that men were closer to Yahoos than Houyhnhnms. The more distasteful the scene described, the greater the vigour of the writing. Several of the satiric passages cut deeply at England's most cherished institutions; in the description of the vicar, Crabbe attacks the church with a vengeance. This particular character portrait was something of an embarrassment to Crabbe's son, and although the portrait is left uncut in the 1834 Poetical Works, when his son discussed the poem in his Life, he deleted four of the most telling lines. Although long, this character sketch of the vicar should be quoted in its entirety to show how strongly Crabbe was willing to criticize one of England's most sacred institutions:

The Vicar at the table's front presides,
Whose presence a monastic life derides;
The reverend Wig, in sideway order plac'd,
The reverend Band, by rubrice stains disgrac'd,
The leerire Eye, in wayward circles roll'd,
Mark him the Pastor of a jovial Fold,
Whose various texts excite a loud applause,
Favouring the Bottle, and the good old Cause.
See! the dull smile which fearfully appears,
When gross Indecency her front uprears;
The joy conceal'd the fiercer burns within,
As masks afford the keene'st gust to Sin;
Imagination helps the reverend Sire,

His son remarks: "It seems probable that the seriousness and purity of his early impressions had, for a season, been smothered: but they were never obliterated." Life, Ch. iv, p. 107.
And spreads the sails of sub-divine desire. 
But when the gay immoral joke goes round, 
When Shame and all her blushing train are drown'd, 
Rather than hear his God blasphem'd he takes 
The last lov'd Glass, and then the board forsakes: 
Not that Religion prompts the sober thought, 
But slavish Custom has the practice taught. 
Besides, this zealous son of warm devotion 
Has a true levite Bias for promotion; 
Vicars must with discretion go astray, 
Whilst Bishops may be d---n'd the nearest way; 
So puny robbers individuals kill, 
When hector-Heroes murder as they will 

(II. 49-74).

While Crabbe obviously disliked the vicar, one can see that he took great delight in expansively describing the vicar over his bottle. The vicar is chosen as a butt, not because he likes rich wines and good suppers, but because he pretends to represent the "monastic life." For Crabbe, the greatest of all sins is hypocrisy. In this poem, if in no other, the rebel in Crabbe stands out particularly clearly.

Critics have never taken the trouble to treat the poem seriously, and it has generally been regarded as a satire pure and simple on the dangers of inebriety.\(^{32}\) Even Huchon agreed that the lesson of the poem was moderation: "We ought to be quite convinced now that the 'charms of wine' are pernicious and that the 'sober joys' of 'social evenings' are preferable to them."\(^{33}\) But Huchon accepts Crabbe's own judgment of what he was attempting to do in the poem:

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But cease, my Muse; of those or these enough, 
The fools who listen, and the knaves who scoff;
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\(^{32}\)See Leslie Stephen, \textit{Hours in a Library}, II, 35.

\(^{33}\)Huchon, pp. 60-61.
Enough of these, and all the charms of wine;
Be sober joys and social evenings mine,
Where peace and Reason unsoil'd mirth improve,
The powers of friendship and the joys of love;
Where thought meets thought ere Words its form array,
And all is sacred, elegant, and gay

(II. 211-224).

Undoubtedly Crabbe says he would rather forgo the charms of wine for sober joys, but the assertion does not carry much conviction when compared with the realistic drinking scenes. Huchon has rather condescendingly admitted that the real-life portraits overshadow the formal structure of satire: "Let us forgive the young doctor the care which he already takes of our souls, let us eliminate from his composition the numerous faults of clumsiness which disfigure it, let us forget the weakness of the execution, let us give a little more collective life to this group in which the individuals remain too isolated, and we shall have an excellent Dutch drinking scene." 34

However Crabbe did not exclude the praise of moderation; he did not want to compose simply a "Dutch drinking scene." Is it possible to say anything more than that Crabbe's imagination was stirred more vigorously by the tavern scenes with Timon and Fabricio, than by the goodness of Damon? The same tendency can of course be seen in Hogarth's prints, especially in the series entitled "Industry and Idleness." In this Progress the Industrious Apprentice is made to appear so insipid, that one almost wishes the Idle Apprentice success in spite of his bad habits. Did Crabbe simply

34 Huchon, p. 61.
find evil easier to portray than goodness? Possibly so. But I think that if this problem is examined, keeping in mind the much neglected third part, a more convincing reason can be found. For it is the third section -- deleted altogether in the 1834 edition -- which is the most interesting and explosive section of *Inebriety*.

In the Preface Crabbe had said: "The LADIES will doubtless favour my Attempt; for them indeed it was principally composed . . . ," and in the third section he fulfills this promise by starting what seems to be the altogether new theme of women's rights:

> Pardon, ye Fair, the Poet and his Muse,  
> And what ye can't approve, at least excuse;  
> Far be from him the iron lash of Wit,  
> The jokes of Humour, and the sneers that hit;  
> He speaks of Freedom, and he speaks to you,  
> His Verse is simple, but his Subject new;  
> And novelty, ye Fair, beyond a doubt,  
> Is philosophic truth, the World throughout  
> (III. 17-24).

Crabbe's demand is that women should be given, or rather, should claim, equal rights with men; they must throw off the inferior status which men have imposed on them, and assert their rights.

The originality of this call for women's rights has possibly been obscured today when in Britain these rights have been all but obtained. But at the time Crabbe wrote *Inebriety* (1775), the subject was virtually untouched. The poem has some of the

35. Huchon notes how original the subject of wine is (p. 58), but in fact Crabbe has a double subject -- the pleasures of wine and the freedom of women. This dual subject is surely unique.

36. J.V. Price has argued that David Hume disliked the double standard, and wished to see women treated as equals. See *The Ironic Hume* (University of Texas Press: Austin, 1965), pp. 13-18. But Hume has said little in print on the subject, and even his few comments are noted for their extreme caution. See Hume's essay entitled "Of Love and Marriage" (1741).
air of an irreverent *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, and even though Crabbe's poem is a burlesque, it definitely looks forward to Mary Wollstonecraft's great defense of women in 1792. Crabbe is aware that he is developing a new subject. As he says: "His Verse is simple, but his Subject new" (III. 22). Two years after the first Reform Bill, the editor of the 1834 edition of Crabbe's *Poetical Works* proved that the subject still contained too much novelty when he deleted this third section.38

I do not wish to claim that the poem is a polemical tract sponsoring a petition for the practical abolition of prejudice against women of the type written long after by Emmeline Pankhurst. Crabbe is not writing with any hopes that the Whigs will suddenly see the logic of his argument and formulate a Bill in the House of Commons. Yet *Inebriety* does develop seriously the subject of women's rights. In lines filled with meaning Crabbe opens his case:

Hard is the lot of Woman, so have sung
The pensive old, and the presuming young;
Born without privilege, in bondage bred,
Slave from the Cradle to the marriage Bed;
Slave from the hour hymeneal to the grave,
In age, in youth, in infancy a Slave

(III. 25-30).

Women, it should be recalled, did not receive the vote until 1926.37

Obviously Crabbe was not the first person to suggest that women should receive equal rights, but in the eighteenth century defenders of woman's rights were few indeed. In literature, most writers treated women with an Addisonian patronage, or at best women were said to have "their place." Occasionally one finds strong advocates for women's rights, and one such advocate is to be found in no less a place than *The Lady's Magazine*. Writing anonymously this early feminist said: "Had the generality of women the same means of acquiring knowledge as the men have, and was their application in their younger part of life as great as their's, there can be little doubt, but they would equal, if not very frequently excel them" (May 1781), p. 255.
Would not many women of the late eighteenth century (even today?) have agreed? That Crabbe is here stating hard fact cannot be denied. One has only to think of George Eliot's frustration when denied the freedom of a responsible position enabling her to utilize her talents to the full.

No amount of rationalization about how women enjoyed "different" and "separate" rights can obscure their place as second class citizens in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Indeed the inferiority of women was often made a virtue, as can be seen in Mrs. John Sandford's popular book Woman, in her Social and Domestic Character (1831). Mrs. Sandford feels she is coming to the defense of her sex when she says: "There is, indeed, something unfeminine in independence. It is contrary to nature, and therefore it offends . . . . A really sensible woman feels her dependence. She does what she can; but she is conscious of inferiority, and therefore grateful for support."\(^{39}\)

In his new role of social reformer Crabbe described himself as a type of unacknowledged legislator of mankind taking up the struggle for equal rights:

Happy the Bard, who, bold in pride of song
Shall free the chain, by Custom bound so long,
And show the Fair, to mean tradition prone,
Though Virtue may have sex, yet Vice has none

(III. 31-34).

Crabbe refuses to accept the belief that women are naturally inferior and totally dependent upon men. In lines which ring with authenticity, he compares the contemporary position of women in

England to that of slaves in the West Indies:

Woman! the spring of super-human wit,
Shall we from her each dear bought bliss withhold,
As Spaniards use the Indians for their Gold?

(III. 63-65).

In the context of the discussions taking place in the late eighteenth century concerning the slave trade, and the usage of Indians in America, this comparison is no idle mockery. The lines would have had even more impact (had they been read) in Crabbe's own time than they do in ours. Were these the only sharp, critical lines in the poem then they alone would show that Crabbe felt strongly about his subject. Like Pope's couplet about jurymen, the social implications of these lines cannot be denied.

By women's rights however, Crabbe does not mean anything so political as voting rights, but rather the moral right to live one's life to the full, with integrity and courage. Crabbe believes that women have become so bound by tradition that they are forced to repress many of their best instincts and live by false standards to which they pay hypocritical obedience. When Crabbe questions the women why they should not be true to their own nature, he raises a question which had remained unasked for centuries and was to remain unanswered for another century:

And you, ye Fair! why slumber on disdain,
Forbear to vindicate, yet can't refrain?

40 It has often been remarked that Pope's lines: "The hungry Judges soon the Sentence sign, / And Wretches hang that Jury-men may Dine" (III. 21-22), are entirely out of place in The Rape of the Lock, the satire being far too bitter for the delicate humour of the rest of the poem.
Why should Papilla seek the vaulted hoard,  
And but in secret ape her honest Lord?  
Why should'st thou, Celia, to thy stores repair,  
And sip the generous Spirit in such fear?  
Reform the Error, and revoke your plan,  
And as ye dare to imitate, be -- Man  
(III. 68-75).

Crabbe wishes women to recognize that their "purity" is no greater than men's; that they will never realize the potential of their own lives while they live a life of hypocrisy, imitating in fear and secrecy vices common to all mankind.

Undoubtedly Crabbe's appeal to women is serious, and the advice he gives -- "First know yourselves" -- is the best possible, yet through it all Crabbe pretends to be in jest. He never suggests that women should claim equal rights so as to be capable of treating, and being treated by, men as equals, but so that they will be able to indulge in vices which are now the prerogative of men. Freedom is to be gained, Crabbe says, so that women will be able to live in licence openly and freely without the inhibitions caused by the double standard.

Clearly one reason for pressing this call for women's rights is to criticize the vice of inebriety in men by a purposeful reductio ad absurdum. The principle is that if women are advised to become as dissolute as their male compeers, then men will realize the ridiculousness of their own inebriety. Like Fielding before him, Crabbe is attempting to laugh man out of his follies. And Crabbe does so by portraying the vices of men in women in the hope that men will perceive their own follies. At one point Crabbe even states that this is his intention:
For this the Muse now calls the Fair to rise,
To shew our failings, and to make us wise;
Be now to Bacchus, now to Venus prone,
And share each folly Man has thought his own;
Shame him from Vice, by shewing him your shame,
And part with yours, to reinstate his Fame;
Be generously vile, and this your view:
That Man may hate his errors seen in you
(III. 194-201).

Throughout the poem, Crabbe plays on two meanings of freedom:
freedom in the customary sense of freedom to choose; and freedom in
the sense of licentiousness. Crabbe shows first that men have
generally interpreted freedom in the sense of licence. As a
result when he advances his claim that women should have equal
freedom, he finds that they will also have the right to licence.
It is this last step from freedom to licence which creates the
humour, and which Crabbe plays upon so brilliantly.

Yet Crabbe has by no means written a straightforward piece
of irony. Were the poem simple irony, Crabbe would first have
indicated that women were really pure and virtuous, in order to
ensure that his presentation of their indulging in men's vices would
seem totally ridiculous. But in Crabbe's version, "the Fair" are
"vot'ries to stolen joys, but yet sincere" (III. 6). He leaves no
doubt that he feels women are as weak and frail as men. When he
poses the rhetorical question:

But why to Vices of the boist'rous kind
Tye the soft soul, and urge the gentle Mind?
(III. 102-103)

41 Even Henry Fielding, in An Enquiry Into the Causes of the
late Increase of Robbers (1751), admits that the nobility of England
have the de facto right, especially with regard to "luxury" and
"pleasure" to do as they like even though it is opposed to the best
interests of the nation. See pp. 10-11.
his answer shows that such a question takes for granted the very point he was querying. Crabbe has realized that the purity of women is a mere myth, so that when he argues that they should indulge freely in all vices, he is asking them only to do openly what they do now in secret:

    Forbid it, Nature! to the Fair I speak,
    By her made strong by Custom render'd weak;
    ... 

    Drink then, ye Fair! and nature's laws fulfill;
    Be ev'ry thing at once, and all ye will
    (III. 104-111).

Crabbe's irony in Inebriety is given greater depth by his realization that women deserve equal rights, not because they are virtuous, and thus "worthy" of freedom, but because they are frail. When Crabbe says that he portrays vice in women "to show our failings, and to make us wise," he is not aiming at that great fantasy of the eighteenth century -- a complete reformation of manners in mankind. For a few lines after, Crabbe makes the following surprising statement:

    Better for us, 'tis granted, it might be,
    Were you all Softness, and all Honour we;
    That never rougher Passion mov'd your mind;
    That we were all or excellent or blind;
    But, as we now subsist by passions strife,
    Which are (POPE writes) the elements of life,
    The general order, since the whole began,
    Should be dissolv'd, and Manners make the Man
    (III. 226-233).

In other words Crabbe is agreeing that it would be better if men and women lived their different roles in a harmonious social system.42

42In Poems (1807) Crabbe included the slight poem "Woman!" in which he shows, although in a rather conventional manner, the deep respect he felt for the fair: "'Tis hers to soothe the ills below, / And bid life's fairer views appear." See Poems by George Crabbe, I, 262.
but since this idea is only wishful thinking which can never be realized -- man's motives being mixed -- men and women both must realize the necessity of abandoning hypocritical absolute standards and adapting morals to meet the complexities of the human situation.

That Crabbe does want men and women to reappraise their system of morality can be seen most clearly in the way he parodies Pope. In *An Essay on Man*, Pope had claimed that man's troubles arose from a misunderstanding of his place in the universe. Believing that once man gained a true perspective of himself he would no longer be a slave to his own ignorance, Pope claimed that he would explore "all who blindly creep, or sightless soar," and thus "vindicate the ways of God to Man." In the same way Crabbe claims that he wants to "catch the stumbling Charmer as she falls," and "vindicate the sweet soft souls to Man." Consequently Crabbe presses women to stop deluding themselves that they are completely virtuous, and to realize that the double standard is a hoax. Yet it is not only women who must change the double standard; men must agree to change it as well. Once Crabbe introduced the idea that women should have equal rights, the conclusion follows that women must be allowed to indulge in all the vices of men. That is, the conclusion follows unless men agree that they, as well as women, have no rights to indulge vice. Inebriety suggests that a new type of morality is needed where the sexes each respect the integrity of the other.

If Crabbe presents the possibility of licence in women to awaken men to the precarious state of civilization, the crux of the matter rests on man's ability to recognize the danger and revise his
standards. Yet when Crabbe presents his picture of man and society, it is so dark that change seems highly unlikely.

Crabbe's society might have shocked Gulliver, even after his last voyage:

Thus does the Muse in vein didactic speak --
"Go, from proud Man thy full instructions take;
Learn from the Law, what gain its mazes yield;
Learn of the Brave the police of the field;
Thy arts of shuffling from the Courtier get;
Learn of his Grace to stare away a debt;
Learn from the Sot his poison to caress,
Shake the mad room, and revel in excess;
From Man all forms of grand deception find,
And so be tempted to delude Mankind"

(III. 240-249).

The world seems constructed as a maze so as to allow those who wish to deceive their fellow men to do so. Crabbe has presented both the world and man in such black colours that there seems little likelihood of man ever giving up his vices. Men turned to wine because the world was cold and hostile, and the world is no less hostile at the end of the poem than at the beginning. Furthermore Crabbe himself has ruled out a sudden change of heart amongst mankind -- "we now subsist by passions' strife" -- and thus has excluded the simple-minded hope that man will reverse his nature over-night.

The possibility exists of course that once man sees all his idols stripped bare -- when, for instance, women are no longer thought of as alabaster saints -- he will be forced to take stock of himself. Yet Crabbe has so emphasized the animal in man, comparing him in Part II to the monkey, that the reader is left with the suggestion that Crabbe's prophesied time when "distinction [is] but an empty name" is not far in the future. In this light, Crabbe's suggestion that Flavia's "Lady-Rape" and "Gamblers in petticoats" are the ends
towards which society is moving does seem an ominous possibility. Certainly history has fulfilled this prophecy.

Yet Crabbe manages to convey these ominous possibilities in an undertone; on the surface of the poem he continues with all good humour to laugh man out of his follies. The humour in Crabbe's description of the results of freedom in women -- Flavia's "Lady-Rape," "female duels" and "Gamblers in petticoats" -- is a type of satire based on exaggeration designed to show the absurdity of such freedom. Crabbe's tone of voice does not permit the reader to question seriously whether such freedom is a genuine possibility; the reader is caught up in the mock-heroics and only occasionally does he realize how close the humour verges on the macabre. The ending of the poem is deliberately light:

Thus every sense is fill'd in due degree,
And proper barriers bound his Grace and me;
Here every Passion is at length display'd,
Nations are ruin'd, Ministers betray'd;
And what, ye Fair, concerns your pleasures most,
Intrigues are plan'd, and Reputations lost

(III. 324-329).

Quite obviously the loss of reputations and intrigues is hardly of a nature to shake the world. Crabbe refuses to allow his readers to

\[43\] In George Lillo's *The London Merchant* (1731), Millwood offers an example of the type of independence which Crabbe advocates for all women. Significantly enough, Millwood claims that she has been driven to a life of vice and crime in order to escape being "a slave to men." She says, "My soul disdained, and yet disdains, dependence and contempt. Riches, no matter by what means obtained, I saw secured the worst of men from both. I found it, therefore, necessary to be rich, and to that end I summoned all my arts. You call 'em wicked, be it so; they were such as my conversation with your son had furnished me withal" (Act IV, xviii).
concentrate on man's bestiality, employing the mock-heroic to lighten the tone.

Sir Leslie Stephen has somewhat patronisingly termed Inebriety "an unblushing imitation of Pope." But surely such a comment misses the brilliant way in which Crabbe parodies Pope's optimism in An Essay on Man. Where Pope intended to depict the goodness of God's plan in the harmony of the universe, Crabbe inverts this procedure by showing how the harmony is in fact universal discord. Compare Pope's description of nature:

Nor think, in NATURE'S STATE they blindly trod;  
The state of Nature was the reign of God:  
Self-love and Social at her birth began,  
Union the bond of all things, and of Man.  
Pride then was not; nor Arts, that Pride to aid;  
Man walk'd with beast, joint tenant of the shade;  
The same his table, and the same his bed;  
No murder cloth'd him, and no murder fed.  
In the same temple, the resounding wood,  
All vocal beings hymn'd their equal God:  
The shrine with gore unstain'd, with gold undrest,  
Unbrib'd, unbloody, stood the blameless priest:  
Heav'n's attribute was Universal Care,  
And Man's prerogative to rule, but spare

with Crabbe's parody:

Nor think of Nature's state I make a jest:  
The state of Nature is a state undrest;  
The love of Pleasure at our birth began,  
Pleasure the aim of all things, and of Man.  
Law then was not, the swelling flame to kill,  
Man walk'd with beast, and -- so he always will;  
And Woman too, the same their board and bed,  
And would be now, but Folks are better bred;  
In some convenient grot, or tufted wood,  
All human beings Nature's circuit trod;  
The shrine was her's, with no gay vesture laid;

44 Sir Leslie Stephen, Hours in a Library, II, 35.

Unbrib'd, unmarried stood the willing maid;
Her attribute was universal Love,
And man's prerogative to range and rove
(III. 172-185).

Crabbe has converted Pope's "self-love and social" into "the love of pleasure." When Pope says that "Union" is the "bond of all things," Crabbe modifies this subtly to "Pleasure" is the "bond of all things." Where Pope envisages Adam and Eve at the beginning of time with the attribute of "Universal Care," Crabbe skilfully alters this (at the same time gaining great comic effect by placing the emphasis on Eve) to "universal Love." The effect of course is to change Pope's vision of man mixing freely with the animals so that man appears as an animal himself.

Although Pope recognized that man was a creature of mixed desires, his belief in God's benevolent plan allowed him to portray man's condition optimistically. Crabbe, on the other hand, is not nearly so confident that the world is planned benevolently. He saw that many of man's civilized customs were based on hypocrisy. Men do not ordinarily worry about this hypocrisy, at least not until a crisis appears. The double standard for men and women offers Crabbe a good example to show the dangers of hypocrisy, to show what will result when the double standard breaks down. At this time it was assumed that while men had the privilege of promiscuously indulging their sexual appetites, such freedom in women was wrong.

46 Here Crabbe implies that man in an ideal condition would not need the restricting sexual taboos of "civilization" -- certainly a daring thought for the time. Compare William Blake's comments on "free love" in Visions of the Daughters of Albion (1793).
This belief in the purity of the good woman lay at the centre of much of the eighteenth century code of manners. In some strange way it was assumed that, as long as chastity amongst women was maintained as an ideal, men could do as they pleased. Yet such obvious hypocrisy is extremely dangerous, for if women decide to break openly with the rule of chastity, the entire system of family life about which so much of morality is constructed may be threatened. Realizing this danger, Crabbe decided to point out that a sensible system of morality was required, one in which no ultimate standard of goodness is fixed for either men or women, but where they are both recognized as the imperfect creatures they are.

From his mood of reflective melancholy in a poem such as "Solitude" Crabbe has moved to one of controlled pessimism where the only consolation he has to offer is that all men are equally guilty of debasement -- the bishops, the vicar, the squire, and the fool. The cynicism becomes even more apparent when in his final lines he completes his imitation of Pope by parodying his best possible world, where everything has its place, with a picture of the worst possible world -- but with everything still keeping its place:

Far as the power of human vice extends,
Her scale of sensual vanity ascends;
Mark how it rises to the gilded Throne,
From the poor wretch who dully topes alone.

What modes of folly, each in one extreme,
The sots [sic] dim sense, th' Epicurean's dream

Pope's epic world has been reduced to the mock-epic.

It is surprising to find how often references to the
question of equality occur in this short poem, ostensibly devoted to a discussion of inebriety. The inequality between man and woman, described in the third section, is only one aspect. In the first and second sections Crabbe repeatedly returns to the theme of inequality. The excesses of the poor he is willing to treat with charity and good humour, but the drunkenness of people such as the vicar, Fabricio, and the Courtiers arouses his indignation. Throughout the first two sections of the poem Crabbe gives the impression that he is speaking to some wealthy person who believes that vice is confined to the lowest classes. Crabbe takes great delight in explaining to this person how the contrary is true, that the peasant is far better off telling his ghost stories over a bottle of ale than he would be emulating the rich to wage "war with an Avenger's Rod," and concludes with the admonition:

Go, wiser thou! and in thy scale of taste
Weigh gout and gravel against ale and rest
(I. 146-147).

Here Crabbe returns to the theme of "Solitude," expressing his belief that the poor in their humble cottages are more fortunate than the lord in his castle. Where "Solitude" failed to present a convincing case for equality, Inebriety manages to show that the drunken lord is no better than the drunken cobbler.

The reason most poems in the eighteenth century failed in presenting this theme was that they attempted to show how the humble joys of the villager were as valuable as the greatness of lords. In Inebriety Crabbe chooses to work from the opposite end: he shows how the drunken vicar is as much an animal as the drunken cobbler.
In his *Elegy* Gray had hoped to show how villagers might have Cromwellian ambitions but retain their innocence; Crabbe on the other hand reveals that much of the veneer of civilization amongst the upper classes is hypocrisy. Neither the vicar nor Fabricio is a greater man than Colin, the villager; in fact their weakness and drunkenness make them lesser men. Crabbe takes great delight in describing how wine strips off this false veneer to reveal that all men are basically the same:

> Oh! happy fall of insolence and pride,  
> Which makes the humblest with the great allied;  
> Which levels like the Grave all earthly things,  
> For drunken Coblers are as proud as Kings;  
> Which plucks the sons of grandeur from their sphere,  
> For who is lower than a stagg’ring Peer?

(III. 280-285)

For Crabbe, man's sin is not that he drinks wine; wine is necessary to life. Man's sin is hypocrisy; he pretends to be greater and better than he is, and thus refuses to recognize his inadequacies. Crabbe hopes that once men realize their true condition, they will be able to drop spurious ideals -- for instance, that wine is evil -- and accept their vulnerability. 47

Inebriety foreshadows much of Crabbe's later work, and his son was perspicacious in seeing it as the first poem in the style Crabbe was later to make his own. Crabbe's handling of the subject -- his opening description of a bitterly cold winter day with the ice-

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47 Compare this theme with William Blake's "The Little Vagabond" in *Songs of Experience* (1799) where the child says: "Dear Mother, dear Mother, the Church is cold, / But the Ale-house is healthy & pleasant & warm." See The Complete Writings of William Blake, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London, 1966), p. 216.
laden trees falling across the path; the way in which this description of stormy weather naturally leads into the scene at the rustic inn where the workers have come to escape the wintry blasts and drink a noggin or two to keep out the cold winds -- is representative of the dominant theme. Both the mental and physical climates are inhospitable; wine is a means of staving off storms.\(^\text{48}\) Civilization and nature, both of which are hostile to man's happiness, cause him to search for a means of release; inebriety is not so much a sin as an escape from the dark realities. While Inebriety points towards a solution in which men finally face the truth that they have hypocritically set up impossibly absolute standards, the ominous tone of Crabbe's bantering mock-heroics suggests that this truth will not be faced. Thus Inebriety manages to imply at least two possible answers to the problem of drunkenness, with Crabbe himself maintaining an impressive silence as to which he thinks the most likely. As will be seen in later chapters, such ambivalent endings are typical of Crabbe's work.

Quite possibly many of the new ideas to be found in Inebriety resulted from Crabbe's education while an apprentice at Woodbridge. During his years of apprenticeship Crabbe appears to have learned a great deal about many other subjects besides medicine. His son notes that while at Woodbridge he "met at an inn on certain evenings of the week to converse, over a frugal supper" on various subjects.\(^\text{49}\)

\(^{48}\)See the opening of The Village for a similar use of natural description to help set the tone of hostility.

\(^{49}\)Life, Ch. 1, pp. 20-21.
According to J. Ewing Ritchie, discussion groups were fairly common in East Anglia at this period. He quotes the Reverend Compton as saying:

In Yarmouth, where I lived at this time ... there was then a society of gentlemen who met once a fortnight for the purpose of amicable discussion. Our members -- alas! how few remain -- were of all parties and persuasions, and some of them of very distinguished attainments. A society thus constituted was in those days as pleasant as it was instructive. The most eager disputation was never found to endanger the most perfect goodwill, nor did any bitter feuds arise from this entire freedom of opinion till the prolific period of the French Revolution.50

No doubt Crabbe's interests greatly expanded as a result of these meetings at which many different shades of opinion were expressed. Reading between the lines of his son's Life, one can see that during this period Crabbe himself was hardly noted for piety. His son remarked that the inn-keeper of "the Lion" used to show visitors "with no little exultation, an old-fashioned room, the usual scene of convivial meetings, not always remarkable for 'measured merriment,' in which the young doctor had his share."51

In all fairness, it should be mentioned that in his later years Crabbe appears to have been unhappy with the sentiments of Inebriety. On the quarto copy of 1775, which Ward used as a text, is the following sentence in Crabbe's own hand: "NB. -- pray let not this be seen at [cipher] there is very little of it that I'm not

51Life, Ch. iv, p. 107.
heartily asham'd of."^52 Yet one should not be put off by Crabbe's later disclaimers; indeed, parts of Crabbe's later work are almost as daring as Inebriety's frontal attack on the drunken vicar.53 Inebriety should be recognized as the first of Crabbe's major works.

III

Robert Chamberlain has remarked that by the time Crabbe wrote Inebriety, he was acquiring a "tragic vision" of man.54 Certainly the events of his life during this period provided ample reason for such a "tragic vision." In a letter to Burke, Crabbe explained his position on leaving Woodbridge: "My Father at this time was much distressed and could not send me to London for the usual improvements. I meant to serve in a shop, but an unlucky opportunity offered itself at Aldbro', the Apothecary there was become infamous by his bad conduct, and his enemies invited me to fix there immediately."55 This cryptic account, so typical of Crabbe's reluctance to discuss his own affairs, omits all mention of the difficulty he encountered in setting up as an apothecary. His son explains that Crabbe did not immediately set up shop as an apothecary when he returned to Aldborough, but first helped his

^52 Prefatory note to A. Ward's edition of Poems by George Crabbe, I, viii.

^53 In Letter II of The Borough Crabbe satirizes the impotency and latent homosexuality of the borough's vicar. See below, pp.

^54 Robert L. Chamberlain, George Crabbe, pp. 52-53.

^55 Bunbury Letter. Quoted from Huchon, p. 494.
father on the quay, working with his hands like any other docker:

Mr. Crabbe returned to Aldborough, hoping to find the means of repairing to the metropolis, and there to complete his professional education. The Salt-master's affairs, however, were not in such order that he could at once gratify his son's inclination in this respect; neither could he afford to maintain him at home in idleness; and the young man, now accustomed to far different pursuits and habits, was obliged to return to the labours of the warehouse on Slaughden quay. His pride disdained this homely employment; his spirit rose against what he considered arbitrary conduct: he went sullen and angry to his work, and violent quarrels often ensued between him and his father. He frequently confessed in after-times that his behaviour in this affair was unjustifiable, and allowed that it was the old man's poverty, not his will, that consented to let him wear out any more of his days in such ignoble occupation.56

At this time Crabbe must have felt that the undertone of cynicism expressed in Inebriety about man's possibilities of happiness was well justified.

Crabbe never relished physical labour and could never feel that his work as a labourer was something honourable and worthwhile. His son mentions that labouring was an "ignoble occupation," and this attitude appears to have been Crabbe's as well. Crabbe's father had recognized when Crabbe was yet a young boy that he was not cut out to be a labourer: "The Salt-master often took his boys a-fishing with him; and sorely was his patience tried with the awkwardness of the eldest."57 Thus as a result of natural endowments, temperament, and education, Crabbe was little inclined to appreciate the rough, boisterous life of an ill-paid quay worker. Unlike someone such as Thomas Wilson, the pitman, Crabbe could never say:

56Life, Ch. ii, p. 29.
57Life, Ch. i, p. 14.
We labour hard to myek ends meet,
Which baffles oft the gentry's schemin';
And though wor sleep be short, it's sweet,
Whilst they're on bums and bailies dreamin'.

There is a charm aw cannot nyem,
That's little known te quality:
Ye'll find it in the happy hyem
Of honest-hearted poverty.

... 

For raither sic disgrace te share,
An' bring a stain upon wor freends,
We'd work, on breed-an'-waiter fare,
Till blood drops frae wor finger ends.

Although Crabbe sympathized with the lot of the poor in Aldborough, he never considered his own difficulties to be of the same kind. Crabbe's attitude to society differs from that of the worker who feels he is in his right place, but wishes to have his conditions bettered, or that of the radical who wishes to see all the injustices of society removed. Crabbe's own problem was to establish himself in a profession, what he felt to be his rightful place.

Crabbe's general acceptance of the conditions of society is worth stressing at this point. Even though a poem such as Inebriety might suggest that Crabbe was becoming radically dissatisfied with the social system, and leaning towards a form of quasi-nihilism, actually Crabbe at this time never felt the impulse to overturn the social structure. In a poem entitled "The Wish" (Aldborough, 1778), he expresses the liberal's desire to be allowed

58 Thomas Wilson, The Pitman's Pay, and Other Poems (London, 1872), pp. 49-50. This poem was first published over the years 1826-30. Wilson's admirers compared his poems to Crabbe's for their fidelity of description.
"to please and to improve" his fellow men. The emphasis here lies not on changing an unjust and corrupt society, but on teaching the basic rightness of man's existing duties:

Give me, ye Powers that rule in gentle hearts,  
The full design, complete in all its parts,  
Th' enthusiastic glow, that swells the soul --  
When swell'd too much the judgment to control --

Be it my boast to please and to improve,  
To warm the soul to virtue and to love;  
To paint the passions, and to teach mankind  
Our greatest pleasures are the most refined;  
The cheerful tale with fancy to rehearse,  
And gild the moral with the charm of verse.

This is not the poetry of a person dissatisfied with society because it is unfair to mankind, but of a man who wishes the opportunity to become a member of the cultured class so that he can help teach the general truths which enable mankind to coexist.

Crabbe's experiences as an apothecary at Aldborough might well have served him with interesting subject matter, but with the exception of "Fragment, Written at Midnight" (1779), his verse contains little reference to his work amongst the poor. Even in the "Fragment" Crabbe was far too concerned with his own problems to give an objective account of other people:

Shall I, preserver deem'd around the place,  
With abject rhymes a doctor's name disgrace?  
Nor doctor solely, in the healing art  
I'm all in all, and all in every part;  
Wise Scotland's boast let that diploma be  
Which gave me right to claim the golden fee.  
Praise, then, I claim, to skilful surgeon due,  
For mine th' advice and operation too;

59 Poems by George Crabbe, I, 40.
And, fearing all the vile compounding tribe,
I make myself the medicines I prescribe.
Mine, too, the chemic art; and not a drop
Goes to my patients from a vulgar shop.
But chief my fame and fortune I command
From the rare skill of this obstetric hand:
This our chaste dames and prudent wives allow,
With her who calls me from thy wonder now.60

While the lines are flat and mundane, they offer some indication of how Crabbe was later to mould his poetry from common, everyday experiences. Yet as he says in this poem, "the restless ocean [was the] emblem of my mind," and at this time his verse expresses his own fears about the future rather than his experiences as a doctor.

During the following years Crabbe's position did not improve greatly, and though he worked diligently at his small medical practice, he gained little. The lyric "My Birth-day" will serve as an index to the state of his mind, and his growing fears about the future:

Through a dull tract of woe, of dread,
The toiling year has pass'd and fled:
And, lo! in sad and pensive strain,
I sing my birth-day date again.

Trembling and poor, I saw the light,
New waking from unconscious night;
Trembling and poor I still remain,
To meet unconscious night again.

Time in my pathway strews few flowers,
To cheer or cheat the weary hours;
And those few strangers, dear indeed,
Are choked, are check'd, by many a weed.61

60 Poems by George Crabbe, I, 46.
61 Poems by George Crabbe, I, 43. Crabbe's son dated the poem December 24, 1778, but Huchon (p. 79) believes the poem was probably written a year later.
The poem excludes all complacency. In it one can see that Crabbe believed his life had reached a dead-end.

Having come to this conclusion that he was fated to live in a condition of near-poverty, Crabbe had still the difficult task of finding a way to live with this knowledge. After all, most people at one time or another conclude that "life is hard." What is interesting is the way they attempt to face, or avoid, this simple truth. One of the main characteristics of Crabbe's later poetry is his insistence that suffering is a "brute fact" which must be accepted and faced resolutely. In an early poem, "Midnight,"

written about 1779, one can see him already attempting to express his newly found knowledge.

A variation on the graveyard school of poetry, "Midnight" begins with the customary carpe diem theme, that life is transitory, a dream lasting for a moment. But then the poem suddenly changes direction with the introduction of the idea that life is not only a dream, but an unhappy dream:

But ah! how dismal are the Dreams of Care,  
How much of Care do e'en the happiest dream,  
And some -- hard Fortune theirs -- of Care alone  
(lines 9-11).

Instead of the conventional theme of the shortness of life, Crabbe develops the Hobbesian belief that man's brief life is a continuous effort to survive in a universe of hostile forces.

Respectfully, the young poet asks the men of learning to forgive him for tampering with their subjects, but in the seeming

62 Poems by George Crabbe, I, 47-60. Not to be confused with the short "Fragment, Written at Midnight," mentioned earlier.
humility of this address to the "Wise" lies a Socratic irony. Quite obviously Crabbe has no faith in their type of wisdom:

Forgive me then, ye Wise, who seem awake,
A Midnight Song, and let your Censure sleep
(lines 12-13).

Since the Wise only "seem" to be awake, their "wisdom" can be a knowledge only of other times and other places. Crabbe implies that the situation has changed, and that the acknowledged men of letters are no longer competent to deal with the new conditions. The great poets of the past -- Homer, Virgil, Milton -- all dealt with grand and beautiful themes; Crabbe feels the modern age needs poets to describe man's disappointments in everyday life. As he says, their was a "blest Task, a gloomier task is mine" (line 111). Akenside for instance, Crabbe feels, "led the soul thro' Nature, and display'd / Imagination's Pleasures to its Eye" (lines 109-110). While recognizing the value of Akenside's themes, Crabbe feels that his own experience of the bleak Suffolk coast, and his constant efforts to earn enough to feed and clothe himself, have ill-equipped him to write poetry in the same grand style.

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

Who but rather turns
To Heaven's broad fire his unconstrained view,
Than to the glimmering of a waxen flame?
Who that, from Alpine heights, his labouring eye
Shoots round the wide horizon, to survey
Nlius or Ganges rolling his bright wave
Through mountains, plains, through empires black with shade,
And continents of sand; will turn his gaze
To mark the windings of a scanty rill
That murmurs at his feet?63

Yet Crabbe wants to write about the very subjects Akenside thought poets should scorn; Crabbe wants to turn away from the grand and marvellous to detail the minute. He believes that he must begin a new style of poetry which, whether he knew it or not, would contradict the neo-classical laws of poetry as defined by Imlac:

He, tyed to some poor Spot, where e'en the rill
That owns him Lord untasted steals away,
Hallows a Clod, and spurns Immensity
(lines 126-128).

The themes and forms of the past are not only insufficient to handle the new situations, they are also obstacles to a clear presentation of the new problems. Crabbe suspects that the modern poets, with their emphasis on the beauties of nature and the pleasures of the imagination, will dislike his new poetry:

Ye gentle, nameless Bards, who float a-down
The soft smooth Stream of silver poesy
And dream your pretty Dreams, permit my Song
Cold inspiration from a Winter's Night
(lines 129-132).

This decision was to place Crabbe in opposition to the spirit of the age.64

Looking about him, and seeing the misery and suffering not only of his own life, but of the lives of his fellow villagers, Crabbe asks:

Is there, who sick of Pleasure's daily Draught,
In repetition mawkish, or who tir'd
Thinks Life an Idiot's Tale? or whom the Hand
Of Disappointment snatches from the Vice
That waits on power?
(lines 139-143).

64See William Hazlitt's essay on Crabbe and Thomas Campbell in The Spirit of the Age (1825).
The method Crabbe chooses to make sense of this "Idiot's Tale" is to give a short history of mankind from the golden age to his own time. From this survey he concludes that civilization has declined, so that at present "Life [is] Deception's Child" (line 482); the world smiles in pain "and smiles believ'd" (line 486).

In "Midnight" as in Inebriety, the world for Crabbe appears to be in a perpetual winter:

Cold Vapour, falling on the putrid Fen,
Condenses grey, and wraps with glassy net
The wintry Fern, and throws along the Heath
A Hoary Garment, nor less fair than Spring
Drops on the Sod, of Texture near as frail

... In Winter's Livery sleeps this earthly Scene --
And, save where Ocean rolls his restless Flood,
The horizontal Eye grasps all things grey
(lines 203-219).

Crabbe's own personal difficulties and his constant money troubles have become objectified in a poetry of "wintry Thoughts." Interestingly enough, when William Blake came to give expression to the poverty he found amongst the children of London, he used much the same terminology as Crabbe. In "Holy Thursday," Blake said:

And their sun does never shine,
And their fields are bleak and bare,
And their ways are fill'd with thorns:
It is eternal winter there.65

To the person fighting for survival, the year appears to be one long winter.

In Inebriety Crabbe had described the uncertainty that besets human life, and suggested that men must rest content without

absolute values. By the time he came to write "Midnight" Crabbe was no longer able to draw this conclusion with so much good humour:

Alas! the State of Man,
Or doom'd the Victim of ungovern'd Zeal,
Or led the Captive of unquiet Doubt
(lines 386-388).

Whereas Inebriety had boldly asserted that the injustices between men and women should be levelled, in "Midnight" Crabbe tends to accept these injustices as "the way of the world." He no longer attempts to suggest solutions for a world in which he sees "all things grey."

I would suggest that one of the reasons Crabbe concludes that all men should resign themselves to their lot is that his quick tour of history has shown him that man was always irrational and bloodthirsty. To have hope, there must be at least one positive example in history of progress. Crabbe's summary view of the past has shown him that, as soon as man "fell" from the golden to the silver age, civilization had become little more than a series of wars and persecutions. This knowledge so numbs Crabbe, that at the end of the poem he decides to acquiesce in whatever befalls him.

Since suffering is ubiquitous, Crabbe concludes that one should be thankful if one's share is small. In the tradition of Johnson's *Vanity of Human Wishes*, he finds that mere physical suffering resulting from poverty cannot compare with the self-torture of the Hamlets of the world. An old man, guilty of murder, has fears and torments far more intense than mere physical suffering:

66 In describing this murder, Crabbe draws openly on Hamlet's "to be or not to be" soliloquy.
Come, all ye little Ills,
Contempt, and poverty, and pale Disease

That I may feel your force, and call it Joy,
So made when weigh'd against the Load that Guilt,
With leaden Hand, deposits on my Heart
(lines 410-418).

Since the poem was written to give expression to Crabbe's own problems, the following lines seem altogether an appropriate ending:

How have I mourn'd my Lot, as if the Fates
Cull'd me, the vilest from their pitchy Stores
That ere in Mortal Bosom planted Woe,
And pain'd the Care-fraught Soul! I'll grieve no more,
But take it patient with a sober hope,
That soon Distress may vary his assault,
Or soon the Welcome Tomb exclude Distress
(lines 492-496).

Such an ending did not content Crabbe however; he wished to extrapolate this answer to all individuals:

But see another Son of Night and Care,
A Shepherd watching o'er his frozen Fold,
Himself benumb'd and murmuring at his Fate.
Sigh not, fond Man; thy bosom only feels
The gentler Blows of Nature, and receives
The Common Visit of Calamity
(lines 499-504).

In one sense, Crabbe's response to his vision of a suffering world is wholly praiseworthy: he offers no easy optimism nor a pietistic belief in Christian salvation. He portrays the facts for all to see -- in as blunt and crusty a manner as possible. Yet, the conclusion that life necessarily holds suffering for all, does not mean that all situations involving suffering can be dismissed. While suffering there must be, much can be alleviated.

One of the reasons why the conclusion leaves the reader feeling uncomfortable is that throughout the poem, Crabbe has
described "suffering mankind" in generalities, alluding to man's mental condition in the vaguest possible terms. One agrees with Crabbe's view that man's life has been difficult throughout the ages; few people would deny that all men face difficulties at one time or another. Yet in the last stanza, when Crabbe introduces the poor shepherd on the hillside, he introduces a particular example of human misery. That men have always suffered does not mean that this particular shepherd must continue to live a life of poverty. Crabbe seems to have become so resigned to the general proposition that the world will always contain hardship, that he acquiesces in each particular example of hardship.

In "Midnight" Crabbe is clearly reacting against the literature of sentiment to return to the themes of Pope and Swift, what Louis Bredvold has termed "the gloom of the Tory satirists." What is missing from "Midnight," which one finds in the works of the earlier satirists, is the tone of indignation. Yet one's reaction to the knowledge that suffering is a permanent part of life can take one of two forms, depending on whether the emphasis is practical or philosophical. In London, Johnson became highly indignant at the injustice and poverty he saw around him in the streets; in The Vanity of Human Wishes, where the emphasis is philosophical, the


spectacle of human misery leads him to suggest that man must acquiesce. These two diametrically opposed attitudes often rest uneasily together, especially in individuals like Johnson who are strongly committed to Christianity. The Life and the poems written at this period both reveal the increasing importance of religion in Crabbe's life. In "Midnight," not only man, but all the earth is described in terms of "the fall." "Did all with Man commit mysterious Sin?" he asks (line 243). Objectified in the image of man's struggle against winter, Crabbe's own difficulties have become mingled with "dread Sorrow, consequent of Sin" (line 286). In addition one can see how Crabbe's repeated use of the pathetic fallacy to indicate man's misery inevitably led him away from objective social analysis. When sorrow and misery are everywhere seen in nature, they take on the status of a "natural law."

In later life Crabbe managed to temper his pessimism, but I would suggest that his vision of a purposeless world slowly decaying in its own grave was to haunt even his mature poetry. His son mentions that throughout Crabbe's life he "was subject to very distressing fits of melancholy." 69

The conclusion of "Midnight" however does not accord with the conclusions Crabbe was reaching in regard to his own difficult situation as apothecary to the poor in Aldborough. In the following year, Crabbe finally decided that Aldborough offered him no hope of success. Instead of resigning himself to poverty, as he had advised the poor shepherd of "Midnight," he decided to give up his seven years

69Life, Ch. viii, p. 214.
of medical apprenticeship and the three years he had spent as an apothecary, to seek his fortune in London. Crabbe was then twenty-six years of age. His explanation to Burke for leaving Aldborough is clipped and factual: "After three years spent in the misery of successless struggle, I found it necessary for me to depart, and I came to London." This account does not give any idea of the stress Crabbe was under at this period as a result of his failure to succeed in medicine. Crabbe's feelings of humiliation at failing to make even a modest success of his life are clearly revealed in the prayers he wrote during this period:

A thousand years, most adored Creator, are, in thy sight, as one day. So contract, in my sight, my calamities!
The year of sorrow and care, of poverty and disgrace, of disappointment and wrong, is now passing on to join the Eternal. Now, O Lord! let, I beseech thee, my afflictions and prayers be remembered; -- let my faults and follies be forgotten!
O thou, who art the Fountain of Happiness, give me better submission to thy decrees; better disposition to correct my flattering hopes; better courage to bear up under my state of oppression.
The year past, O my God! let it not be to me again a torment -- the year coming, if it is thy will, be it never such. Nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt. Whether I live or whether I die, whether I be poor or whether I be prosperous, O my Saviour! may I be thine!
Amen.71

The comparison with some of Johnson's prayers is not inappropriate, so long as one bears in mind that Crabbe was moved to make these

70Bunbury Letter. Quoted from Huchon, p. 495.
71Life, Ch. ii, pp. 42-43.
appeals to the Deity because of his poverty and not out of a fear of original sin and God's judgment. Concerning this prayer, E.M. Forster has said that "[it] reveals the agony through which he then passed, and it is possible that if life had kept hard for him he might have taken a tragic view of it, similar to Thomas Hardy's." But as will be seen in later chapters, Crabbe's experiences did lead him to take a tragic view of life, but never consistently.

Had Crabbe fully appreciated the difficulties ahead of him in London, he might never have given up his practice. The boldness of his decision to go to London is worthy of note as an example of his singularly persistent determination to achieve distinction. In leaving Aldborough he was breaking all his family ties to make one desperate gamble for success. Crabbe was no Boswell travelling to the capital in the hope of becoming an officer in the Guards; Boswell knew that if he failed he could always return to the Scottish bar, that his father, Lord Auchinleck, would be ready with assistance. Crabbe, on the other hand, had no money; to pay for his passage he had to borrow five pounds from Dudley North. He had no connections in London, and based most of his hopes on Lord North, whom his father had met once at the House of Commons on a matter of election business. Apparently Lord North had treated the elder Crabbe with "condescension and affability."  


73 Bunbury Letter. Quoted from Huchon, p. 495.
Grabbe realized that if he were ever to fulfill himself, live as a gentleman, and marry Mira, then he had to make himself known in the capital.

The flight from Aldborough was a flight from poverty: Crabbe did not sail to London for the purpose of establishing himself as a poet; he went to London in the hope that his education and writings would enable him to secure a livelihood. No doubt he believed his poems would help to win him favour (although in this he later admitted his naivete\(^7_4\)), but unlike Chatterton who came to London primarily to make his name as a poet, Crabbe arrived in the metropolis hoping to find a government post. Although Crabbe attempted to publish his verses, and one poem, *The Candidate*, was eventually published by H. Payne, he did not at first place much hope in his poetry. For some time he was busily engaged in writing a book on theology, "A Plan for the Examination of our Moral and Religious Opinions."\(^7_5\) When he petitioned Lord North for help, he asked "for employment in any department that I should be thought qualified for."\(^7_6\) After Lord North had proved unreceptive, Crabbe appealed to his opposite, Lord Shelburne:

> My Lord, I now turn to your Lordship, and entreat to be heard. I am ignorant what to ask, but feel forcibly my wants -- Patronage and Bread. I have no other claim on your Lordship than my necessities,

\(^7_4\)Bunbury Letter. See Huchon, p. 495.

\(^7_5\)*Life*, Ch. iii, pp. 57-58.

\(^7_6\)Grabbe mentions this in the Bunbury Letter. Quoted from Huchon, p. 495. The letter to Lord North is now lost, several pages being torn out of Crabbe’s journal.
but they are great, unless my Muse, and she has, I am afraid, as few charms; nor is it a time for such to flourish: in serener days, my Lord, I have produced some poetical compositions the public might approve, and your Lordship not disdain to patronise . . . . May I not hope it will occur to you how I may be useful? My heart is humbled to all but villainy, and would live, if honestly, in any situation.77

Until this time Crabbe had vaguely and rather naively thought that it would be fairly easy for a person of merit to gain advancement in London.78 Like most middle-class people he had no quarrel with the existing social system. But after receiving rebuffs from many of the great figures of the time -- North, Shelburne, Thurlow -- Crabbe began to grow disillusioned with the social order he had so eulogized in his youth. The beginning of this process of disillusionment can be seen in "The Choice" (1780). In his youth Crabbe had enjoyed publishing his poetry in Wheble's Lady's Magazine, but he now realized that poetry of this evanescent kind:

The dull description of a scribbler's brain,
And sigh'd-for wealth, for which he sighs in vain;
A glowing chart of fairy-land estate,
Romantic scenes, and visions out of date,
Clear skies, clear streams, soft banks, and sober bowers,
Deer, whimpering brooks, and wind-perfuming flowers
(lines 5-10)

cannot hope to gain favour with the world because the great are no longer interested in such "visions" of the imagination. He declares that no poet, with the exception of Pope, ever profited

77 Life, Ch. iii, pp. 78-79.
78 See Crabbe's first letter to Edmund Burke, in Huchon's facsimile, pp. 112f.
from poetry, and claims that all the famous poets, from Dryden to Johnson, died poor, never knowing from where the next day's food was to come. As "The Choice" indicates, Crabbe was becoming quite bitter towards the upper classes; the only way of obtaining help from the great was by flattery:

No, if for food thy unambitious pray'r,
With supple acts to supple minds repair;
Learn of the base in soft grimace to deal,
And deck thee with the livery genteel;
Or trim the wherry, or the flail invite,
Draw teeth, or any viler thing but write.
Writers, whom once th' astonish'd vulgar saw
Give nations language, and great cities law;
Whom gods, they said -- and surely gods -- inspired,
Whom emp'rors honour'd, and the world admired,
Now common grown, they awe mankind no more,
But vassals are, who judges were before

(lines 44-55).

Crabbe's son claimed that his father knew nothing about the upper classes which he had so bitterly satirized in *Inebriety*. Yet "The Choice," written out of Crabbe's own experiences with the charity of the great ones of the land, is very close in tone and sentiment to the satire on the rich in *Inebriety*. In "The Choice" one can see that Crabbe was becoming dissatisfied with both the "romantic scenes" of contemporary poetry and the great myth of the eighteenth century that the wealthy held themselves responsible for encouraging merit amongst the poor.

That Crabbe's principal aim in writing poetry was to gain a comfortable living has already been mentioned. "The Choice" again brings out the point that Crabbe's desires were not overly ambitious. As he said to Shelburne, he required bread, not glory.

Obviously Crabbe is here exaggerating, although only a little.
Rene Huchon has also commented on Crabbe's conservatism:

He is by nature an official and a gentleman; what he wants is some modest but safe post, which will give him consideration and leisure. In our day his ambition would have been to scribble his verses on a desk in a Government office. He has none of the heedlessness and absent-mindedness of Goldsmith; none of the irregularity of Boyse or Savage, who, once their pockets were full, spent the money in drink and debauchery; none of their indifference to the opinion of society.80

This view of Crabbe is true only in part, for Crabbe's experiences in London led him to regard society with a good deal of reserve. He had a great admiration for individuals of the aristocracy, but as a class purporting to administer the wealth and constitution of the nation to the best advantage of all, the wealthy landowners and Westminster officials no longer commanded his unconditional esteem. In "The Choice" Crabbe makes clear that the rich and influential are often the pawns of fools and flatterers. Wisdom and good sense, he finds, are no longer prized in a world where members succeed by bribes and "ministers by lies." Lord North was supposed to have been a man of letters (in this Crabbe, like many other people, was no doubt mistaken) and Crabbe had been optimistic about his letter to Lord North, "the most consequential piece I ever executed, whether in prose or poetry."81 When Lord North failed to recognize the great art of this petitioning letter, Crabbe no doubt felt he had been deceived, that the fraternity of men of letters was just one

80Huchon, p. 97.
81Entry for May 21, 1780, of Crabbe's "London Journal," in Life, Ch. iii, p. 73.
more of the many hoaxes of a world in which the gold sovereign was the new card of admittance. Yet his increasing disillusionment with the upper classes did not change his own goals. As he says at the end of "The Choice," what he requires is "a placid harbour from the stormy main" (line 83).

As a result of his experiences, Crabbe began to feel that he was a different kind of poet from those of previous generations, a poet who could offer a view of society from below stairs. His early life effectively debarred him from assuming the tone and stance of the Augustans with their comprehensive world view, and when he realized this, he began to understand that he was uniquely equipped to write about a section of the world which it had been customary to ignore -- the difficulties and sufferings of those who had no claim to notice other than that they were struggling human beings. This new knowledge of himself is beginning to make itself felt in the poem which he wrote to Prince William Henry, a fragment of which remains. Here he identifies himself by drawing attention to his different background:

Who thus aspiring sings, would'st thou explore?  
A Bard replies, who ne'er assumed before --  
One taught in hard affliction's school to bear  
Life's ills, where every lesson costs a tear;  
Who sees from thence the proper point of view,  
What the wise heed not, and the weak pursue.  

He asks the Prince's pardon for being presumptuous in his demands, but claims that poverty makes a man forget his manners: "For want is absent, and dejection rude" (line 39).

82Poems by George Crabbe, I, 66, lines 1-6.
Crabbe's growing discontent with the way the influential people of London ignored his requests for help finally brought him in the poem "An Epistle to a Friend" (1780),\textsuperscript{83} to question the validity of the social structure itself.\textsuperscript{84} Crabbe begins by describing the political poets of the time whom he feels to be parasites because they change their party allegiances for gain. Crabbe denies that he has ever been such a person:

\begin{quote}
The Muse I court ne'er fawn'd on venal souls,
Whom suppliants angle, and poor praise controls
\end{quote}

(lines 7-8).

But of course for the past year he had done just this, writing verse letters first to Lord North and then to Shelburne. Actually the poem depends for its impetus on Crabbe's guilty conscience, for he now feels that such dissembling is wrong, and resolves to speak honestly and without hypocrisy.

In stating his new poetic creed, Crabbe confesses that he had amused himself as a young man by writing simple pastoral poetry and love songs to Mira; his muse "sang to the woods, and Mira was her theme." But he feels now that this type of poetry is a mere pretence, and that a greater theme demands expression. His intention

\textsuperscript{83}One of the poems he sent to Lord Shelburne when asking for his patronage. See Life, Ch. iii, pp. 78-81. "An Epistle to a Friend" as well as the poem "To the Right Honourable Earl of Shelburne" (presumably another such poem Crabbe sent to Shelburne) have been included in Ward's edition of Poems by George Crabbe.

\textsuperscript{84}He felt that Lord North had been not only ungenerous, but "cruel and unkind." The reason was that for over three months Lord North had refused to give an answer to his request for help. See Letter to Lord Shelburne in Life, Ch. iii, p. 78.
is to give up poetry which is merely "fancy's dream," poetry which sentimentalizes the world, for he has discovered that the cloak of ignorance and poetic illusion is helping to hide society's corruption. In this poem Crabbe sees himself as the prophetic individual who reveals the true state of the king's clothes. His muse is now to speak from the oracle of truth:

But, when she sees a titled nothing stand
The ready cipher of a trembling land --
Not of that simple kind that, placed alone,
Are useless, harmless things, and threaten none;
But those which, join'd to figures, well express
A strengthen'd tribe that amplify distress;
Grow in proportion to their number great,
And help each other in the ranks of state --
When this and more the pensive Muses see,
They leave the vales and willing nymphs to thee;
To Court on wings of agile anger speed,
And paint to freedom's sons each guileful deed.
Hence rascals teach the virtues they detest,
And fright base action from sin's wavering breast;
For, though the Knave may scorn the Muse's arts,
Her sting may haply pierce more timid hearts.
Some, though they wish it, are not steel'd enough,
Nor is each would-be villain conscience-proof
(lines 11-28).

His theme will be social reform; his task, to call attention to the injustices he had seen so clearly in his difficult years in London and Aldborough. In his prayer he had called upon God to help him bear oppression; now he plans to take it upon himself as a poet of social protest to show the world where this oppression lies.

If the poem ended here, it could be regarded as a revolutionary manifesto, but a coda, equally important, is added to alter the revolutionary attitude to one of reform:

Yet shall not Satire all my song engage
In indiscriminate and idle rage;
True praise, where Virtue prompts, shall gild each line,
And long -- if Vanity deceives not -- shine.
For, though in harsher strains, the strains of woe,
And unadorn'd my heart-felt murmurs flow,
Yet time shall be when this thine humbled friend
Shall to more lofty heights his notes extend
(lines 37-44).

Realizing that there is a danger of painting the world too black,
Crabbe explains that he will apportion praise as well as blame.
Then quite unexpectedly, but in a way which we shall see is typical
of all Crabbe's poetry, the poem turns from a diatribe against court
flattery into a tribute to Lord Shelburne:

Round the reviving bays new sweets shall spring,
And SHELBURNE'S fame through laughing valleys ring
(lines 53-54).

Beginning with a condemnation of political flattery, Crabbe has ended
by indulging in just such flattery. It is extremely doubtful that
Crabbe gave this tribute to Shelburne because he was politically
acute enough to see Shelburne's statesman-like qualities, and
besides, he had written shortly before in praise of Shelburne's
opponent, Lord North. Was Crabbe simply unable to see that a
general attack on court flattery made impossible his own flattery?
Or perhaps he actually believed that important figures such as
Shelburne, North and Thurlow were a race apart from the "venal souls"
-- the ordinary members of parliament? He describes Shelburne: "A
Man -- for other title were too poor -- / Such as 'twere almost
virtue to adore."

Another hypothesis, although hardly satisfactory, is that
the last line of the poem: "And SHELBURNE'S fame through laughing

\[85\] Shelburne was one of the most unpopular of all politicians
of the time of George III, although twentieth century historians have
found him to be one of the most brilliant.
valleys ring," is meant to be ironic. Are the valleys meant to be laughing with, or at Shelburne? Crabbe of course would not have meant Shelburne to see the irony and take offence, since he wanted Shelburne's patronage. Still, he might well have included the irony as a means to satisfy his own convictions.

Yet the poem is hardly ironic in the normal sense of the term, since an ironic intention cannot be identified with any certainty. One is driven to suggest irony as a possible answer because the poem is able to contain two contradictory ideas. Nor is this essentially dialectical phenomenon to be found in this poem alone; I suggest, and this thesis will, I hope show, that ambivalence or dialectic lies at the heart of all Crabbe's poetry, and especially those poems developing social ideas.

While "An Epistle to a Friend" states Crabbe's intention of launching into a new type of verse, that of social protest, the poem itself does not contain any mention of particular social and economic problems. For those, we have to await The Village. Yet by 1780 it seems clear that Crabbe's own experiences in Aldborough and London have forced him to drop his earlier professions of "sad melancholy" in poems such as "Midnight" to voice his own dissatisfaction with the state of the nation. In the years ahead, this indignation with abuses in the social order was to be manifested many times, yet as will be shown, Crabbe never lost his earlier vision of "Life" as an "Idiot's Tale" in which progress was impossible.
CHAPTER 2

"OUR BRITISH JUVENAL"

I

The year 1783, the last year of the long and costly American war, was a particularly difficult one for England's lower and middle classes. During the spring of the year the poor were especially affected "owing to the high price of food," with many parts of the country experiencing a "frightful increase of crime, especially of burglaries and highway robberies." As a result of a series of sharp increases in prices, the cost of wheat stood at an all time high. When the price of wheat plummeted immediately after the Treaty of Versailles, the uncertainty of these fluctuations caused even greater hardship. Nor were the times difficult for


the poor alone; the large number of bankruptcies in the year 1783 reveal that merchants and traders were also affected. Undoubtedly the exigencies of the American war were responsible for much of the hardship -- the high price of wheat, and the decrease of trade in sea ports such as Bristol -- but even so, many people were beginning to realize that conditions among the lower classes were not good, and that the nation would have to turn its mind to removing some of the burden falling on small farmers, tenants, and labourers. In this respect the year 1783 was also a year of good omen, for with the end of the highly unpopular American war, it was expected that Great Britain could begin to tackle some of its own problems. In the previous year George III had found it necessary to give up Lord North because "public opinion was unashamedly for a quick peace"; the nation waited with hesitancy and expectation to see what the reforming intentions of Rockingham and Shelburne would bring.

In May 1783, amidst economic depression and uncertainty, appeared Crabbe's poem The Village. It is curious to note that The Village, which protests strongly against the commercial and inhuman treatment of workers, did not cause people any undue concern, or even arouse controversy about its social statements. If the poem had been published some ten to fifteen years later, it might well have been classified as a scurrilous Jacobin attack on the

3T.S. Ashton, Table XVI, p. 254.

principles of the Constitution, but appearing as it did in 1783, published by the respectable Robert Dodsley, *The Village* was regarded as a "classical" poem.

That Crabbe's intention was to expose some of the worst conditions of the agricultural labourers is clear even from the most superficial reading of the poem. The "weighty griefs" of the poor, Crabbe feels, are "real ills" which can no longer be hidden "in tinsel trappings of poetic pride" (I. 48). The old peasant of Book I tellingly presents the hardships endured by the poor. He finds that after a long and honest life of labour he has no rewards in his old age, no security, and certainly no comfortable cottage to which he can retire; he has to begin again, working when he can for the lowest wage. In order to impress upon his readers that such cases were not merely poetic effusions, Crabbe felt it necessary, in later editions, to add a footnote to this passage explaining the circumstances of the peasant. He wanted his readers to understand that the social evils described in the poem were documentaries, not poetic constructs.

Yet in spite of strong social criticism in *The Village*, readers were not so much distressed by Crabbe's accusations as they

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[A statement by Coleridge at the time when he was trying to defend Southey's *Wat Tyler* may be helpful in pointing out that social ideas for reform were more acceptable in the days before the French Revolution than after. Coleridge said that, with the exception of one passage, *Wat Tyler* "contains nothing . . . that would not have been praised and thought all very right forty years ago at all the Public Schools in England, had it been written by a Lad in the first form, as a Poem. For who in the Devil's Name ever thought of reading Poetry for any political or practical purposes till these Devil's Times that we live in?" Letter to T.G. Street, March 22, 1817, in *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1959), IV, 713.]
were pleased with the way in which he had presented them in a "classical" form. Scott of Amwell, said:

"The Village" is a very classical composition. It seems designed as a contrast to Goldsmith's "Deserted Village" in one point of view; that is, so far as Goldsmith expatiates on the felicities and inconveniences of rural life. The author of "The Village" takes the dark side of the question; he paints all with a sombre pencil; too justly, perhaps, but, to me at least, unpleasingly. We know there is no unmixed happiness in any state of life; but one does not wish to be perpetually told so. 6

As Crabbe had no wish to describe village life in a pleasing manner, Scott's comment on how The Village dealt too much with the dark side of life suggests that the poem may have achieved more of its intention to shock and disturb than Scott realized or was willing to admit.

One would have thought that an attack such as Crabbe's would have elicited some unfavourable criticism from those who still regarded England as a georgic Garden of Eden. Readers and reviewers alike, however, seem to have quietly accepted Crabbe's opinions about the terrible state of the poor. Even the title page of the poem excited no comment:

The / Village: / A / Poem. / In Two Books. / By / The Rev'd George Crabbe, / Chaplain To His Grace The Duke Of Rutland, Etc.

Readers found nothing unusual in a chaplain to one of the greatest lords of the land exposing the callous treatment meted out by the estate owners to tenants and labourers.

6 Letter to James Beattie, August 1783. Quoted from the 1834 edition of the Poetical Works, II, 99, n.2. Crabbe's son also emphasized the "classical" qualities of The Village. See Life, Ch. v, p. 121.
Crabbe's contemporaries have not been the only ones to overlook his new themes. Recently Arthur Sale has emphasized once again how conservative Crabbe was in his use of Augustan models for *The Village.* Nor would I wish to deny that *The Village,* with its antitheses and satire directed at a general subject (Sale's phrases), resembles more closely early eighteenth century models than does any of his later work. The poem begins in the great classical tradition:

The Village Life, and every care that reigns
O'er youthful peasants and declining swains;
What labour yields, and what, that labour past,
Age, in its hour of langour, finds at last;

... Demand a song -- the Muse can give no more
(I. 1-6).

But what many readers of Crabbe, Sale included, seem to have misunderstood is that Crabbe’s use of classical forms is often ironical. In the midst of this epic opening, Crabbe introduces his theme:

What form the real picture of the poor
(I. 5).

At this point the reader realizes that Crabbe is mocking the classical subjects. The irony lies in the way Crabbe employs the

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Arthur Sale, "The Development of Crabbe's Narrative Art," in *The Cambridge Journal,* V (May 1952), 482. Admittedly Arthur Sale's point is well taken. All too many people have agreed with the editors of the Oxford edition of Crabbe's Poetical Works, when they said: "It is unnecessary to speak of his later work: where this is good it carries on the quality of *The Village,* but while the range of treatment is larger, it can hardly be said anywhere to reach a higher level," ed. A.J. Carlyle and R.M. Carlyle (London, 1908), pp. xi-xii. This view of Crabbe is utter nonsense, and Sale was correct to point it out to be such.
classical form to state his rejection of the classical subject matter. The subject of The Village is not to be an epic battle, nor a pastoral, but "the real picture of the poor." And in giving this real picture, Crabbe shows that classical portraits and images have no place. To say that The Village is a "classical poem" is to state only half the truth; Crabbe uses the classical conventions, but he does so to an ironic purpose.

If Crabbe intended to give "the real picture" then there must also have been a false picture. This false picture had its origin in the belief that a pastoral life of ease and pleasure existed in England. Crabbe's first job was to demolish this pastoral myth. But once again, he ensures that his criticism of the classical pastoral is formulated in a classical manner:

On Mincio's banks, in Caesar's bounteous reign,
If Tityrus found the Golden Age again,
Must sleepy bards the flattering dream prolong,
Mechanic echoes of the Mantuan song?
From Truth and Nature shall we widely stray,
Where Virgil, not where Fancy, leads the way?
(I. 15-20)

These lines, written in the formal classical style, and abounding in classical allusions, appealed greatly to many of Crabbe's readers like Scott of Amwell. But the point is that in spite of their classical appearance, they are a repudiation of the classical aesthetic as practised in the eighteenth century. Crabbe is claiming that Roman models are useful only to "sleepy bards"; by

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8 For a full treatment of Crabbe's repudiation of the pastoral tradition, and a discussion of how deeply interwoven the pastoral ideal was with eighteenth century ideas, see Appendix I.
following the classical models English poets have strayed from the truth of English life.

These last quoted lines, it should be remarked, are Johnson's, not Crabbe's. But the only major difference in thought between Crabbe's original version and that of Johnson is in the last line. Johnson declared that the poet would go astray if he followed Virgil and not his "Fancy." In the original, Crabbe had said that the poet would be mistaken if he followed either Virgil or his "Fancy." Obviously what Crabbe wanted was poetry which incorporated direct observations, and which did not attempt either fanciful or Virgilian commentary. Thus in a very classical manner, Crabbe has set out to refute the need for classical allusions to describe English village life.

Crabbe's main criticism, however, is not with classical poetry per se, but with the inclusion of classical subject matter in descriptions of English country life. In the pastoral, shepherds were often portrayed in "song contests," and in one sense, Crabbe utilizes this convention; in the "song contest" of The Village, Crabbe's adversary is the modern poet who remains content to know nothing of the lives of agricultural labourers, except what he learns from the classics.

In his criticism of contemporary poets for continuing to dress villagers in the trappings of Virgil's Eclogues, Crabbe takes care to remind his readers of the imagined life of bliss enjoyed by

Appendix I gives Crabbe's original lines and a discussion of the significance of the change.
the pastoral shepherds and milkmaids. Not only does this
description show how little English rural life approximates the
pastoral standard, it also gives Crabbe a measuring stick with
which he can judge contemporary rural life. The life of ease and
pleasure enjoyed by the Corydons of pastoral offers a startling
and most unpleasant contrast to the actual lives led by farm
labourers. Nowhere does Crabbe suggest that the life of pastoral
was ever a true representation of the facts of English country life,
or even that such a life was possible in eighteenth century England.
But the contrast between the pastoral and the actual does serve to
point up the disparity between what many of the cultured towns¬
poples would have liked to believe constituted the life of country
people and what actually was the case. The contrast between the
two enables the reader to see that something is seriously amiss.

Few people of the eighteenth century would have actually
believed that pastoral poetry described life around them in village
England, but that they were willing to believe, or imagine, such a
life possible, creates a situation where the actual conditions of
eighteenth century villagers appear intolerable. Thus by intro¬
ducing the mock standards of the pastoral, Crabbe was able to
contrast the actual and the visionary, the obvious conclusion being
that immediate steps to improve living conditions were necessary.

This juxtaposition of the real and ideal -- of the life

\[10\] William Empson has suggested that the pastoral art form
"is important for a nation with a strong class-system" because it
"makes the classes feel part of a larger unity or simply at home
with each other." See Some Versions of Pastoral (London, 1935),
p. 199.
that society would like to imagine the shepherds leading and the life they actually lead -- gave Crabbe his chance to condemn the hypocrisy of the wealthy and prosperous, thus manipulating a situation where one's sympathy is placed immediately on the side of the villager. Throughout the poem Crabbe pretends to address someone of the leisured class who believes, or pretends to believe, that village life approximates Virgil's golden age. By this means, Crabbe is able to speak as if he were arguing with a simple-minded advocate of pastoral. When Crabbe says: "I grant indeed that fields and flocks have charms" (I. 39), he pretends for the moment to agree with the person defending the good life of England's villagers. But he then adds his own comment in the next line: "For him that grazes or for him that farms," showing that the pastoral applies to the rich landowner, not to the poor shepherd. This continued sense of argument gives the poem its tone of high moral indignation. But Crabbe criticizes without ever saying that the social order is itself in any way unjust; the question, on the surface at least, is not whether the great landowners treat their workers unfairly, but whether they are unfair to themselves in refusing to recognize the actual conditions of village life. The difference here is important to an understanding of the poem and is essential to a clear grasp of Crabbe's social ideals. His sympathy lies with the workers, but it derives originally not from any ultimate conception of an equitable social order, but from a disdain for the hypocrisy of the leisured class which refuses to admit the substandard conditions of village life.
In order to understand Crabbe's purpose in describing the villagers as both vicious and ill-treated, it is essential to grasp at the beginning that Crabbe was not the first poet of the eighteenth century to describe the plight of the poor. Poverty, exemplified by widows and orphans, is a recurrent theme in eighteenth century poetry. In many respects The Village was written in protest against a particularly obnoxious version of sentimentalized humanitarianism which was rife in the period 1740-1790. An early evidence of this humanitarian spirit can be seen in Richard Steele's comment on the paupers of London: "Such miserable Objects affect the compassionate Beholder with dismal Ideas, discompose the Cheerfulness of his Mind, and deprive him of the Pleasure that he might otherwise take in surveying the Grandeur of our Metropolis."\(^{11}\) One sees immediately that Steele is interested as much in the effect of poverty on the mind of the beholder as he is in poverty itself.

Early in the century, charity to the poor became one of those stock epithets which one finds attributed to any member of the leisured class claiming to fulfil Shaftesbury's ideal of the man of taste, humanity and culture.\(^{12}\) In The Choice (1700) Pomfret declares:

I'd have a clear and competent Estate,  
That I might live genteelly, but not great:


As much as I could moderately spend;  
A little more, sometimes t'oblige a Friend.  
Nor should the Sons of Poverty repine  
Too much at Fortune, they should taste of mine;  
And all that Objects of true Pity were,  
Should be reliev'd with what my Wants could spare.  

John Philips in his poem *Cyder* (1708) also includes amongst the virtues of the good man, his desire to remove "Penury, the worst of Iills."¹⁴ In these passing nods to benevolence, neither poem succeeds in convincing us that the poet feels a deep concern for the poor. Much of the impetus for benevolence stems from the poets' disapproval of the luxury of the city. The writers generally remark how, in retiring to the country, the good man is able to participate in the harmony of nature. In *Trivia* (1716) Gay notes the discord of the city:

> Here the brib'd lawyer, sunk in velvet, sleeps;  
The starving orphan, as he passes, weeps.  

This belief that the customs of the city had thrown man out of step with God's original cosmic order was echoed time and again.

James Thomson was often able to throw off the conventions of humanitarianism to instil new life in his descriptions of poverty. He notes how the poor were forced to live in the "sordid hut of cheerless poverty." Thomson felt that if only the problems of the poor were recognized and dealt with, society might be restored to its early harmony:


Thought fond man
Of these, and all the thousand nameless ills,
That one incessant struggle render life,
One scene of toil, of suffering, and of fate,
Vice in his high career would stand appall'd,
And needless rambling Impulse learn to think;
The conscious heart of Charity would warm,
And her wide wish Benevolence dilate;
The social tear would rise, the social sigh;
And into clear perfection, gradual bliss;
Refining still, the social passions work.

But even here, Thomson places great stress on the "social tear" and "social sigh," and thus takes the reader's attention away from the poor to the feelings of the philanthropist. Savage in The Wanderer (1729) showed his dislike for contemporary attitudes about the "lazy poor" when he wrote of the vagrants being hassased by the wealthy:

Poor Wretch! -- Is this for Charity his Haunt?
He meets the frequent Slight, and ruthless Taunt.
On Slaves of Guilt oft smiles the squand'ring Peer;
But passing knows not common Bounty here.
Vain thing! in what dost thou superior shine?
His our first Sire: what Race more ancient thine?

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

Yet here the gesture of giving alms once again dominates the description. Throughout the century countless poets retailed the pleasures of charity; Pope's Man of Ross is only one example of many such philanthropists. In most of these cases, the emphasis


lies not on the poor person, but on the benevolence of the rich man. No doubt all these poets had a genuine humanitarian feeling for the poor, but when they expressed these feelings in verse, the stress fell on the act of charity, on the way this act placed the "good man" in harmony with nature and God, rather than on the plight of the poor man.

Such an emphasis on the dispenser of charity was bound to have a degenerating effect on lesser poets, and in the second half of the eighteenth century, benevolence, which had begun as a stock but pleasant epithet, became debased and sentimentalized. This process can be seen especially in Akenside. In The Pleasures of Imagination (1744), benevolence is admired because the act itself gives pleasure: nothing is so "fair" as "the graceful tear that streams for others' woes." Even in The Pleasures of Melancholy (1747), where Thomas Warton enthusiastically describes the life "remote from man," this equation of the "good man" with the "benevolent man" makes its appearance, for Warton (at midnight, in reverie) "melts" with "sympathizing tears" at the thought of a "brother's woe" (lines 225-225). John Armstrong went one step further when he equated charity with good taste: "Of all Taste the noblest and the best" was to "behold in Man's obnoxious State / Scenes of Content, and happy Turns of Fate." Armstrong believed


that the "Man of generous Mould" exercises the best taste when he helps to bring content to the poor, and as proof, he cites how these are "generous Deeds as we with Tears admire."

Gradually, as a result of the emphasis placed on the feelings of the philanthropist, the poor were no longer described as distressed people living in a "sordid hut," but pastoral shepherds idling in a green and merry land. Since the poets wished to emphasize the beauty of the act of charity, they found it necessary to describe beautiful surroundings and not empty commons. The countryside in The Pleasures of Imagination is not only beautiful, but its beauty is an emblem of the good life nature intends for the villagers:

The generous glebe

Whose bosom smiles with verdure, the clear tract
Of streams delicious to the thirsty soul,
The bloom of nectar'd fruitage ripe to sense,
And every charm of animated things,
Are only pledges of a state sincere,
The integrity and order of their frame,
When all is well within, and every end
Accomplish'd.21

In Dodsley's Agriculture, the farmer who is not tempted with pride or "pomp of Power," and who does not succumb to "grasping Av'rice," lives in a pastoral landscape where "sweet prospects rise / Of meadows smiling in their flow'ry pride," and of course, "scenes of innocence, and calm delight."22 One wonders how avarice could

20 Of Benevolence, p. 7.
ever gain a foothold in such an idyll or how there could be poor for the farmer to relieve.

Shenstone was to continue this process of beautifying the poor until they were unrecognizable. In Rural Elegance (1750), he wrote:

O sweet disposal of the rural hour;
0 beauties never known to cloy!
While worth and genius haunt the favour'd bow'r,
And every gentle breast partakes the joy!
While charity at eve surveys the swain,
Enabled by these toils to cheer
A train of helpless infants dear
Speed whistling home across the plain.\(^{23}\)

Here the ugliness of poverty has been entirely removed.

By mid-century, benevolence had become associated with good taste and elegance. The squalor and misery of the poor had been replaced by a pastoral landscape in which the man of leisure could gracefully assist the "sons of want" at his leisure. This debased theme of charity was developed by hundreds of poetasters throughout the century; numerous examples can be found in any of the reviews, journals and miscellanies. In 1787 George Wright edited a collection of such poems entitled Retired Pleasures in Prose and Verse. In this collection, the greatest of all pleasures is, of course, the gift to the poor. B. Kirkman Gray has pointed out that throughout this period whenever the rich completed a long journey, were caught in a storm at sea, or for any other reason felt the desire to thank God for helping them, they showed their

pleasure and gratitude by a gift to the poor.\textsuperscript{24}

An apology is perhaps required for developing at such length the background to Crabbe's attack on "sleepy bards," but it is important to see the type of "humanitarian poetry" being written prior to Crabbe's The Village to understand his reaction. He is not developing the idea that the poor should be helped (the humanitarians had made this theme appear trite), but rather that one must recognize what the poor and their conditions are really like before attempting to help them. In many ways, Crabbe's The Village is anti-humanitarian, because in the 1780's "humanitarian" entailed a sentimental attitude to the poor. I am not trying to say that no genuine humanitarian poetry was written before Crabbe's time. Obviously sections of Pope's Moral Essays and Thomson's The Seasons, Johnson's London and Langhorne's The Country Justice show a genuine concern for the poor. The point which does need stressing, however, is that the great mass of humanitarian verse, especially from 1740 to 1780, was of a mawkish and sentimental character. In order to avoid the dangers of a trite humanitarian appeal to the conscience of the rich, Crabbe decided that a true account of the state of the poor was required. Opinions can be easily disregarded; a statement of fact almost always stirs the conscience.

When Crabbe decided to portray villagers in all their rusticity, he was not required to begin a totally new type of

description, but only to alter a convention already in existence. Pope's "The Alley" (1727), Swift's "A Description of the Morning" (1709), and Gay's The Shepherd's Week (1714) had all shown the lower classes to be rude and barbaric. Throughout the eighteenth century, the writers of town-eclogues portrayed the lower classes as curious and rude. Even Goldsmith's Tony Lumpkin, although hardly a labourer, has something of "Colin Clout" about him.

Crabbe's account follows in this tradition, for the people of The Village are "wild" and "sullen." Yet Crabbe's representation of brutish low life has a very different purpose from that of Gay and Swift. Whereas earlier eighteenth century poets had revelled in the clown-like qualities of the country bumpkin, these qualities appalled Crabbe and left him highly indignant. Although Crabbe's villagers are still as "low" as Swift's "Brickdust Moll," Crabbe has introduced a new tone and theme: the tone lies in Crabbe's indignation with the debasement of the poor, and the theme in his new-found concern to explain the reasons for their degradation.

Crabbe's interest in the social causes of the viciousness of the poor is a point much neglected by critics. In his

25 Varley Howe Lang, in Crabbe and the Eighteenth Century (Baltimore, 1938), deals at some length with Crabbe's debt to the mock-pastoral tradition. Franklin P. Batdorf has pointed out that Cowper in "Hope" (1782) had already shown that English village life was altogether unlike the pastoral ideal when he noted that the poor, who were "inur'd to drudgery and distress," could "think little and feel less." Like Crabbe, Cowper felt that only in "feign'd Arcadian scenes," could the poor "Taste happiness, or know what pleasure means" ("Hope" lines 7-10). See Franklin P. Batdorf, "The Background of Crabbe's Village," Notes and Queries, CXCIV (1949), p. 477.
recent book, George Crabbe, Robert Chamberlain has suggested that Crabbe was unaware of the interaction of social forces on man's personality: "If vice may inhabit all men and if resistance to vice depends little upon social conditions, then those poor for whom Crabbe's verses waken compassion must as human beings receive also their share of reproof." But does "resistance to vice," or even vice, depend little on social conditions? And is this not one of the central issues on which the two books of The Village divide? The "frightful increase of crime" in Bristol during 1783 was not unconnected with the high cost of wheat and the general hard times. Did not Owen, Cobbett and many others, say that the nation could not expect workers to be honest and lawful until they were given at least a minimum of security?

Certainly in the first book of The Village Crabbe is anything but disposed to believe that social conditions are unconnected with crime. But for some reason critics have pretended to see little if anything new in Crabbe's censure of society for allowing and sanctioning the pernicious conditions of the poor. Indeed Arthur Sale has said that The Village offers no new ideas with regard to social conditions. According to Sale, it is a mistake to give Crabbe credit for any innovation in the representation of the plight of the workers. In Sale's view the reason why people were not stirred to action by Crabbe's description of village conditions was that Crabbe's view of society differed little from that of earlier poets and novelists: "The near-

political tone of some passages probably took its courage if not its conviction from the louder indignation of Langhorne's *The Country Justice*, which, being nearly a decade earlier, and also popular, might be thought to deserve the credit for pioneering mistakenly given to *The Village* . . . ."  
While the question of Crabbe's possible debt to Langhorne is a serious one, Sale only confuses the main issues when he nonchalantly states that neither Crabbe nor Langhorne had anything fresh to say, since Dodsley had said it all decades before in his poem *Agriculture*:  "The whole thing [had] been nutshelled still another twenty years earlier in a generously open order to 'reward / The poor man's toil, whence all your riches spring.'" Is "the whole thing" which Crabbe had to say in *The Village* nothing more than a command to reward the labour of the poor? Were this the case, then truly the poem would contain nothing new, but Crabbe does have a great deal more to say, and he succeeds in saying it.

Crabbe's sympathy for the villagers has already been noted in the way he indignantly spurns unrealistic portrayals of village life. By itself, this sympathy for the poor was hardly a new


28 Nowhere does Crabbe mention John Langhorne's poem *The Country Justice* (1774-1777), and there is no evidence to show that he read the poem. However as parts of *The Country Justice* were widely anthologized in the 1790's and later, it is likely that Crabbe knew of the poem at one time or another.

29 Sale is quoting from Robert Dodsley's poem *Agriculture* Canto I., lines 49-50.
phenomenon, yet often enough in the eighteenth century sympathy for the poor led only to sentimental gestures. The importance of *The Village* lies in the way Crabbe's knowledge of the actual hardships of the poor expresses itself in indignation. Moreover, Crabbe's attitude towards the poor derives not just from the humanitarian impulse to pity the misery and hardship of the villagers' lives, but also from a profound understanding of the underlying causes which create poverty, and over which the poor have little or no control. As seen by Crabbe, the villagers are victims of circumstance. A poetic realization of the "real picture of the poor" is necessarily different from that of the sociologist or statistician, but Crabbe's rendering of the villagers as the helpless captives of nature and commerce at once raises the poem above so many other humanitarian documents. For humanitarians to decry misery and exclaim that all men should be happy, that all men should be rewarded, is a beginning, but if such people do not recognize that changes in man's lot can only be effected by major social changes, then the "humanitarianism" remains mere cant, possibly causing more harm than good.

The setting of *The Village*, Crabbe's own town of Aldborough, brings out the ways in which environment moulds the character of the villagers. Situated on the sandy, infertile coastline of East Anglia, with its importance as a seaport declining, Aldborough in the late eighteenth century held none of the promise of rich farm lands and factories as did many of the towns around. It was
stagnating. In addition the sea was eating away the coastline of loose shingle, so that the inhabitants were forced to keep a close watch, lest during a storm, their homes be swept into the ocean. This setting of decay and violence admirably served Crabbe's purpose, for he wished to describe the villagers' fighting for their very survival.

This struggle for life is suggested through metaphors and images of dark forces of evil opposing man. Crabbe explains how he was born, not on an ordinary coast, but on a "frowning coast." He shows how the countryside is filled with Manichean forces ready to thwart man's efforts:

Lo! where the heath, with withering brake grown o'er, 
Lends the light turf that warms the neighbouring poor; 
From thence a length of burning sand appears, 
Where the thin harvest waves its wither'd ears; 
Rank weeds, that every art and care defy, 
Reign o'er the land, and rob the blighted rye: 
There thistles stretch their prickly arms afar, 
And to the ragged infant threaten war; 
There poppies, nodding, mock the hope of toil; 
There the blue bugloss paints the sterile soil; 
Hardy and high, above the slender sheaf, 
The slimy mallow waves her silky leaf; 
O'er the young shoot the charlock throws a shade, 
And clasping tares cling round the sickly blade; 
With mingled tints the rocky coasts abound 
And a sad splendour vainly shines around 
(I. 63-78).

This passage, which has become a favourite with admirers of Crabbe, is not the first example we have seen of Crabbe's use of topographic description to set the tone of a poem. It will be recalled that in both "Midnight" and Inebriety Crabbe described a landscape hostile

\[30^3\] See Life, Ch. i, p. 9.
to man. Endowed with human feelings, the threatening landscape is a good example of what Ruskin derisively termed the pathetic fallacy. Mrs. Haddakin has said: "The function of the passage as a whole is to demonstrate that if you look closely enough into a picturesque landscape you are led, by way of agricultural problems, to consider the welfare of human beings." Crabbe the poet has chosen not just any landscape, but one which answers his poetic needs; his description is not in natural terms alone, but in highly evocative normative language as well. Images such as "clasping tares," and the "slimy mallow" waving its "silky sheaf," have been carefully chosen to convey the impression that, on the most primeval terms, man has to combat forces of destruction. The inhabitants of the village do not live in a "Happy Valley" where the design of nature is ordered to help man, but on a coast where nature is man's enemy. The "frowning coast" sets the tone for the rest of Book I and develops the theme of man's struggle for existence. Nor is the land completely barren and sterile; rather a sad splendour reigns -- reminiscent of Milton's Hell.


32 Laura Johnson Wylie has commented that, "He conceived of no such thing as an isolated individual. His profound interest in the concrete led him to study men so closely that he saw them as part and parcel of the world to which they belonged. His people smack of the soil in which they have grown, and are intimately related to each other, as well as to that larger society whose creatures they are, however unconscious of the fact they may be." See "The England of George Crabbe," in Social Studies in English Literature (Boston & New York, 1916), p. 95.
The weeds look splendid to the "sleepy bards" writing pastoral, but they are a sad sight to the villager attempting to earn a living from the "thin harvest."

Surely one of Crabbe's innovations in humanitarian literature lies in his ability to set the scene so that his readers are able to understand the feelings of those living in poverty. By means of his imagery, he gives expression to the fears of the poor; one is able to experience something of the despair which confronts the villagers who submit to the "frowning coast." In addition he is able to suggest some of the reasons why the poor feel so helplessly inadequate to escape from poverty or to improve their lives. Just as in one of Mrs. Radcliffe's novels the reader is made to sympathize with the helpless heroine when confronted with different horrors, so the setting in *The Village* enables the reader to understand the villagers' fight for survival against superior and hostile forces of nature. This basic fact, that the artist interested in social commentary must always involve the reader in the actual circumstances and feelings of the persecuted, Crabbe had learned long before the novel of social protest was born.

Writers of pastorals had always described nature in pleasing terms so as to mirror their shepherds' contentment. Crabbe, who in some ways is writing an anti-pastoral, inverts this convention by describing a hostile nature. In his use of the sea as an agent of violence, Crabbe is following Thomas Tickell's theory that the sea was an unfit image for pastorals. In his papers on

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pastoral in *The Guardian*, Tickell had disapproved of the piscatory eclogues of Sannazarius because he felt the sea to be an object of terror instead of pleasure. Crabbe's development of the image of the threatening ocean, which "sweeps the low hut and all it holds away," to create a sense of terror is completely in accord with his wish to write an anti-pastoral.

That many of the people who do survive such an anti-pastoral environment are morally stunted, misanthropic, and guilty of criminal acts, is only to be expected. Even to hope that morality would exist under such circumstances is perhaps presumptuous. Crabbe was never greatly influenced by theories of the natural goodness of man, so that having once established nature as opposing man, he does not hesitate to draw the conclusion that the people of the village are rude and lawless. Critics have made much of the way Crabbe, in Book II, shows his villagers to be brawling drunkards, but in fact Crabbe brings out the baseness of the villagers in both books. The villagers of Book I are far from being the pleasing shepherds of pastoral:

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

The writers of genuine anti-pastoral, such as Gay in *Rural Sports* and Jago in *The Scavengers*, realized of course the basic error in assuming that the English peasant could be anything like the Shepherd of Virgil's Eclogues. Much of their satire is based on the antipathy between character and situation, personality and environment.
The villagers reflect the environment around them:

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

(The. 85-88).

The village then is pre-eminently a place of hostility in which all the forces of nature oppose man's happiness. Man's misery and his viciousness are explained as the counterparts of environment.

In Huchon's opinion, one of the reasons why Crabbe failed to create a unified poem was that he was unsure whether to describe his villagers as vicious or virtuous. Yet in Book I, Crabbe shows that the villagers are vicious, and what is more important, that their viciousness is the result of their surroundings. Just as the heath around the village produces weeds and "clasping tares" so does it produce wild, uncouth people. The people mirror their environment: as the heath is untamed, "so looks the nymph." Crabbe's villagers are pitied, not because they are virtuous, but because they cannot help being vicious. The surroundings drive the villagers to crime as the only way to make a living. The land will not allow them to grow crops: "poppies, nodding, mock the hope of toil." Moreover these people have never been taught the civilizing graces; they live "far from civil arts and social."

Obviously a great deal more could be said about the implications of Crabbe's naturalistic descriptions of the "frowning coast," but this is by no means the place. Yet it might be possible

35 Huchon, p. 168.
to draw one tentative conclusion. Most eighteenth century writers were convinced that one could see aspects of God through his harmonious and beautiful world.\textsuperscript{36} Thomson wrote of Isaac Newton:

\begin{quote}
All intellectual eye, our solar round
First gazing thro', he by the blended power
Of gravitation and projection saw
The whole in silent harmony revolve.\textsuperscript{37}
\end{quote}

An amateur scientist himself,\textsuperscript{38} Crabbe no doubt valued the principle of classification which Thomson praises so highly, but as Crabbe said in "Midnight," his was a "horizontal Eye" that saw "all things grey" (line 219). It would seem that Crabbe was attempting to give a different perspective of the world from that "all intellectual eye" of Newton. Thomson began with the assumption that Newton had been able to give a reason for everything, including "the yellow waste of idle sands."\textsuperscript{39} Crabbe, on the other hand, begins with the particular, the barren soil of Aldborough, and from this particular, he attempts to draw conclusions. Whereas most 18th century thinkers accepted axiomatically that the world was benevolently oriented, Crabbe rejected this idea as an a priori truth, and developed his themes from the irrefutable fact that evil existed in the world.


\textsuperscript{37}James Thomson, A Poem Sacred to the Memory of Sir Isaac Newton, lines 39-42, in The Works of James Thomson, I, 210-211.

\textsuperscript{38}It is interesting to note that Crabbe's botanical interests led him to collect weeds and coarse plants. He was relatively uninterested in the "beautiful flowers." See Life, Ch. vii, pp. 164-165.

\textsuperscript{39}To the Memory of Sir Isaac Newton, line 56.
In this setting, where nature is opposed to man, Crabbe subtly introduces a second anti-social element to explain the viciousness of the villagers. This is the "lawless merchant" who entices the peasants to turn smugglers. Natural philosophers in the eighteenth century can often be divided into two categories: those who feel nature is evil and civilization good; and those who hold nature is good and civilization evil. Surprisingly enough, in Book I Crabbe shows himself to belong to neither school, since he advances the opinion that both society and nature oppose the villager. The prosperous and important men of the village do not lend their aid to help the unfortunate poor. Instead, they seduce the poor away from honest attempts to wrest a living from the infertile soil to enlist them in the more lucrative trade of smuggling:

Here too the lawless merchant of the main
Draws from his plough th' intoxicated swain;
Want only claim'd the labour of the day,
But vice now steals his nightly rest away
(I. 89-92).

Moreover Crabbe shows that smuggling does not involve one or two lawless people. The smuggled goods have to be taken across England, and in order to achieve this "lawless passport," numerous officials participate.

In the eighteenth century smuggling was a prosperous and important trade. When Crabbe draws attention to the "lawless merchant" he is not mentioning a minor evil restricted to East Anglia, but a pressing problem badly in need of redress. 40

40 Crabbe was later to develop some of the implications of wide-spread smuggling in "Smugglers and Poachers," Book XXI of Tales of The Hall.
R.W. Harris has described smuggling as "a major national industry" and estimated that it employed some forty thousand men. When Crabbe wrote *The Village*, smuggling was at its zenith, constituting such a danger to the country that Pitt, when he came to office in December 1783, decided that the redress of smuggling must be among his first reforms. The "lawless merchant" is not a petty thief but a symbol or representative of a flourishing national crime which was causing a lowered moral tone in the nation. The peasant has to combat the opposition of nature as well as the perfidy of his fellow men.

When Crabbe describes the difficult life of the villager in Book I his sympathies, and those of the reader, are perforce on the side of the villagers; the villagers are the underdogs in a war against oppressive forces from outside. But Crabbe's use of hostile nature serves yet another purpose, for clearly nature, if it is an active force resisting man's attempts to sustain himself, must be a conditioning factor as well. Crabbe explains how he too had once lived in the village. But realizing that circumstances would defeat him if he remained, he seized the "favouring hour" and fled. Looking back at the neighbours he left behind, he holds out little hope for their welfare: "Ah! hapless they who still remain" (I. 124). In Crabbe's view, the people are helpless, because the ocean will sooner or later swallow them up by sweeping "the low hut and all it holds away." When this happens, as Crabbe

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feels it certainly will, the only alternative for the poor villagers is to weep from door to door and beg "a poor protection from the poor" (I. 130).

Crapbe is here in the process of formulating a tentative theory of the influence of environment on man, where man is not free to make himself what he wants to be, but is moulded into the person he is by the physical and social forces around him. For the villager to be "hapless" (in other words "unfortunate" or "unlucky") is tantamount to saying that his environment overpowers him. Nature and society force upon him a life of "Rapine and Wrong and Fear," about which he can do little (I. 111). It is important not to under-estimate Crapbe's use of environment; although it becomes a cliché in later nineteenth century social criticism, in Crapbe's day it was new. Even a novel such as Mary Barton (1848), where the theme of environment's conditioning influence plays an important part, adds little to Crapbe's statement of the theme six decades earlier.  

One finds few references in the eighteenth century to a full-scale theory of environmental influence. The idea did not really come into its own until the following century.  

David Hume, for instance, in his essay "Of National Characters" rejects...
altogether the idea of "physical causes" having any great influence on national character. But a person such as Robert Wallace in his *A Dissertation on the Numbers of Mankind* admits that natural causes can have a "baneful influence," and although like Hume he feels that these natural causes can be overcome by man's "skill and industry," he concedes that natural causes such as "incurable barrenness or unwholesomeness of some particular regions" perhaps do greatly affect the size of the population and the greatness of the country.\(^4\)

While the eighteenth century produced few strict environmentalists (probably to its credit), many of the more progressive minds realized that the poor of the country were greatly affected by sub-standard living conditions and bad laws. Hume claimed that it "must be evident to the most superficial observer" that "poverty and hard labour debase the minds of the common people, and render them unfit for any science and ingenious profession."\(^4\) But Hume's views were not widely held. As late as 1786 William Gilpin in his *Observations, Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty... Particularly the Mountains, and Lakes of Cumberland*, and...
Westmoreland could write that the villagers of Rosthwait actually lived a pastoral life in spite of near-poverty conditions:

Here the sons, and daughters of simplicity enjoy health, peace, and contentment, in the midst of what city-luxury would call the extreme of human necessity. . . . Their scanty patches of arable land, and these cultivated with difficulty; and their crops late-ripening, and often prey to autumnal rains, which are violent in this country, just give them bread to eat.46

Because these villagers in the mountains were picturesque, Gilpin saw them living in a golden age. The reason he gave for their dignity was that they had been spared the decadence of civilized luxuries and follies. Thus when Crabbe described the brutalizing effect of bad land, poverty and cruel laws, he may have been stating the obvious to people such as David Hume, but he was definitely fighting against a long tradition which held that the villager could be corrupted only by the luxuries of city-life.

II

The Village, until line 130, has been concerned with the poor of a small part of England, the Suffolk coast. The conclusion reached is that their poverty is the "fault" of nature:

But these are scenes where Nature's niggard hand Gave a spare portion to the famish'd land; Hers is the fault, if here mankind complain Of fruitless toil and labour spent in vain (I. 131-134).

Quite legitimately, Crabbe's readers might have objected that his "real picture of the poor" in fact described the plight of only a small number of unrepresentative villagers. As if to refute such an objection, at line 131 Crabbe deliberately expands the subject of the poem and turns inland to describe scenes "more fair in view," examining again the plight of the poor. In the more prosperous counties nature is no longer so hostile, but the labourers are still just as poor. The reason is that they are now coerced by yet another unfriendly agent, the employers:

But yet in other scenes, more fair in view,
Where Plenty smiles -- alas! she smiles for few --
And those who taste not, yet behold her store,
Are as the slaves that dig the golden ore,
The wealth around them makes them doubly poor
(I. 135-139).

If on the "frowning coast" nature was to blame for poverty, then inland, where the country is rich, the blame must be placed on the unequal division of property. Here Crabbe introduces the idea that poverty is the result of exploitation by the landed class. In Inebriety Crabbe had compared women to slaves in order to emphasize their lack of intellectual freedom, but the comparison was only vaguely developed. In The Village the comparison is literal. As slaves dig the golden ore for their masters, so the English peasants till the fields of golden corn for the landlords. Crabbe is implying that an invidious type of slavery, economic slavery, as unjust as the physical slavery of the West Indies, could be found in England.

That the labourer was cut off from the ameliorating
influences of society had been tentatively suggested at the opening of the poem when Crabbe denied that any connection existed between the work of the peasant and the work of the artist. The shepherds of the golden age may have composed songs, but in eighteenth century England this was no longer possible. The peasant had no contact with the arts, with culture, or even with society, except through his contract of labour. At line 140 Crabbe pursues his argument with the imaginary defender of pastoral when he asks what possible profit the poor gained from their part in the division of labour. The answer many people gave, the answer Dodsley gave, was that the poor lived a healthy life in the invigorating country air. Crabbe pretends to accept this answer when he asks:

Or will you deem them amply paid in health,
Labour's fair child, that languishes with wealth?
(I. 140-141)

and in refutation of such sentimentalism, he replies, showing the peasant's life to be one of unremitting labour:

Go, then! and see them rising with the sun,
Through a long course of daily toil to run;
See them beneath the dog-star's raging heat,
When the knees tremble and the temples beat;
Behold them, leaning on their scythes, look o'er
The labour past, and toils to come explore;
See them alternate suns and showers engage,
And hoard up aches and anguish for their age;
Through fens and marshy moors their steps pursue,
When their warm pores imbibe the evening dew
(I. 142-151).

Crabbe demands that the landowners stop deluding themselves, and admit that long hours of toil are not only unpleasant, but possibly killing:
Then own that labour may as fatal be
To these thy slaves, as thine excess to thee
(I. 152-153).

At this point Crabbe states openly that the workers are slaves.

Some years later, the massacre of Peterloo (1819) drove Shelley to define slavery in much the same terms as those of Crabbe:

'Tis to work and have such pay
As just keeps life from day to day
In your limbs, as in a cell
For the tyrants' use to dwell,

So that ye for them are made
Loom, and plough, and sword, and spade,
With or without your own will bent
To their defence and nourishment.\(^{47}\)

Both Crabbe and Shelley perceived that a labourer, even though he does not wear chains, may still be a slave if forced to work long hours for subsistence wages, and all to profit a landlord.

The answer of such people as Hannah More -- that the poor were equal but different, that they benefited from a life of healthy labour by gaining integrity and purity of intention -- could not satisfy Crabbe. He saw that the conditions under which the poor had to work made it virtually impossible for them even to perceive the meaning of such fine phrases. Poverty and long hours of work bred an indifference to all questions but that of survival.

To all those people who attempted to find compensations for the poverty of the poor in their supposed peace of mind or

health, Crabbe replies with indignation:

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

(I. 164-171).

Crabbe may well have been thinking of such poems as Samuel Jackson Pratt's *Sympathy* (1781), where the labourers on the farm are described as pastoral shepherds enjoying country food and health. It is doubtful whether Crabbe saw this attempt on the part of the wealthy to paint the villager's life in rosy colours as malicious; when he speaks of "ye gentle souls, who dream of rural ease," he seems rather to have in mind poets such as Goldsmith, who, realizing that the modern villager was in difficult circumstances, still continued to think of an ideal village in terms of the pastoral myth. Auburn, Goldsmith's ideal, does not represent a viable alternative to his picture of empty commons, and because it does not, Goldsmith's criticism of the enclosures is also enveloped in the mists of sentimental idealization. Crabbe seems to have felt that no progress could be made to help the villagers until the facts of the situation were stated objectively. It was no use comparing the empty commons with Auburn. Any farmer could tell you that, as an historical fact, the villagers had never enjoyed those halcyon days of "health and plenty" which Goldsmith thought he remembered. As Raymond Williams has pointed out, even a hard-headed critic such as William Cobbett based his fulminations against the
great landlords on an imaginary, pastoral picture of village England populated largely by independent yeomen. What was required, Crabbe thought, was to show the villagers in all their misery and poverty so that people would realize the ultimate degradation of a life of toil.

In the description of the labourer "rising with the sun" to face a day of toil in the fields, Crabbe's contemporaries would no doubt have recognized yet another instance of Crabbe's development of early eighteenth century poetic material. The description is an obvious allusion to Stephen Duck's "The Thresher's Labour," and indeed the 1834 edition of Crabbe's Poetical Works contains a passage from Duck's poem in a footnote. Since Crabbe mentions Duck by name in line 27, the reference is undoubtedly deliberate. Duck's phenomenal rise from a poor labourer to a favourite of Queen Caroline was well known and often quoted as an example of what honest industry could make the humblest of men. By quoting Duck on the hardships of the life of the agricultural labourer, Crabbe was allowing the peasant to speak for himself.

That Crabbe chose to allude to Duck's poem here is


49 On the whole Duck's poems are devoid of all poetry and merely echo commonplace Augustan platitudes in limping couplets. But his first poem, "The Thresher's Labour" does show inspiration, and perhaps if Duck had continued to pursue this theme of the life of the labourer, his own experience could have served for some interesting poetry. But like Bloomfield after him, he gave up describing the life he knew, in order to write about people and ideas which his noble patrons deemed most fit for verse.
significant for several reasons. First, in "The Thresher's Labour," the poem by which Duck is usually known, Duck had outlined the labours of the poor and the relations between master and worker in such a way as to make it impossible for his reader to draw any other conclusion than that the labourer had a difficult life. But in spite of emphasizing how hard the farm labourer had to work, and how few pleasures he had, Duck never attempted to draw conclusions that would suggest the labourer was treated unjustly. Although at the end of the poem, the reader is left with the suspicion that a life of unceasing toil is hardly a fair one, Duck himself never drew this conclusion. Many later poets derived inspiration for their poems about the country from Duck's "The Thresher's Labour," and indeed Dodsley's description of the thresher in Agriculture owes much to Duck. However not a few poets, and Dodsley is one of them, refused to recognize the implications of Duck's stress on the arduous life of the labourer. Crabbe appears to have realized the possibilities inherent in Duck's description of the farm labourer, and consequently in The Village, Duck's thresher is refashioned into the symbol of the exploited labourer. Through Crabbe's eyes, the reader sees that the thresher has a life of unremitting toil (Duck's thesis), but further, that such a life is a miserable one, so miserable in fact, that it is wrong.

Crabbe's reference to Duck is not without a touch of irony as well. Although Duck managed to free himself from his job as a farm labourer, he accomplished this, not through his work in the fields, but as a result of his turning poet and describing the
difficult life of the peasant. When Crabbe asked:

Save honest Duck, what son of verse could share
The poet's rapture, and the peasant's care?
Or the great labours of the field degrade,
With the new peril of a poorer trade?

(I. 27-30)

he is pointing out the vast differences between the peasant and the poet. Nor was Crabbe altogether in jest when he said that poetry "degrades" the life of the labourer. After being recognized for his merits in "The Thresher's Labour," Duck composed little else but complimentary verses to Queen Caroline's ladies and appalling odes in which he extolled the pastoral philosophy: "High Stations often bring a Weight of Cares; / True Happiness is found in humble Spheres."\(^50\) The "peril" of the poet's trade is that he will forget to write of the life he knows, and follow the old pastoral myths. Certainly this happened in Duck's case and in a good many of England's "humble poets" of the next decades.\(^51\)

Both Duck in "The Thresher's Labour" and Crabbe in The Village wanted to describe the difficulties of the peasant's life. Whereas Duck had shown the farmers to be indifferent to the plight of the workers, Crabbe emphasizes how the upper classes scorn the villager's life of toil. This upper class scorn is manifested in

\(^50\)Stephen Duck, Poems on Several Occasions (London, 1736), p. 220.

\(^51\)Crabbe gives the following comment on Robert Bloomfield in his "London Journal" for July 3, 1817: "Robert Bloomfield. He had better rested as a shoemaker, or even a farmer's boy; for he would have been a farmer perhaps in time, and now he is an unfortunate poet." See Life, Ch. ix, p. 245.
their continued pursuit of the outdated pastoral form. And the 
pastoral he feels to be "letter'd scorn" (I. 55). Duck had 
passively accepted the state of the world, but Crabbe becomes highly 
indignant at the patronizing attitude of the leisured class towards 
the poor. Crabbe had originally intended to press this idea of 
the opposition between worker and employer even more strongly. In 
place of the purely descriptive lines:

See them beneath the dog-star's raging heat, 
When the knees tremble and the temples beat 
(I. 144-145)

Crabbe had originally written the more revolutionary lines:

Like him to make the plenteous harvest grow 
And yet not share the plenty they bestow.\(^ {52} \)

By placing the workers and employers in opposition, Crabbe's portrayal 
of village conditions hints at the class struggle which was to 
begin in earnest in the next decades, once the industrial revolution 
had succeeded in severing the bonds of feudal loyalties. But in 
removing lines such as these, which stress the inequalities, it 
appears that Crabbe did not want the poem to preach open rebellion. 
His aim is to show "the real ills" of the poor without didactically 
pressing any conclusions.

In spite of what critics have derogatorily said about 
Crabbe's social themes, it seems clear that Crabbe was experimenting 
with new ideas. Arthur Sale, as has already been seen, declared 
that Crabbe had said nothing new because Dodsley had said it all 
before in his advice to reward the poor man's toil. But if poems

\(^ {52} \) Poetical Works, II, 79, n. 3.
such as Dodsley's *Agriculture* are examined carefully one finds that they are far removed from both the themes and spirit of the first book of *The Village*. For instance, when Dodsley refers to the "poor" he is not referring to the parish poor, the peasants, or the labourers, but to the farmers. According to Dodsley, the basis of England's wealth is not the agricultural labourer, but the flourishing farmer. This farmer is only "poor" in comparison to the nobles. When Dodsley's views about actual labourers are investigated, one finds that he normally portrayed them in the pastoral tradition of healthy, happy Arcadians. His favourite peasant remains the milkmaid Patty: "Her shape was moulded by the hand of Ease" (I. 161); and her lover is "Young Thyrsis." Far from stating the same themes as Crabbe, Dodsley never touches upon the conditions of the poor. Occasionally when he mentions villagers without their pastoral disguise, he speaks of them with the contempt of the prosperous middle-class merchant. In his instructions to the farmers (his ideal of industry and frugality) on how to operate their farms, he advises them:

> Leave not to ignorance, and low-bred hinds,  
> That noblest science, which in ancient time  
> The minds of sages and of kings employ'd.  

Surely this was the very attitude which Crabbe censured! But even if Sale had been correct in his reading of Dodsley's portrayal of the agricultural worker, this would hardly destroy the uniqueness of Crabbe's poem. Crabbe is not interested in telling people

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how the village labourer should be treated. The great merit of Book I is that Grabbe does restrain himself from giving advice. The eighteenth century had more than enough advice. Instead, Crabbe attempts to set down an impression of the people of the village. Inevitably the poem implies social solutions, but Crabbe is not so much interested in any single solution as he is in portraying villagers and village life so as to make people realize the kind of conditions that existed around them.

Crabbe would no doubt have agreed with what Sale believed to be Dodsley's point, that the labourer should be paid for his work, and even that the wealth of Britain was ultimately based on the worker. But more important than either of these points is Crabbe's desire to describe the harsh, demoralizing forces which were destroying the villagers. Crabbe's chief objection is not to particular abuses: low pay, bad living conditions, parish workhouses, etc., but to the amoral attitude to the poor which men sanctioned in the name of charity.

Up to this point Crabbe's technique in the poem has been to describe the villager as alone and defenceless before a world warring against him. The soil is barren, or armed with thistles; the ocean tears away his village; his fellow men attempt to lead him into criminal acts; and the leisured classes ignore his real plight while envisioning for him a life of country health and dance. The farmers and estate owners reap profits from his work, yet refuse to aid him in return. The effect of this presentation has been to reveal how the village labourer is not in fact a part of society
at all. The poor, according to Crabbe, form a sub-class of society, completely separate from what would be termed the main stream of culture. As individuals in this sub-class, they have no succor from any of the softening influences of civilization. 54

When the poem is examined in detail, one can see that Crabbe was arguing his case carefully. The forces opposed to the villager are introduced in a progressive scale. First nature, then the lawless merchant, and finally the landowner thwart the villagers' attempts to find security. Yet as Crabbe realized only too well, most of his readers would be little affected by this account. The attitude of the time could still be summed up in the Biblical statement: "Ye have the poor with you always." Poverty was still accepted as a pre-ordained part of God's plan.

Acquiescence to poverty was made especially easy, paradoxically enough, because both the social code and the law recognized that the poor had a claim on society. In the novels of this period the idea that the wealthy have a duty to give charity to the poor is a constant theme. 55 Furthermore, ever since the passing of the Elizabethan Poor Law, the 43 Eliz. c.2, it had been accepted that the parish had a duty to care for its poor. As Dorothy Marshall comments: "In the record of the English Poor Laws this co-ordinating principle is seen to be that of public

54 See J.L. and Barbara Hammond's chapter "The Isolation of the Poor" in The Village Labourer, pp. 207-224.

55 Henry Brooke's The Fool of Quality (1760-1772) has the theme of charity as one of the central ideas of the novel.
responsibility for the Poor. In these circumstances, many people took the attitude that the poor were already being helped sufficiently. For instance Daniel Defoe in *Giving Alms no Charity* (1704) argued persuasively that government aid to the poor would only increase their laziness. The perplexity of many people is exemplified in the Rev. Joseph Townsend's statement:

There never was greater distress among the poor; there never was more money collected for their relief. But what is most perplexing is, that poverty and Wretchedness have increased in exact proportion to the efforts which have been made for the comfortable subsistence of the poor.

After Townsend, Robert Malthus in his *An Essay on the Principles of Population* (1798) was to become one of the main exponents of this theory that charity to the poor would only create more problems.

Recognizing that many people believed the poor already received enough, if not too much charity, Crabbe decided to show that the Poor Laws, as they were then administered, were by no means giving the poor the kind, and the amount, of relief that most people supposed. Thus he added the Poor Laws to his growing progression of causes which were destroying the integrity of the poor.

To prove his point about the Poor Laws, Crabbe takes as his example an old peasant, a man who at one time had been "chief in all the rustic trade." When he ages and is unable to work any longer, his masters treat him with callous brutality:


The rich disdain him, nay, the poor disdain;
Alternate masters now their slave command,
Urge the weak efforts of his feeble hand;
And, when his age attempts its task in vain,
With ruthless taunts, of lazy poor complain
(I. 195-199).

The man is poor through no fault of his own. He has lived a long and honourable life during which he has been one of the best workers. But as T.S. Ashton has commented: "The insecurity of the standard of life of the wage-earner was attributed not to faulty social or economic arrangements, but to defects of personal character."^58

Those people who believed that the poor were lazy advocated a life of hard labour for them. In 1739, William Temple, a clothier, said that the only way to keep workers industrious was "to lay them under the necessity of labouring all the time they can spare from rest and sleep, in order to procure the common necessaries of life."^59 Crabbe wished to show that this belief in "defects of personal character" could not account for a very large number of the poor.

When Crabbe shows the employers' taunting the old man with being lazy, he is describing a common reaction amongst people who felt that the character of the poor naturally led them to an idle and lazy life.^60 No doubt at certain times, and especially in some


^60 Dorothy Marshall mentions that this idea was fashionable until at least the 1770's when a softening of opinion began to take place. Henry Fielding, it will be recalled, remarks how the poor should not be treated leniently, since such leniency would only increase their laziness. See An Enquiry Into the Causes of the late Increase of Robbers (1751).
professions, this charge of laziness was made with good reason.61 But often enough the complaint of laziness was applied to situations where the real cause lay not in the worker's lack of effort but in economics, or, as in Crabbe's example, exploitation. The old man is only too willing to try and earn his own bread rather than go on the dole, but the only thanks he receives for his efforts is to be used cynically for what little labour he can offer -- at the lowest wage.

The word "exploitation" is used advisedly in this case, for Crabbe's description of the old peasant indicates that he has been caught up in the "roundsman system."62 Crabbe wished his readers to be in no doubt that the old man is a genuine case of distress, and so he added the following footnote: "A pauper who, being nearly past his labour, is employed by different masters for a length of time, proportioned to their occupations."63 In this case the employers have no grounds for the taunts of "lazy poor." The "roundsman system" was obnoxious for several reasons. First, the farmer often did not need the man at the time he was allotted, and thus the roundsman did nothing and was forced to bear the insults of the farmer. Secondly, the man often had to walk long distances to reach his place of work. Most important of all, the


62 For an explanation of this pernicious system see J.L. and Barbara Hammond, The Village Labourer, pp. 164 f.

system degraded the poor by taking from them their integrity and status. They became labour pure and simple -- distributed at the whim of the "kingly overseer."

In the figure of this old man Crabbe is attacking the myth that the parish adequately cared for its poor. No longer able to find work, the old man has turned to the parish, but in order to lower its costs, always a central concern, the overseer sends the old man on the rounds of the parish, making him do odd jobs for various employers. As he is not capable of a full day's work, the parish subsidizes his wages. The jobs allotted to the old man show how little consideration was given to his age:

Oft may you see him, when he tends the sheep,
His winter-charge, beneath the hillock weep;
Oft hear him murmur to the winds that blow
O'er his white locks and bury them in snow,
When, roused by rage and muttering in the morn,
He mends the broken hedge with icy thorn

(I. 200-205).

If the old man had refused this work, then the parish could have instituted even harsher action: "If such poor person shall refuse to work, or run away from such employment, the guardian shall complain to a justice, who shall on conviction commit the offender to the house of correction, there to be kept to hard labour not exceeding three calendar months, nor less than one." When once the villager turned to the parish for help, he gave up independence and integrity.

As has already been pointed out, one of Crabbe's principal

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aims in Book I is to make the reader understand and sympathize with the poor. His choice of the old peasant who "journeys to his grave in pain," is appropriate, for it brings out the utter indifference of the "Churchwarden stern" to the hopes and cares of the lower class. The old man has worked hard all his life, contributing to the economic prosperity of which so many Englishmen were proud, but in his last days his reward is the sordid parish poor house. What so appals Crabbe is the hypocrisy of the parish. The overseers feel proud that they have not left the old man to starve on the open hillside. But the poorhouse is the decrepit asylum of all society's undesirables -- the lame, the blind, the sick, the mad. Although the intention of the Poor Laws -- to find work and supply shelter for the poor -- was admirable, Crabbe wished to show that these laws broke down badly in practice. Dorothy Marshall makes much the same point when she notes: "The distinguishing mark of the Poor Law administration, during these years, was the enormous gulf between theory and practice. As has been seen, the latter was a miserable travesty of the former." 65

The description of the old man in the parish poorhouse is one of Crabbe's most famous. Burke placed it in The Annual Register and it appeared in Knox's Elegant Extracts. Certainly Crabbe's description of the poorhouse appears to have come as a great shock to many of his contemporaries. Francis Jeffrey commented that he knew "more than one of our unpoetical acquaintances who declared they could never pass by a parish workhouse, without thinking of the

description of it they had read at school in the Poetical Extracts. 66 The reason this description had such an effect on Crabbe's readers was that they had never taken the trouble to look into one of these poorhouses. Had they taken the trouble to acquaint themselves with the accommodation given to the poor, Crabbe's description would not have been so great a shock. As it was, Crabbe's description of a poorhouse left many readers horrified:

Such is that room which one rude beam divides,  
And naked rafters form the sloping sides;  
Where the vile bands that bind the thatch are seen,  
And lath and mud are all that lie between,  
Save one dull pane, that, coarsely patch'd, gives way  
To the rude tempest, yet excludes the day.  
Here, on a matted flock, with dust o'erspread,  
The drooping wretch reclines his languid head;  
For him no hand the cordial cup applies,  
Or wipes the tear that stagnates in his eyes;  
No friends with soft discourse his pain beguile,  
Or promise hope till sickness wears a smile
(I. 262-273).

The description is in terms we would now refer to as Dickensian, but long before Dickens hit on the idea of surrounding a character with objects which establish his inner state of mind, Crabbe had used this technique in The Village. The dilapidated condition of the House reflects the parish's degenerate social conscience. Moreover the images of decay and squalor used to describe the House serve as a corollary to the opening images of the sterile coast. The poorhouse represents all that is left for the poor villager after his defeat by the forces of evil.

What Crabbe objects to is not just the terrible

66 The Edinburgh Review, XII (1808), 131.
conditions of the poorhouse, but that all those unable to work, for whatever reason, were placed in the same category under the same roof. Although the passage describing the inmates of the poorhouse is long, I think it is worth quoting at length, both because of its intrinsic merit and because it so greatly affected and influenced Crabbe’s contemporaries:

Theirs is yon house that holds the parish poor,  
Whose walls of mud scarce bear the broken door;  
There, where the putrid vapours, flagging, play,  
And the dull wheel hums doleful through the day --  
There children dwell, who know no parents’ care;  
Parents, who know no children’s love, dwell there!  
Heart-broken matrons on their joyless bed,  
Forsaken wives, and mothers never wed;  
Dejected widows with unheeded tears,  
And crippled age with more than childhood fears;  
The lame, the blind, and, far the happiest they!  
The moping idiot and the madman gay.  
Here too the sick their final doom receive,  
Here brought, amid the scenes of grief, to grieve,  
Where the loud groans from some sad chamber flow,  
Mix’d with the clamours of the crowd below  
(I. 228-243).

All the people of the parish unable to support themselves -- unwed mothers, bastard children, widows, the lame, the blind, the mad -- are placed in one small room. Numerous people, including William Wordsworth and Sir Walter Scott, commented that this passage and especially the lines: "The lame, the blind, and, far the happiest they! / The moping idiot and the madman gay" affected them greatly.67 That this description could have such an effect proves that Crabbe was correct in his belief that such facts were little known. Yet Crabbe was only pointing out what anyone might see in

67 Both Wordsworth and Scott claimed to know the passage by heart. See Poetical Works, II, 83, n.1.
parish poorhouses, or what they might read in the Poor Laws. As the 43 Eliz. c.2. made clear, "every poor, old, blind, lame, and impotent person, or other person not able to work" was entitled to relief. Crabbe's point is not to suggest that the Poor Laws do not already provide for the poor; as he says, "the laws indeed for ruin'd age provide." But he feels that because of the inept administration and "the cold charities of man to man" the "scrap is bought with many a sigh."

One of the reasons that Crabbe's portrayal of village conditions remains of such great interest for us today is that he did not attempt to hide one set of facts in order to give the poem a propagandist theme. Many writers would have wished to portray the village labourers in the best possible light, in order to show them as the unfortunate pawns of an evil class system. While Crabbe points out that the parish treats its people abominably, he also shows how the poor themselves refuse to help one another. The old man has children who should help to care for him, but they refuse:

To me the children of my youth are lords,
Cool in their looks, but hasty in their words:
Wants of their own demand their care; and who
Feels his own want and succours others too?
(I. 216-221)

That the poor often refused to aid their own relatives was a point frequently raised by those in favour of decreasing the relief given to the poor. It might seem odd that Crabbe introduced this point when it would decrease the sympathy his readers felt for the
poor. Yet one of Crabbe's virtues is his impartiality; he has set out to give "the real picture" and he does so, whether or not this picture shows the poor in a good or bad light. Laura Johnson Wylie has commented that:

With his unfailing truth to reality and his vivid sense of the relation of one part of life to another, he shows in people and circumstances the causes that have made them what they are. It is by the remorseless presentation of evil working in and through existing institutions that, in spite of the differences between them in theory, he complements the work of the radical reformers of the day. He is, indeed, an even more convincing preacher than they, in that his constant appeal to facts saves him from any appearance of extenuation or of exaggeration.68

Throughout the eighteenth century, a great deal of the magistrate's time in the administration of the Poor Laws was spent sorting out who in a particular family were bound by law to support relatives in need of relief. Since two-thirds to three quarters of the population of England were potential applicants for poor relief, the officials were anxious for individuals to bear as much of the burden as possible. But when the labourer realized that poor relief was "his due," if only he shouted loud enough, he naturally attempted to shirk many responsibilities he might feel for needy relations, leaving to the parish the job of supplying them with a shilling or so a week. Dorothy Marshall has said: "Children had to be forced by law to keep the parents, and if they were not 'persons of substance' they would seldom support them without some payment from the parish. The results of so insidious
an influence could be hardly anything else than a lowered moral tone."\(^{69}\)

Much of the difficulty was caused by subsidized wage schemes. When the labourer was paid wages which were continuously below the amount needed to sustain existence, he came to expect an allotment from the Poor Rates. If the labourer was unable totally to support himself, but looked to the overseers and churchwardens for supplementary aid, then inevitably he expected the parish to provide for parents and disabled relatives incapable of earning their own living. By the 59 Geo. 3 c.12, justices in petty sessions were empowered to order the relatives in good circumstances to give certain assessed sums to needy members of the family.\(^{70}\) By a process of attrition the system of organized charity in England was gradually destroying the villagers' independence and integrity. Crabbe wished to point out that the Poor Laws, which in theory provided for all cases of need, gave only a limited protection, protection bought at the price of human values.

In the end, man, who has all along been at the mercy of forces of nature which act upon him with irreversible direction and force, is so manipulated by society that he loses even his desire for survival. The old man asks himself why he should live when nothing he can do will help and no one will aid him:

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

---


\(^{70}\) See Richard Burn, *The Justice of the Peace* (London, 1820), IV, 120.
Like leaves in spring, the young are blown away,
Without the sorrows of a slow decay;
I, like yon wither'd leaf, remain behind,
Nipp'd by the forst, and shivering in the wind;
There it abides till younger buds come on,
As I, now all my fellow-swains are gone;
Then, from the rising generation thrust,
It falls, like me, unnoticed to the dust
(I. 206-215).

When no answer is forthcoming, the old man finds life holds no further interest for him and so he gladly dies. Interestingly enough, at this point in the poem, the old man recognizes how his own life has been so determined for him that he has become little more than a natural object following inviolable laws. He is like the tree which flourishes, gives seed, and dies. His last comment is a recognition that his life has meant nothing to anyone:

Then let my bones beneath the turf be laid,
And men forget the wretch they would not aid!
(I. 224-225)

Crabbe placed the blame for such occurrences squarely on society.

Yet Crabbe's poetry avoids the great pitfall of earlier humanitarian verse, slogans and humanitarian flagwaving. At the end of his description of the poorhouse, he does not conclude, as Dodsley or Savage or Shenstone would have done, by saying that everyone must help their neighbour. He continues to describe different features of the condition of the poor, leaving the reader to draw his own conclusions. Crabbe never allowed himself to talk for long about abstractions in connection with human problems. He never loses sight of society as a collection of individuals, and as a result, if blame is to be affixed for social abuses, it must be placed
at the door of the individual. In one sense the parish fulfils its legal responsibilities. It supplies both a doctor and a priest for the poor. But both doctor and priest are uninterested in the poor. The doctor who looks after the poor is a conceited quack:

Anon, a figure enters, quaintly neat,
All pride and business, bustle and conceit;
With looks unalter'd by these scenes of wo,
With speed that, entering, speaks his haste to go
(I. 276-279).

This "potent quack" (potent in the ironical sense that he is dangerous) is obviously to blame for at least part of the misery of the poor. Crabbe however emphasizes that the fault lies not only with the doctor; he is "paid by the parish" and protected by a "drowsy Bench." It will be recalled that the reason Crabbe had been employed at Aldborough as a doctor to look after the poor was because the other doctor, Raymond, had raised his prices. The parish chose Crabbe because he was poor, badly qualified, and therefore cheap. Who is to blame? First, the doctor. Second, society. The "drowsy Bench" allows the quack to practise, and the parish employs him. But the individuals of the parish are themselves to blame for condoning the practice, for employing the quack in order to save a penny on the rates.

The parish priest who ministers to the poor proves to be no better than the doctor. He is the caricatured eighteenth century vicar, riding to the hounds, playing whist, and drinking

71 In Letter VII of The Borough Crabbe deals in detail with the dangers of the quack doctor. See below, pp. 302-313.
72 See Huchon, pp. 63-64.
until he slips under the table -- the type of priest George Eliot was later to satirize in *Scenes of Clerical Life* and whom we have encountered already in *Inebriety.* The priest is a "holy stranger" to the poor, and like the doctor, he refuses to spend his time with them. Again one can see Crabbe's attempt to refute the sentimental approach to village life when he compares the priest of *The Village* with Goldsmith's good priest, "passing rich with forty pounds a year." In his later poems Crabbe was often to satirize Goldsmith's ideal of the "good-natured man."

The difference between Crabbe's poem and the earlier poems which had taken up the subject of the poor can be seen in the following lines with the obvious allusion to Gray's *Elegy:*

Now once again the gloomy scene explore,  
Less gloomy now; the bitter hour is o'er,  
The man of many sorrows sighs no more. --  
Up yonder hill, behold how sadly slow  
The bier moves winding from the vale below;  
There lie the happy dead, from trouble free,  
And the glad parish pays the frugal fee.  
No more, 0 Death! thy victim starts to hear  
Churchwarden stern, or kingly overseer;  
No more the farmer claims his humble bow,  
Thou art his lord, the best of tyrants thou!  
(I. 318-328)

The continued comparison between the life of the labourer and the life of a slave is neatly summarized in this last couplet. In his *Elegy* Gray had generously allowed that all men were equal at death, and from this, had concluded that the rich and great had no right to feel superior to the humble. Yet this is sentimentality, no matter how pleasantly conveyed. Crabbe, on the contrary, declares that the poor are the slaves of the great, the tyrants. While Gray
was content to formulate the proposition that all men are alike defeated by the tyrant death, Crabbe declares that death is by far the kindest tyrant of the poor.

When the ending to Book I of The Village is compared with the ending to Gray's Elegy, the conclusion is inescapable that The Village constitutes a reply. Both poems end with the bier being taken to the graveyard. Gray ended his poem with the villagers reading the epitaph on the gravestone; Crabbe's villagers explore "the mingled relics of the parish poor." At this point the tension in The Village relaxes for a few lines and one suspects that the poem may end in elegiac melancholy. But then Crabbe announces that the priest has refused to take the time to give the last benediction. The poem concludes acidly:

And, waiting long, the crowd retire distress'd,
To think a poor man's bones should lie unbless'd.

And surely these lines express Crabbe's theme: the poor are unblessed.  

Crabbe's chief innovation was to describe the poor and their living conditions in such a way as to make the reader feel that the poor man was worthy of his consideration. Crabbe presents the labourer as a man, not as a convenient pretext for the good

73 Crabbe may have received adverse criticism about these lines, for in later editions he added the following footnote: "Some apology is due for the insertion of a circumstance by no means common: that it has been a subject for complaint in any place is a sufficient reason for its being reckoned among the evils which may happen to the poor, and which must happen to them exclusively; nevertheless, it is just to remark, that such neglect is very rare in any part of the kingdom, and in many parts is totally unknown," Poems by George Crabbe, I, 136, n.2.
man to prove his benevolence. The radical novelists of the next few decades -- Godwin, Bage, and Holcroft -- attempted unsuccessfully to take as their principal theme this equality of all men, illustrating the thesis by showing all men to have the same feeling heart.\textsuperscript{74} The \textit{Village} does not set out to prove theories about equality, but by its insistent concern with the quality of life amongst the poor, Crabbe succeeds in convincing us that the poor are as human as the rich. And because the poem persuasively argues that the poor man is an individual worthy of attention, so it also suggests that society has refused to give its blessing to the poor. \textit{The Village} indicts the upper class, those individuals of position and power -- the parish overseer, the doctor, the clergyman, the farmer -- and finds them guilty of wilful neglect of their fellow man.

Although it is important to emphasize the innovative quality of \textit{The Village}, Crabbe should not be seen as a radical thinker far in advance of his time. His pre-occupation with the plight of the poor can be seen as part of a general trend in England at this period. Dorothy Marshall has described how the attitude towards the poor underwent a gradual change from the early part of the century, when it was recommended that the poor "be set on work," until at the end of the century the predominant opinion had swung round to giving the poor maximum assistance: "After the '70's there came a gradual change of opinion . . . and the general attitude became

\textsuperscript{74} Even a novelist such as Robert Bage found it difficult to break with tradition. When he wished to describe Hermsprong triumphing over the evils of the class system, his only "solution" was to show his hero inheriting a title and estate!
softened by a more sympathetic outlook." If any one date can be
given to mark this change of attitude, then 1782, the year before
the publication of The Village, would serve well. For 1782 saw
the passing of "Gilbert's Act," which aimed "at making the workhouses
decent places of retirement for the old and unfortunate." Moreover at this time several other poets began to describe with a new
realism the difficulties of the poor. In The Task (1785) Cowper
noted how the labourer was "angry and sad, and his last crust consum'd,"
how he was "ill clad and fed but sparely" (I. 246 and IV. 379).
Robert Burns in his songs, notably "The Twa Dogs" (1787), "Logan
Water" (1793), and "Is there for Honest Poverty" (1795), also brought
out the inequalities between rich and poor. Yet with the exception
of parts of John Langhorne's The Country Justice (1774-1777), no
poet before Crabbe speaks out so strongly and indignantly about the
"real ills" of the poor; even Langhorne fails to match Crabbe's
ability to give the reader a feeling for the villagers as people.
Crabbe was not the first to describe the "real picture of the poor,"
but he was the first poet to do so.


In any discussion of The Village a danger exists of treating Book I as a poem complete in itself. This is because the effect of the far-reaching social analysis in Book I is partially destroyed in the second book when Crabbe offers what seems to be a platitudinous and somewhat sycophantic solution easily acceptable to anyone. Critics have long remarked that the bitterness Crabbe directs against corrupt society in Book I is muted in Book II by his pursuing a different and somewhat antithetical theme. This notion of The Village being split into two books, each emphasizing different sympathies and even contradicting one another, is by no means a new discovery. René Huchon developed this theory of two minds at some length, explaining that in Book I Crabbe "wanted to show the rich, who were misled by pastoral effusions, the real lot of the rustics, to contrast the luxury of the former with the misery of the latter, and thus draw the attention of the great to a class which has no share of the good things of this life." Huchon felt that, when in Book II Crabbe wished to show how "Lord Robert Manners should be mourned even in the 'village,' he had to begin by telling the poor that they are wrong to 'lament their fate' and 'envy the great,' misfortune being the lot of all mankind; he had to display a universal and commonplace pessimism, dictated by circumstances and foreign to the original conception of the work."

77 Huchon, p. 167.
Huchon concluded: "Here the chaplain has spoilt the poet." 78

Arthur Pollard, in one of his early critiques of Crabbe's poetry, rejected Huchon's thesis that the two books of The Village express different and contradictory ideas, and has suggested, on the contrary, that the world view expressed in Book II is only the complement of Crabbe's personal statement in Book I. 79 Pollard argues that when Crabbe in Book II develops the idea that villagers are not always good and virtuous, he is only completing his picture of the labourer which he left unfinished in Book I. In the first book Crabbe wished to reveal the miserable lot of the poor, and in the second, his sincerity and honesty compelled him to acknowledge that, even though the labourers were badly off, their poverty did not in any way make them virtuous.

Professor Sigworth has also rejected the notion that the poem lacks unity, and has refused to accept Huchon's claim that "the chaplain has spoilt the poet." 80 Like Pollard, he believes that Crabbe wanted to show first that the rich were mistaken in believing the poor happy (Book I), and second, that the poor were wrong in their belief that the rich were happy (Book II). Sigworth considers that Crabbe's advice to the poor -- not to envy the rich -- was meant to balance the statement of Book I -- that the rich should not envy

78 Huchon, pp. 167-168.


the poor. Yet the unhappiness of the wealthy is hardly of the same kind as the physical and spiritual poverty of the villager, and to pretend that the villagers' basic economic problems are somehow compensated for by the problems of the wealthy is hardly satisfactory. Crabbe himself in Book I compares the ills of the rich with those of the poor:

Say ye, oppress'd by some fantastic woes,
Some jarring nerve that baffles your repose;

How would ye bear to draw your latest breath,
Where all that's wretched paves the way for death?  
(I. 250-261)

The sufferings of the rich have nothing in common with the "real pain" of the poor. Both Sigworth and Pollard ignore a great deal of what Crabbe actually said in Book II, and do not account for the eulogy of Robert Manners.

While the attempts of Sigworth and Pollard to find a unity in the two books are laudable, their conclusions about how Crabbe achieves this unity are not altogether convincing. Yet since instances of dual and somewhat contradictory themes have been found in several of Crabbe's early poems -- "Midnight," Inebriety and "An Epistle to a Friend" -- and since Crabbe consistently employs paradox in his poetry, it might be as well to look closely at the effect Crabbe achieves in The Village by his antinomies. In Book II, which begins with a summary of the theme from Book I: "No longer truth, though shown in verse, disdain, / But own the Village Life a life of pain," Crabbe proceeds to explore further the life of the villager. Surprisingly enough, in the name of truth, he admits that
he has himself oversimplified village life somewhat, and now claims that villagers probably do enjoy moments of "sweet repose." This phrase "sweet repose" has connotations of pastoral, and suggests that Crabbe was perhaps about to readmit the pastoral. 

Immediately one is heartened to find that village life is not quite so terrible as Book I seemed to indicate. Yet Crabbe's contemporaries were greatly mistaken if they thought Crabbe prepared to say some kind words about "merry England." For Crabbe shows that the labourers enjoy their "sweet repose," not because of, but in spite of, the efforts of the middle and upper classes. The "careful masters" would like to see Sunday outlawed so that the labourers could work every day of the week:

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

(II. 19-24).

Thus after leading his readers to expect an admission that the pastoral ideal is not wholly inapplicable to the lives of the poor, Crabbe deliberately turns around and disappoints these expectations. Usually the farmers and landlords were depicted as kind and generous; Crabbe shows them to be rapacious for gain.

The same technique of inversion is utilized with regard to

It is significant that many of Crabbe's poems dealing with the poor follow the formula laid down in the poem "An Epistle to a Friend." There, it will be recalled, Crabbe had said that he would begin with harsh strains, "the strains of woe," then move on to describe more pleasant scenes, and end by singing of "more lofty heights." Poems by George Crabbe, I, 71.
the "sweet repose" of the villager. After leading his readers to expect that he will describe pastoral figures such as "sweet Patty" playing at innocent diversions on the village green; it comes as something of a shock to see the villagers retire to an ale-house and erupt in a bloody brawl. Nor is Crabbe's account of the leisure of the villagers inaccurate. As Dorothy Marshall has commented:

"Throughout the eighteenth century there were but few recreations which appealed to any but the most material and least elevated side of human nature. In all ranks of society, high and low alike, drinking and gambling abounded. . . ." The brawling, drunken villager is Crabbe's answer to the pastoralist who imagines that the villagers "with rural games play'd down the setting sun" (I. 94).

In many ways Crabbe in Book II seems to set out deliberately to defeat the reader's expectations. Many readers would have applauded the "honesty" of Crabbe's sketch of the labourers' abusing the Sabbath, and would have felt that Crabbe was doing a service to his country in pointing out the profligacy of the labourer. In a copy of the second edition of Poems (1808) in my possession, someone in an early nineteenth century hand has scratched out Crabbe's line:

Resign their pipes and plod behind the plough
(I. 23-24)

and has substituted his own version:

Suck their tobacco pipes and hold the plough.

The attitude evinced in this emendation is typical of that of many who

believed that the poor should be described as idle and profligate. Yet when Crabbe describes the vices of the poor in Book II, he is not so much interested in condemning the poor as he is in showing that, in comparison with the "pleasures" of the wealthy, these village vices appear innocent diversions.

Pretending at first to frown on the village girls not "so chaste as fair," Crabbe then goes on to reveal that their lack of chastity is by no means entirely their own fault:

These to the town afford each fresher face,
And the clown's trull receives the peer's embrace;
From whom, should chance again convey her down,
The peer's disease in turn attacks the clown
(II. 51-54).

The village girls lack chastity, which is not unexpected, but the "peers" bring with their licentiousness, disease. This comparison between the vices of the rich and the poor is carried on at some length. For instance, Crabbe describes the "injured peasant and deluded fair" standing before the stern judge. The moral most people would draw is that the judge is right in reprimanding the villagers. Henry Fielding, for instance, believed the poor required a stern hand. But before the scene ends, Crabbe shows how great and poor are in fact alike, when:

Some favourite female of her judge glides by,
Who views with scornful glance the strumpet's fate,
And thanks the stars that made her keeper great
(II. 80-82).

Crabbe appears to wish to draw his readers on to the conclusion that the poor are vicious and lewd, and then to confront them with facts to show that the licentiousness of the poor was not nearly so bad
as that of the great.83

Certainly such an enlightened attitude was much needed in this period. When in 1787 William Wilberforce set up his Society for the Suppression of Vice and Immorality, he did so with the idea of reforming the vices of the lower classes.84 While the Society often reprimanded people of low birth for swearing or drinking, the members never thought of giving the same reprimand to a person such as Richard Brinsley Sheridan or the Prince Regent, both of whom led notorious private lives. What Crabbe has done in Book II is to show that the poor cannot be singled out for special rebuke.

This view of the world where no man is perfect, neither the poor nor the rich, is only to be expected, given Crabbe's anti-pastoral premises. The pastoral depends on a world in which there is no vice, but where everyone lives equally in harmony with nature. In rejecting this view of the world, Crabbe showed that men do not live harmoniously together, and that nature is either indifferent or hostile to man. Such a "naturalistic" world places man on the same plane as other animals, and seems to make him the slave of his passions and instincts. One recalls that in Inebriety Crabbe had already described a world in which men and women both descended to

83 Compare Cowper's account in Truth (1782) of the "ancient prude" watching the "am'rous couple in their play" while behind her walks her foot-boy, a "shiv'ring urchin" without proper clothes to keep him warm (lines 131-148).

84 At first this society was called the Proclamation Society, after the famous Royal Proclamation against Vice in 1787. See J.L. and Barbara Hammond, The Village Labourer, p. 22, and Muriel Jaeger, Before Victoria, 2nd ed. (London, 1967), p. 24.
the level of the brutes. When Crabbe looked closely at the "simple life that Nature yields" he found a Hobbesian world of "Rapine and Wrong and Fear." Instead of simple shepherds, he found poor villagers and villainous employers; in the place of harmony, he found class hatred. The summary of mankind in Book II shows men to have no values at all:

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

(II. 93-100).

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

Many critics have felt dissatisfied with Crabbe's refusal to advocate changes in Book II, and have disliked this summary in which Crabbe shows all men to be corrupt. Ian Gregor, for instance, sees Book I as "propagandist in purpose" and finds it surprising that Crabbe should have included pictures of Rapine, Wrong, Fear, since these offset some of the sympathy the reader feels for the poor.85 But this is to claim that in The Village Crabbe advocated the alleviation of social abuses. I find this thesis highly suspect. Nowhere in Book I does Crabbe ever suggest that changes should, or

will, be made. At the opening of the poem, he states his intention of describing what actually existed; he excludes unconditionally any attempt to describe what might be, or what should be. As was noted at the beginning of this chapter, Crabbe's indignation stems from the refusal of the rich to recognize the miseries of the poor, not from their failure to correct them.

One could argue that even though Crabbe never says that changes should take place, his presentation suggests this conclusion. For example, in Gray's *Elegy* the lines:

> Full many a gem of purest ray serene,
> The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear:
> Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
> And waste its sweetness on the desert air

contain latent political ideas. But it is fair to say that the elegaic mood created by the *Elegy* invites the reader to accept the democratic implications without wanting to alter the social structure. In Book I of *The Village*, Crabbe's tone of moral indignation creates the opposite reaction; the reader feels that village conditions are intolerable. But Book II of the poem rules out the possibility of benevolence, for it presents the poor as brawling "boobies" and the rich as diseased libertines. In Crabbe's description of the world there is no good-natured man, no man of social conscience. Whereas earlier humanitarian poets had often described a pastoral world in which it was difficult to imagine poverty, in *The Village* it is difficult to imagine benevolence.

To understand Crabbe's position in Book II, where he seems
to exclude the possibility of reforms, it will be helpful to look at the grounds on which previous humanitarian poets had urged reform. Social critics of the early eighteenth century had assumed that the vices of the town were the chief causes leading to man's corruption; like Cowper, they believed firmly that if men were given the opportunity to retire to a quiet life in the country, their good nature would come to the fore. Accordingly, it was believed that the essential factor in social reform was to eradicate man's follies by removing the false values of the city, especially the emphasis upon luxuries. Poets such as Dodsley, Shenstone and Akenside transformed the country into a place of virtue. When Crabbe took up this essentially pastoral theory and showed it to be completely false, he in fact destroyed the basic premise of eighteenth century social criticism -- the optimistic view that man in the country was innocent and virtuous. No longer could the pretence be maintained that men were bad in the city, but good in the country. Consequently, when in Book II Crabbe sums up his philosophy of man: "a poor, blind bewildered, erring race," he finds that he has created a world in which the eighteenth century ideal of benevolence cannot exist. Crabbe would have been the first to admit that the lot of the poor was miserable and deserved to be changed. But *The Village* (at least up to line 106 of Book II) allows no possible solution. All men are corrupt.

Yet, as is well known, Crabbe does not close the poem at this point, but turns suddenly in a new direction to give his famous,

87 In both *Tom Jones* and *Joseph Andrews*, Fielding shows his ideal man living a "pastoral" life.
or rather infamous, threnody on Robert Manners. Manners offers Crabbe a new ideal because he rises above the world of mixed hopes and fears. Manners takes on some of the attributes of Christ, the leader who dies as a sacrifice for his people. That he died fighting for his country makes his sacrifice all the more meaningful. Finding no one in his village capable of benevolence, Crabbe has been forced to introduce a philanthropist from the outside world, and, so to speak, impose him on the poem.

I would suggest that one of the reasons for much of the critical discussion over whether Book II does, or does not, amplify the themes of Book I has been caused by a misreading of this eulogy on Robert Manners. Ian Gregor's article "The Last Augustan" typifies the way in which critics have over-simplified the poem. Gregor has claimed that Crabbe "sees in Manners' death a link between the distresses of the great and those of the poor, both being involved in a 'universal woe.'" But Gregor is mistaken, for not only does Crabbe never attempt to link the poor and Robert Manners, he states quite categorically that such a connection does not exist. The figure of Robert Manners offers a possible reason for hope, because Manners is the "noble chief" who triumphs over the debauchery of the world:

\[
\text{Born to enjoy whate'er delights mankind,}
\text{And yet to all you feel or fear resign'd}
\text{(II. 109-110).}
\]

It is because Manners stands above the general depravity of the world that Crabbe eulogizes him. The injustices and evils of the

\footnote{86} Ian Gregor, "The Last Augustan," p. 40.
world will not be changed by popular reforms, but through the agency of great men such as Manners.

In one sense Gregor's conclusion, that in Book II Crabbe envelops all men in "universal woe," is correct. For Crabbe finds little difference between the morals of the ordinary worker and his village master; both the judge and the libertine enjoy mistresses. It is this universal degradation which causes Crabbe to despair. Yet when he turns to Manners, he finds in this aristocrat someone outside the ordinary realm of mankind. Manners is the exception; his ability to live in the world, without being corrupted by it, sets him apart from ordinary people -- rich and poor alike. Because of his virtue, Manners will act as a force for reform in the country. The poem ends with Crabbe's appeal to the Duke of Rutland, to continue his brother's efforts to serve the country: "Oh! make the age to come thy better care" (II. 194).

To see this eulogy as a purely selfish attempt on Crabbe's part to gain the Duke's favour would be unfair both to the poem and to Crabbe. Crabbe's own experiences had given him good reason for holding suspect any "democratic" solutions of social reform. As one of the villagers of the "frowning coast," Crabbe had found that the only solution to his own problems of poverty had been the patronage of a great man -- Edmund Burke. For Crabbe, the experience of "the noble chief," the saving grace of the villagers, was a true experience. At the time when he wrote to Burke his desperate letter of appeal, he faced debtor's prison. While waiting for Burke's answer, his anxiety and despair were so
great that he spent the night walking up and down Westminster Bridge. Today there is a tendency, and possibly it is a correct one, to devalue such eulogies of great men. Yet Crabbe had actually experienced the saving efforts of such a person; Burke's help had snatched him from debtor's prison, possibly even suicide.

This claim that Crabbe makes for the aristocracy, that they are the possible saviours of the nation, is not a passing fancy with him. In "An Epistle to a Friend," he also began by announcing his intention to reveal the corruption of the times and ended by flattering Shelburne to gain his patronage. Moreover, Crabbe's son has commented on how his father preferred to consult acknowledged authorities for an answer to a problem rather than seek solutions by argument:

Argument he sustained with great impatience. . . . He had seen the submission paid to the opinions of Johnson and Burke; and he always readily followed the lead of any one whom he thought skilled on the topic in question; but when he ventured an assertion himself, he expected similar deference. And, to be candid, though what he said was pretty sure to be just, yet there was an unfair and aristocratic principle in this expectation, which I never could think quite in harmony with the general modesty of his nature. 89

One can see how Crabbe's experience in London, and his aristocratic temperament would lead him to find his solutions to the evils and abuses of the world through the figures of great men such as Burke, Rutland, and Manners.

Crabbe was not the only person at this period to suggest that the genuine aristocracy, free from the commercial spirit of

89Life, Ch. ix, p. 236.
the time, was the nation's only hope. In a letter to his brother George, Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote:

I am inclined to consider the Aristocrats as the more respectable of our three factions, because they are more decorous. The Opposition and the Democrats are not only vicious— they wear the filthy garments of vice.90

Many people felt that reforms were hopeless when the country was burdened with vice, members of parliament often being the worst offenders. When Pitt, with his reputation for moral sobriety made his bid for the reins of government in December 1783, the "Country Gentlemen" gave him their support in large part because he offered a platform of rectitude and obedience to the sovereign. Crabbe's fears -- that ordinary people, rich and poor alike, were too selfish to effect reforms -- were voiced by many writers at this time, including Cowper in The Task:

For when was public Virtue to be found
Where private was not? Can he love the whole
Who loves no part? He be a nation's friend
Who is, in truth, the friend of no man there?
Can he be strenuous in his country's cause
Who slights the charities, for whose dear sake
That country, if at all, must be lov'd?91

Like Cowper, Crabbe found it difficult to believe that when the people neglected common charities they would be able to institute reforms.

It would seem that Crabbe, in a way very similar to that

of Bolingbroke, saw what he took to be the utter corruption of the world around him, and despairing of reform by political parties or through gradualist measures, turned to the "great patriot" (Bolingbroke's "Patriot King") who, free from petty squabbles, would be able to effect the necessary action. I am not suggesting that Crabbe owed a direct debt to Bolingbroke's political writings, but I am suggesting that the comparison with Bolingbroke will help clarify the type of "great man" solution Crabbe invoked in the figure of Manners. This idea of the "great man" was by no means the invention of Carlyle and the nineteenth century; it was voiced often in the eighteenth century. Both Chatham and Pitt the younger owed much of their political following in the Commons, not to the number of their "party," but to the status of "great men" which they had created for themselves.

Burke of course regarded the members of the aristocracy as the country's natural leaders, and Crabbe may well have been influenced by Burke's ideas during his stay at Beaconsfield. Yet it is unnecessary to hypothesize such a direct debt. For instance Soame Jenyns in 1757 argued that the "Great Man" (his italics and capitals) must accept imperfections and abuses as a necessary part of human government, but suggested that the "virtue" of the great man would gradually act as an influence for reform:

To this [imperfection] every wise man ought quietly to submit, endeavouring at the same time to redress them to the utmost of his power; which can be effected by one method only; that is, by a reformation of manners: for as all political evils derive their original from moral, these can never
be removed, until those are first amended. He, therefore, who strictly adheres to virtue and sobriety in his conduct, and enforces them by his example, does more real service to a state than he who displaces a bad minister, or dethrones a tyrant; this gives but a temporary relief, but that exterminates the cause of the disease.92

Soame Jenyns believed the country needed a large number of such "great men."

In Book II Crabbe seems to endorse this idea of a "great man"; he tells the poor that if such great men exist "then let your murmurs cease, / Think, think of him, and take your lot in peace" (II. 113-114). And in the next line he exclaims that such men are to be found; Manners is an example. Crabbe appears to be suggesting that if no such great men existed then the poor should not peacefully accept their difficulties, but since there are such great men, the future holds hope. As he says to Rutland:

Yet the pure stream moves on, and, as it moves,
Its power increases and its use improves;
While plenty round its spacious waves bestow,
Still it flows on, and shall for ever flow
(II. 204-207).

In Crabbe's view the Duke and his family are to purge the country of its depravity.

Crabbe takes great care to ensure that the eulogy of Manners forms a logical and possible conclusion to the poem. Yet while I admire the skilful way Crabbe introduces the eulogy of

Manners so as to allow the "great man" to offer a solution to an otherwise depraved world, I rejoice to concur with the common reader that the ending does not completely satisfy the expectations aroused by Book I.

Even if the Duke and Robert Manners had been the paragons of virtue that the poem seems to suggest, most readers would find it difficult to believe that they offered a permanent solution to the problems of the villagers. Crabbe's prophecy, in which he saw the Duke of Rutland purifying England, was never fulfilled since the Duke died four years later, aged only thirty-three. Nathaniel Wraxall's comments on the Duke reveal him to have been a man who never "displayed any eminent talents," a pleasant but rather decadent member of the aristocracy:

Play, which divided with wine his evenings, had impaired his ample fortune previous to his visiting Ireland. Nor, though united by marriage to the most beautiful woman in England, was he insensible to the seductions of beauty in others. A siren of that period . . . held him for some time in her chains. Excesses of various kinds precipitated his end.93

Today one tends to see the Duke's character as additional evidence of the untenability of Crabbe's solution.

Yet in Crabbe's own time this panegyric on the Manners family was little questioned, especially since the father of Charles, fourth Duke of Rutland, was the famous Marquis of Granby -- a national hero. The reviewer for The Monthly Review felt the eulogy

to be "warm, though merited."\textsuperscript{94} For a great many of Crabbe's contemporary readers, the panegyric served the purpose of bringing the poem within the canon of respectable and serious literature. Many persons who might otherwise have dismissed Book I as radical propaganda were forced to admit that the poem was both powerful and elegant.\textsuperscript{95} The reviewer for The Monthly Review said: "In the second part the Author's good sense compels him to acknowledge, contrary to the tenor of what had gone before, that the poor have no reason to envy their superiors . . . ."\textsuperscript{96} Obviously this reviewer felt that Crabbe was wrong in the first Book to suggest, however tentatively, that the poor were in a worse condition than their superiors. But because Book II seemed to obviate any radical opinions, this reviewer was able to conclude, fairly cheerfully, that the poem contained "many splendid lines, many descriptions that are picturesque and original, and such as will do credit to the ingenious Author of The Library."\textsuperscript{97} While admitting that the poem was "illogical" and that "the second part contradicts the assertion of the first," this reviewer felt that he could accept the statements of The Village, albeit with reservations. Since The Village seemed to be a "classical poem," although a defective classical poem, the fashionable world was ready to accept the poem's

\textsuperscript{94}The Monthly Review, LXIX (November 1783), 420.

\textsuperscript{95}In a letter to Sir Joshua Reynolds, Samuel Johnson said that The Village was "original, vigorous, and elegant," Poems by George Crabbe, I, 92.

\textsuperscript{96}The Monthly Review, LXIX (November 1783), 420.

\textsuperscript{97}The Monthly Review, LXIX (November 1783), 421.
conclusions. And because Crabbe was so careful to formulate his criticisms in this classical form, high Tories like Sir Walter Scott were able to applaud Crabbe's poems, and dub him "our British Juvenal." That people such as Scott could see Crabbe as a classical satirist of England's social abuses shows that his poetry was regarded as a part of English poetical tradition.

Even though Crabbe meant the panegyric to be taken, at least in part, seriously, it also contains an element of irony. Yvor Winters has pointed out that in several poems Charles Churchill "in his ambiguous territory between irony and eulogy, awakened a number of feelings belonging neither to irony nor to eulogy, but capable of joining with both." As Winters has pointed out, in such cases where a poem arouses contrary feelings, the poem's structure must be studied closely if the reader is not to be left "suspended in ambiguity." Certainly The Village is not so "illogical" as the reviewer for The Monthly Review believed. Ian Gregor has with great insight pointed out that the ending of Book II converts the poem into "a striking variation of a well recognized 'kind' -- the elegaic pastoral." I would suggest that the closing lines of Book II, with its classical elegy, affords a counterpart to the classical opening of Book I.

It will be recalled that Crabbe opened the poem with a classical

98 The Heart of Midlothian (1818), Ch. xxxiv.
100 "The Last Augustan," p. 40.
invocation to the muse; in Book II he closes singing of the "pure stream" which still flows on, "and shall for ever flow." In effect the classical eulogy of the great man rounds out and completes the classical opening of the poem.

Such eulogies of great men were of course a characteristic classical feature of many of the "humanitarian" poems of the eighteenth century; the ending of The Village echoes exactly both the phrasing and the sentiments of such poems. In Cyder (1708) John Philips encourages the young Harcourt to return to England to follow his father's example: "See! how the Cause / Of Widows, and of Orphans He asserts / With winning Rhetoric, and well argu'd Law!"  

In his well known poem On the Prospect of Peace (1712), Thomas Tickell tells the Queen that she must turn her attention to the needs of her subjects:

Henceforth be thine, vice-gerent [sic] of the skies,  
Scorn'd worth to raise, and vice in robes chastise,  
To dry the orphan's tears, and from the bar,  
Chace the brib'd judge, and hush the wordy war.

Similarly Ambrose Philips claims that Pulteney is "to mankind a friend."  

And of course Goldsmith in Threnodia Augustalis (1772), written for the Princess Dowager of Wales, asserts her great benevolence:


103 Ambrose Philips, "To the Right Honourable William Pulteney, Esq.," (1723), line 14, in The Poems of Ambrose Philips, ed. M.G. Segar (Basil Blackwell: Oxford,1937), p. 120.
Want pass'd for merit at her door,
Unseen the modest were supplied,
Her constant pity fed the poor,
Then only poor, indeed, the day she died. 104

It was a customary eighteenth century theme to link benevolence and patriotism in a classical tribute to some public figure.

Crabbe's ending of Book II, therefore, employs the customary patriotic appeal to be found in countless "humanitarian" poems, and so brings The Village within the pastoral syndrome. For the patriot was envisioned residing in his country seat, dispensing charity to "needy" shepherds living in idyllic country surroundings. Goldsmith's Threnodia Augustalis decked out the Princess Dowager of Wales in the customary pseudo-pastoral trappings. Nor is this unexpected, for the pastoral elegy is a recognized literary form. In employing this form of the pastoral elegy to end The Village, Crabbe seems to be indulging in the type of poetry he had scathingly attacked earlier. Yet it will be recalled that Crabbe employed the classical form at the beginning of the poem with an ironic purpose. The classical form of The Village operates as an ironic device to contain anti-classical ideas. Everything about The Village contradicts the greatness, beauty and harmony which the eighteenth century saw in classical times. The Village describes the small, the ugly, the particular. As a result, the classical ending of the poem, coming as it does, after so much abjuration of the classical, also partakes of this ironic mode. An anti-pastoral, The Village ends ironically in the form of a pastoral elegy.

It has already been noted how Crabbe in Book II realized that his readers would admire his "picturesque" scenes of village poverty but would reject any radical conclusions. Consequently he plays with what he anticipates to be their normal views. First he introduces a conventional theme -- for instance, the "sweet repose" of the villager -- pretends for a moment to argue its validity, and then turns round to show its falsity. He repeatedly arouses and then deflates his readers' expectations; from the very beginning of Book II, versions of pastoral are suggested, and then rejected. At the end the theme of the "great man" sweeps in and overwhels the poem. Obviously the "great man" is a variant of pastoral just as was the "sweet repose" of the villager, but Crabbe bows to the inevitable, and allows his readers the "pastoral" solution he knows they have wanted all along.

Yet the ending is neither wholly ironic nor wholly serious. It contains an ambivalence similar to that we have seen already in _Inebriety_, an ambivalence that is to be found in most of Crabbe's best poems. I would suggest that in _The Village_ Crabbe has constructed a poem in which a pattern of dialectic has been created. In such a pattern the end conclusion is of necessity unstable, and must give way, but it serves the function of giving form to the poem, while suggesting its inner instability of theme.
In 1785, five years after arriving in London, Crabbe appeared to be on the point of realizing all his ambitions. His poems -- The Library, The Village and The Newspaper -- had enjoyed a certain success; Dr. Johnson had given him his blessing; and his appointment as chaplain to the Duke of Rutland had placed him in a respectable profession. His success had also enabled him, after an eleven-year engagement, to marry Mira. Yet just when one might have expected Crabbe's literary career to flourish, he disappeared completely from the world of letters. With the exception of a sermon preached at the funeral of the Duke of Rutland, and a chapter in J. Nichol's The History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester, Crabbe published nothing from 1785 until 1807. Accordingly, the opening lines of The Newspaper, written in 1785 -- "A time like this, a busy, bustling time, / Suits ill with writers, very ill
with rhyme" -- deserve to be taken seriously, for Crabbe followed his own advice to eschew poetry.

From a poet such as Crabbe, with a strong satiric bent and a keen interest in describing rural manners, this long silence seems especially strange. One would have expected more poems dealing with the corruption and humbuggery of English life, which at this time offered the satirist no small number of subjects. His son, also puzzled by this retirement from poetry, was unable to offer a satisfactory explanation: "Why ... he for so great a period of his life remained unmoved by the stimuli of reputation or money, or the pleasure of select society, is a question which will never, I suppose, be quite satisfactorily answered." Crabbe's son seems to have believed that his father could move at will amongst "select society," yet he forgets that when Crabbe's patron, the Duke of Rutland, died unexpectedly at an early age in 1787, Crabbe could do little else but devote himself to his parish work. Still his duties as a parish priest need not have stopped him from continuing to write and to publish poetry.\(^1\)

Crabbe's own explanation for his long silence, stated in the Preface to Poems, is not entirely satisfactory. He says that:

> In truth, I have, for many years, intended a republication of these poems [The Library, The Village, and The Newspaper], as soon as I should be able to join with them such other of later date as might not deprive

\(^1\)Life, Ch. vi, p. 135.

\(^2\)Nor is it quite correct to say that Crabbe wrote nothing during this period. His son mentions three novels that were consigned to the flames. Moreover in 1799, Crabbe began negotiations with Hatchard to publish some new poems. These he withdrew on the advice of his friend Mr. Turner. See Life, Ch. vii, p. 168.
me of the little credit the former had obtained. Long
indeed has this purpose been procrastinated; and, if
the duties of a profession, not before pressing upon me --
if the claims of a situation, at that time untried -- if
diffidence of my own judgment, and the loss of my
earliest friends, will not sufficiently account for my
delay, I must rely upon the good-nature of my reader,
that he will let them avail as far as he can, and find
an additional apology in my fears of his censure. 3

Yet as he himself admitted, he had published The Newspaper at a time
when he was very busy and without first consulting any literary judges.

In a curious poem entitled "To His Grace the Duke of
Rutland" written at Belvoir in August 1784, Crabbe gives yet another
and certainly more interesting motive for not writing poetry:

Think you, my Lord; your Belvoir heights infuse
Vigor, like old Parnassus, to the Muse?
Not so; Parnassus was a dismal scene,
And hunger made the wretched Tenants keen;
Still the same kinds of Inspiration last:
A London garret and a long day's fast. --

I -- and I thank your Grace -- have ceased to strive
In niggard rhymes to keep us just alive,
And little can, if now it pleased the State
To tax your poets as they tax your plate.
Exempt from both, my useless life I'd close,
Use humbler ware, and correspond in prose. --

Yet, if it pleased your Grace, I'd now and then
Employ a grateful, but a lazy, pen,
To paint these laughing scenes that round me shine --
Scenes worthy thee, and then to call them thine;
Nor vainly then the Village Squire should charm,
The buried Cottage or the busy Farm;
Nor then unpaid the blooming banks should die,
Nor Wood-shop's little rill run vainly by. 4

According to Crabbe the comforts of his position as ducal chaplain
have robbed him of all motive to write. While Crabbe's son found
difficulty in understanding why his father stopped writing poetry,

3 Poems by George Crabbe, I, 93-94.
4 Poems by George Crabbe, III, 494-495, lines 41-60.
thereby giving up his claim to the company of fashionable society, Crabbe himself attributes his loss of poetic inspiration to his new-found luxury. Undoubtedly the poem contains a vein of raillery, and Crabbe appears to take his argument only half seriously, but the assertion that his own pleasant situation had, for the time being, robbed him of his muse, probably contains an element of truth. In part he is saying, as did so many Romantics, that the poet needs the stimulus of suffering to write, but in addition he is claiming that his subject matter is rooted in the sufferings of the common people--scenes not to be found amongst the beautiful landscape of Belvoir. Crabbe's poetry loses its vigour whenever it strays far from the subject of the common people and their hardships. He was a poet motivated to write, not by the beauties of the lily and the rose, but by the strength and obduracy of the nettle and the seaweed. In "To His Grace The Duke of Rutland," he says that if the Duke wishes, he will attempt some occasional verse by describing the beauties and glories of Belvoir. Yet he leaves no doubt that such poetry is valueless, fit to rank only with the pastoral so bitterly condemned in The Village--poetry which results from a "lazy pen." Clearly Crabbe felt that his position at Belvoir was destroying his ability to write serious poetry:

Pardon, my Lord, these idle fits of rhyme
That flow from too much ease and too much time!
You bade th' inspiring Days of Gloom depart
And spoiled the poet when you eas'd his heart:
Take then such feeble thanks as he can pay,
Who feels more grateful as his powers decay,
And finds the will to sing, but cannot find the way!\(^5\)

\(^5\)Poems by George Crabbe, III, 496, lines 120-126.
For inspiration, Crabbe required actual contact with village life.

Although in this period Crabbe may have stopped writing verse about English country life, some evidence is available to show that he never forsook his liberal ideals. His son records that while Crabbe was resident in Suffolk, rumours circulated in Muston that he had become a Jacobin. While Crabbe's son is eager to assure us that the rumours were unfounded, he admits that his father opposed the war with France: "But he did not, certainly, approve of the origin of the war that was raging while he lived at Parham, Glemham, and Rendham; nor did he ever conceal his opinion, that this war might have been avoided ... . He was one of the innumerable good men who, indeed, hailed the beginning of the French Revolution, but who execrated its close." Thus in 1789 Crabbe, like Wordsworth and Coleridge, believed that the French Revolution would be beneficial to mankind. When the Revolution, the supposed beginning of liberty, equality and fraternity, turned into anarchy and then despotism, the Lake poets lost all hope in man's ability to gain political equality and freedom, but Crabbe (as we shall see in a later chapter) never gave up hope of reform in England. Unlike Charles James Fox however, Crabbe did not continue to support the French after Napoleon came to power; like Wordsworth and Southey he wrote a poem in praise of the Duke of Wellington. But his attitude towards the best values of the French Revolution, and his

6 Life, Ch. vii, p. 174.
7 Poems by George Crabbe, III, 431.
repugnance at the way Pitt and Burke had hurried England into war with France, were clearly in the best liberal tradition. 8

When Crabbe published *Poems* (1807) after twenty-two years of silence, not only had England changed a great deal, but so had Crabbe. He was fifty-three years of age and a clergyman of the Church of England -- unlikely qualifications for a social reformer. Knowing these facts, it is with some trepidation that a reader approaches the new poems, perhaps expecting to find a new conservatism to accompany the advanced years of the poet. After all, Wordsworth was hardly the exception when he lost his poetic fervour and zeal for reform at the age of forty.

To discover that most of the new poems of 1807 -- "Sir Eustace Grey," "The Parish Register" and "The Hall of Justice" -- are fresh and original is thus both surprising and pleasing. "The Parish Register" indeed amplifies Crabbe's best theme, the lives of common people, and develops further the interest in social types shown in *The Village*. "Sir Eustace Grey" attempts to reproduce something of the quality of the mind of a madman, a new and surprisingly different theme. But it is in "The Hall of Justice" where Crabbe shows unmistakeably that during his years as a parish priest he had not forgotten the plight of the poor. The tone, blunt and argumentative, suggests that the poem is closer to the style of

8 All the information we have about Crabbe's attitude to the French Revolution is derived from his son's comments on the charge of his being a Jacobin. Although the evidence is slight and sketchy, there is no reason to doubt its reliability.
The Village than the objective probing attitude of "The Parish Register." Crabbe's statement in the Preface that "nine years have since elapsed" since he wrote the poem,\(^9\) confirms this impression.

"The Hall of Justice" confronts the reader with the theme that poverty and crime are often the results of social conditions. In The Village Crabbe had shown how a few people were able to divert into their own pockets the benefits and profits from the land, leaving large numbers of labouring people with a bare subsistence. While never explicitly stating the connection between poverty and crime in The Village, Crabbe, through his imagery, had shown that the wretches and criminals of the village were at least in part the product of their environment. In "The Hall of Justice" Crabbe once again takes up this theme of the causal connection between environment and crime to show, in a particular case, how a woman with no education is finally forced into a life of crime in order to obtain bread.\(^{10}\)

The main theme of "The Hall of Justice," that the criminal's deeds are not solely his own responsibility but that of society at large, was by no means a new idea in 1807. Almost a century earlier, Daniel Defoe had insisted on a close connection between poverty and crime. In his Preface to The History of Colonel Jack, Defoe stated categorically of Jack: "Circumstances form'd him

\(^9\)Poems by George Crabbe, I, 98.

\(^{10}\)In Letter XXII of The Borough Crabbe showed how the cruel treatment Peter Grimes meted out to his apprentice compelled the boy "by fear to lie, by need to steal" (line 91).
by Necessity to be a Thief."\textsuperscript{11} Again, in The Fortunate Mistress, Defoe expressed much the same sentiment through Roxana's maid, Amy: "Poverty is the strongest incentive; a Temptation against which no Virtue is powerful enough to stand out. . . . As to Honesty, I think Honesty is out of the Question when Starvation is the Case."\textsuperscript{12} Maximilllian Novak has pointed out how this causal connection between poverty and crime is central to Defoe's concern with the nature of justice in English society.\textsuperscript{13}

While this belief -- that necessity and self-preservation are often the causes of crime -- was alive at the beginning of the century in the writings of people such as Defoe and Mandeville, by the middle of the century it had lost most of its original force. Although the idea remained current throughout the eighteenth century, it is found only occasionally in the "humanitarian" poems as a reason why the good man should pity the poor. As was seen in Chapter 1, poets were mainly interested in the feelings of the philanthropist rather than those of the poor. Thus when Savage said: "Hence Robbers rise, to Theft, to Murder prone, / First driv'n by Want, from Habit des'p'rate grown,"\textsuperscript{14} and Johnson in London commented

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{12}Daniel Defoe, The Fortunate Mistress (1724), Shakespeare Head ed., I, 28-29.
  \item \textsuperscript{13}Maximilllian E. Novak, Defoe and the Nature of Man (London, 1963), pp. 87-88.
\end{itemize}
how the "midnight murd'rer" is "cruel with guilt, and daring with despair" (lines 238-239), both were voicing sentiments heard only infrequently in verse during this period. What is more, the poets who developed the causal connection between poverty and crime rarely did so to any purpose. Neither Johnson nor Savage suggested that the criminal was not wholly responsible for his actions. Not until Robert Owen's *A New View of Society* appeared in 1813 did this idea -- that environment and education mould an individual's personality -- come to play an important and decisive role in men's thinking. The result of Owen's teaching was the birth of socialism and the co-operative movements as they are known today.

When most eighteenth century poems paid only lip service to the idea that necessity offers an excuse for crime, it is no

15 In the nineteenth century Thomas Hood, in his poem "A Drop of Gin" (1843), took up this theme when he showed how poverty and despair could drive people to gin -- a theme developed by both Defoe and Fielding. One of the greatest nineteenth century literary exponents of this idea that vice stems from social causes was Harriet Martineau in her series *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1832-1834).

16 Many writers reiterated Pope's statement: "Tis Education forms the common mind, / Just as the Twig is bent, the Tree's inclin'd" (*Moral Essays* I. 101-102). But the full consequences of this idea were not realized until much later.

17 In "The Convict" (first published in December 1797, and then in *Lyrical Ballads*), Wordsworth expresses his wish to help the convict by transporting him to one of the colonies so that he might "blossom again." Likewise in "The Female Vagrant" (published in *Lyrical Ballads*), Wordsworth tells the story of a woman who follows her husband to war. When the husband is killed, she returns to England where she joins a group of friendly gypsies and learns to steal for a living. The woman then decides she does not like the life of a gypsy and wanders off alone. In the latter case especially, one can see the seeds of Crabbe's poem, but Wordsworth certainly does not place much emphasis upon the causal connection between poverty and crime nor upon society's share in the responsibility for such people.
surprise that Crabbe's exposition, in which he presses home the
logical conclusion that crimes of necessity cannot be punished by
the courts, should have created a great impact on his readers.
Jeffrey found the poem "very nervous -- very shocking -- and very
powerfully represented."18 Such a reaction was only to be expected
when one considers that "The Hall of Justice," by raising questions
of natural law, called into question the entire basis of English
judicial law. Such ideas at this period of the Napoleonic Wars,
when a great many Englishmen feared that the French Revolution might
any day spread across the Channel, were political heresy.

The stated theme of "The Hall of Justice" is probably the
most radical of any in Crabbe's poems, yet in a way that should now
be familiar, the conclusion of the poem seems deliberately ambiguous
and even conservative. In this respect "The Hall of Justice"
resembles The Village where the radical ideas of Book I are followed
by the conservative and conventional ending of Book II. Crabbe's
intention appears to have been to raise the issue of the influence
of social conditions on crime without forcing his readers to the
conclusion that society is ultimately responsible for the acts of
criminals. Like most of Crabbe's best writing, the poem works
obliquely, leaving much unsaid, and indeed, leaving much that appears
to be purposely ambiguous.

If one is to observe Crabbe's brilliant use of many ideas
current at this time, the poem needs to be examined closely. "The

18Francis Jeffrey, review of Poems, in The Edinburgh
Review, XII (1808), 149.
Hall of Justice" tells the story of a vagrant woman who has been caught stealing. Before she is sentenced by the judge, she asks that the story of her life may be heard in the hope that her circumstances will be taken into account. Reluctantly the judge agrees to listen, but by the time the woman has finished her story of hardship and misery he has been moved to compassion. The opening lines in which the vagrant begs that her story be heard are bold and dramatic; their style and tone suggest not a cowed criminal begging for mercy, but an aristocrat demanding justice. "Impetuous and lofty" is Jeffrey's description. Crabbe has given the woman a dignity and self-assurance which immediately impress the sensibility of the judge. Nor does Crabbe allow the possibility of the judge's rebuking the woman for daring to address her "betters" without humility; in the poem the judge and vagrant are of equal stature. To the constable, who thinks he can treat vagabonds with disrespect, the vagrant speaks contemptuously:

Take, take away thy barbarous hand,
And let me to thy master speak;
Remit awhile the harsh command,
And hear me, or my heart will break. 19

The language is strong, and the words "barbarous" and "harsh" carry a certain amount of irony, being spoken in a courtroom -- supposedly a hall of justice.

The passage gathers even more effect when one recalls that Crabbe has the woman speak on her own behalf, not simply to add drama to the scene, but because under the law at this time, a person accused of a felony was not permitted to employ a lawyer to make his

defence in the courts. Of this law forbidding counsel to speak for those accused of felonies, Sydney Smith had said: "We are called upon to continue a practice without example in any other country, and are required by lawyers to consider that custom as humane, which every one who is not a lawyer pronounces to be most cruel and unjust -- and which has not been brought forward to general notice, only because its bad effects are confined to the last and lowest of mankind." Lacking education and all knowledge of the law, the vagrant woman is forced to conduct her own case against a judge, who is in all probability little disposed to be charitable to a woman who has spent her life wandering with gypsies. By giving the vagrant woman the ability to make a strong and impassioned speech in her own defense, Crabbe manages to show what can, in exceptional circumstances, be said to extenuate a crime. That the judge is surprised by the woman's speech is clear from his replies, and thus Crabbe is able to show how trials, as they are usually conducted, neglect to take into account an important aspect of the case -- the defendant's situation. Sydney Smith, in describing the condition of most poor people when brought into court, asks:

Can a sick man find strength and nerves to speak before a large assembly? -- can an ignorant man find words? -- can a low man find confidence? Is not he afraid of becoming an object of ridicule? -- can he believe that his expressions will be understood? How often have we seen a poor wretch, struggling against the agonies of his spirit, and the rudeness of his conceptions, and his

20 This anomaly was not corrected until 1836.

awe of better-dressed men and better-taught men, and the shame which the accusation has brought upon his head, and the sight of his parents and children gazing at him in the Court, for the last time, perhaps, and after a long absence.  

Crabbe has taken the opposite extreme, and has given his vagrant the ability to speak in "impetuous and lofty" language -- the result being that the woman's speech came as something of a shock to his contemporaries. For Crabbe has shown what can be said to help the case of a person guilty of a felony. 

At the beginning of the poem Crabbe presents the judge as stern and unbending. Nor is he exaggerating in the least. Although many judges were undoubtedly compassionate in their private lives, in their public capacity they were notoriously strict with the "unworthy poor." When the judge finds that the woman wishes to plead her case, he asks incredulously what she can possibly have to say in her own behalf. From his address to her as "fond wretch," it is clear that in his opinion the vagrant is a different order of being, hardly worthy his attention:

Fond wretch! and what canst thou relate,  
  But deeds of sorrow, shame, and sin?  
Thy crime is proved, thou know'st at thy fate;  
  But come, thy tale! -- begin, begin!  
(I. 5-8)

Summing up his opinion of the woman, the judge says that her life

22The Works, II, 212-213.

23In Smollett's novels the cruelty of the magistracy to the lower classes is frequently mentioned. For instance, Roderick's grandfather "was remarkable for his abilities in the law, which he exercised with great success, in the station of a judge, particularly against beggars, for whom he had a singular aversion." The Adventures of Roderick Random, in The Works of Tobias Smollett, ed. George Saintsbury (London, 1895) I, 1.
has been a series of "deeds of sorrow, shame, and sin"; because of these deeds, he concludes that she is past help. The judge's interpretation of the law is literal: since the woman has been found guilty, and has no character to plead, all that remains is to pronounce sentence. Yet Crabbe has the judge emphasize the word "deeds," leaving the way open to a possible discussion of motive.

When the woman begins her speech -- a speech on which her life may depend, since stealing goods worth more than five shillings was punishable by death -- Crabbe introduces a decidedly radical proposition. Explaining first that she stole the food to feed herself and her baby, the woman acknowledges that she broke society's law, but claims that she followed "a stronger law." In making this statement, the woman challenges the validity of England's system of jurisprudence by appealing to natural law or the law of self-preservation. As soon as she begins instructing the judge on the interpretation of man's law in relation to nature's law, however, she realizes that this method will not succeed. Her case is almost lost before it is begun:

My crime! -- This sick'ning child to feed,
I seized the food your witness saw;
I knew your laws forbade the deed,
But yielded to a stronger law.

Know'st thou, to Nature's great command
All human laws are frail and weak?
(I. 9-14)

At this point she sees the judge frown, and realizing that she is losing his sympathy, abruptly stops discussing natural law: "Nay! frown not -- stay his eager hand, / And hear me, or my heart will break" (I. 15-16). The vagrant then attempts to gain the judge's
sympathy by another course, by describing the difficulties she and her baby have encountered. Even in the early nineteenth century it appears that babies were excellent subjects for gaining sympathy.

Crabbe's method of invoking a brief allusion to natural rights without ever pursuing the argument was a method in vogue amongst liberal reformers in the repressive years at the end of the eighteenth century. In a debate in 1796 on Curwen's motion to change the game laws, Windham had stated in his best reactionary voice that he felt "a very great repugnance to accede to any sudden change in any ancient system." Before developing his practical arguments for a change in the laws, Charles James Fox ironically replied that he "should not offend the right hon. gentleman who spoke last by saying anything upon the doctrine of natural rights." Crabbe's brief reference to natural rights carries the same stinging rebuke.

The momentary introduction of the argument commits neither Crabbe nor the vagrant to its validity. That the judge refuses to listen to any arguments involving natural law is only to be expected, since the doctrine was literally outlawed. Concerned that the French Revolution would spread to England, the government had endeavoured by every means within its power to stop the spread of ideas about natural law and natural rights. The publication of Thomas Paine's Rights of Man, by far the most influential book amongst those of the lower classes who were attempting to articulate their desire for a better life, had been banned in 1792, the year

following its publication. Locke's statements on natural law, which at the beginning of the eighteenth century had seemed self-evident and even innocuous, a century later appeared full of revolutionary venom:

The law of nature stands as an eternal rule to all men, legislators as well as others. The rules that they make for other men's actions must, as well as their own and other men's actions, be conformable to the law of nature, i.e., to the will of God, of which that is a declaration, and the fundamental law of nature being the preservation of mankind, no human sanction can be good or valid against it.25

What the reader is meant to make of the vagrant woman's brief appeal to the theory of natural rights is by no means certain. Crabbe gives no indication in the poem of his own opinion. A naive reader might conclude from the judge's objection to the subject, that Crabbe had no wish to hear more of such an offensive topic. But such a view is untenable, for Crabbe, the poet, gave the argument to the vagrant in the first place. Had he not wanted the issue of natural rights raised, he could have ignored the argument completely. What becomes clear is that any person wishing to argue his own case would do well to avoid arguments from natural rights.

The judge is moved to sympathy by the tale of the woman's suffering,

25 John Locke, The Second Treatise of Government (1690), ed. J.W. Gough (Basil Blackwell: Oxford, 1956), p. 69 (Ch. xi, Sec. 135). The change in attitude towards the question of the rights of man can be seen clearly in the writings of Edmund Burke. In 1756 Burke published A Vindication of Natural Society in which he showed that all political societies were based on injustice and therefore deprived their citizens of their natural rights. Later, however, when Burke saw, or thought he saw, the dangers inherent in the version of natural rights incorporated in the French Revolution, he claimed that the phrase "natural rights" had no meaning at all and that the only "rights" a man could have were those he obtained under a civil government. Burke's Vindication, however, does have a large element of irony.
not by her plea of abstract natural rights. The poem indicates that from a practical point of view a tale of woe is a more effective weapon than abstract theory. Crabbe of course knew from his own experience that the way to gain sympathy was to arouse compassion. In his first letter of appeal to Burke, he had called himself "one of those outcasts on the world," and had openly said, "Let me, if possible, interest your compassion." 26

It is now well substantiated that by the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries, the lower classes had lost many of their rights. 27 The gentry had begun to regard the poor as a separate and rather bothersome class. Crabbe had himself experienced the scorn of the upper classes for the poor. His son comments how, when Crabbe was struggling to succeed as an apothecary, the people of Aldborough had convicted him of the "crime of poverty." 28 Crabbe's depiction of the vagrant woman as an equal to the judge should be seen as an attempt to counter this idea that the poor were not members of society, and therefore of less importance than the wealthy. Malthus' Essay on Population (1798) is an indication of the growing suspicion about the poor. Malthus believed that all help given to the poor contributed to a never-ending cycle in which the numbers of the poor would continue to

26 Quoted from Life, Ch. iv, pp. 90-92.

27 See especially J.L. and Barbara Hammond, The Village Labourer, pp. 207-234.

28 Life, Ch. iv, p. 103.
increase: "A man who is born into a world already possessed, if he cannot get subsistence from his parents on whom he has a just demand, and if the society do not want his labour, has no claim of right to the smallest portion of food, and in fact, has no business to be where he is. At nature's mighty feast there is no vacant cover for him." When such pseudo-scientific attacks on the poor enjoyed popularity, an attempt by a poet such as Crabbe to re-establish the poor as individuals and equals, with the same rights as those possessed by the rich, would have been met with scorn. Instead, Crabbe first introduces the idea of natural rights and then asks his readers to ignore it. Of course in the total context of the poem, the idea of natural rights underlies the sympathy and help finally given to the woman. In fact the poem testifies to the woman's natural rights.

Although Crabbe does not press the abstract issue of natural rights, his next argument supporting the woman's case shows him willing to argue extenuating circumstances. The woman begins, with a great deal of rhetoric, to describe the plight of her child; once the judge's interest has been regained, she proceeds to argue

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30 One should recall that although books such as Thomas Paine's Rights of Man had an enormous circulation amongst the lower classes (in the first two years, two hundred thousand copies were sold), Paine's ideas had absolutely no appeal to the middle and upper classes -- amongst whom Crabbe would have found all his readers. In this period poets and journalists alike found that they had to adapt their ideas to their readers' pre-conceived opinions, a consideration which was to affect profoundly the early Victorian novel.
that she has been the victim of her circumstances and lack of education:

Taught to believe the world a place
Where every stranger was a foe,
Train'd in the arts that mark our race,
To what new people could I go?
Could I a better life embrace,
Or live as virtue dictates? No!
(I. 47-52)

Moreover the judge listens sympathetically to her tale of how she was forced to wander with a "vagrant crew." In the same way as Defoe observed in The History of Colonel Jack how Jack had "never been taught any Thing, but to be a Thief," so also does Crabbe stress the woman's lack of education. She is "a child of sin, conceived in shame, / Brought forth in wo, to misery born" (I. 35-36). As a means of self-preservation the vagrant turns to crime, "by want on error forced," taking from society only what she needs to stay alive. It is significant that in the first edition Crabbe had written "on Want and Error forced" and only later changed it to the much stronger version "by want on error forced," for this latter version brings out clearly that it is the woman's poverty which forces her to commit "error."

Crabbe's views on the influence of education were hardly radical, since over one hundred years earlier John Locke, in Some Thoughts Concerning Education (1693), had asserted: "I think I may say, that of all the Men we meet with, Nine parts of Ten are what they are, Good or Evil, useful or not, by their Education." In

Lockean terms, the vagrant's life of evil is the manifest result of her faulty education. Throughout the eighteenth century this belief in the power of education to alter a man for good or evil continued to exert a strong influence. Henry Brooke's emphasis on education in The Fool of Quality (1760-1772) is clearly based on Locke's account. Rousseau's Emile was of course the second primary source of ideas on education, and influenced works such as the Edgeworths' Practical Education (1798). Nevertheless whether one agreed with Locke's ideas about "natural sin" as did Mrs. Hester Chapone in Letters on the Improvement of the Mind (1797), and Hannah More in Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education (1798), or whether one agreed with Rousseau's ideas about man's innate goodness, the practical role of education in "moulding" or "releasing" the best in an individual was constantly stressed. In the writings of Adam Smith the practical conclusions of this belief in education to influence character became manifest: "The difference between the most dissimilar characters, between a philosopher and a common street porter, for example, seems to arise not so much from nature, as from habit, custom, and education." 33

While accepting this idea of the formative influence of education, most men of the eighteenth century cherished a second belief, a belief in man's ability to find and make his own happiness. The two beliefs could often be contradictory. How could a man with an extremely bad education be said to hold the key to his own happiness? At the beginning of "The Hall of Justice," the judge has

the second of these ideas uppermost in his mind. Believing that
the woman is responsible for her own ill-advised life, he intends to
sentence her accordingly. When the woman begins to convince the
judge of her inability to lead a good life, then the two beliefs --
that man can fashion his own happiness, and that education makes a
man what he is -- come into conflict.

For the most part, philosophers and novelists refused to
attempt a synthesis of these two seemingly opposed views. Thus on
the first page of his book on education John Locke says: "Men's
Happiness or Misery is for the most part of their own making," and
on the next he confidently asserts that men are made happy or sad
by their education. Often men chose whichever of the two theories
was the most applicable to their present need, and conveniently
forgot the other. It is noticeable that, whereas eighteenth
century novelists stress the effects of education on determining
whether a man is good or bad, very often the novels reveal birth to
be the more important factor. If the hero of the novel is a
gentleman born, no amount of low life will corrupt him. In "The

34 Robert Owen was one of the first to point out the
dangers to society resulting from the conflict of these two views on
the formation of human character. See A New View of Society,

35 Fielding's Tom Jones and Smollett's Roderick Random and
Humphry Clinker are obvious examples. Significantly enough, if a
character is low-born, then the novelist graciously attributes his
faults to lack of education. In describing the "vulgar Mr. Smith"
in Evelina, Frances Burney mentions "his visible struggle against
education to put on the fine gentleman" (Letter XLVII). But what
Miss Burney actually means is that vulgarity is inevitable unless
one is of gentle birth.
Hall of Justice" what Crabbe does is to place the argument from education into the mouth of the poor woman, while giving the judge the argument that man's will is the determining factor. Although Crabbe's theory of education is by no means new, its use in "The Hall of Justice" has something of a radical tang.

Crabbe may well have counted on the vagrant's gypsy life to help soften the feelings of his readers towards her, since the gypsies were known across Europe for their licentious and lawless behaviour. Groups of gypsies travelling together constituted a separate community, ruled by their own laws. When Crabbe describes how the vagrant involuntarily joined one of these bands, he ensures that she is cut off from the normal habits of English society. As a member of a gypsy band she is in a different society; for all intents and purposes she might be in Bohemia or Asia.\(^{36}\)

Certainly the woman's story of her life with the gypsies earns her the compassion of the magistrate. She tells how she fell in love with Aaron, the handsome young son of the leader, and how they were happy for a time, until Aaron's father became jealous and drove him from the band. She emphasizes again how she, and indeed, the entire band were at the mercy of Aaron's father: "The clan were all at his command, / Whatever his command might be" (I. 87-88).

\(^{36}\) Writers occasionally used the gypsies as an example of the way in which people could live together in harmony. In Tom Jones Fielding ironically cites the "Egyptians" as an example of the happy community. Wordsworth comments on the friendly nature of the gypsies in "The Female Vagrant." Crabbe realized that there was both a good and bad side to the gypsies, as can be seen in his representations of them in "The Lover's Journey" (Tale X, Tales).
Thus when Aaron's father demands her love, she has no other recourse but to obey. There is no person or law to which she can turn for help; the commands of the gypsy leader are those of an arbitrary monarch. The very fact that she is entrapped in an alien society where arbitrary laws prevail would undoubtedly gain the vagrant support from amongst Crabbe's readers. Englishmen at this time were only too ready to lend their help and pity to those unfortunate enough not to be born under England's humane laws.

Ironically, neither the judge nor most of the Englishmen of this time (clearly Crabbe means the judge to stand for the opinions of society) would have stopped to consider whether the woman's situation amongst the gypsies was not similar to her position in the court of law. In both cases she is in an alien society, forced to obey laws she had no hand in making. For her the judge is as much a despotic ruler as was the gypsy leader. Amongst the gypsies the woman was forced to live by her wits, and in England, where laws were made to protect property, her situation is no different. Born without property, the poor were isolated from all that Englishmen held dear.

Even though her wild story has little to do with the theft of which she has been accused, the woman soon gains the sympathy of the judge. He says:

I hear thy words, I feel thy pain;
Forbear awhile to speak thy woes;
Receive our aid, and then again
The story of thy life disclose.

For, though seduced and led astray,
Thou'rt travell'd far and wander'd long;
Thy God hath seen thee all the way,  
And all the turns that led thee wrong  
(I. 101-108).

At the beginning of Part II, he again shows that the woman's sorrows have touched him deeply. However, one cannot help noticing that in Part II his role has changed from that of judge to that of priest. When he asks to hear her sins, he sounds very much as if he were a confessor:

Come, now again thy woes impart,  
Tell all thy sorrows, all thy sin;  
We cannot heal the throbbing heart  
Till we discern the wounds within.

Compunction weeps our guilt away,  
The sinner's safety is his pain;  
Such pangs for our offences pay,  
And these severer griefs are gain  
(II. 1-8).

At this point, when the judge assumes the role of priest, the poem begins to change direction.

That the woman is aware of her crimes and feels guilty about them contributes to her success in winning the judge to her side. The woman is careful to explain that, through all her difficulties, she was always able to distinguish right from wrong. She lacked only the will and the power to flee from the gypsies:

True, I was not to virtue train'd;  
Yet well I knew my deeds were ill;  
By each offence my heart was pain'd --  
I wept, but I offended still;  
My better thoughts my life disdain'd,  
But yet the viler led my will  
(II. 69-74).

In this section Crabbe is not necessarily introducing ideas of "natural sin," for when the woman describes her grand-daughter, she mentions her "yet spotless soul," a clear indication that environment
and circumstance bring about man's corruption. Yet Crabbe has by no means described the vagrant in terms of the true "child of nature." While the woman was forced into a life of crime by circumstances, throughout her career, she has been conscious of guilt. Unlike Defoe's Colonel Jack, Crabbe's vagrant cannot plead innocence of sin. In his ignorance, Jack was a true child of nature: "[I had] no Manner of Thoughts about the Good or Evil of what I was embark'd in; consequently, I had no Sense of Conscience, no Reproaches upon my Mind for having done amiss." 37

When Crabbe's vagrant wins the compassion of the judge she does so, not by pleading her ignorance of guilt but by appealing to his Christian compassion for a penitent sinner:

Oh! by the GOD who loves to spare,  
Deny me not the boon I crave;  
Let this loved child your mercy share,  
And let me find a peaceful grave;  
Make her yet spotless soul your care,  
And let my sins their portion have;  
Her for a better fate prepare,  
And punish whom 'twere sin to save!  
(II. 119-126)

The appeal to the judge is strong, and since the judge appears now to be compassionate, the reader naturally expects him to show mercy. In these circumstances, the judge's reply comes as something of a shock:

Recall the word, renounce the thought,  
Command thy heart and bend thy knee.  
There is to all a pardon brought,  
A ransom rich, assured and free;  
'Tis full when found, 'tis found if sought,  
Oh! seek it, till 'tis seal'd to thee  
(II. 127-132).

37 The History of Colonel Jack, Shakespeare Head ed., I, 71.
For Crabbe has shifted the theme from a social to a theological level. At the end of the poem, the judge is concerned to show the woman, not that a legal pardon is possible, but that spiritual salvation lies within her grasp. Somehow the social and economic problem has been lost in the spiritual, leaving the ending slightly enigmatic. The judge never says whether he will help the child or pardon the mother; instead he turns his attention to assuring the vagrant woman that she need not despair of finding grace.

It might be assumed that Crabbe has intended the legal pardon to be found included in the spiritual one. But he does not explicitly say so. The shift away from economic and legal concerns is bothersome, since it leaves the problems raised at the beginning of the poem unresolved. Does the woman succeed in convincing the judge that the difficult circumstances of her early life made virtue impossible? Nowhere does Crabbe answer the problem of whether the accused should be punished when the crime was one of necessity. The difference between God's justice and man's is not a minor one. At this time in England many people (perhaps even most) were capable of admitting that the social order was full of injustice, while rationalizing that God's justice would rectify this state of affairs in the next world. Paley, Wilberforce and Burke all held this view in one form or another.

The effect of Crabbe's shift of emphasis from the secular to the religious is best understood in relation to the structure of the poem. The importance of the structural relations between ideas in Crabbe's poems has often been overlooked, and yet this question
of "structure" is of fundamental importance to an understanding of Crabbe's ideas. At the beginning of "The Hall of Justice," Crabbe poses the radical question (radical even today) of whether a woman with no education is guilty of the crimes which force of circumstance compels her to commit. And although the poem suggests that the woman is not responsible, Crabbe has subtly transformed the problem so that the answer does not appear revolutionary. He does this by answering the original question in religious terms. Few people in England would have wished to assert that God would not be merciful to a vagrant woman, brought up amongst the gypsies with little or no opportunity to live a Christian life. Crabbe's argument is so arranged that the poem implies (without ever pressing the issue) that man's law will be the same as God's law. As Locke and so many other eminent historians and lawyers had repeatedly stressed, the rules of a society must conform "to the will of God."38

Crabbe realized that most of his readers would want to see mercy shown to the vagrant, but that they would not tolerate this single case being turned into a precedent for general theory. Many writers had already expressed their horror of any relaxation of the principle of "the responsibility of the individual." At the time of the rebellion of 1745, the anonymous writer of A Serious Address had shown his dislike of theories placing responsibility for criminal acts on society rather than on the individual criminal: "But sure every Body sees the Weakness and Folly of this Excuse; it is as good in the Mouth of a Thief and a Robber, when he tells

38 See above, p. 161.
you he must either Steal or Starve; or of a Murtherer, that he must either kill or be hang'd." Obviously such writers felt social standards were challenged by ideas of "corporate responsibility." In order to allay such fears, Crabbe introduced mercy under the guise of theology. Of course for any enlightened reader, this introduction of God's justice is ironical, since it has nothing to do with the problem itself. For some, the ending would have undoubtedly brought about the realization of just how anachronistic such uses of divine justice were. And for others, the few radicals, the ending would have served as convincing proof of how benighted the magistrates were. The only possible way to obtain a hearing for such "radical" ideas was to make them appear innocuous. This Crabbe was able to do by his skilful references to religious beliefs.

The presupposition that God would rectify the inequalities of this world in the next was widely accepted and in itself was innocuous enough. Yet often writers were tempted to use this belief to justify social inequality, or at times, even to go one step further and disallow reform by arguing that changes in this world would upset God's plans in the next. In "The Hall of Justice" Crabbe utilized this tradition without ever sanctioning it; thus the ending serves as an ironic counterpoint.

One of the best (or worst) examples of this callous "liberal" theology is to be found in James Grahame's "The Sabbath" (1804). It might be worth examining Grahame's use of divine justice

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39 A Serious Address to the People of Great Britain, In which certain consequences of the Present Rebellion are fully demonstrated (London, 1745), p. 9.
in order to illuminate the problem in "The Hall of Justice." About halfway through the poem, Grahame touches on the subject of suicide. In order to show the suicide that the miseries of his life are not nearly so desperate as those of many people who continue to live, Grahame asks the suicide to consider the lot of those in the debtor's prison. He explains that the debtor is in a particularly bad situation, since by the laws of England (Grahame was a lawyer before he became a clergyman) the creditor is made the judge of the debtor. But Grahame maintains that even though the debtor may be condemned to life in prison without a proper hearing, he is probably happier than the hard-hearted creditor. Grahame is even led to acknowledge that this fault in the English legal system probably results in many innocent people being sent to prison. For a moment this thought disturbs him, but his anxiety is dispelled when he remembers God's justice:

But see, a smile illumines
The face of some; perhaps they're guiltless:  Oh!
And must high-minded honesty endure
The ignominy of a felon's fate!
No, 'tis not ignominious to be wronged;
No; -- conscious exultation swells their hearts,
To think the day draws nigh, when in the view
Of angels, and of just men perfect made,
The mark which rashness branded on their names
Shall be effaced; -- when, wafted on life's storm,
Their souls shall reach the Sabbath of the skies; --
As birds, from bleak Norwégia's wintry coast
Blown out to sea, strive to regain the shore,
But, vainly striving, yield them to the blast, --
Swept o'er the deep to ALBION'S genial isle,
Amazed they light amid the bloomy sprays
Of some green vale, there to enjoy new loves,
And join in harmony unheard before.\(^40\)

The incredible complacency with which worldly justice is dismissed by this sleight of hand would almost seem to be hypocrisy. Or one is tempted to protest that perhaps the good clergyman "nodded" at these lines. Neither alternative is possible. In the following lines Grahame states quite openly that only those criminals who are not taught their religion die unjustly:

The land is groaning 'neath the guilt of blood
Spilt wantonly: for every death-doomed man,
Who, in his boyhood, has been left untaught
That Wisdom's ways are ways of pleasantness,
And all her paths are peace, unjustly dies.\(^\text{41}\)

The interesting point about this comparison of "The Hall of Justice" with "The Sabbath" is that Crabbe's progression from laws to sociology to theology has the effect, structurally, of ironicallycontroverting such rationalizations as Grahame's. That Crabbe was writing "The Hall of Justice" six years before "The Sabbath" would seem to make the point stronger, since it suggests that even as attempts were being made to consolidate injustice, Crabbe was pointing up its illogic, albeit in a restrained and undogmatic manner.

Aware of the influence on morals attributed to the teaching of the Church of England, Crabbe, throughout the poem, stresses the vagrant's lack of religious education. Statements such as Jeremy Collier's -- "Religion is the Basis of Government, and Man is a wretched Companion without it"\(^\text{42}\) -- had exercised a

\(^{41}\) "The Sabbath," in Poems, I, 18.

strong influence on people throughout the eighteenth century. In the hysteria of panic-patriotism which accompanied the Napoleonic wars, this emphasis on the ascendancy of the church in shaping men's ideas was continually repeated. When Aaron's father rapes her, the woman exclaims:

Accursed be the love he bore,  
Accursed was the force he used;  
So let him of his God implore  
For mercy, and be so refused!  
(I. 93-96)

The words "his God" imply that Aaron's father is not a Christian. The woman's outburst of anger causes the judge to frown again, yet this time the frown is ultimately favourable. The first time the judge was angered at her attempt to utilise Paine's ideas; the second time, he is concerned to find that she has not been properly instructed in the Christian religion.

In Part II Crabbe again mentions the gypsies' different religion. In describing the story of her life with Aaron, the woman says:

For he not yet had felt the pain  
That rankles in a wounded breast;  
He waked to sin, then slept again,  
Forsook his God, yet took his rest  
(II. 25-28).

In such a situation most Englishmen would have found it difficult to disagree with the evidence that the vagrant was forced into a life of crime and sin. One should recall that at about this time a new interest was being taken in the gypsies and their lack of Christian faith. In 1831 the Reverend James Crabb (no relation to George Crabbe) published The Gipsies' Advocate in which he stated
that his object was to furnish a work that "might be the means of exciting among his countrymen an energetic benevolence toward this despised people." James Crabb agreed that the gypsies were often vicious, but pleaded that they could not help themselves because they lacked the benefit of Christianity:

> Among this poor and destitute people, instances of great guilt, depravity and misery are too common; nor can it be otherwise expected, while they are destitute of the knowledge of salvation in a crucified and ascended Saviour.

Thus when Crabbe in "The Hall of Justice" calls attention to the gypsies' lack of true religion as a reason why the vagrant woman fell into a life of crime, he is voicing current opinion.

> When the magistrate finds that the woman is not the usual sort of vagabond, without morals or conscience, he feels that he ought to help and reclaim her for Christianity. His attitude is not dissimilar to that of Mrs. Tow-wouse in Joseph Andrews. It will be recalled that Mrs. Tow-wouse had "a natural antipathy to Vagabonds: but could pity the Misfortunes of a Christian as soon as another" (Bk. I, Ch. xv). Furthermore the magistrate's interest in saving her for Christ is typical of the attitude of many missionaries of

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44 The Gipsies' Advocate, p. 42.

45 Some years before the publication of James Crabb's account, John Hoyland published A Historical Survey of the Customs, Habits, & Present State of the Gipsies (York, 1816). Hoyland based his work on the studies of H.M.G. Grellman. Although Hoyland's study is more scholarly than that of James Crabb, he was also interested in promoting reform amongst the gypsies, and concludes the work with a plan for their improvement.
the time. Even James Crabb, although clearly moved to pity the gypsies' condition, is interested more in converting them to Christianity than in helping to better their conditions. A marvellous story is told of George III which typifies this attitude. Apparently the King saw a gypsy woman dying with her children around her. Going to her, the King attempted to help the woman and tell her of the grace of God. According to James Crabb, the King "saw her expire cheered by the view of that redemption he had set before her." But no mention is made of what happened to the children; the interest is all in the soul of the dying woman. Clearly Crabbe is portraying much the same missionary zeal in the magistrate's concern for the woman's soul. This over-zealousness for the woman's soul, at the expense of questions about social reform, forms an ironic contrast to the pointedly secular questions asked at the beginning of the poem.

By choosing such an extreme case -- that of a woman forced to live amongst the gypsies -- one might wonder whether Crabbe has not weakened the general case of an ordinary Englishman forced into a life of crime by poverty. But if the situation of the vagrant is considered carefully, one can see that her case is not actually exceptional. Her isolation from English morals and English religion is what makes her appear different. Yet the isolation of the poor was causing increasing concern to social commentators at this period. Richard Yates was only one of many who saw that the gradual shift of population from the countryside to the towns and cities was creating

^Quoted from *The Gipsies' Advocate*, p. 43.
a new type of working class, no longer greatly influenced by the Church of England and middle class standards. Yates claimed:

When large and preponderating masses of the population, who are supposed to be Members of the Established Church, and who might, if sufficient means were provided, be associated in its Worship, and attached, by benefits conferred, to its support and defence, are, on the contrary, shut out from all the advantages it confers, and virtually excluded from its communion, they will necessarily become powerful and dangerous materials for the agents of revolutionary change to work upon.\textsuperscript{47}

Thus what Crabbe has presented in the person of the vagrant -- a victim of lack of education and religion -- is not simply the person isolated by the gypsies but a symbol of what was happening to the poor across England.

If the poem does not seem unusually radical today, and if one wonders whether Crabbe's extreme caution was necessary, Jeffrey's remarks should dispel any doubts. The theme, he says, is "dreadful" and "it is painful to follow the story out." He was obviously much affected by the poem's theme and the descriptions of brutality: "It certainly is not pleasing reading; but it is written with very unusual power of language, and shows Mr. Crabbe to have great mastery over the tragic passions of pity and horror."\textsuperscript{48} One should remember that in writing his poetry Crabbe was aiming not at the ballad readers of London streets, but at "respectable society."

"The Hall of Justice" is a cautious poem; Crabbe by no


\textsuperscript{48}The \textit{Edinburgh Review}, XII (1808), 150-151.
means wishes to startle his readers or frighten them into rejecting new ideas. Yet the poem undoubtedly contains revolutionary suggestions. Technically, it is remarkable in the way it poses an extremely forceful and radical question -- are the poor wholly responsible for their crimes? -- while cloaking the equally radical answer in respectable religious terminology. The ambivalent ending allows Crabbe to acclaim the equality of the poor and the rich without ever seeming to challenge the aristocratic belief that the social hierarchy, with its various ranks and classes, was God's pre-ordained plan.
CHAPTER 4

"THEIR TEMPERS, MANNERS, MORALS, CUSTOMS, ARTS"

I

After completing "The Hall of Justice," Crabbe's interest in writing polemical poems about particular social problems waned. He found now that his interests lay in exploring social and psychological situations through a presentation of people and manners, rather than in didactic or discursive poetry. His growing use of characterization in "The Parish Register," The Borough, and Tales, with each poem embodying longer and more complete character sketches, reveals this poetic development. To some extent even, this pattern can be seen in the internal development of "The Parish Register," the longest and most significant new poem in Poems (1807). Whereas the poem begins with a long discussion on the relative merits of the idle and industrious peasants, by the time Part III is reached, Crabbe has begun to develop his themes by the use of character sketches, sometimes at length. Crabbe was obviously fascinated by the private
lives of his characters in "The Parish Register," and it would be a mistake to search for "social significance" in every character. But as George Eliot has so justly commented in her discussion of social changes in *Felix Holt*: "These social changes . . . are comparatively public matters, and this history is chiefly concerned with the private lot of a few men and women; but there is no private life which has not been determined by a wider public life."¹ Likewise in "The Parish Register" Crabbe is consciously attempting to present the private concerns of individuals in terms of public questions.

In "The Parish Register" Crabbe has again taken the people of the countryside for his subject matter. While at the time of writing *The Village* (1783), Crabbe was one of the first poets to describe in detail English rural workers, by 1807, when he published "The Parish Register," he was one of many. For instance *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) contains many sketches of rural workers, people such as Simon Lee and Harry Gill. Yet even in 1807, Crabbe's treatment of the lower classes, if for no other reason than the amount of space he devoted to his descriptions, was significantly different from that of his contemporaries for critics of the time to comment. Jeffrey, the most important of these contemporary critics, mentions that much of the novelty of Crabbe's subject matter lies in his treatment of "rustic life." Jeffrey realized that Crabbe was by no means the only poet describing the poor; he refers to the interest

of the "Lake poets" in the lower classes. Jeffrey even discusses some of Wordsworth's poems as a case in point, but he does so to bring out, not the similarities, but the differences: "These gentlemen [Wordsworth, Southey and Coleridge] write a great deal about rustic life, as well as Mr Crabbe; and they even agree with him in dwelling much on its discomforts; but nothing can be more opposite than the views they take of the subject, or the manner in which they execute their representation of them." Jeffrey's point is crucial to any discussion of Crabbe's representation of society, since it emphasizes that Crabbe's innovation lay in the manner of his approach to the poor. Perhaps Jeffrey overstates the differences between the rural descriptions of Crabbe and those of Wordsworth, but basically he is correct when he says:

Mr Crabbe exhibits the common people of England pretty much as they are, and as they must appear to every one who will take the trouble of examining into their condition; at the same time that he renders his sketches in a very high degree interesting and beautiful, -- by selecting what is most fit for description, -- by grouping them into such forms as must catch the attention or awake the memory, -- and by scattering over the whole, such traits of moral sensibility, of sarcasm, and of useful reflection, as every one must feel to be natural, and own to be powerful. The gentlemen of the new school, on the other hand, scarcely ever condescend to take their subjects from any description of persons that are at all known to the common inhabitants of the world; but invent for themselves certain whimsical and unheard of beings, to whom they impute some fantastical combination of feelings, and labour to excite our sympathy for them, either by placing them in incredible situations, or by some strained and exaggerated moralization of a vague and tragical description. Mr Crabbe, in short, shows us something which we

2Francis Jeffrey, review of Poems, in The Edinburgh Review, XII (1808), 133.
have all seen, or may see, in real life; and draws from it such feelings and such reflections as every human being must acknowledge that it is calculated to excite. He delights us by the truth, and vivid and picturesque beauty of his representations, and by the force and pathos of the sensations with which we feel that they ought to be connected. Mr Wordsworth and his associates show us something that mere observation never yet suggested to any one. They introduce us to beings whose existence was not previously suspected by the acutest observers of nature, and excite an interest for them, more by an eloquent and refined analysis of their own capricious feelings, than by any obvious or very intelligible ground of sympathy in their situation.  

Jeffrey's claim that Crabbe's representations have more "truth" than those of Wordsworth causes unnecessary difficulties, but if this idea of truth in the abstract is disregarded, then Jeffrey's main point -- that Crabbe's description of villagers seems fairly accurate -- is sound. But to say that Crabbe accurately describes villagers is not to aver anything about whether Crabbe is a better poet than Wordsworth, as Jeffrey wishes to say. For the most part, they were poets aiming at different effects.  

In "The Thorn," "Matthew" or "The Idiot Boy," Wordsworth is not so much interested in describing his characters in relation to the rest of the village, as he is in using them as a means to present psychological or spiritual insights. Crabbe has been justly praised for his innovative sketches of humble life, and contemporary critics were right in pointing out that these sketches were one of the distinguishing features of his

3The Edinburgh Review, XII (1808), 133.

4Oliver Sigworth gives a long if somewhat prosaic account of these differences in Nature's Sternest Painter, pp. 57-87.
poetry. Yet there is a danger of taking Crabbe too much at his own estimate in his repeated assertions that the theme of "The Parish Register" is the annals of the poor. In the introductory prologue he notes: "The Village Register considered, as containing principally the Annals of the Poor." Similarly the poem begins with the lines:

The year revolves, and I again explore
The simple annals of my parish poor
(I. 1-2)

and ends with the same sentiment:

or one like me, explore
These simple annals of the VILLAGE POOR
(III. 969-970).

Yet while the poem contains many character studies of the poor, Crabbe by no means limits himself to the poor for his subject matter. This belief that Crabbe wrote only about the poor has been fostered in large measure by people who knew Crabbe only from The Village. Henry Crabb Robinson was not alone when he said: "I take no pleasure in Crabbe's unpoetical representations of human life. . . . I shall never look again into Crabbe's 'Village.' Indeed this impression is so strong, that I have never read his later works, and know little about them."6

A glance at a few of the dramatis personae serves to indicate that the characters in "The Parish Register" are by no means

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5Certainly many critics in 1807 took Crabbe at his word. For instance when one reviewer wrote: "'The Parish Register' . . . may be characterised as a more expanded continuation of 'The Village,'" he obviously believed the poem to be about the peasantry. The Monthly Review, LVI (London, 1809), 172.

all poor. Sir Edward Archer, the Widow Goe, Farmer Frankford and Lady Catherine Lloyd could scarcely be classified in the lower orders. Since this mistaken notion that Crabbe limited himself to describing the poor has flourished for some time, a rough inventory of the characters, and in indication of their status, will be helpful in determining the composition of Crabbe's village community. The characters are listed below in their order of appearance:

The characters are divided into three categories in which the upper class is designated--UC; the middle class--MC; and the lower class--LC. Major changes in station are designed by two classifications separated by a dash. The number of lines devoted to each character is also noted.

**PART I**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Lines</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>the miller</td>
<td>MC</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the miller's daughter, Lucy</td>
<td>MC -- LC</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the sailor, William</td>
<td>LC</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>MC</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan</td>
<td>MC</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the harlot</td>
<td>LC</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gerard Ablett</td>
<td>LC</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gerard's master</td>
<td>UC</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dawkins</td>
<td>MC</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ditchem</td>
<td>MC</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>three parents</td>
<td>LC</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the school mistress</td>
<td>LC</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter Pratt, the gardener</td>
<td>LC</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard Monday</td>
<td>LC -- UC</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>six farmers</td>
<td>MC</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Arthur Sale in "The Development of Crabbe's Narrative Art" has quite rightly criticized what he terms this "picture of Crabbe brooding in a pebbly nest over seven volumes of the wrongs of the poor." See *The Cambridge Journal*, V (May 1952), 482.
the poacher

**PART II**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Lines</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gaffer Kirk</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>his servant-wife</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donald</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Dobson</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catharine</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phoebe Dawson</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the squire and his lady</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy Collins</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Footman Daniel</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen Hill</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>old Lodge and his wife</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the farmer's wife</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reuben</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sir Edward Archer</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fanny Price, the bailiff's</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>daughter</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**PART III**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Lines</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andrew Collett, the landlord</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widow Goe</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the Lady of the Hall</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lady Catherine Lloyd</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaac Ashford</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robin Dingley</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the attorney</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farmer Frankford</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>his wife</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Leah Cousins, the midwife LC 55 lines
Doctor Glibb MC 35
the town-dame MC 4
Roger Guff MC 
George MC 
James MC 
Peter MC 69
John MC 
Nancy MC 
Sexton Dibble LC 22

six rectors (only one of whom is a member of the community at any one time)
Addle UC 12
Peele UC 13
Grandspear UC 21
the author-rector UC 32
the evangelical UC 51
the narrator UC 14

(Average number of lines per rector = 24)

UC -- total number of lines 420
MC -- total number of lines 618
LC -- total number of lines 732

Such a list, of course, positively invites debate. Even the method of listing the characters is open to objection; for often Crabbe mentions only casually a person who plays an insignificant role in the poem. The three labourers who bring their new-born infants to be christened and the poacher's five sons are obvious examples. Crabbe sometimes mentions a person's wife, and sometimes not. But the list has been composed with the intention of giving a separate entry to every person dealt with at any length. Where Crabbe is obviously discussing a married couple as a single portrait, husband and wife are not given separate entries.
English society was definitely broken up into classes, but as T.S. Ashton has remarked: "Class never hardened into caste." No doubt a multitude of distinctions existed between members of any one group of people, so that a prosperous merchant might be considered higher in station than a poor farmer, and endless disputes must have developed between the affluent second generation farmers and the decayed gentry. It will be recalled that Mrs. Honour in *Tom Jones*, although only the maid-servant of Sophia, claims that she is not "base-born" since she is the daughter of a clergyman (*IV, xiv*). In *The Borough* Crabbe himself exploits these minute differences between the classes when he describes in descending order the many different inns of the town -- each inn corresponding to a different rank in society. He notes how the "Bear and Crown" is next in precedence to the "Lion," yet they are "next, but not near" (*XI. 53*). He asks, "Who shall the nice, yet known distinction, tell" (*XI. 147*)? That many of the gradations in class could not be specified exactly in terms of money or education did not mean they did not exist. But in spite of all the varying class distinctions, and the difficulty in drawing a line in individual cases (for instance, is the Widow Goe a member of the lower gentry, or affluent farmers?), a rough list of categories is possible. The above list has taken into account both money and birth to arrive at an approximate estimate of the individual's place in society.

The breakdown of characters presents an interesting insight.

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Eleven per cent of the characters turn out to be gentry; forty-six per cent middle class; and forty-three per cent lower class. If the five dead rectors were included in the calculation, obviously the percentage belonging to the two upper classes would be increased. Although class distinctions are not rigid, there is little social mobility with the exception of Richard Monday's dramatic rise from parish ward to knight of the shire.

The percentage composition of the village changes slightly if it is calculated on the basis of the number of lines devoted to each person in each class. This basis of calculation gives a much better approximation of the importance of each class to the poem than does a calculation based only on the number of persons in each class. The gentry receive 24 per cent of the space; the middle class 35 per cent; and the lower class 41 per cent. Both sets of figures are summarized in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>UC</th>
<th>MC</th>
<th>LG</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% of characters</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of lines devoted to characters</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since Crabbe included descriptions of five dead rectors as well as one living rector, for the purposes of this calculation, an average figure has been used to represent the number of lines designated to the rector. If the total number of lines devoted to all the rectors had been used, obviously the percentage of space devoted to the gentry would have been slightly higher. The figures designating the amount of space devoted to each class are based on the number of lines in the individual portraits and do not incorporate
Crabbe's discursive comments. If the opening section of the poem in which Crabbe discusses the lower class -- both idle and industrious -- had been incorporated, then the amount of space devoted to the lower class would have been considerably higher. Of course such calculations can only be viewed as rough approximations, and should not be treated too seriously. After all, a short but well written portrait of an exciting person may have more influence in the poem than a long and verbose rendering of an uninteresting character. Yet imperfect though these percentages may be, they do indicate that, far from devoting all his attention to the poor, Crabbe has given a cross-section of a village community in which the middle and upper class characters occupy more of his attention than do those amongst the poor.

Nor are Crabbe's poor characters by any means all defenceless paupers. For instance when William goes to sea, the miller disowns his daughter Lucy so that she appears to have no means of support for herself and her daughter; yet in fact the miller continues to give Lucy a small allowance which prevents her from turning to the parish. As a youth Richard Monday is brought up in the workhouse, but later he makes himself a squire and contributes to charities. Farmer Barclay is poor, but poor only in relation to the other farmers. Crabbe mentions three families of paupers (I. 584-589), but devotes only six lines to them. When discussing the idle poor, he comments that the parish supplies them with relief: "[They take] from our reluctant hands, / What Burn advises or the Bench commands" (I. 271-272). The poacher may
be poor, but he is certainly independent, and indeed, seems to have sufficient money to spend many long evenings drinking ale with his cronies. The harlot's strenuous life has not subdued her saucy tongue; presumably she earns enough to keep herself presentable. The only examples of people thrown upon the parish for any length of time are the five sons of the atheist-poacher and Robin Dingley, the man who was touched in the head when promised wealth by a fraudulent lawyer. When Robin returns from one of his periodic journeys, the parish looks after him: "We chide, we pity; -- placed among our poor, / He fed again, and was a man once more" (III. 559-560).

On the evidence of the character sketches alone, the conclusion might be drawn that Crabbe has chosen a village with few destitute persons, but the opening of the poem belies this interpretation since here Crabbe discusses at some length the poverty of the "idle poor." Moreover at several places throughout the poem Crabbe refers to the village poor, although never in any detail. For instance, when Roger Cuff died, Crabbe mentions that he left his money to build "a refuge for the poor" (III. 793). In his old age Isaac Ashford mentions that he may have "to join your poor, and eat the parish-bread" (III. 475). Significantly enough, Isaac hates the thought of being called a pauper. As a result of these comments about "our poor" there is little doubt that many people live in great distress, but Crabbe chooses to give hardly any descriptions of them.

To be quite fair, one should recognize that Crabbe did
not have to portray the destitute to write about "the poor," for the phrase "the poor" was often used to describe, not only those without any means of support, but also all those people who were not wealthy. Samuel Johnson's definition of "the poor" in its collective sense is relevant: "Those who are in the lowest rank of the community; those who cannot subsist but by the charity of others; but it is sometimes used with laxity for any not rich." Classified under "the poor," using the term with laxity, would be the small farmers, labourers and servants -- anyone who might conceivably need parish aid at some time in his life; therefore many of the people of "The Parish Register" fall into the category of "the poor" in the widest definition of the term. Still, the term "the poor" cannot be stretched wide enough to encompass such people as Sir Edward Archer, the Widow Goe or the Lady of the Hall. These people belong to the gentry. However imprecise this term "the gentry" may be, and while no doubt poor gentry did exist, the poor did not include the gentry. 9

Why then, if the poem is a cross-section of the parish, does Crabbe repeatedly say that he is describing "the annals of the poor"? One answer is that Crabbe may have set out to describe labourers and then found that he wanted to add some sketches of higher class people. Certainly the title, "The Parish Register," would indicate Crabbe's awareness that the poem was a description

9 Crabbe's son remarks that Miss Sarah Elmy's family had, "though in apparently humble circumstances, always been numbered among the gentry of the place, and possessed education and manners that entitled them to this distinction." Life, Ch. ii, p. 36.
of parish life, and not simply a description of the lives of the poor. The beginning of the poem gives every indication that Crabbe intended to confine himself to descriptions of "the lowest rank" of the community, since he begins by describing the two different types of labourers in the village -- the industrious and idle peasants. But after describing these two types in general terms, he unexpectedly adds two lines in which he mentions the farmers, and later in the poem, when he gives his individual portraits, his intention is obviously to describe farmers and gentry as well as labourers. The poem gives the impression of having grown wider in scope than Crabbe had originally intended. However I hope to show shortly that this seemingly haphazard form also serves a structural purpose in that it allows Crabbe to posit, and then criticize, what turns out to be a traditional and rather superficial analysis of the social community.

II

At the outset "The Parish Register" appears to be a type of sequel to The Village; Crabbe claims that he needs no "poetic" muse to help him sing the story of the village poor: "No Muse I ask, before my view to bring / The humble actions of the swains I sing" (I. 7-8). This abjuration of any aids from the poetic
imagination coupled with an insistent reminder that he will speak plain truth would seem to indicate that Crabbe was planning to describe "the real picture of the poor" as he had done in The Village. Since Crabbe admits that many of the poor live in an "infected row" the poem at first gives the impression of being yet another anti-pastoral. Indeed the rhetorical question:

Is there a place, save one the poet sees,
A land of love, of liberty and ease;
Where labour wearies not, nor cares suppress
Th' eternal flow of rustic happiness
(I. 15-18)

confirms the impression that the poem is to be yet another anti-pastoral. However the next lines show that the type of anti-pastoral Crabbe has in mind differs greatly from that portrayed in The Village. He claims that look where you will, you will never find a village in which "no proud mansion frowns in awful state, / Or keeps the sunshine from the cottage-gate" (I. 19-20). These lines lack the tone of moral indignation found in The Village; Crabbe seems to be saying that the inequalities between rich and poor are brute facts which must be accepted as the way of the world. The world, Crabbe asserts, is a place of "good and evil mix'd"; the conclusion he draws is that, in order to fashion a good life for himself, the individual must use his "will" to distinguish good and evil.

After outlining this puff for a philosophy of individualism, Crabbe then proceeds to show his readers around the homes of the industrious peasants, who live a good life in "fair scenes of peace." All those who are honest and diligent occupy cottages, around which the lord of the manor has given land for their private cultivation
The cottages are certainly not palaces, but they are pleasant and clean; moreover, the walls are decorated with prints, and each cottage has a supply of books. By eighteenth century standards, these cottagers lead a life that might well be called "pastoral." But this idyllic life is only for the industrious peasant; for the "idle peasant," Crabbe reserves the "infected row" where everything is dirty and ugly. The idle peasants consist of "the sot, the cheat, the shrew," and many are thieves and smugglers.

In these descriptions of the idle and industrious peasants, Crabbe has clearly followed the popular eighteenth century assumption that, if a man were poor yet assiduous, he could always earn a decent living. William Paley, who had eulogized the pleasures of the working man on low wages, maintained that "frugality itself is a pleasure." Paley firmly believed that:

All the provision which a poor man's child requires is contained in two words, "industry and innocence." With these qualities, though without a shilling to set him forwards, he goes into the world prepared to become an useful, virtuous, and happy man. Nor will he fail to meet with a maintenance adequate to the habits with which he has been brought up, and to the expectations which he has formed; a degree of success sufficient for a person of any condition whatever.  

As Asa Briggs has noted, this philosophy of individualism dominated much of eighteenth century thinking; in the nineteenth century the ideas were taken up by people such as Harriet Martineau and Samuel Trilliam Paley, Reasons for Contentment, Addressed to the Labouring Part of the British Public (1793), in Sermons and Tracts by the late Rev. William Paley (London, 1815), pp. 187-188.

Smiles to be developed into full-blown theories.

To explain the difference in living conditions between the people of the row and the agricultural labourers, Crabbe abjures the social explanation which he had given in The Village; instead he draws on the type of explanation given by Paley that the bad conditions were solely the responsibility of individuals:

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. 226-229).

No doubt this belief, that the reasons for poverty lay in the individual's own lack of will to better his position, contained some truth, but then, as now, poverty had a great many social causes over which individuals had no control. It should be recalled that Crabbe was writing "The Parish Register" during the period of the Napoleonic wars. Most social historians (even those like M. Dorothy George and T.S. Ashton who feel that the labouring classes had a rising standard of living throughout the eighteenth century) agree that from the 1790's until about 1820 the poor in England experienced enormous hardship, caused in part by the high price of wheat. During this period, large numbers of poor, even in the richer counties, were forced to seek aid from the parish. ¹² Nor was Crabbe unaware of the social causes of want; both "The Hall of Justice" and The Village emphasize the economic reasons for poverty. The surprise

¹²Robert Southey had noted with some dismay that the first census (1801) and the inquiry into the state of the poor had revealed that one person in nine received parish relief. See Essays, Moral and Political (London, 1832), I, 75.
then is that the opening of "The Parish Register" contains no mention of economic causes.

Many people have criticized Crabbe's assertion that only the vice-ridden are poor. Huchon asked: "Is not this the most hackneyed proposition imaginable?" And recently W.K. Thomas has claimed that Crabbe was not really "nature's sternest painter," since he refused to show that both the industrious and the idle peasants lived in near-poverty conditions:

When describing the dwellings of the industrious poor and the lazy poor, for instance, he was careful to point to the clay walls, the weatherboard, and the windows of oiled paper in the dwellings of the lazy poor, so as to show the squalor their sloth produced; but he made no mention at all of the composition of the dwellings of the industrious poor, even though contemporary evidence would indicate that their dwellings were constructed in the same way as those of the lazy. More importantly, when he described hideous overcrowding in the cottages of the poor, and hinted at the indecent consequences of that overcrowding, he did so with reference to the lazy poor only, even though it is certain that in his area of Suffolk the industrious poor were no more able to avoid such overcrowding than were the others. Thomas however seems to doubt that any agricultural workers could have lived in pleasant conditions at this period. Such an assumption is of course demonstrably false. As has been mentioned, several eminent economic historians of the twentieth century have argued the possibility of a rising standard of living amongst the

13 Huchon, p. 250.

labourers throughout the eighteenth century. Moreover Crabbe by no means lacks acuteness as Thomas would have us think. Crabbe includes in his picture of the prosperous peasant a pointed comparison with conditions in France. He indicates a print on the wall of the cottage and comments:

Here the last Lewis on his throne is seen,  
And there he stands imprison'd, and his queen;  
To these the mother takes her child, and shows  
What grateful duty to his God he owes;  
Who gives to him a happy home, where he  
Lives and enjoys his freedom with the free;  
When kings and queens, dethroned, insulted, tried,  
Are all these blessings of the poor denied  
(I. 43-50).

As various social historians have pointed out, the condition of the English agricultural labourer was far better than that of labourers in other European countries. Henry Meister has commented: "I do not impose upon you when I say that though the English labourer is better clothed, better fed, and better lodged than the French, he does not work so hard." Moreover V.M. Lavrovsky has shown that "the peasantry and peasant economy still played an important part in the Suffolk parishes .... Owners of the peasant type owned more land than the gentry and the clergy taken together, and the enclosures did not lead immediately to any substantial changes.

in the proportion of land owned by peasant proprietors." It seems fairly clear that Crabbe was correct in pointing out that land-holding peasants (even though the acreage held was often extremely small) would live a more prosperous life than those living in the row.

Obviously not all or even most of the cottagers would have enjoyed pleasant homes and gardens. Yet a certain amount of evidence is available to show that at this time the cottagers were being prompted by the gentry to improve their gardens. The Rev. James Plumptree in his account of cottagers' gardens in the county of Cambridge (Cambridge lies next to Crabbe's Suffolk) notes that the Earl of Hardwick placed on the door of the church a note addressed to the cottagers and labourers of the parish "that premiums of one guinea and a half, one guinea, and half a guinea, would be given to the three persons of that description, who should appear to have taken the greatest care of their gardens . . . in the course of the summer."

The Rev. Plumptree investigated the effect of these premiums on the villagers, and noted exuberantly that for the sum of three guineas "a large number of families, perhaps all the cottagers, are excited to industry." Undoubtedly the Rev. Plumptree is overly-optimistic about the benefits to be reaped from such a


\[19\] The Reports of the Society for Bettering the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor, III (London, 1802), 112.

\[20\] Reports of the Society for Bettering the Condition of the Poor, III, 119.
system, but his account should indicate that many villagers in the county of Cambridge had gardens around their cottages, and some at least had very fine gardens.

When Crabbe turns to discuss the idle poor living in the row he does not take up the usual eighteenth century attitude of stern rebuke; instead he complains that not enough people are endeavouring to help them. Here he clearly departs from the current belief that the "idle poor" did not deserve help. The reason they require even more help than the "deserving poor" is because they are idle and vicious. Crabbe says:

Ye who have power, these thoughtless people part,  
Nor let the ear be first to taint the heart!  
(I. 210-211)

Crabbe wants potential social reformers to forget what they have heard of the vices of these poor in the row, and help them as people -- "thoughtless people." Unlike many eighteenth century "humanitarians" Crabbe proposes that the "idle poor" should neither be ignored nor sternly punished. He recommends: "Come! search within, nor sight nor smell regard; / The true physician walks the foulest ward" (I. 212-213). Many workers, enlightened enough to see that thoughtless early marriages and "drink" were pitfalls in the way of gaining a comfortable existence, agreed with this conclusion that the poor labourer must attempt to adapt himself to regular hours of work and a planned domestic economy.21

21 See James Hawker's Journal: A Victorian Poacher, ed. Garth Christian (London, 1961), pp. 78-80. James Hawker was a nineteenth century poacher who believed that his own class must first educate themselves and then seize power in the country through parliament.
Critics such as W.K. Thomas have asserted that Crabbe's description of village life fails to represent the "grim and harsh aspects" of English rural life, and that Crabbe ignored the evidence that many people became paupers in spite of their best efforts to the contrary. However such a view is tenable only if one fastens on Crabbe's statement at the beginning of "The Parish Register," while ignoring completely the rest of the poem, in particular the sketches depicting the processes by which people fall into poverty. As has been seen, the total meaning of Crabbe's poems often modifies internal didactic statements; only an insensitive reading could fail to appreciate the extent to which "The Parish Register" qualifies its opening statement. To abstract Crabbe's overt social comments is to ignore most of his poem, and to refuse to recognize how his characterizations convey social ideas. In order to gain an impression of the total meaning of the poem it will be necessary to examine the opening statements in conjunction with some of the portraits.

III

It will be advantageous to begin by examining Crabbe's third group of villagers, the farmers, about whom he has little to say in his introductory remarks, except that they are all hard
working and flourishing: "Our farmers round, well pleased with constant gain, / Like other farmers, flourish and complain" (I. 273-274). At first sight it would appear as though Crabbe were praising the farmers highly for their industry. Certainly throughout the poem Crabbe maintains and reinforces this view that the farmers lack little. But as the pun on "round" and the sarcasm of the second line indicate, Crabbe was aware of the irony inherent in the position of the farmers. In developing the sketch of Robert and his family, small farmers, Crabbe is quite fair. He shows that while their type of life permits few luxuries, their farm supplies them with the basic necessities of life:

Few were their acres, -- but, with these content,  
They were, each pay-day, ready with their rent;  
And few their wishes -- what their farm denied,  
The neighbouring town, at trifling cost, supplied.  
If at the draper's window Susan cast  
A longing look, as with her goods she pass'd,  
And, with the produce of the wheel and churn,  
Bought her a Sunday-robe on her return;  
True to her maxim, she would take no rest,  
Till care repaid that portion to the chest:  
Or if, when loitering at the Whitsun-fair,  
Her Robert spent some idle shillings there;  
Up at the barn, before the break of day,  
He made his labour for th'indulgence pay:  
Thus both -- that waste itself might work in vain --  
Wrought double tides, and all was well again  
(I. 417-432).

It is worth remarking that in order to show Robert and his wife Susan content with their farm, Crabbe has described them both as extreme pragmatists. Their attitude to love is significant:

Bless'd in each other, but to no excess,  
Health, quiet, comfort, form'd their happiness;  
Love, all made up of torture and delight,  
Was but mere madness in this couple's sight:  
Susan could think, though not without a sigh,  
If she were gone, who should her place supply;
And Robert, half in earnest, half in jest,
Talk of her spouse when he should be at rest:
Yet strange would either think it to be told,
Their love was cooling or their hearts were cold
(I. 407-416).

Robert and Susan may not think their hearts are cold, but clearly Crabbe believes them at least cool. To prove that small farmers such as Robert and Susan live contented lives, Crabbe has had to tone down their personalities and make their claims to happiness slight.

It would be unfair to claim that Crabbe has made Robert and Susan less than human, or that he has chosen people with an abnormal regard for prudence, since obviously the world is full of Roberts and Susans. What is new and surprising is that Crabbe has felt it proper to introduce the sketches of Robert and Susan. Basically they are uninteresting, grey people. They are not denied moments of excitement and happiness, but these are well spaced:

Yet, though so prudent, there were times of joy,
(The day they wed, the christening of the boy,) When to the wealthier farmers there was shown
Welcome unfeign'd, and plenty like their own
(I. 433-436).

Their pleasures are totally conventional. What makes the sketch of Robert and Susan important is that they are so uninteresting, that they have little personal experience which one would call unusual. Crabbe's innovative decision to write about such people introduced to English poetry the average person. But the end result is not what most of Crabbe's readers would have anticipated, for instead of the hard-working Robert and Susan becoming the heroes of the poem, they are turned into figures of gentle irony. Crabbe's rhyme
and metre underline the mediocrity of such farmers' lives:

Few were their acres, -- but with these content,
They were, each pay-day, ready with their rent
(I. 417-418).

The rhymes "content" and "rent" suggest that the contentment of the farmers goes no further than the pleasure they receive from the regular payment of their rent.

For Crabbe, farmers appear to be in a particularly privileged position. Nor is their prosperity exaggerated. Knowing that during the Napoleonic wars high prices were extremely profitable to the farmers, one tends to agree with Crabbe's comments on their prosperity. The Widow Goe's farm, "ruled, with matchless skill, /
With guiding judgment and resistless will" (III. 129-130), brings her a comfortable income. Farmer Frankford, briefly mentioned at several points, is always spoken of with high regard as a man of influence and importance. Crabbe believed, and rightly so, that the lot of the farmer had improved greatly during the eighteenth century. Comparing a typical farmer's wife with one from the past, he says:

Yet not the ancient kind; nor she who gave
Her soul to gain -- a mistress and a slave;
Who not to sleep allow'd the needful time;
To whom repose was loss, and sport a crime;
Who, in her meanest room (and all were mean),
A noisy drudge, from morn till night was seen; --
But she, the daughter, boasts a decent room,
Adorn'd with carpet, form'd in Wilton's loom;
Fair prints along the paper'd wall are spread;
There, Werter sees the sportive children fed,
And Charlotte, here, bewails her lover dead
(II. 408-418).

Dorothy Marshall mentions that this "new breed of prosperous farmers" came into notice at the end of the eighteenth century. She comments:
There is a certain amount of scattered evidence that indicates that at least some of them were adopting a style of living that had previously been associated with their social superiors, and were beginning to constitute a rural variation of the middle class. 22

M. Dorothy George quotes with approval Crabbe's sketch of the modern farmer's wife as being an excellent example of a new social type. 23

While admitting that a great change for the better had occurred in the farmers' standard of life, Crabbe does not hide its narrowness. Prudence, he feels to be the farmers' chief characteristic:

Our farmers, too; what, though they fail to prove,
In Hymen's bonds, the tenderest slaves of love,
(Nor, like those pairs whom sentiment unites,
Feel they the fervour of the mind's delights)
Yet, coarsely kind and comfortably gay,
They heap the board and hail the happy day
(II. 390-395).

Asa Briggs has noted that it is from about this period that "respectability became as much a mark of the middle classes as wealth or superior income," resulting in a close connection of "domestic virtue" with "mediocrity of station." 24 Unlike a writer such as Frances Burney, who would have felt compelled to compare the farmer disadvantageously with a man of quality, Crabbe can accept the farmer for what he is. His sense of irony allows him to admit without distaste the idiosyncrasies detected by his trained eye.

24 Asa Briggs, The Age of Improvement 1783-1867, p. 73.
At this time the marriage of money and education presented one of the means of social mobility. Young ladies were given a superficial education in playing the pianoforte or the harp, or more often, in voice, and then placed in what Maria Edgeworth called "the marriage auction" to search for husbands with money. In Crabbe's version of the story, the "educated" young girl soon learns to put aside her art in favour of the farm:

And, though the bride, now freed from school, admits
Of pride implanted there some transient fits;
Yet soon she casts her girlish flights aside,
And in substantial blessings rests her pride.
No more she moves in measured steps, no more
Runs, with bewild'er'd ear, her music o'er;
No more recites her French the hinds among,
But chides her maidens in her mother-tongue;
Her tambour-frame she leaves and diet spare,
Plain work and plenty with her house to share;
Till, all her varnish lost, in few short years,
In all her worth, the farmer's wife appears
(II. 396-407).

Crabbe suggests that all farmers' wives were happy to leave their novels and harps for the business of managing the farm house. In a later poem (Tale VII, Tales) this theme is again developed, only with the accent on the difficulty which the young girl has in adapting to coarse farm life. But in "The Parish Register" Crabbe contrives to make the farmers and their wives fit the requirements necessary for the type of life they were to live, and thus to make them happy and prosperous.

The first reaction one has to the farmers is that they exemplify Crabbe's earlier statement that the good and diligent prosper. Yet on closer inspection, one is struck by the narrowness
of the farmer's life, by the sterile complacency with which he regards the world around him. In suggesting this lack of imagination amongst the farmers, Crabbe is of course not making a new and profound observation. The literature of the period teems with denigrating comments about the rustic country folk. However Crabbe's juxtaposition of one platitude, "farmers lack imagination," with a second platitude, "assiduous work is good in itself," created a new insight. Clearly these sketches hint that the lower and middle classes do not entirely benefit from their diligence. Such a view was heresy for those who believed that God had ordained the lower classes for work. 26

IV

It will be helpful now to turn from the farmers to examine in some detail Crabbe's descriptions of the poor of the parish to see how these character sketches inform the opening statement of the poem. The "bad characters" or at least "undesirable characters" (in the ordinary sense of the term) are indeed a curious lot. All of them -- the atheist-poacher, the harlot,

Andrew Collett, Richard Monday -- exude a rare zest for life which triumphs over any disapproval the reader may feel about their actions. How can one condemn the free and independent spirit of the poacher or the magnificent landlord of the Old Crown Inn -- "Big as his butt, and, for the self-same use" (III. 77)? These sketches contain an element of earthiness and a fullness of life which would have been a credit to Smollett or Fielding. When the harlot says: "Would men forsake us, and would women strive / To help the fall'n, their virtue might revive" (I. 459-460), one is forcefully reminded that the oldest profession in the world grew upon demand. Moreover, when it is noted that Crabbe introduces the passage on the harlot immediately after the long paean to the prudence of Robert and Susan, and that the section begins with the line -- "Recorded next, a babe of love I trace" (I. 449) -- the irony of the phrase "a babe of love" is seen to be two-faced, reflecting on both the excess of "love" in the harlot's life and the lack of it in Robert and Susan's. In addition, Crabbe does not permit only the voice of the narrator to speak in this case. For when the narrator tells the harlot that her misery is the result of her "wanton thoughts," she replies convincingly:

Alas! your reverence, wanton thoughts, I grant,
Were once my motive, now the thoughts of want
(I. 453-454).

Clearly the harlot's argument that she is forced into prostitution modifies the point of view of the parish priest who feels she is totally wanton. However Crabbe takes care not to endorse either view, and leaves the reader to draw his own conclusions.
Similarly a character such as Richard Monday, willing to stoop to anything for anybody, would normally be an odious creature, but here he serves as an example of the best in mankind. He becomes a rich squire who gives freely to charity. As a youth Richard Monday lacks all the virtues, but instead of condemning him, Crabbe compares him with the "good folk" of the parish, and finds that Richard is neither better nor worse than his "betters." When Richard is first discovered as an infant left within the bounds of the parish no benevolent Squire Allworthy is at hand to protect him. The "prudent vestry" finally agree to care for him, but Crabbe shows that their only motive is fear of the law. Crabbe's ironic interposition of the half line: "the rogue would live," with a heavy accent on the word "would," draws attention to the large numbers of such orphan children who died at birth. As was almost the case with Tom Jones, such children were left to the tender mercies of the elements.

Far from attempting to present the parish elders in a favourable light in this sketch, Crabbe shows them to be merciless in their dealings with the poor:

Back to their homes the prudent vestry went,
And Richard Monday to the workhouse sent.
There was he pinch'd and pitied, thump'd and fed,
And duly took his beatings and his bread;
Patient in all control, in all abuse,
He found contempt and kicking have their use --
Sad, silent, supple; bending to the blow,
A slave of slaves, the lowest of the low;
His pliant soul gave way to all things base;
He knew no shame, he dreaded no disgrace
(I. 709-718).
Clearly Crabbe’s opening statement about the idle being vicious must be qualified in the light of this sketch, where he shows that the "good people" of the parish force Richard, in self-defence, to become vicious and base. Moreover Crabbe does not attempt to correlate Richard’s baseness with poverty and failure; on the contrary, the parish has given him just the right qualities of knavery to ensure success when he ventures into the world. Richard Monday ends life as the Squire of Monday-place.

Richard Savage had praised highly the type of workhouse in which Richard Monday grew up:

See Structures, rising from the healthy Soil,
For Sickness, Want, and Age, worn out with Toil! 27

Savage had been impressed, as an outsider, by the size of the building. What Crabbe has done is to enter the workhouse and discover the actual treatment meted out to the poor. Although both poets are humanitarians, the difference between Crabbe’s view of the poor and that of Savage is that Savage never saw with the peasant’s eye, while Crabbe was able to depict the peasant’s motives and feelings. The difference may seem slight at first, but in fact it is symptomatic of a complete change in sensibility.

In addition to the sketch of Richard Monday, many other portraits controvert the opening statement that only the idle are poor. In fact the first character sketches reveal that individuals fall into poverty as a result of an error in judgment, not because they have vicious natures. The miller’s daughter is perhaps the

best illustration. The sailor William attempts to woo her for his wife, but when he asks her father for her hand, he is refused. Tyrannical and vain, the miller demands that his daughter marry someone with as much money as himself. The sailor of course earns very little, the wages in the navy of 1807 being £1. 15. 6d, per man per month. But the sailor refuses to give up his suit and continues his wooing. No doubt the sailor is something of a fortune hunter, but at the same time he is not a villain, since he asks Lucy to marry him. Unfortunately they cannot find a priest prepared to marry them before William sails to seek his fortune -- presumably through prize money -- leaving Lucy with child. He later dies in a sea fight. When the miller discovers his daughter's pregnancy, he consigns her with many curses to the "higgler's cottage" and leaves her there alone, supported by a small weekly allowance. The story ends with Lucy slowly going mad. Who is to blame? The pride of the miller, the vanity of the sailor and the rashness of Lucy all play some part in the tragedy.

Grabbe offers two more stories of a similar type, those of Phoebe Dawson and Lucy Collins. The stories are presented in such a way that the accent is mainly on the personal unhappiness of the young couples, so that the problem of poverty is only of secondary interest. Nevertheless Grabbe does show Phoebe Dawson, "the sweetest flower," falling into poverty -- poverty which is caused by neither idleness nor viciousness but by a series of unfortunate circumstances. In the case of Lucy Collins and
Stephen Hill, Lucy's betrayal of Stephen's love for the glamour of Footman Daniel's fine livery causes Stephen to work even harder to make his little farm a success, but his hard work does not bring him happiness. After having lived with Daniel for some time as his mistress, Lucy flies in "pure fear" and returns to Stephen to beg for help:

Trembling, at Stephen's door she knock'd for bread —
Was chidden first, next pitied, and then fed;
Then sat at Stephen's board, then shared in Stephen's bed:
All hope of marriage lost in her disgrace,
He mourns a flame revived, and she a love of lace.

(II. 353-357).

That Lucy, unlike Phoebe, does not live in poverty is the result of chance.

Throughout the poem Crabbe demonstrates many times how a single imprudent step often leads inexorably to poverty; the conclusion to be drawn is that the poor have little option in the life they lead. Fielding could afford to allow Jones and Booth many mistakes, since he had Allworthy and Harrison close at hand to bail them out in times of difficulty. But in Crabbe's world the economics are so brutal that a single mistake, a side-step from the established path, is enough to send a person to the poorhouse for life.

In spite of the register being a "melancholy book" many people, even amongst the poor, live in reasonable prosperity. About Peter the gardener and Gaffer Kirk, Crabbe has little to say, but they appear to live fairly prosperous lives. Crabbe has introduced them to point up the follies of mankind, but follies which are
relatively harmless to themselves and the rest of the community. More important, however, is his sketch of the ideal labourers, Reuben and Rachel. Here he resorts to much the same technique as he had used in describing the prosperous farmers; the labourers Reuben and Rachel are copies of the farmers Robert and Susan. In describing their love for one another, Crabbe gives them so much prudence that they become almost unbelievable:

Reuben and Rachel, though as fond as doves,  
Were yet discreet and cautious in their loves;  
Nor would attend to Cupid's wild commands,  
Till cool reflection bade them join their hands.  
When both were poor, they thought it argued ill  
Of hasty love to make them poorer still;  
Year after year, with savings long laid by,  
They bought the future dwelling's full supply;  
Her frugal fancy cull'd the smaller ware,  
The weightier purchase ask'd her Reuben's care;  
Together then their last year's gain they threw,  
And lo! an auction'd bed, with curtains neat and new.  
Thus both, as prudence counsell'd, wisely stay'd,  
And cheerful then the calls of Love obey'd

(II. 435-448).

Crabbe has introduced this sketch to prove the point that labourers can live a good life only if they are willing to wait until they have enough money to marry. None of Crabbe's work contains any direct reference to Malthus, but clearly this insistence on abstinence amongst the lower classes echoes the ideas of Malthus. Of course Crabbe may well have derived the Malthusian principle from his own experience; after all, Crabbe himself waited eleven years before marrying Sarah Elmy.

Yet once again it is important to notice how Crabbe undercuts the Malthusian theme even as he advances it. Is there not a hint of sadness (possibly from his own personal experience), when he
asks the question: "What if, in both, life's bloomy flush was lost, / And their full autumn felt the mellowing frost" (II. 453-454)? For most people it would matter a great deal if they had to wait for old age before marrying. Prudence may decree long engagements, but few young people are prudent. Although Crabbe may have agreed that Malthusian restraint amongst the lower classes is economically necessary, the results do not please him. He compares Reuben and Rachel to the rose, of which the winds of time have destroyed the flower. Self-abnegation may be necessary, and Crabbe stresses its value, but clearly it often prevents man's full development:

Yet time, who blow'd the rose of youth away,
Had left the vigorous stem without decay
(II. 455-456).

Even if the stem has not decayed, a rose bush in the autumn looks terribly forlorn. Yet Crabbe is not satirizing the prudence of Reuben and Rachel; rather he is demonstrating with brutal lucidity that the poor cannot afford beauty if they are to eat.

Whereas at the beginning of "The Parish Register" Crabbe had optimistically stated that the good lived well and the bad lived in misery, the sketches of the poor in Parts I and II do not bear this out. The stories of people such as Phoebe Dawson and Lucy Collins show rather what a fine border-line exists between prosperity and poverty. A single unknowing error can push an individual into a life of unhappiness. If a person is poor, then

28 Crabbe had some reason to be suspicious of the rewards of long engagements. In 1796 Mira fell ill with some sort of mental disease, which afflicted her until her death in 1813. His wife's long illness and fits of madness occasioned Crabbe considerable difficulties.
he must be almost inhumanly perfect and prudent to prosper in Crabbe's village.

Generally when an author championed the plight of the lower classes in the nineteenth century he did so with the intention of creating lower class heroes. Knowing how close many of the poor lived to subsistence level, Crabbe realized that a lower class hero with the virtues of the gentry would result in distortion. Thus Crabbe's model farmers, Robert and Susan, and his model labourers, Reuben and Rachel, reveal that the type of life demanded of them left them devoid of heroic sentiments. To ensure that his model people from the lower classes had enough to eat, Crabbe had to show them stripped of their finest qualities. As it was possible to draw only one model farmer and one model labourer (since others would be identical), the rest of his characters, if Crabbe were to be true to his own experience, must end up in varying degrees of misery.

Progressive writers in the eighteenth century were fond of explaining how the true heroes were not the warriors of old, such as Alexander the Great, but the men who helped to build civilizations and create beauty. This idea can be seen clearly in the novels of Henry Brooke, Godwin and Mrs. Inchbald. These writers attempted to choose "heroes" who were kind and benevolent, reared close to nature. But none of them could create a hero who was not a member of the upper class, for if the hero were poor, force of circumstance would make him live a restricted and uninteresting life. For instance, Brooke's Henry, Earl of Moreland, during the first years of his life is brought
up amongst the lower orders, but when Brooke wishes to exhibit the
virtues Henry has learned from the peasants, he is forced to give
Henry money and position. Thus throughout the eighteenth century
writers found themselves in the paradoxical position of praising
the peasant by making him a lord. With his desire for truth,
Crabbe described the peasant as a peasant, with the result that
most of the peasant's much vaunted Rousseau-like virtues disappeared.

By the time the reader reaches Part III, little remains
of the original statement that only the idle are poor, and what
does remain is effectively demolished in the stories of Isaac
Ashford and Robin Dingley. Isaac is the model peasant; indeed,
the model man. Of all the characters in "The Parish Register"
(including those amongst the gentry) Crabbe reserves the highest
praise for Isaac. As Crabbe's description of Isaac is too long
to quote in full, a few lines will have to suffice:

A noble Peasant, Isaac Ashford, died.
Noble he was, contemning all things mean,
His truth unquestion'd and his soul serene;
Of no man's presence Isaac felt afraid;
At no man's question Isaac look'd dismay'd:
Shame knew him not, he dreaded no disgrace;
Truth, simple truth, was written in his face
(III. 414-420).

Isaac has all the virtues: he is serious, yet cheerful; proud of
his own abilities, yet benevolent; and he is religious, without
taint of enthusiasm. But when old, and unable to support himself
any longer, this "noble Peasant" faces the workhouse:

At length he found, when seventy years were run,
His strength departed, and his labour done;
When he, save honest fame, retain'd no more,
But lost his wife and saw his children poor:
'Twas then, a spark of -- say not, discontent --
Struck on his mind, and thus he gave it vent:
"Kind are your laws, ('tis not to be denied,
That in you house for ruin'd age provide,
And they are just; -- when young, we give you all,
And for assistance in our weakness call. --
Why then this proud reluctance to be fed,
To join your poor, and eat the parish-bread?
But yet I linger, loth with him to feed,
Who gains his plenty by the sons of need;
He who, by contract, all your paupers took,
And gauges stomachs with an anxious look.
On some old master I could well depend;
See him with joy and thank him as a friend;
But ill on him, who doles the day's supply,
And counts our chances, who at night may die:
Yet help me, Heav'n: and let me not complain
Of what I suffer, but my fate sustain"

(III. 465-486).

Heaven grants Isaac's prayer; he dies before he has to enter the poorhouse. 29 Isaac's fate offers a serious objection to the tidy world which Crabbe tentatively proposed at the beginning of Part I. Isaac is the perfect man who, after abiding by all the rules, has to face the workhouse at the end of his life. 30 His case proves that even the best of men has to grapple with the spectre of poverty.

29 Eighteenth century poets of a certain type were fond of placing their characters in situations of great distress where, when they could no longer bear the pain, they called upon God to help them. God does so -- by allowing them to die. Robert Noyes has a particularly interesting example of this version of God's mercy in his poem Distress (Canterbury, 1783), where he describes a woman settler in America, captured by Indians. After being forced to live with the Indians for years the woman escapes to the wilderness where she wanders until, exhausted and starving, she calls upon God. God's answer is euthanasia. Crabbe's presentation of the death of Isaac Ashford parodies such themes. That God has to kill Isaac says more about the bad social conditions than about heavenly mercy.

30 A few years later Crabbe developed at some length his objections to the workhouse. See Letter XVIII of The Borough, and below, pp. 313-326.
Numerous people throughout the eighteenth century remarked that workhouses were an inappropriate means of helping genuine cases of distress. Sir Frederick Eden quoted an anonymous critic of the Maidstone workhouse as saying:

A work-house is a name that carries along with it an idea of correction and punishment; and many of our Poor have taken such an aversion to living in it upon that account, as all the reason and argument in the world can never overcome. Therefore it will be a means of preventing a great deal of trouble, and avoiding a greater expence than you can imagine, to have the work-house called by a softer and more inoffensive name.  

Yet a change in name hardly alters the nature and purpose of the workhouse.

Crabbe's comments, couched in guarded irony, hint that fundamental changes in the principle of the workhouse are required. At line 471, Crabbe has Isaac say: "Kind are your laws, ('tis not to be denied)." Immediately one is led to ask why it is not to be denied. A possible reason is that the laws were in fact kind. But a second ironic interpretation is also possible; it is not to be denied that the laws are kind, because in a time of war hysteria such a denial would be treason. Again, at line 469, when Isaac realized he might have to go to the poorhouse, he felt "a spark of --" and Crabbe quickly intercedes ironically to add, "say not, discontent." But clearly "discontent" is the mildest word possible. Crabbe only hints at the hard usage the law metes out to Isaac; he sums up: "I lament no more / A wise good man, contented to be poor"

Here what has been left unsaid is of importance, for although content to be poor (not rich), Isaac was not content to be destitute. Crabbe's original statement of how the woes of poverty are the result of "want of virtuous will" cannot be applied to Isaac's case. Isaac certainly had the will to keep himself from poverty. In The Borough Crabbe made this idea even more explicit when he said of the curate, a good man, but poor:

Pity, a man so good, so mild, so meek,
At such an age, should have his bread to seek;
And all those rude and fierce attacks to dread,
That are more harrowing than the want of bread;
Ah! who shall whisper to that misery peace,
And say that want and insolence shall cease?

Crabbe's next sketch, that of Robin Dingley, also refutes the original statement that responsibility for poverty lies with the individual. Robin's difficulties arise when he is approached by a "keen Attorney" who persuades him that he is the rightful heir to a large fortune. Taking the attorney at his word, Robin orders the things necessary for his new style of life. The lawyer however fails in his claim: "They proved the blood, but were refused the land" (III. 528). By this time Robin's head has been turned by visions of wealth, so that he is unable to return to his work. He dies in poverty, slightly crazed, after having spent the remainder of his life in lonely wanderings. Crabbe places the blame squarely on the attorney when he says of Robin:

But now he fell, a victim to the snare,
That vile attorneys for the weak prepare --
They who, when profit or resentment call,
Heed not the groaning victim they enthrall

(III. 577-580).
Possibly the difference in tone between the opening lines and the body of the poem may be explained by positing a change in Crabbe's philosophy. The last tales of "The Parish Register" are decidedly more pessimistic than the first ones. Death or failure comes for no obvious reason. For instance, Farmer Frankford's wife dies unexpectedly while still a young woman. At the end of this sketch there is a heartfelt cry, presumably from Farmer Frankford:

Oh sacred sorrow! by whom souls are tried,
Sent not to punish mortals, but to guide;
If thou art mine, (and who shall proudly dare
To tell his Maker, he has had his share?)
Still let me feel for what thy pangs are sent,
And be my guide and not my punishment!

(III. 629-634)

Although this hypothesis that Crabbe had changed his mind about the causes of poverty and misery by the time he came to write the last sections of "The Parish Register" cannot be ruled out entirely, surely it is unnecessary. Whereas at the beginning of the poem Crabbe says that the world is well ordered, with the good being rewarded and the bad punished, as the poem unfolds, the lives of the villagers illustrate that the world is in chaos. The change of emphasis can then be seen as a structural device. Farmer Frankford's prayer, which begins as though he meant to accept his sorrow, ends with a demand upon God to prove its usefulness. In the same way, Crabbe says that his first portraits will describe births, presumably the most cheerful section of the register, but in the first story, Crabbe shows the miller's daughter being courted by a fortune hunter, seduced, forsaken, thrown into a tiny cottage, and finally going mad. Surely this very first sketch refutes the simple-minded idea that the
good prosper and the bad suffer. Who is good in this case? and who is bad? The miller is a tyrant, but he manages to keep his money and a hard-hearted mistress as well. If anything, the sketch demonstrates that people with open hearts and generous sentiments suffer because of their innocence. The development of the poem is a continual modification of the original statement, with the individual sketches showing a marked progression of pessimism about man's ability to fashion his own happiness.

In one respect "The Parish Register" employs the same technique as "The Hall of Justice," only in reverse. As has been seen, "The Hall of Justice" sets out asking the radical question of whether those who commit crimes of necessity should be punished. It ends however with the utterly orthodox but inapplicable view that if the criminal repents, God will grant him mercy. In "The Parish Register," on the other hand, Grabbe begins with the orthodox view that the poor are idle and worthless, while all the time introducing individual cases to modify this over-simple view.
V

One of the reasons why Crabbe is able to offer contradictory accounts of the causes of poverty is that he does not always speak with the same "voice." Because both the narrator and Crabbe are clergymen, critics have tended to equate the two. But quite obviously in a case like that of Richard Monday, the voice speaking is critical of the way the vestry has treated the poor infant. The poem will seem less puzzling if every viewpoint expressed is not assigned to Crabbe.

In the story of Leah Cousins, for instance, the narrating voice is not the same as the dogmatic voice which opened the poem. Leah is a midwife who for many years has served the parish. By the criterion of the early part of the poem, she should have lived a happy life, for both rich and poor respect the conscientious care with which she performs her duties. But difficulties arise when a young bride from the town imports her own doctor -- Dr. Glibb. Her choice is a bad one; even the doctor's name -- Glibb -- suggests his incapability. When the girl's baby is born dead, so skilful is Dr. Glibb, that he manages to be praised for the mother's survival rather than blamed for the baby's death. The doctor's glib methods succeed in dazzling the parish with the result that he soon has a large and thriving practice; Leah is left with only the very poor for patients.

One of the most interesting features of this study of the Crabbe's use of different "voices" is discussed in detail in Chapter 5 with reference to The Borough.
midwife is that Crabbe manages to maintain complete objectivity. He does not act the progressive by asking his readers to observe superior science defeating ignorance; nor does he play the moralist by demonstrating modern quackery's victory over folk-knowledge. While the doctor undoubtedly possesses some modern techniques Leah possesses traditional country skills. Crabbe, however, barely mentions these issues. Concerned with the effects of modern science on the lives of the villagers, he concludes that the new world simply outdates Leah. She is one of those persons with old skills who lose their livelihood when new methods and techniques are introduced. In Crabbe's narration of this story there is something quite dispassionate, as if he realized the inevitability of the Leahs of the world being forced out of work. The description of her death is at least partly symbolic, suggesting the end of an old order:

The many left her, and the friendly few,
If never colder, yet they older grew;
Till, unemploy'd, she felt her spirits droop,
And took, insidious aid! th' inspiring cup;
Grew poor and peevish as her powers decay'd,
And propp'd the tottering frame with stronger aid; --
Then died! -- I saw our careful swains convey,
From this our changeful world, the matron's clay,
Who to this world, at least, with equal care,
Brought them its changes, good and ill to share
(III. 721-730).

To say that Crabbe has been objective in this sketch is to say that he has managed to tell the story of Leah's declining influence without taking sides or pre-judging the rightness or wrongness of the situation. The villagers' support of the new doctor appears
the inevitable result of a changing social order. No doubt Crabbe was facilitated in maintaining his stance of objectivity because only one person was in question. The case of the vanishing midwife hardly compares with that of the thousands of hand weavers who were at this time being superseded by machines. Even though Crabbe does not raise issues which concern large numbers of workers, his attitude towards Leah Cousins remains important. The objective reporting of the changing village scene helps to set the tone for the entire poem. If personal misfortunes are the result of inevitable economic change, then the personal responsibility involved is diminished.

In order to evaluate Crabbe’s seemingly contradictory representations of village life one must also take into account his portraits of the gentry. These are important not only for their own sake but because the manner of life amongst the gentry serves structurally to alter appreciably the perspective from which the reader sees and appraises the quality of life in the village. Oddly enough, although Crabbe offers a picture of the model farmer and the model labourer, he does not include a picture of the model gentleman. Not that this is a fault; to read a work of literature of this time which is not haunted by the ghost of Sir Charles Grandison is a great relief. 33  In one instance, Crabbe presents a gentleman-rake, Squire Archer, in order to have him reformed by his

33 Eighteenth century writers seemed to feel that if a novel did not contain at least one Sir Charles it would depict society in such an unjust light as to offer reasons for revolution. They were correct. Smollett’s Roderick Random leaves one feeling that England could well afford to lose her upper classes.
bailiff's daughter (a theme reminiscent of Colley Cibber's plays), but most of the passage is given over to description of his temptation of Fanny Price. The rest of Crabbe's gentry -- Lady Catherine Lloyd, the Lady of the Hall, Widow Goe, and the squire with his new bride -- all have serious faults.

One of the surprising features of Crabbe's descriptions of the gentry is that he does not differentiate greatly between his treatment of squire and labourer. On the contrary, he spares no pains to bring the two to a common level. This may be one reason why so few readers of Crabbe have pointed out that "the annals of the poor" is an inappropriate summary of "The Parish Register." For example, after telling the story of Phoebe Dawson, who came to the altar in her "long rent cloak, hung loosely," Crabbe turns to another pair forced to marry:

Next came a well-dress'd pair, who left their coach,  
And made, in long processon, slow approach  
(II. 247-248).

Obviously well dressed people who can afford to arrive in a coach are not village labourers. Yet Crabbe saves his surprise until the last line, when, with seeming innocence, he reveals that this forced marriage, so similar in all respects to that of Phoebe Dawson, is the wedding of the squire of the parish. The dignified "slow approach" is then seen to carry ironic overtones. Many poets throughout the eighteenth century talked about the equality of squire and labourer; none brought the fact home so unostentatiously, yet dramatically, as Crabbe has done through the juxtaposition of these two marriages.
Throughout the poem Crabbe asserts that imprudence amongst the lower classes leads to economic misfortune. Since the gentry are usually well above the subsistence line, their follies seldom result in poverty. Instead Crabbe points out how the vanity of the gentry ruins them as human beings. In his discussion of the gentry, Crabbe is no visionary intent upon levelling all distinctions. He accepts that different stations in life give people different responsibilities. As William Blake said in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: "One Law for the Lion & Ox is Oppression."

As a prosperous farmer, the Widow Goe has many of the same qualities of industry and prudence which Crabbe praised highly in Rachel and Susan. When the Widow Goe's husband died, she assumed control of the farm:

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Full thirty years she ruled, with matchless skill,
With guiding judgment and resistless will;
Advice she scorn'd, rebellions she suppress'd,
And sons and servants bow'd at her behest
(III. 129-132).
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As a result of her perseverance, the widow succeeds in building up an excellent farm. But her ceaseless efforts do not earn praise. Crabbe dislikes her mainly because she is not forced by necessity to undertake her various jobs and schemes. With the extreme diligence of the labourer Crabbe is sympathetic; he gently satirizes the same attitude in the farmer; and wholly dislikes such efforts amongst the wealthy. Reuben and Rachel were forced to postpone their marriage, save their money, and deny themselves luxuries in order to live well as servants. Since the Widow Goe already has
a sufficiency, her desire for unnecessary wealth and power becomes a subject for satire. Instead of developing her personality and living to her full potential, the Widow continues to expend her time and efforts on gaining power. What was a worthwhile endeavour for servants has become an ethic of work for the Widow Goe -- an end in itself.

Perhaps in order to ensure that his readers did not draw the wrong conclusions from his satire on Widow Goe's attempts to organize the parish, Crabbe next gives a character sketch of the Lady of the Hall, a woman who refuses to assume any of her responsibilities in the parish. The lady, an absentee landlord, lives in town with her estate in the care of a steward. The steward, true to his own interests (and those of his mistress), does not attempt to help the tenants. The steward is probably dishonest, but even worse, he refuses to improve the estate, or allow the profits to return to the community. That the country suffered when the landed gentry did not live on their estates was well known. The Clapham sect was particularly vociferous in its attempts to encourage the gentry to reside at least part of the year on their estates.  

The theme of the absentee landlord may have been commonplace at this period, yet in "The Parish Register" it plays an

34 For once Cobbett found himself in agreement with the evangelicals; he also disliked to see the ties of landlord and tenant broken. In particular, he disliked the introduction of stewards or bailiffs to interpose between the farmer and his workers. See his Political Register, March 17, 1821, XXXVIII (1821), 778-779.

35 Maria Edgeworth's Castle Rackrent (1800) and The Absentee (1812) deal boldly with the theme.
effective, highly charged role. For if absentee landlords could cause hardship to the poor tenantry, and everyone admitted that many landowners did live in fashionable London, then it followed that at least some labourers fell into poverty for reasons other than "want of virtuous will." Here one platitude is being used effectively to undercut another. The labourers on the estate of the Lady of the Hall suffered, not because of their own faults, but because of those of their mistress. Often in the eighteenth century little or no blame was attached to such a fault, since the injured party was merely a commoner and not a gentleman. Frances Burney in Cecilia brings out this point clearly when she shows Harrel indifferent to the plight of his unpaid tradesmen, but willing to commit suicide over a "debt of honour." Crabbe's "epitaph" on the Lady of the Hall is an unusually strong indictment of not unusual behaviour. As the village people gather around the grave to stare at the fine coffin, an old man speaks up disdainfully:

Away, my friends! why take such pains to know
What some brave marble soon in church shall show?
Where not alone her gracious name shall stand,
But how she lived -- the blessing of the land;
How much we all deplored the noble dead,
What groans we utter'd and what tears we shed;
Tears, true as those, which in the sleepy eyes
Of weeping cherubs on the stone shall rise;
Tears, true as those, which, ere she found her grave,
The noble Lady to our sorrows gave

(III. 302-311).

The important point is not that Crabbe has given a rustic peasant a sophisticated speech edged with irony, but that he has thought fit

36 Crabbe's description of a large number of paid mourners carrying the coffin to the grave is similar to that of Robert Blair in his poem The Grave (1743), lines 156-161.
to allow a peasant to judge the gentry. Surely this is a feeling for equality found in few other writers of the time. In *Cecilia*, when Frances Burney allows Mrs. Hill to comment on the failure of Harrel to pay his debts to the tradesmen, there is no outright condemnation. Mrs. Hill only expresses how sorry she is. And when Maria Edgeworth allows some of the rich London businessmen to comment on the bad behaviour of the gentry, only a brief aside is allowed in which compliment is mixed with criticism: "There's one of the high-breds, now, that's well-bred too." Crabbe has none of this false modesty; he allows his peasants roundly to condemn the gentry.

The ending of "The Parish Register" is designed to reduce still further rich and poor to one level. Sexton Dibble, something of a comic character, has prided himself on outliving five vicars. In his talks with the narrator of the poem (at this point Crabbe once again seems to choose a different voice), he has had occasion to mention some of the former vicars. In recounting these stories, Dibble has slyly hinted that he will outlive the present vicar:

His masters lost, he'd oft in turn deplore,
And kindly add, -- "Heaven grant, I lose no more!"
Yet, while he spake, a sly and pleasant glance
Appear'd at variance with his complaisance
(III. 813-816).

37 Mrs. Hill's strongest censure of Harrel's refusal to pay her bill comes when she says: "But, indeed, madam, his honour was so hard hearted this morning, that if I was not afraid you would be angry, I could not tell how to bear it." *Cecilia*, 4th ed. (London, 1784), I, 136 (Bk. I, Ch. xi).

38 *Helen* (London, 1834), III, 61.
But he does not. And the death of the wise sexton Dibble, observer of so many changes in the parish, reminds the reader that yet another far-seeing observer must eventually die -- the narrator.

This theme of the equality of all men in the grave was of course a favourite with eighteenth century poets. Gray, Parnell, Porteus and Blair all played the tune at one time or another. Yet in these poems the flat statement that, as all men must die all men are equal, rarely seems sincere. Crabbe plays upon the techniques of such poems in order to render meaningfully an idea that had become a cliche. Instead of stating flatly that all men must die, Crabbe has the narrator express great surprise at Dibble's death. But after expressing his surprise, the narrator suddenly remembers his intention of preaching that all men must die. Accordingly he does so, but in tones that parody the worst graveyard poetry.

The moment of hesitation between the narrator's first spontaneous expression of surprise and the following speech, full of cliches about the inevitability of death, allows the reader to perceive that death, the expected guest, always surprises. Dibble did not expect to die; the narrator's stentorian tone implies that he does not expect to die. And suddenly, by means of Crabbe's skilful use of the persona, the reader is able to see that he has not really believed in his own mortality. Like Dibble, like the narrator, the reader has unconsciously assumed he would outlive everyone else. As the graveyard poets often commented (although

39 Compare Edward Young in The Complaint, or Night Thoughts (1742-1745), when he says, "All Men think all Men mortal, but Themselves," First Night, line 423.
it is doubtful whether many of them believed the idea), if once readers could be shocked into the realization that all men are equal in the coffin, then it would be easier for them to believe that rich and poor in this world should be treated with equal respect. The trouble with the graveyard poets was that they did not shock. Crabbe achieves this sense of shock by parodying the graveyard poets themselves.

In "The Parish Register" Crabbe does not treat the rich as a race apart from the lower and middle classes, but as an integral part of a social community. If they play their part well, which means to the benefit of the community, then they receive praise, as does Squire Archer. But if the gentry behave as ludicrously as the worst of the peasantry, they are treated in the same way as the peasants. For instance, Lady Catherine Lloyd lives for her own exclusive benefit. Near the end of her life she begins to fear death, and asks how she can gain peace of mind. Crabbe answers that it can be achieved only by contributing to the happiness and welfare of others. Alone Lady Catherine is merely an object of irony; even wealth cannot gain her respect. Crabbe has succeeded in placing stress upon man in his social role, instead of upon man as an individual. That Crabbe's insistence upon equal treatment for all classes was a relatively new phenomenon can be appreciated if one compares Crabbe's view with that of a well known humanitarian such as Henry Fielding. In his pamphlet *An Enquiry Into the Causes of the late Increase of Robbers* Fielding had called for repression of many of the amusements of the lower classes, arguing that such
luxuries would lead only to increased indolence and a loss of potential wealth to the country. While asking that stern measures be applied to the lower classes, Fielding dissociated himself from any attempt to apply similar strictures to the gentry. He claimed: "In Diversion, as in many other Particulars, the upper Part of Life is distinguished from the Lower. Let the Great therefore answer for the Employment of their Time, to themselves, or to their spiritual Governors ... The Business of the Politician is only to prevent the Contagion from spreading to the useful Part of Mankind. ..." In "The Parish Register," however, "the upper Part of Life" cannot be so easily excluded; the Lady of the Hall and the Widow Goe are intrinsic parts of a social body, the health of which depends on each individual's fulfilling his responsibilities.

Crabbe's view of society in "The Parish Register" is basically democratic, since throughout the poem he is tacitly asking, "What is best for the common people?" Squire Archer is introduced, not because he is particularly interesting as a gentleman, but because he serves as a foil to the virtues of the village girl Fanny Price. In the same way the Lady of the Hall, a petrified shell, is important only for her negative features -- the way she harms the poor. Even Lady Catherine Lloyd, probably the most highly developed psychological study, plays a part in the register because of what she does, or rather what she does not do, for the poor.

While Crabbe's description of the poem as "the annals of the poor" is by no means accurate in an economic sense, one can see

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that in a metaphorical sense the poem describes the "poor." The conventional idea was that poverty was caused by vice. In part this was no doubt true, but where the moralists made their mistake was in singling out the poor for special rebuke. Once Crabbe had posited the idea that vice caused poverty, he was then able to show that many of the gentry must be as "poor" as their neighbours in the lower classes.

Crabbe's innovation lay in his inclusion of both the upper and lower classes within the same frame of reference and in his subsequent appraisal of them on the basis of merit alone. Most novelists of the time had treated the poor as a race apart, although Jane Austen solved the problem by refusing to discuss the poor at all.\textsuperscript{41} In the end Crabbe manages to show that the quality of life amongst the village people depends little on class and cannot be summed up in moral aphorisms. That Isaac Ashford is faced with the workhouse at the end of his life does not mean that he has failed, nor that his life has been "poorer" than that of someone like the Lady of the Hall. It does mean, however, that an individual's private life is very much influenced by the social life of his community.

\textsuperscript{41}Often Sir Walter Scott in the Waverley novels is given credit for first introducing upper and lower class figures within the same frame of reference. Scott's success has been attributed in part to the lack of class consciousness in Scotland. Yet in "The Parish Register" Crabbe had portrayed rich and poor alike seven years before Waverley appeared. For a discussion of Scott's treatment of the interlacing of classes, see A.O.J. Cockshut, The Achievement of Walter Scott (London, 1969), and Arnold Kettle, An Introduction to the English Novel (London, 1951), I, 105-109.
Whether many of Crabbe's readers ever consciously realized the extent to which the poem employs irony to undercut the initial picture of a tidy world in which the good are rewarded and the bad punished is unknown. Yet the poem left a disturbing impression on at least one critic. Francis Jeffrey was distinctly uneasy about aspects of Crabbe's technique, an uneasiness which might well have developed even further had he not been so anxious to uphold Crabbe as an example to the Lake poets. He mentions that some readers may find Crabbe's portraits of low life in bad taste:

They are, no doubt, executed in some instances with a Chinese accuracy; and enter into details which many readers may pronounce tedious and unnecessary. Yet, there is a justness and force in the representation which is entitled to something more than indulgence; and though several of the groups are confessedly composed of low and disagreeable subjects, still, we think that some allowance is to be made for the author's plan of giving a full and exact view of village life, which could not possibly be accomplished without including those baser varieties. He aims at an important moral effect by this exhibition; and must not be defrauded either of that, or of the praise which is due to the coarser efforts of his pen, out of deference to the sickly delicacy of his more fastidious readers.42

Jeffrey defends Crabbe's portraits, but only on the assumption that they exemplify a high moral theme. What this moral theme is, he never says. Presumably he is thinking of Crabbe's first assertion that only the idle are poor, for immediately afterwards he mentions it. Jeffrey would never have countenanced Crabbe's portraits had

42 The Edinburgh Review, XII (1808), 141. When Jeffrey collected some of his reviews in 1844 into the edition entitled Contributions to the Edinburgh Review, he changed the phrase "executed in some instances with a Chinese accuracy" to the more strongly worded phrase "executed in some instances with too much of a Chinese accuracy." See Contributions, 2nd ed. (London, 1846), II, 285.
he thought them to have no raison d'être; he notes uneasily that occasionally Crabbe heaps up "circumstances rather to gratify his own taste for detail and accumulation, than to give any additional effect to his description."^43 Jeffrey is of course harkening back to the idea that good literature should not attempt to paint the stripes of the tulip. The real danger in such writing was not that authors would stoop to the particular rather than rise to the general, but that in the descriptions of the particular some very ugly truths about man's role in an unjust world might be revealed. And many of Crabbe's portraits do reveal these truths.

Jeffrey was perspicacious enough to see that in Crabbe's general description at the beginning of Part I, the portrait of the profligates is more "striking" than that of the contented villagers. This sketch so impressed Jeffrey that he exclaimed enthusiastically: "There is nothing comparable to the following description [of the "infected row"], but some of the prose sketches of Mandeville."^44 This comparison of Crabbe with Mandeville is surprising, since Mandeville was notorious throughout the eighteenth century for his paradox that private vices lead to public benefits.^45 Jeffrey may have been led to compare Crabbe and Mandeville because both writers skilfully depicted the seamy side of human life. Mandeville's

43The Edinburgh Review, XII (1808), 141.
44The Edinburgh Review, XII (1808), 141-142.
45Crabbe mentions Mandeville several times in his later poems, but always along with such people as Hobbes, as a corrupter of morals. He certainly would not have relished being leagued with Mandeville.
reputation, it will be recalled, rested (quite wrongly) on the belief that he had shown man to be totally corrupt. In fact, he had refused to be hoodwinked by the benevolent, good-mannered creature of Shaftesbury's imagination, and had vividly portrayed man as a flesh and blood animal largely ruled by his instincts and appetites. Crabbe had also shown man to be dominated and led astray by appetite; where the necessities of economics curtail the appetites of Crabbe's characters, they appear lifeless and unimaginative. Jeffrey's comparison of Crabbe with Mandeville indicates that the poem's sketches of a chaotic world must have made a strong impression.

Although Jeffrey found Crabbe's sketches of low life "striking" and interesting, they obviously disturbed him. In discussing the marriage of Nathan, Jeffrey says: "The reverend Mr Crabbe is very facetious on this match; and not very scrupulously delicate." Alarmed at this comment, Crabbe modified the passage considerably rather than outrage the moral sense of the pre-Victorians. As modern readers rarely read the passage in the first edition a few lines at least should be quoted:

Fie, Nathan! fie! to let a sprightly Jade Leer on thy bed, then ask thee how 'twas made And lingering walk around at Head and Feet, To see thy nightly Comforts all complete; Then waiting seek -- not what she said she sought, And bid a Penny for her Master's Thought; -- (A Thought she knew, and thou could'st not send hence, Well as thou lov'dst them, for ten thousand Pence!) And thus with some bold Hint she would retire,

46 Crabbe's descriptions of low life are not nearly so "earthy" as those of Fielding and Smollett.

47 The Edinburgh Review, XII (1808), 144.
That wak'd the idle wish and stirr'd the slumbering Fire; Didst thou believe thy Passion all so laid That thou might'st trifle with thy wanton Maid, And feel amus'd, and yet not feel afraid? The dryest Faggot, Nathan, once was green, And laid on Embers, still some Sap is seen; Oaks, bald like thee above, that cease to grow, Feel yet the Warmth of Spring and Bud below; More senseless thou than Faggot on the Fire For thou could'st feel and yet would'st not retire. 48

Obviously the Crabbe who wrote "Inebriety" had not completely disappered under the cassock, although the demands of the times and his readers frequently forced him to use his cassock in the way a matador uses his cape.

When one considers the type of "moral literature" demanded by critics in this period, Crabbe's reluctance to engage the censors in battle is understandable. It is surprising not that he was hesitant, but that he was willing to venture so far. About his intentions in writing "Sir Eustace Grey," Crabbe said: "Yet be it granted to one who dares not to pass the boundary fixed for common minds, at least to step near to the tremendous verge, and form some idea of the terrors that are stalking in the interdicted space." 49 Chamberlain has commented: "To many readers in 1807 the author of The Register must have seemed to be moving towards 'forbidden' things." 50 From what has already been seen of "The Parish Register," one can infer that Crabbe must have known that many of his social ideas, if developed fully, would have taken him into "the interdicted

48 Poems by George Crabbe, I, 534-535.
49 Preface to Poems, in Poems by George Crabbe, I, 98.
50 Robert L. Chamberlain, George Crabbe, p. 78.
space." In order to protect himself, his profession and his poems from universal castigation, he first set out a conventional half truth -- the vicious are poor -- and then proceeded to indulge his own interest in exploring the actual social and psychological causes which lead to man's impoverishment. Had Jeffrey not been so anxious to criticize Wordsworth, he might have found that Crabbe's portrait of an impotent old gentleman's seduction by his passionate servant-wife suggested more than ribald images.

VI

One of Huchon's criticisms of "The Parish Register" was that it did not "contribute any new idea to literature." Yet surely Huchon has failed to notice how Crabbe's picture of a parish community incorporates for the first time in poetry the techniques and ideas of sociology. As this, one of Crabbe's greatest achievements, has remained largely unrecognized, something further needs to be said on the subject. Obviously Crabbe could not have been a sociologist in the modern professional meaning of the term, since the science of sociology was yet to be invented. But sociological ideas were clearly in the air. Adam Ferguson (d. 1816) insisted

\[51^{\text{Huchon, p. 251.}}\]
that man could and should be studied as a member of a social group. Just as Ferguson can be hailed a father of sociology because his writings incorporate a new approach to society in which the elements of the sociologist's methods are stressed, so Crabbe's discussion of types and groups, manifesting a similar technique, may also be called sociological.

It will be recalled that at the beginning of "The Parish Register" Crabbe had said: "No Muse I ask, before my view to bring / The humble actions of the swains I sing" (I. 7-8). Critics have never been slow to point out Crabbe's emphasis on humble life, but few have bothered to note the care with which Crabbe defined his intentions. Robert Chamberlain was one of the first to attempt to see Crabbe's characters as members who either contribute to, or oppose, the welfare of the village. Crabbe says that he intends not only to describe humble people, but that he will describe their "actions" as well. The word "actions" is important, for it shows that Crabbe is thinking primarily in terms of what people are doing. Since he is describing a village community, the inevitable result of such an emphasis on "actions" is to describe some of the features of social life in the community. That Crabbe's intention was to offer something of a sociological survey, he himself makes clear:

How pass'd the youthful, how the old their days;  How pass'd the youthful, how the old their days;  Who sank in sloth, and who aspired to praise;  Who sank in sloth, and who aspired to praise;  Their tempers, manners, morals, customs, arts;  Their tempers, manners, morals, customs, arts;  What parts they had, and how they 'mploy'd their parts;  What parts they had, and how they 'mploy'd their parts;

^Sociological ideas and methods may be seen most clearly in An Essay on the History of Civil Society (1767).^  
^Robert Chamberlain, George Crabbe, pp. 56-101.\}
By what elated, soothed, seduced, depress'd,
Full well I know -- these records give the rest
(I. 9-14).

In this survey of a particular community Crabbe explains that he will use his own expertise as well as the parish records to give his account authenticity. When Crabbe says that he will describe "their tempers, manners, morals, customs, arts," he is in effect undertaking roughly the same sort of survey as that of a modern sociologist. For such a survey, Crabbe had the excellent precedent of F.M. Eden's massive three volume opus, The State of the Poor (1797).

A sociological approach does not necessarily mean that the observer has to retain complete objectivity and neutrality. Max Weber, for instance, was deeply conscious of his role as a critic of the values he was cataloguing and discussing. In large measure Crabbe imbues his sketches with an air of objectivity because he is so often subjective. At many places in the poem he intrudes his own voice or that of the narrator to comment on the characters or actions. A good if somewhat trivial example of this technique is to be found in Part I, in the description of the types of books to be found in cottages. Crabbe notes that one cottage contains a Bible filled with notes by famous commentators. After making this observation, he then adds his own opinion that the peasants would be better off without the commentary (I. 83-88).

People interested in the "state of the nation" at this period were becoming increasingly concerned with the lack of accurate information about the population. The first national census took place in 1801.
The reader comes to believe implicitly in the truthfulness of Crabbe's statement that the cottage has a Bible, because Crabbe not only says it is there, but voices his disapproval of the type of Bible. Unconsciously the reader assumes that Crabbe could not comment adversely on something which did not exist in the first place. Crabbe uses this technique time and again to build up an air of credibility. In the portraits of the miller and the Lady of the Hall he uses this technique to excellent advantage, first constructing their characters through the use of manifold small details, and then venting his own disapproval.

If "The Parish Register" is an early type of sociological survey, then surely some conclusions about its social validity can be drawn. Huchon, who liked Crabbe's account of the village people, believed he had given an accurate account of villagers. "Crabbe," he said, "does not invent."55 Crabbe himself has said that his sketches were of people whom he had observed, but noted that he often made changes or substitutions.56 Yet surely this question of whether Crabbe did or did not invent his characters is irrelevant. A lesser artist might base all his characters faithfully on living persons, and make them less credible than an artist who created people from his own invention. More important, the question at the moment is not whether Crabbe has drawn convincing characters, but whether he has introduced errors into his sketch seriously invalidating the picture of village life. The question is difficult

55Huchon, p. 230.
56See the letter to Mary Leadbeater, December 1, 1816, in Life, Ch. ix, pp. 230-233.
to answer. J.L. and Barbara Hammond have said: "We owe much of our knowledge of the social life of the time" to Crabbe's "sincere and realist pen." That any economic historian would make such a statement today is highly dubious. Crabbe was an observer; like any other observer, his assertions must be checked.

It is difficult to judge whether Crabbe has given a good representation of an 1807 village, since the poem does not deal with particular social problems. For instance, in a novel such as Mrs. Gaskell's *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863), dealing with the activities of press gangs amongst the whalers, one can easily check Mrs. Gaskell to determine whether her facts on whalers and press gangs are correct. But Crabbe's poem does not deal with one large social problem; instead it attempts to give a picture of some aspects of village England. Had Crabbe written with the propagandist purpose of describing, say, the population problem, then today a social historian could check Crabbe's facts against economic and social data. But Crabbe did not write with this purpose, and so his social observations are difficult to check. Village England varied tremendously from county to county. Dorothy Marshall has commented: "Generalizations about the English social structure or the English way of life [are] dangerous. What is true of Lancashire is not true of Middlesex, what is true of Devon may well be false for Essex." Even within one particular county, variations in the soil or the existence of

57 *The Village Labourer*, p. 212.
an industry could account for wide variations in village life. 59

Still, even the most cursory reading of the poem reveals that Crabbe has introduced few of what we, in the twentieth century, have come to regard as the great divisive issues. He does not mention the growing use of machinery; on enclosures he is silent; population movements he disregards; and no mention is made of inflated war-time prices. Crabbe's village seems to be cut off from the great social changes which were transforming England at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Commenting on Crabbe's descriptions of the upper classes, Huchon says: "Here the eighteenth century seems to survive itself; manners and characters remain what they were fifty years since." 60 Yet "The Parish Register" is not completely divorced from its time. "The Sorrows of Young Werther" (1774) is a topical reference. Crabbe mentions Nelson's victory at the Battle of the Nile (1798), and alludes to Nelson's death at Trafalgar (1805). The new-found affluence of the farmers is frequently mentioned as well as the way in which townspeople (in the figure of the new doctor) were changing the patterns of village life. In his list of vicars at the end of Part III, Crabbe mentions the Cambridge evangelical youth -- one of the fore-runners of the Anglican reform movement. Thus through-

59 Realizing the need to confine Crabbe's account of village England to a particular area, critics have tended to discuss "Crabbe's Suffolk." But to be accurate, even the county of Suffolk is not a small enough region, for geographically Suffolk is divided into a number of distinct agricultural areas. See Eric Kerridge, The Agricultural Revolution (London, 1967), pp. 77-80.

60 Huchon, p. 229.
out the poem references and allusions help to pinpoint the period the poem is meant to represent. Yet one cannot help feeling that Crabbe’s village is definitely a backwater of England, so little does he mention the industrial revolution. However one must be cautious that this impression is not merely the result of an over-emphasis by economic historians on the degree of change taking place in England.

In Crabbe’s survey much is omitted which one might have expected to find included, but one should recall that what seems important to the historian of today may well have seemed the exception to the social chronicler of the past. And historians, especially social historians, are beginning to realize that although vast social changes were taking place in the early 1800’s, for much of the country continuity with the past was still more apparent than disruptive signs of change. 61 Moreover even today if a poet set out to describe the dominant features of, say, a Highland village, he would not choose a village in which there was a marked discontinuity with the past, nor one which was rapidly becoming an industrial town. Crabbe’s description of village life is a reminder that, although great winds of change were sweeping across England, many villages still experienced only the most gentle of breezes.

61 See Dorothy Marshall, English People in the Eighteenth Century. Chapter two and the final pages of the book are especially relevant. Asa Briggs, in The Age of Improvement 1783-1867, also stresses the idea of "process" in historical changes, and maintains that although England of the late eighteenth century was undergoing change, one of its dominant features was social stability. See pp. 4-5.
Furthermore the sociology of the eighteenth century was not analytic but synoptic. The leading philosophers of the time -- Adam Ferguson, Adam Smith and David Hume -- approached the problems of economics in terms of philosophy. They were interested in giving a balanced picture of the way man does and should act in society. Thus to expect Crabbe to give an analytic account of a village community is unreasonable. With Smith and Ferguson, Crabbe naturally attempted to give an account of man (not the economic man, but a man of flesh and blood as he is usually understood), and some of the various ways he could be expected to behave. Crabbe discusses individuals, but in situations he felt were universal.

The most important consideration of all, however, is that Crabbe did not set out to write a chapter of social history, but a poem. If the social ideas are abstracted from the structure of the poem, they can be made to seem inconsistent and even contradictory, but when they are related to the logic of the poem's themes, the social documentary can then be seen to serve a definite purpose. All too often, critics have neglected to ask how Crabbe used these social descriptions to serve as material for poetry. Here Crabbe's claim that he is writing a sociological poem is particularly helpful to an understanding of the technique employed to bring the social commentary into a formal poetic structure.

As any good social scientist knows, it is impossible to catalogue every detail of a community. One must first establish a working hypothesis, and then carefully test this hypothesis against the facts.

collected. Regarding the poem in a sociological context, one can see that this is what Crabbe has done: his "hypothesis," as stated at the opening of the poem, is that the good people prosper and the idle fail. Of course the irony is that "The Parish Register" does not substantiate the hypothesis, but shows it to be false. As a piece of sociology, the poem is a marvellous example of the way in which social data and experience contradict a seemingly plausible hypothesis.

As a pretence to be a story of the poor, illustrating the moral that only the wicked suffer, "The Parish Register" quite naturally seems at first sight to be full of inconsistencies, since it contains portraits which show the good man suffering. Yet these seeming inconsistencies need not fault the poem, for taken together in context, they create a new line of development. Covertly the poem suggests that a basic premise of eighteenth century theory about the poor must be wrong. The mistaken premise is not far to find, since most of the poem is devoted to illustrating the idea that poverty has causes other than bad conduct. In part poverty can be explained by the precarious economic situation, but in the last analysis suffering must be accepted as an intrinsic part of the world. To attempt to explain it away is to falsify life. In Crabbe's experience no "invisible hand" is present to ensure that each person receives fair play when he brings his goods to market.

By the end of "The Parish Register" Crabbe has clearly illustrated that the original hypothesis -- only the idle suffer --
is badly in need of modification. While Crabbe does not draw explicit conclusions, preferring to leave his various portraits as evidence of the complexity of the social structure, the poem urges the reader to draw a few tentative generalizations. The first is that skilled workers, such as Peter the gardener and Reuben the labourer, who stick to their jobs with determination, generally succeed, whilst unskilled workers who become unemployed have a very difficult time indeed. T.S. Ashton has confirmed this general trend: "The divergence of experience between skilled and less skilled explains how honest observers could differ as to whether things were getting better or worse for labour at this time. And it is because historians tend to look at this or that section of the workers exclusively that the controversy continues."\(^6^n\)

Critics such as W.K. Thomas, who assume that Crabbe should have described the condition of all lower class people to be terrible,\(^6^n\) will no doubt be disappointed by such a balanced summary, but surely it is closer to the truth than the melodramatic theory that all lower class people lived in hovels under substandard conditions. That Crabbe recognized conditions for the poor were extremely difficult is indicated by the fate of the model villager; Isaac Ashford, it will be recalled, is threatened with the workhouse. But Crabbe also recognized that in Suffolk there were a large number of small peasant farmers who could and did manage by


diligent effort to earn a living from the soil. As V.M. Lavrovsky has shown in his examination of Suffolk parishes, out of two hundred and five peasants owning land, ninety-two of them possessed three acres or less. Where people owned extremely small plots of land, obviously the success or failure of the farm depended much on the diligence of the farmer involved. If a man had less than three acres to farm, he could not afford to be anything other than a model of industry. As is usual with Crabbe's poems, at the end of "The Parish Register," one cannot state explicitly that the poem embodies any one conclusion. Rather it is possible to see that Crabbe has offered his readers the opportunity to re-examine some widely-held social theories in the light of recorded individual experience.

Because of his poetic technique of constant qualification, Crabbe's sketches are never fused into a single story, a feature of the poem which almost all critics have unreservedly condemned. Yet this lack of a formal plot or story often helps to give Crabbe's disparate sketches an air of credibility. In desiring an organic unity in Crabbe's poems, critics have been asking Crabbe to write a different type of poem, a verse-novel. What interested Crabbe was the possibility of presenting a kaleidoscopic picture of a village community, not a novel in verse. The imposition of a story would have destroyed the formal unity of Crabbe's poem, a unity which

65V.M. Lavrovsky, "Parliamentary Enclosures in the County of Suffolk (1797-1814)," in EHR, VII (1936-1937), 190.

66In his novels Daniel Defoe also uses this technique.
derives from one part contradicting and qualifying another. While Crabbe's development of the verse tale is no doubt important, undue emphasis on the tale itself often obscures the role it plays in the over-all poem.

In conclusion it is perhaps worth emphasizing once again how important it is not to allow the century and a half which intervenes between the present day reader and the poem to obscure the skilful way in which Crabbe has managed to challenge many of the accepted dogmas about the poor without frightening his middle class and aristocratic readers. At a time when a large portion of the leisured class believed that the poor should be excluded from literature, 67 and when the rich believed that they had been charged by "natural providence, as much as by revealed appointment, with the care of the poor," 68 the lower classes were regarded as objects of pity rather than as interesting people in their own right. Crabbe stripped away this attitude of condescending pity, not to demonstrate the wonders of the working class (only another version of the same pity), but to show the poverty of rich and poor alike.

67Smollett, in the introduction to Roderick Random, has a marvellous passage in which he does not beg forgiveness for introducing "mean scenes."

CHAPTER 5

"THIS IS THE LIFE ITSELF"

I

The great length of The Borough and its vast amount of social comment make a detailed discussion of Crabbe's social ideas doubly difficult. Running to $77\frac{1}{2}$ lines, The Borough is only a few hundred lines shorter than The Prelude. In the poem's twenty-four Letters, Crabbe scrutinizes a large number of subjects: prisons, schools, alms houses, hospitals and the medical profession, to name only a few. To understand Crabbe's intentions as a social critic one cannot simply examine each subject on its own. As was seen in "The Parish Register" Crabbe's poetry gains its total effect from a series of cumulative points, so that each part of a poem must be seen in relation to the whole. Crabbe was keenly aware that his primary task was not to write social history but to translate his observations of social life into poetry. In his
description of the vicar, for instance, Crabbe noted that he had no intention of explaining everything about the man -- this "let historians show" (III. 6). The Borough cannot be regarded merely as rhymed history; the social commentary and criticism form part of a poetic structure, and must be treated as such. Often the manner in which an idea is introduced, or its juxtaposition with another, is as important to a grasp of Crabbe's intention as the idea itself.

In The Borough Crabbe introduced for the first time what he called a "man of straw" narrator.¹ The relation of this narrator to Crabbe is not immediately clear. In the Preface, Crabbe said that he had called to his aid "the assistance of an ideal friend." Yet when this ideal friend is "a residing burgess in a large seaport," and one recalls that the reputation in literature of the businessman or "cit" was not high,² one can be pardoned for entertaining some suspicions about how far Crabbe intended the narrator for his own mouthpiece. At several points throughout the poem, mocking comments are made about "merchant-maxims" (VIII. 134), and Crabbe generally pokes fun at the businessman whose first concern is with the prudent arrangement of his life and fortune. Furthermore the identity of the narrator does not remain consistent throughout the poem; in Letter XI (line 232) the narrator claims to be a


²Frances Burney's portrait of Mr. Briggs in Cecilia (1782) is no doubt something of a caricature of merchant vulgarity, but that such a portrait could be given at all shows in what low esteem merchants were held.
squire with a country estate, clearly contradicting Crabbe's assertion in the Preface that the narrator is a burgess. Possibly this variation may be only a slip of the pen on Crabbe's part, but other evidence supports the view that at different points in the poem Crabbe finds it convenient to speak with different voices.\(^3\)

In order to understand Crabbe's intentions in his various sketches the rhetorical structure of the poem cannot be ignored. For instance in the opening lines of the poem, the narrator-burgess claims that a poetic description of borough life offers little scope for "the muse"; he pretends to go ahead with his description only at the pressing invitation of his country friend. Crabbe may well have invented this reason as a protective measure against the many critics who had censured his earlier scenes of "low life." But this structure also allows Crabbe to develop his arguments in the form of a dialogue. Thus the narrator can ask rather hesitantly of his friend: "Can scenes like these withdraw thee from thy wood, / Thy upland forest or thy valley's flood?" (I. 25-26) and then proceed to describe some of the basic differences between a Horatian life of calm and the busy life of a seaport. In a certain sense, Crabbe surely meant the "retired friend" to stand for the man of leisure, who, busy with his own set of friends, rarely bothered to attempt

\(^3\)If it appears strange that Crabbe should use more than one "voice" in the poem, it should be recalled that Jonathan Swift often did the same thing. Herbert J. Davis has pointed out that Swift often made use of several masks in a single work of art: "Just as with all his other later disguises, Swift simply makes use of a mask as it suits him; it is never permanently moulded over his face, and it always allows him to use his own voice." See Herbert J. Davis, "Swift's Use of Irony," in The Uses of Irony, William Andrews Clark Memorial Library (University of California, 1966), p. 44.
to understand the lower classes. Moreover the narrator warns that he will not be able to give a complete description of borough life; he insists that his friend (in other words, the ordinary reader of the time) must use his "fancy" to help fill out the sketch of the borough. And of course with any such rhetorical structure, the reader, in order to understand the author's meaning, cannot accept any one person as the author's spokesman, but must use his "fancy" to piece together the various components, and so arrive at the author's own point of view.\(^4\)

Crabbe hints many times that he expects his readers to have a high degree of sophistication, and asks that they challenge the narrator's conclusions. In Letter II, for instance, Crabbe has the narrator ask: "What is a Church" (II. 1)? The narrator finds that the question can receive many answers, all of them correct, depending on the attitudes of the people asked. The vicar replies that the church is a flock, "whom bishops govern and whom priests advise; / Wherein are various states and due degrees" (II. 6-7). The sexton has quite a different view: "'Tis a tall building, with a tower and bells" (II. 12). And in the abstract, the church is: "The faithful, pure, and meek; / From Christian folds the one selected race, / Of all professions, and in every place " (II. 2-4). Throughout the poem Crabbe exploits this idea that many different

\(^4\)A good article dealing with the way in which "masks" are employed by an author is Irvin Ehrenpreis's "Personae" in Restoration and Eighteenth Century Literature, ed. Caroll Camden (For William Marsh Rice University by University of Chicago Press, 1963), pp. 25-37.
answers can be given to a single question.  

Crabbe also suggests that the narrator has difficulties in arriving at objective conclusions, in distinguishing appearance from reality. For instance the memorial to Jacob Holmes claims that Jacob was worthy and virtuous, that his wife loved him, and that he was "liberal, kind, religious, wise." But the narrator asks, "What is the truth?":

Old Jacob married thrice;  
He dealt in coals, and av'rice was his vice;  
He ruled the Borough when his year came on,  
And some forget, and some are glad he's gone;  
For never yet with shilling could he part,  
But when it left his hand, it struck his heart  
(II. 152-157).

As shall be seen later, one of the main themes of The Borough is the discovery of how complex and difficult the search for "the truth" actually is.

At the beginning of the poem our doubts about the relation of the narrator to Crabbe are dispelled somewhat when he strikes what appears to be a peculiarly Crabbe-like stance. As he attempts to describe borough life to his retired friend in the country, the tone of his voice becomes sharp and argumentative, similar to that of the opening sections of The Village where Crabbe had stated his intention of overturning the pastoral myth. When he describes the "squalid sea-dames" and the "living mass" of freshly netted fish, one feels certain that Crabbe himself is speaking, once again

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5This concern with man's perception of the world, and the conditioning factors, was the central problem for many eighteenth century thinkers. Locke, Berkeley and Hume all made it the basis of their philosophical works.
attempting to give the rich some idea of how other people live.

Soon however Crabbe appears to withdraw. The narrator informs his country friend that he is about to describe the borough's river, and in order to do this, he asks his friend to imagine his own country stream:

Seek, then, thy garden's shrubby bound, and look,
As it steals by, upon the bordering brook:
That winding streamlet, limpid, lingering, slow,
Where the reeds whisper when the zephyrs blow
(I. 27-30).

The narrator then asks him to compare this river with that of the borough, in every way different:

Draw then the strongest contrast to that stream,
And our broad river will before thee seem.

Thy gentle river boasts its pigmy boat,
Urged on by pains, half grounded, half afloat;
While at her stern an angler takes his stand,
And marks the fish he purposes to land
(I. 35-48).

Instead of the casual, leisurely angler, the borough has a poor oyster-dredger:

Nor angler we on our wide stream descry,
But one poor dredger where his oysters lie:
He, cold and wet, and driving with the tide,
Beats his weak arms against his tarry side,
Then drains the remnant of diluted gin,
To aid the warmth that languishes within;
Renewing oft his poor attempts to beat
His tingling fingers into gathering heat
(I. 53-60).

This deliberate juxtaposition of the poor oyster-dredger with the indolent angler raises problems in the reader's mind (at least it raised problems in this reader's mind) about Crabbe's intention in portraying the difference between the lives of the two fishermen.
Interested in describing only the objective facts of the poor oyster-dredger and the angler, the narrator describes but does not comment on the disparity in their lives. In many circumstances this attempt to give a disinterested account would be quite acceptable, but the manner of description in this case teases the reader to comment on the injustice of the situation. The question of injustice is made particularly relevant to the description of the oyster-dredger at evening, selling his catch to the rich:

He shall again be seen when evening comes,
And social parties crowd their favourite rooms;
Where on the table pipes and papers lie,
The steaming bowl or foaming tankard by.
'Tis then, with all these comforts spread around,
They hear the painful dredger's welcome sound;
And few themselves the savoury boon deny,
The food that feeds, the living luxury
(I. 61-68).

At the very least, this presentation has the effect of reversing the normal perspective that one would expect to find in the literature of the time. The reader is made uncomfortably aware of the oyster-fisherman's relation to the "social parties." The surprising feature of this juxtaposition is that, while the narrator does not ask the reader to sympathize with the oyster-fisherman, the sketch invites sympathy. A phrase such as "the painful dredger's welcome sound" suggests that the rich are entirely oblivious of the dredger's condition; his "painful cry" does not arouse compassion, but only feelings of hunger. Crabbe appears to be injecting additional social implications into the narrator's story, implications of which the narrator remains unaware.
Nor is this incident between the oyster-dredger and the rich an isolated one. Even if one is unprepared for the moment to accept the view that Crabbe wished his readers to see injustice in this scene, one must admit that throughout the poem Crabbe encourages the reader to see borough life from a new perspective. In Letter X, the narrator gives the following reply to his friend's comment about the social life to be found in the borough:

You say you envy in your calm retreat
Our social meetings; -- 'tis with joy we meet.
In these our parties you are pleased to find
Good sense and wit, with intercourse of mind
(X. 1-4).

In a barely concealed form Crabbe is here portraying the much discussed topic of the preferability of town life to country life. The rich friend in the country imagines that city life must be gay, sociable and interesting; conversely the narrator points out that most of what passes for high-society glamour bores him. He observes how, in a typical evening, time is consumed in eating, drinking and playing cards. Much of what passes for conviviality is spurious: "Thus it appears these envied clubs possess / No certain means of social happiness" (X. 77-78). This denigration of the city's social life contains nothing new; what is surprising however is that the passage does not end with the usual panegyric on country solitude, but with some muted praise of the happiness to be found in the poor man's social meetings. Compared to the clubs

—even early novelists such as Fielding and Richardson usually included scenes in which city life was disparaged. Mr. Wilson of Joseph Andrews retires to the virtues of the country. William Cowper's The Task includes many passages condemning the luxury of the city.
of the wealthy, the poor man's club is a great success:

The poor man has his club; he comes and spends
His hoarded pittance with his chosen friends;
Nor this alone -- a monthly dole he pays,
To be assisted when his health decays;
Some part his prudence, from the day's supply,
For cares and troubles in his age, lays by;
The printed rules he guards with painted frame,
And shows his children where to read his name:
Those simple words his honest nature move,
That bond of union tied by laws of love.
This is his pride, it gives to his employ
New value, to his home another joy;
While a religions hope its balm applies
For all his fate inflicts and all his state denies

(X. 269-282).

Quite obviously Crabbe is here describing and praising a Friendly Society, a poor man's Benefit Club, much under discussion at the time, and greatly feared by many as an institution of insurrection. In so doing he has again inverted the usual description of society. While fashionable clubs and parties are unsatisfactory, the poor man's club offers just those pleasures that the narrator's friend expected to find amongst the gentry. This praise of the poor is given in a quiet and restrained manner, and in such a way as not to offend. In fact the narrator seems unconscious of the implications of his praise. Thus we must conclude that the poem can imply more than the narrator suspects.

At many places in the poem, the narrator's detached

7 See E.P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class (London, 1965), pp. 418-423. A great variety of these "Friendly Societies" existed, ranging from the purely convivial social gatherings to the intensely sober societies for the payment of burial fees. Running through all these clubs one can see the experience of "mutuality." Formed by the poor to benefit the poor, the societies embodied that sense of community spirit, the lack of which in high society moralists were so fond of decrying.
observations add significantly to the way in which the reader sees life in the borough. E.M. Forster has defined "reproving" as Crabbe's prevailing attitude. But this epithet hardly applies to The Borough, where one of the most noticeable aspects of the poem is the narrator's attempt to sustain an objective and disinterested attitude. Certainly little reproving spirit can be found in "Peter Grimes," the epitome of the tale in which the narrator refuses to intervene. One reason Crabbe advances for this pose of objectivity is the necessity of always being on the alert to detect hidden motives. In Letter II, Crabbe recognizes that people often cannot help obscuring the truth about those they love, but comments: "But let not love nor grief believe / That we assent (who neither loved nor grieve)" (II. 135-136). Throughout the poem the narrator attempts to describe rather than to criticize the borough. Far from leaving the reader with a sense of reproof, this disinterested narrative lends the poem what is almost a sense of inevitability; events are described in terms of a deterministic cosmic pattern. The narrator seems to want to give the impression that man has no control over much of what happens; as a result he often remains stoically unmoved by social abuses and human tragedy.

Letter I offers an excellent example of this general trend. Beginning with a description of the borough, the narrator then turns to give a description of the sea. At first the ocean is tranquil, but soon a storm arises, a storm in which a ship is wrecked and many

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men drowned. Significantly enough the people of the borough can do nothing to help the drowning sailors. The women beg their husbands and sweethearts not to put out the lifeboats, but their pleas are unnecessary, since the force of the storm forbids such an attempt. In the face of tragedy the fishermen can only acquiesce. While the ocean is described as cyclically destructive, one can by no means use Forster's adjective "reproving." If anything, the ocean stands as an objective correlative for the sense of the inevitable. At least this is how the narrator saw the ocean; the shipwreck does not disturb him, since he sees it as part of the rhythm of life. After describing in quite moving language, the shipwreck, the corpse on the beach, and the cries of the dying sailors, the narrator calmly sums up:

But hear we now those sounds? Do lights appear? I see them not! the storm alone I hear: And lo! the sailors homeward take their way; Man must endure -- let us submit and pray.

Such are our winter-views; but night comes on --
Now business sleeps, and daily cares are gone;
Now parties form, and some their friends assist
To waste the idle hours at sober whist;
The tavern's pleasure or the concert's charm
Unnumber'd moments of their sting disarm
(I. 267-276).

Throughout this Debussy-like "La Mer" cycle, the narrator refuses to become emotionally involved in the shipwreck and dismisses it as further evidence of man's helplessness. I would submit, however, that although the narrator dismisses the shipwreck and the bodies the dead seamen, the reader finds this impossible because the

9 The stress on the relentless and destructive power of the ocean (continued throughout the poem) gives The Borough much of its effect of grimness and blackness -- a trait often commented upon.
emotion aroused by the descriptions of the shipwreck dominates the Letter.

The presentation of the sea indicates that Crabbe meant it to have emblematic as well as topographic significance. Throughout, the sea exerts a pervasive influence on the borough and the lives of its people. This influence is pointed out in many places, but in none more subtly than in Letter I where the narrator attempts to escape the sea by going into the country. When he finds a garden surrounding a cot, he concludes that he has at last left the influence of the ocean behind. But he is mistaken:

This gives us hope all views of town to shun --
No! here are tokens of the sailor-son:
That old blue jacket, and that shirt of check,
And silken kerchief for the seaman's neck
(I. 139-142).

In its ancient role of an indifferent destroyer, the ocean is never far away in these Letters describing life in the borough.

So important and pervasive is this role of the sea that it seems almost unnecessary to stress its influence; and so it would be, had not some of Crabbe's critics overlooked the point altogether. For instance Oliver Sigworth has claimed that Crabbe meant the sketch of the ocean and the shipwreck to be seen almost wholly as topographic description: "We can imagine how Wordsworth or Thomson would have concluded the passage. The description would probably have led them somehow to a series of reflections upon man and the universe. Not so Crabbe."¹⁰ Considering the emphasis which in late years has been placed on the analysis of images it seems rather ridiculous

¹⁰ Oliver Sigworth, *Nature's Sternest Painter*, p. 94.
to have to point out the obvious truth that Crabbe could suggest
ideas through descriptions and images without didactically
explaining his intention. Crabbe might well have answered Sigworth's
comment in the words of Rhodophil in *Marriage à la Mode*: "I am not
so ill a painter that I need to write a name beneath the picture."

Crabbe's use of the ocean creates in the reader a whole
host of reflections on man and the universe. Moreover that Crabbe
portrays the narrator's almost ostentatious refusal to draw these
conclusions has even more significance. For the narrator first
shows the reader the horror of the shipwreck, then dismisses it
himself, and ends by telling the reader to forget it. The
narrator's indifference to the horror of the shipwreck suggests that
Crabbe wished to raise ideas in the reader's mind about man's
difficult position in a hostile universe, but to do so while seeming
to place the emphasis elsewhere -- on the continuity and harmony of
man's life. And when, as shall be seen later, this ambivalence is
continued through the poem, especially in instances of social abuses,
the reader must be prepared for a degree of complexity, not only in
content, but in the mode of presentation as well.

At the end of *The Borough* Crabbe states that his intention
has been to describe "Man as he is" (XXIV. 440). This desire to
"number the streaks of the tulip" does not at first seem conducive
to social criticism. If he is anything, the social critic is
committed, committed to a definite viewpoint. But in addition
Crabbe claims that he has wanted to combat "Man's vice and crime"
(XXIV. 450). To accomplish both at one and the same time raises
difficulties; in order to describe man "as he is" one cannot describe him as he ought to be. Crabbe circumvents this difficulty to a certain extent in his own way. He claims:

I point the powers of rhyme,
And, sparing criminals, attack the crime
(XXIV. 464-465).

Yet in stories where the main emphasis is on character, little room is left for the narrator to attack social abuses. When old Grimes advises his son Peter to read the Bible, he admonishes the boy: "It is the word of life." But Peter's reply: "This is the life itself" (XXII. 19) silences the old man. If the reader is not to be silenced as well, then he must forget his ordinary moral aphorisms to follow Crabbe into the strange social and psychological world of Peter Grimes. At the end -- hopefully -- he will emerge with a better understanding of both Peter and the social community of which Peter is a part. In some sketches of course this problem does not arise; like Swift, Crabbe occasionally drops his mask to speak openly in his own voice against social abuses. In most cases, however, Crabbe chooses to employ the rhetorical structure of the poem, in which neither the narrator nor the characters wholly represent Crabbe's own viewpoint, to suggest a number of opinions. Where this happens the reader must listen carefully to the various voices employed in narration to penetrate, where possible, to Crabbe's own position.
II

The question of whether the narrator expresses Crabbe's own opinions is crucial to Letter V, where the subject is corrupt elections. Most of Crabbe's critics in the early nineteenth century disliked this Letter. Even Jeffrey, who usually found something to praise in Crabbe's poetry, commented, "The letter on the Election, we look on as as [sic] a complete failure, -- or at least as containing scarcely any thing of what it ought to have contained."\(^{11}\) The Letter, however, begins promisingly enough:

Yes, our Election's past, and we've been free,
Somewhat as madmen without keepers be;
And such desire of freedom has been shown,
That both the parties wish'd her all their own
(V. 1-4).

But criticism of corrupt elections soon declines into a tale of woe about the inconveniences such elections occasion the good people of the town. The Letter is written in the "genteel" style of the Spectator essays, rather than that of the vitriolic political controversies concerning the reform of corrupt boroughs raging in the years before the first Reform Bill. What causes the narrator most concern is not the corruption and bribery of the election, but the loss occasioned to his own dignity as a result of his supporting one of the candidates. As soon as the villagers learn that he supports a particular party, he receives numerous social calls from voters who make demands on his time. The narrator explains at length how he dislikes "party-friendship" which forces him to entertain people who "make your house their home." He hates

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\(^{11}\) Francis Jeffrey, review of The Borough, in The Edinburgh Review, XVI (1810), 52.
being forced to be polite to the "wretch" who prates "your wife and daughter from the room." One of his chief criticisms of the election is that the opponent's side rakes up family scandal to sway the voters.

In other words what the narrator dislikes is not so much the corruption of the election as the way in which the election forces him to become involved. It makes him suffer all the indignities while allowing him none of the glory:

Those friends indeed, who start as in a race,  
May love the sport, and laugh at this disgrace;  
They have in view the glory and the prize,  
Nor heed the dirty steps by which they rise:  
But we, their poor associates, lose the fame,  
Though more than partners in the toil and shame  
(V. 69-74).

These lines contain a good deal of self-pity and little concern with the need for reform. *The Eclectic Review* attributed such tepid criticism to Crabbe's timidity: "We scarcely need remark, that though the term *Borough* can hardly be pronounced by an independent Englishman without emotions of contempt and indignation, Mr. G. has carefully abstained from saying a syllable, even in the chapter upon *Elections*, which could displease a single individual, whether buyer or seller, among the crowds who traffic in political corruption."12

The Letter contains little, if anything, which is controversial. Although the narrator eventually stops complaining about his own discomfort to comment on some of the serious evils of

12*The Eclectic Review*, VI (1810), 549.
elections, he never tackles the question of their injustice. Undoubtedly he is correct in his assertion that the bribery employed by the candidates will spread corruption throughout the people:

Alas! but here the vilest passions rule;
It is Seduction's, is Temptation's school;
Where vices mingle in the oddest ways,
The grossest slander and the dirtiest praise

(V. 79-82).

While this sort of criticism is good in its way, one cannot help agreeing with The Eclectic Review that the Letter is timid. It criticizes only the side effects of corrupt elections and says nothing about the principles involved.

After all, criticism of the ill effects of party spirit was hardly a new theme in 1810. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Addison in The Spectator had described the disease, and thereafter writers had found it fashionable to decry party spirit. Indeed Addison's strictures on "the Malice of Parties" are probably even more severe than those found in Crabbe's "The Election." A short quotation from Addison may be useful to show how little Crabbe had varied his presentation:

A furious Party Spirit, when it rages in its full Violence, exerts it self in Civil War and Blood-shed; and when it is under its greatest Restraints naturally breaks out in Falshood, Detraction, Calumny, and a partial Administration of Justice. In a Word, It fills a Nation with Spleen and Rancour, and extinguishes all the Seeds of Good-nature, Compassion and Humanity.13

When one compares Addison's criticism with that of the narrator of *The Borough* it becomes clear that the narrator, like Addison, is objecting as much to the system of political parties as he is to the corruption which results from rigged elections. When he says:

> And, though the terrors of the time be pass'd,  
> There still remain the scatterings of the blast.  
> The boughs are parted that entwined before,  
> And ancient harmony exists no more;  
> The gusts of wrath our peaceful seats deform,  
> And sadly flows the sighing of the storm

(V. 115-120)

he is echoing commonplace criticisms of the divisive effects of party spirit.

While agreeing with Jeffrey and *The Eclectic Review* that "The Election" does not in any way reach the heart of the problem, one can still ask the question of whether it was meant to do so. In his Preface Crabbe had stated explicitly: "From the title of this Poem, some persons will, I fear, expect a political satire, -- an attack upon corrupt principles in a general view . . . of these they will find nothing satirized, nothing related. . . . An Election indeed forms a part of one Letter, but the evil there described is one not greatly nor generally deplored, and there are probably many places of this kind where it is not felt." If Crabbe is serious here, and there seems no reason to doubt his statement, then he did not think the problem of corrupt elections important. Indeed, Crabbe seems as much interested in the effect of the election on the narrator and the mayor as he is in the election itself. In order to bring out Crabbe's intentions a

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14 Poems by George Crabbe, I, 268.
little more clearly it might be advantageous to begin by investigating Crabbe's attitude towards the mayor and the narrator. Could it not be that Crabbe was satirizing the beliefs of his strawman narrator? Although critics have tended to regard Crabbe as the narrator of "The Election," the internal evidence shows that at times Crabbe treats his narrator ironically.

Even if this idea seems somewhat surprising at first, it must be recognized that more is going on in this particular Letter than criticism of corrupt elections. At line 127 the narrator interrupts his criticism of elections to give a long description of the town's mayor.\(^{15}\) Although the narrator treats this man seriously as the borough's "worthy mayor," the reader soon becomes aware that the mayor is not so "worthy" as the narrator would have us think. For instance, the narrator sees the mayor as a person having at heart the best interests of the borough:

Our worthy mayor, on the victorious part,  
Cries out for peace, and cries with all his heart;  
He, civil creature! ever does his best,  
To banish wrath from every voter's breast;  
"For where," says he, with reason strong and plain,  
"Where is the profit? what will anger gain?"

\(\text{(V. 127-132)}\)

The reader is able to perceive that the narrator's judgment of the mayor is inadequate, that the mayor's being "on the victorious part" probably accounts in large part for his good nature and restraint. The pun on the word profit in the mayor's question, "Where is the profit?" alerts us to the possibility that the mayor might wish to

\(^{15}\) Crabbe felt that the character of the borough's mayor was so odd that it merited an explanation in his Preface. Poems by George Crabbe, I, 274.
see party animosity continue if it could be shown that such animosity led to profits. The mayor seems to judge all actions on the basis of their commercial value. In his wholehearted concern for money, the mayor resembles Laughton, the director of the almshouse (Letter XIII). While the narrator reports non-committally the mayor's rise from a poor fisherman to a man of riches, and quietly explains how the most important event of his life was the day he discovered that money could earn interest, the reader can see that this man is by no means "worthy." The mayor's reaction at learning money will breed is: "I begin to live." Clearly a man who finds his first interest in life when he discovers usury is not "worthy" in the usual meaning of the word. Furthermore in order to emphasize this ironic treatment of the mayor and ensure that none of his readers would mistake the mayor for a praise-worthy figure, Crabbe inserted a footnote in which he pointedly refers to the questionable legality of the mayor's corporation doles.

By means of his ironic treatment of the mayor, Crabbe presents his reader with a dual vision: he allows him to see both the narrowness of the mayor and the narrator's mistaken belief in the mayor as a good man. In this context the narrator's comment on the mayor's attempts to calm the election spirit can be seen as intended irony on Crabbe's part: "But 'tis not he, 'tis not the kinder few, / The mild, the good, who can our peace renew" (V. 181-182). Since the reader knows that the mayor is not good, that he deals in corporation doles, these lines reveal the inadequacy of the narrator's moral vision.
I would submit that at the end of the poem, when the narrator once again recounts some of the bad effects of the election dispute, the reader is no longer prepared to accept the narrator as his moral guide. The reader can now observe the narrator's list of complaints from a new perspective. When he does so, the narrator's voice takes on a new and somewhat petty tone:

There is no more the social board at whist,  
The good old partners are with scorn dismiss'd;  
No more with dog and lantern comes the maid,  
To guide the mistress when the rubber's play'd;  
Sad shifts are made, lest ribbons blue and green  
Should at one table, at one time be seen  
(V. 185-190).

After all, the narrator is as much a citizen of the borough as the mayor, and there is no reason why his attitudes should not also be satirized. In the closing lines of the poem, where the narrator gives his ultimate reasons for suppressing the "attendant ills" of elections, Crabbe's ironic tone becomes abundantly clear. For these lines show that the narrator is concerned neither with the problem of election reform, nor with the bad effects of bribery and corruption, but that his own poetry should attain glory (in the service of humanity, no doubt!) and that the good vicar should have "less to do." This closing line "And our good vicar would have less to do" surely strikes one as intentional bathos. The narrator's "concern" for the election strife is no more than one would expect of any good Burgess interested in maintaining "that old ease."

My point is not to disagree with critics such as Jeffrey who have pointed out the timidity of the Letter's criticism, but to suggest that the Letter does not wholly endorse the narrator's point of view.
While the Letter begins with criticism of corrupt elections, at the end the reader is able to see that Crabbe's attention has shifted from criticizing the corrupt elections to satirizing the narrator's inadequate reaction to the corrupt elections. However, since the irony is by no means well sustained the Letter fails both as serious criticism and satire.

III

Letter XXIII, "Prisons," offers an excellent example of the way in which Crabbe manages to manipulate the narrator so that the poem implies more than the narrator's overt statements would seem to allow. The Letter opens with the narrator's statement: "'Tis well that man to all the varying states / Of good and ill his mind accommodates" (XXIII. 1-2). In normal conversation one might expect this piece of moralizing to be followed by a comment on how all men are susceptible to hardships and misfortunes. A few such misfortunes might even be mentioned, such as those associated with extremes of heat and cold, disease, accidents, etc. But the narrator, surprisingly enough, cites as his example of misfortune, his belief that men often go to prison. The very assurance with which the narrator posits this statement strikes one as a little odd. A term in prison is not normally placed in the same category
of natural misfortunes as that of, say, childhood diseases.16

As soon as the narrator begins to describe the prison, however, his reason for accepting prison life as a possible part of every man's experience becomes understandable. In the borough's prison all the different types of offenders are grouped together. When serious and trivial offences may equally result in a prison sentence, there is some reason for regarding a term in prison as not unlikely. Moreover even to use the word "offence" is to mislead, for many of the prisoners have committed no offence other than that of being unfortunate enough to fall into debt. When the narrator says: "Thus might we class the debtors here confined, / The more deceived, the more deceitful kind" (XXIII. 36-37), one feels that a prison which fails to distinguish between the wilful and the accidental debtor is unfair. It seems foolish and wrong to treat a man who has spent a lifetime in hard work on the same footing as a man who has set out to deceive his creditors.

Nor is this interest in finding examples of injustice in Crabbe's prison merely a twentieth century penchant. The narrator may appear insensitive to the injustice of the prison, but he clearly perceives the foolishness of imprisoning certain classes of debtors. Of the small shopkeeper who fails in business because he does not have sufficient goods to sell, the narrator says:

16 That many eighteenth century fictional heroes -- Tom Jones, William Booth, Jonathan Wild, Peregrine Pickle, Humphry Clinker, Dr. Primrose and his son George -- spend time in prisons does not contradict this statement. Fielding, Smollett and Goldsmith placed their heroes in jail to illustrate how the naturally good man often falls foul of conventional morality.
"Debtors are these on whom 'tis hard to press, / 'Tis base, impolitic, and merciless" (XXIII. 82-83). Furthermore he realizes that in many instances the causes of bankruptcy do not lie altogether with the merchant, but can be traced to a general depression in trade. At this time a small business man could still be made or broken by the patronage of one or two well known neighbouring families. The narrator admits that the reason for many failures in business is this lack of patronage:

Alas! he wants the requisites to rise --
The true connexions, the availing ties;
They who proceed on certainties advance;
These are not times when men prevail by chance
(XXIII. 76-79).

Thus the narrator is aware that many of the prisoners do not deserve their fate. The small shopkeeper tried his best, but did not have capital enough to succeed.

In fact many of the examples seem to have been selected for the express purpose of showing how little many of the prisoners merit a prison sentence. In this category is the man who pledged his bond for a friend:

And there sits one, improvident but kind,
Bound for a friend, whom honour could not bind;
Sighing, he speaks to any who appear,
"A treach'rous friend -- 'twas that which sent me here:
I was too kind -- I thought I could depend
On his bare word -- he was a treach'rous friend"
(XXIII. 96-101).

17The reason many tradesmen did not dare offend their powerful clients by pressing for unpaid bills was that they realized the disfavour of one particular family might easily ruin them with other clients as well. In her novel Cecilia (1762), Frances Burney showed the thoughtless Harrel refusing to pay his tradesmen's bills, thereby placing the tradesmen in peril of debtors prison because they in turn could not pay their bills.
Automatically one feels sympathetic towards such "innocent" people forced to spend perhaps a lifetime in "a damp prison, where the very sight/ of the warm sun is favour and not right" (XXIII. 22-23). Nor were such cases uncommon. A few years later Crabbe had occasion to see the poet Thomas Moore placed in a similar situation when he had to flee the country for two years after his deputy in Bermuda had made him liable for a debt. At that time Crabbe commented, "Mr. Anacreon Moore is obliged to go abroad on Acc. of the decision which calls on him for £6,000, a Debt contracted without a Fault on his part and almost without a Possibility of Avoiding it." Clearly Crabbe wished his readers to feel pity for the prisoners. He has one of them express the following sentiment to the narrator:

Go to thy world, and to the young declare
What we, our spirits and employments, are;

And bid them haste to join the gen'rous tribe
(XXIII. 193-198).

When the prisoner asks the narrator to tell other people to join the "gen'rous tribe" he is asking that more people should give generously of their time to visit prisoners. It will be recalled that in Tales of the Hall (XI. 641-648) Crabbe holds up Elizabeth Fry's visits to the prisons as an example for other people to follow.

Crabbe himself had firsthand knowledge of the way people

were forced, against their will, to fall into debt. In his first letter to Burke, he had described his situation thus:

About ten days since, I was compelled to give a note for seven pounds, to avoid an arrest for about double that sum which I owe . . . . Having used every honest means in vain, I yesterday confessed my inability, and obtained, with much entreaty, and as the greatest favour, a week's forbearance, when I am positively told, that I must pay the money, or prepare for a prison. 19

This experience obviously stayed with Crabbe for his son notes that he often went to the King's Bench (a prison for debtors in Southwark), "and rejoiced in administering the little relief he could afford." 20

Compassion for the plight of the debtors in prison is extended even to those who have committed serious crimes. The woman under sentence of death, because "she fired a full-stored barn," is not condemned. Rather her life is shown to be a chain of violent actions leading to the desperate act of firing a barn. But her act in turn provokes the authorities to even greater violence when they commit her to prison and condemn her to death:

She was a pauper bound, who early gave
Her mind to vice, and doubly was a slave;
Upbraided, beaten, held by rough control,
Revenge sustain'd, inspired, and fill'd her soul
(XXIII. 217-220).

That the narrator sees and explains the social causes of the woman's act mitigates to a great extent its viciousness. In fact this brief sketch of the woman comprehends in miniature the situation arising between rich and poor at this period.

19 Quoted from Life, Ch. iv, p. 92.

20 Life, Ch. viii, p. 208.
The very fact that Crabbe allowed the narrator to tell this story dispassionately says something about his intentions in the Letter. At this period the landed interest regarded the firing of barns as something akin to the murder of children. Because such acts were totally destructive, difficult to control, and symbolic of rebellion, the county justices punished barn-firers and rick-burners heavily, often (as in this case) with death. Yet instead of insisting on this point of view, or even representing it, Crabbe portrays the reaction of the imprisoned woman. She does not feel bound by law; she "laugh'd at law and justified the act." Religion seems to have no power over her, at least not the type of religion offered by the "male lily" of the borough:

Our gentle vicar tried his powers in vain,
She answer'd not, or answer'd with disdain;
Th' approaching fate she heard without a sigh,
And neither cared to live nor fear'd to die  
(XXIII. 223-226).

In spite of, or perhaps because of, the woman's lack of conscience, the reader is impelled to pity her rather than condemn. Crabbe's inclusion of the social circumstances -- that she was a badly treated pauper -- allows the reader to see her as a victim of social circumstance rather than as a malevolent criminal.

The manner of presentation of this little sketch would do honour to the best of today's economic historians anxious to describe

21 In regard to a similar sort of violence -- the Luddite risings of 1812 -- Byron was to say: "These men were willing to dig, but the spade was in other hands: they were not ashamed to beg, but there was none to relieve them: their own means of subsistence were cut off, all other employments pre-occupied, and their excesses, however to be deplored and condemned, can hardly be subject of surprise." "Debate on the Frame-Work Bill, in the House of Lords," February 27, 1812, in The Works of Lord Byron, ed. E.H. Coleridge and R.E. Prothero (London, 1898-1904), "Letters and Journals," II, 426.
objectively the difficulties caused by the lean years of 1793-1819. The narrator does not comment at all, but in a skeletal outline gives the cause and effect relationship of the pauper situation. This objective manner of presentation takes it outside the normal rationale of moral praise and blame and prevents oversimplified conclusions.

In all these sketches one cannot help noting that the narrator's objective and yet compassionate account constantly edges forward considerations of justice. The narrator of course never says that the prison is unjust, but his manner of presentation suggests this idea. Furthermore Crabbe ensures that this question of justice is brought into the framework of the poem by actually raising the question in connection with the highwayman. Generally the narrator attempts to dissociate himself from the question of mercy and justice. But at one point a new voice intrudes which compels the narrator to consider the vital question of justice, however briefly:

"But will not mercy?" -- No! she cannot plead
For such an outrage; -- 'twas a cruel deed:

22 The attainment of objectivity in discussions of social and economic history is a goal much sought after at the present time. The result has been a new reliance on statistics and a movement away from discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of historic events and movements. For some discussion of this problem, see E.P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class, p. 196.

23 Crabbe was of course not the first to raise such questions about prisons. During the years 1777 and 1791 John Howard published four volumes on the state of prisons in the United Kingdom. Howard's great innovation was that he did not sensationaly denounce the cruelty of the prisons, but set out to give a statistical account of life in prisons. See Sidney & Beatrice Webb, English Prisons Under Local Government, Frank Cass reprint (London, 1963), pp. 32-37.
He stopp'd a timid traveller; -- to his breast,
With oaths and curses, was the danger press'd: --
No! he must suffer; pity we may find
For one man's pangs, but must not wrong mankind
(XXIII. 245-250).

The method of introducing the question, of allowing it to flicker across the narrator's mind, only to have it stopped in mid-sentence, suggests that Crabbe wanted the possibility of reduced prison sentences only to be hinted at. A similar instance of this technique has been seen already in "The Hall of Justice." But whether or not the narrator wishes to discuss the question of justice, and from the way he stifles it, he clearly does not, Crabbe certainly wished the reader to be aware of its presence. One might even say that the manner in which the narrator forcibly ends any further consideration of the question makes the reader even more aware and suspicious of the implications of the question than he would have been by a longer and more prosaic treatment.

Certainly it is curious that this question of mercy should be raised, not in connection with the debtors, nor with the barn-firer, but with the highwayman -- the man of violence. While the plight of the debtor aroused a certain amount of sympathy in Crabbe's time,\(^2\) few people would have extended this sympathy to the highwayman who murdered or threatened murder.\(^2\) Crabbe appears

\(^2\) On June 25, 1812, Sir Samuel Romilly "moved in the House of Commons for a committee to inquire into and report to the House what has been and now is the condition and treatment of prisoners confined in the Castle of Lincoln, and the state and management of that prison." The committee was sparked off by the harsh treatment of a debtor. Memoirs of the Life of Sir Samuel Romilly (London, 1840), III, 44.

\(^2\) Interestingly enough Crabbe never mentions whether the highwayman actually murders his victim or only threatens to do so.
to have wished to raise the question of justice overtly, but in a situation where it could seem to be reasonably dismissed. The curious thing is that, although the narrator dismisses the question of mercy, the poem still continues to suggest it. The total effect of the poem is to make the reader pity the prisoners, to make him feel that they deserve mercy. Here is an example of where a careless reader, hunting for didactic statements of belief, would be led astray by the narrator's statement. The result of this conflict between the narrator's judgment, that mercy cannot be allowed, and his description of "life itself," with all its implications of the need for mercy, is to set up a tension within the poem.

Even in the extreme case of the highwayman, Crabbe manages to cast doubt on the rightness of the punishment. The technique Crabbe employs to gain the reader's sympathy for the highwayman is to present him dreaming of his happy youth:

The house, the chamber, where he once array'd
His youthful person; where he knelt and pray'd.
Then too the comforts he enjoy'd at home,
The days of joy; the joys themselves are come --
The hours of innocence -- the timid look
Of his loved maid, when first her hand he took
And told his hope

(XXIII. 277-283).

The highwayman's "early prospects" were happy and good; had circumstances proved different he would probably have developed into a good citizen. In his dream, the highwayman imagined crowds following him to the gallows: "Some heartless shout, some pity, all condemn" (XXIII. 269). But the reader, having seen
what the highwayman once was, and perceiving his despair at the thought of the gallows, cannot so easily join the ranks of those who condemn. The sketch forces the reader to see both past and present simultaneously, so that in forming an opinion of the highwayman, one cannot, as the judge has done, take into account only the single felonious action on the highway.

Crabbe's son throws some interesting light on the composition of this story and Crabbe's intentions: "I know that my father was himself much affected when he drew that picture, as he had been, by his own confession, twice before."26 One instance was at the time of his despair in London (before he met Burke), and the other at the time he was writing "Sir Eustace Grey" -- both times of great emotional feeling for Crabbe. His son points out that Crabbe was driven to write the story of the condemned felon after having actually seen just such a person:

While he was struggling with poverty in London, he had some reason to fear that the brother of a very intimate friend, a wild and desperate character, was in Newgate under condemnation for a robbery. Having obtained permission to see the man who bore the same name, a glance at once relieved his mind from the dread of beholding his friend's brother; but still he never forgot the being he then saw before him.27

Quite possibly this story stems from Crabbe's sympathy for the condemned man and his realization that the criminal might have been his close friend.

26Life, Ch. viii, p. 197.
27Life, Ch. viii, p. 197.
However even some of the most perceptive of Crabbe's readers have failed to make the imaginative leap necessary to reconcile the two pictures of the highwayman. Jeffrey, who singled out the details of the felon's dream as an example of "the exquisite accuracy and beauty of the landscape painting," found "an unspeakable charm from the lowly simplicity and humble content of the characters." Yet when Jeffrey quoted this section of the poem, he stopped at line 329, omitting the last four lines of the poem where Crabbe shows the "unspeakable charm" to be all in the past. Jeffrey ended his quotation at the point where the young man and his beloved were dallying by the ocean; he does not include the lines describing the dreamer awakening to find himself a convicted felon. Presumably Crabbe wished to observe that both the pleasant days by the peaceful ocean and the day on the highway were integral parts of the same man. But Jeffrey, charmed by the pastoral section of the poem, failed to grasp Crabbe's point that such pastoral "content" in the peasantry was only one side of the coin.

The two aspects of the man's life must be taken together; to be like Jeffrey, and focus on the aspect of the highwayman's life which is particularly appealing, is to misread the poem. Always intent on "seeing life whole," Crabbe was not content to portray the prisoner only as a highwayman; he wanted his readers

28 The Edinburgh Review, XVI (1810), 42.

29 Many times Crabbe returns to this image of the ocean, first in calm, and then in storm, to reinforce the sense of the inevitable in man's life. The prisoner awakes dreaming that his beloved is being drowned by a huge wave.
to see that in any one man there were actually a great many different men. Yet Jeffrey's mistake is a natural one, since the description of the early life of the highwayman is given at great length. The disproportionate amount of space given to the highwayman's happy youth compels the reader to base his opinion of the man mostly on this aspect of his life. Crabbe's rendering of the situation enables the reader to see that one cannot judge a person on the basis of one action, but must take into account the rest of his life.

The effect of the last section of the Letter is extremely artful. As has been seen, Crabbe permitted the narrator to state specifically that mercy could not be shown to the highwayman. Yet the long description of the highwayman's pleasant youth captures the reader's interest, and as Jeffrey noted, makes him feel "how deep and peculiar an interest may be excited by humble subjects." After having aroused this interest in the highwayman as a young boy amidst his pastoral landscape, Crabbe changes suddenly to the present, when in the last four lines of the poem he shows the prisoner awakening from his dream. The effect of the sudden transition is to give the reader some idea of the prisoner's despair, and to transfer all the affection which he had felt for the youth to the condemned felon. And thus even in the extreme case of the highwayman, Crabbe has managed to gain the reader's sympathy.

Crabbe nowhere states didactically that we are meant to pity the

30 The Edinburgh Review, XVI (1810), 43.
highwayman; however the poem constantly pushes the reader in this
direction. After all, it was very much the eighteenth century
practice to say as much by implication and as little by direct
statement as one could.

One might wish to argue that the narrator himself felt
pity for the prisoners: "Pity we may find / For one man's pangs,
but must not wrong mankind (XXIII. 249-250). Yet what sort of
pity is it which disallows action, which refuses to take the step
from pity to mercy? As the narrator says of the crowd: "Some
pity, all condemn." Is not this mere sentimentality? Yes, but
the sentimentality lies with the narrator, and not with Crabbe.
For the closing section of the Letter allows the reader to
sympathize with the plight of the highwayman to such a degree that
the pity aroused is not static but dynamic. The effect of the
Letter is to create the maximum amount of sympathy for the
prisoners on an individual basis without ever jeopardizing the
general principle that crime must be punished. Although the
conflict between the two themes -- crime must be punished, and
individuals should be spared -- is never resolved, the conflict
generates a high artistic level of suggestive dialectic.

In this Letter Crabbe does not employ his straw man in the
conventional manner, in the way Swift had done in A Modest Proposal
for example. The narrator of The Borough does not hold beliefs
antithetical to those of Crabbe. In fact the narrator constantly
approaches Crabbe's own position but is never allowed to reach it.
Although an excellent observer, he is blind to the implications of his own observations. Crabbe's ability to employ a narrator whose views differ only slightly from his own possibly accounts for the failure of critics to recognize the importance of Crabbe's manipulation of his narrator's voice.

IV

Crabbe's use of narrating voices is often extremely complex and subtle. For instance in Letter XVI, "Benbow," the narrator first prepares the reader to dislike Benbow and all his ideas by portraying him as a drunken profligate. For the most part, the reader agrees with the narrator's assessment that Benbow is an unworthy member of the alms-house, and that Sir Denys committed an error of judgment in admitting him. Yet when Benbow tells the story of old Squire Asgill and his son, one feels that Crabbe meant the reader to disagree with the narrator and find Benbow's criticisms of society accurate. Undoubtedly Benbow has faults, and Crabbe wished his readers to appreciate these faults, but to

31 Benbow may well have been modelled on a friend of the Tovells. At least the description that Crabbe's son gives of this man agrees well with Crabbe's portrait of Benbow. See Life, Ch. vi, pp. 145-146. It is unlikely that Crabbe had in mind William Benbow (1784-?), the famous Radical from Manchester.
a certain degree Benbow usurps the narrator's role as Crabbe's mouthpiece. As a result, the reader's attitude towards Benbow constantly varies, and Crabbe's own position is never certain.

For the purposes of this chapter, my main interest in Benbow lies in his account of old Squire Asgill and the change which took place in the Asgill estate when the young Squire assumed control. The reasons Benbow gives for praising the old Squire and disparaging his son are almost always connected with the old Squire's love of hospitality. Benbow lays particular emphasis on the way the old Squire refused to make a great distinction between himself and his servants:

No pride had he, and there was difference small
Between the master's and the servants' hall;
And here or there the guests were welcome all
(XVI. 73-75).

The old Squire differs from the new farmers who are interested only in reaping the maximum amount of profit from their land. For instance he does not attempt to restrict the game to his own table: "Of Heaven's free gifts he took no special care; / He never quarrel'd for a simple hare" (XVI. 76-77).

Like Squire Western in Tom Jones, old Squire Asgill is interested primarily in his own pleasures, and these are of the simple and crude country variety. A drinking tenant pleases him more than one who wishes to enclose the land for greater profit. Consequently his gruff good nature benefits his poor neighbours:

Along his valleys, in the evening hours,
The borough-damsels stray'd to gather flowers,
Or by the brakes and brushwood of the park,
To take their pleasant rambles in the dark
(XVI. 86-89).
As far as Benbow is concerned, the old Squire -- a Tory and a Churchman -- is the perfect example of England's landed gentry. That he keeps a mistress instead of a wife is not a sign of corruption but of high spirits in the best tradition of the novels of Fielding and Smollett.

This is not to say that the reader cannot appreciate that old Squire Asgill is an extremely limited person, a man who is probably as narrow as Squire Western and with a sense of humour as crude as Frances Burney's Captain Mirvan. But for all that, surely Crabbe meant the reader to agree with Benbow in his preference for the father to the son:

The father dead, the son has found a wife,  
And lives a formal, proud, unsocial life; --  
The lands are now enclosed; the tenants all,  
Save at a rent-day, never see the hall;  
No lass is suffer'd o'er the walks to come,  
And, if there's love, they have it all at home
(XVI. 120-125).

Instead of the old Squire's generosity to guests and servants alike, his son has instituted a penurious system of economy. As Benbow remarks, if the ghost of the old Squire could return, it would no longer find the house filled with song and the smells of food cooking:

There would it see a pale old hag preside,  
A thing made up of stinginess and pride;  
Who carves the meat, as if the flesh could feel,  
Careless whose flesh must miss the plenteous meal
(XVI. 136-139).

Clearly Benbow is claiming that pre-industrial revolution England, with its sense of community, responsibility and general joie de vivre,

32Evelina (1778).
was more pleasant than the new style "cash nexus."

Of course Crabbe was by no means the first to question whether the country benefitted from the new style of agricultural life. Goldsmith had made enclosures one of the central issues of *The Deserted Village* (1770); the Reverend Davies had traced many of the problems of the poor to the way in which enclosures deprived them of many of their ancient rights. It would be a mistake however to see Crabbe's attack on the new class of landowners as a belated imitation of Goldsmith. This questioning of the results of progress continued through the nineteenth century as a minor stream of thought. Humphry Repton in *An Inquiry into the Changes of Taste in Landscape Gardening* (1806) commented through his pictures how enclosures had changed England for the worse. His pairs of pictures depicting England "before and after" show the same changes commented on by Benbow. And of course Cobbett, in his *Rural Rides* (1821-1832), continually decried the farmers' attempts to imitate the gentry, a fashion he felt sure would ruin England's yeomanry.

Yet Cobbett's condemnation of the new-style farmer differs greatly from that of Crabbe. For one thing, Crabbe speaks through Benbow, a disreputable character in the same category as Clelia and Blaney, and thus the criticisms are by no means given the direct emphasis that they might have. Indeed the narrator keeps up the pretence that Benbow's criticisms of the new Squire reveal, not that

society has changed for the worse, but that Benbow himself is a profligate for wishing to see the old Squire's system revived. Furthermore Crabbe's criticisms of the new class of capitalist landowners are handled good naturedly; they contain none of Cobbett's puritanic moral indignation. Where Cobbett suggests that village life, with the old style of squire, was a time of manly virtue, Crabbe implies that many of the good results came from the somewhat doubtful motive of wishing to see everyone eating, drinking and wenching as much as possible.

Despite Benbow's own drunken life, and the narrator's failure to recognize that the values for which Benbow nostalgically longs are praiseworthy, the reader cannot fail to recognize the serious aspect of his criticisms. When a modern historian wishes to generalize about the gradual alteration in living standards in the later part of the eighteenth century, he almost always touches on the same main points as Benbow. Dorothy Marshall has said:

> The squires of the early eighteenth century were often almost as boorish as the country folk amongst whom they lived. They were devoted to the chase, to the pleasures of the table and the bottle, and had little contact outside the small area in which their estates and their position on the local Bench gave them influence over their neighbours.  

In addition she notes that by the end of the century "the rough social equality of the farm kitchen . . . began to disappear," and that with enclosures, the poor man's rights on the common also


35 *English People in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 239.
disappeared.\(^{36}\) Benbow's criticisms are clearly on the mark.

As was seen in "The Parish Register," however, Crabbe knew that the changing styles of life brought the small farmer a higher living standard, allowing him to buy Wilton carpets and to grace his walls with prints of Werter.\(^{37}\) That Crabbe realized new methods of agriculture also brought greater productivity perhaps partially accounts for his refusal to commit himself entirely to Benbow's belief that the old order was better in every way. On the other hand, there is no doubt that in Benbow he has created exactly the right sort of character to present his criticisms. The criticism of young Squire Asgill which Benbow has to offer could be made only by someone holding the same values as those of Benbow.

Much of the hardship caused by enclosures could not be measured in pounds, shillings and pence, but was to be found in the changed "style of life." Benbow, because he valued the hospitality of the old Squire, and could appreciate his generosity in little things, is able to understand the importance of these intangibles. For instance Benbow notes how, under the old Squire,

\(^{36}\) For further confirmation of Dorothy Marshall's opinions about this change, see M. Dorothy George, England in Transition, Ch. v; and G.E. Mingay, English Landed Society in the Eighteenth Century (London, 1963), pp. 205-256.

\(^{37}\) "The Parish Register" II. 390-430. One often finds amongst Crabbe's contemporaries a wavering of attitude about the benefits and drawbacks associated with the change in village life as a result of changing agricultural methods. For example, Arthur Young decried the farmers' imitation of their superiors' way of life. Annals of Agriculture, XVII (1792), 152-153. But he also praised the new comforts brought by prosperity. General View of the Agriculture of the County of Essex (London, 1807), I, 123-124.
the borough maidens were allowed to go into the fields to pick flowers, whereas the new Squire denied them this right. The right to pick flowers is a small matter, but when the labourer lived close to subsistence level such privileges often meant the difference between living in frugal comfort or slavish poverty. This matter of children being allowed to go into the fields and parks for their own enjoyment, to pick flowers and berries, was a point often touched on in the debate over enclosures. It occasioned a dispute in The New Monthly Magazine between two men signing themselves Publicola and Veritas. The debate arose when "Publicola" complained that the squires were setting man traps and spring guns against poachers, thus closing the fields and parks to the innocent diversions of the country people. "Humanity" felt the issue to be serious enough to warrant the following answer:

I cannot at all agree with VERITAS when he terms PUBLICOLA'S complaints relative to cottagers' children not being permitted to gather berries "too frivolous to reply to." Deprive the rich and luxurious man of his pines and grapes, and he will feel how frivolous is the complaint of the child of poverty when deprived of his haws and sloes.

Benbow was by no means alone in his insistence that the labourers had lost a great deal on the passing of the older rural economy. Many people recognized that if all the labourer's rights were taken away, he soon became a slave (like the barn-firer). As Benbow is

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38 This passage also carries an undertone of irony. No doubt old Squire Asgill also picked some flowers.

39 The New Monthly Magazine, V (1816), 500.
exactly the sort of person who would appreciate the dangers inherent in a capitalistic attitude to land and wealth, Crabbe's employment of him to criticize the change of attitude in the landed gentry has a sound artistic basis.

By using Benbow as his mouthpiece, Crabbe was able to lodge his social criticisms without seeming to endorse them himself. Because the narrator first prepares the reader to dislike Benbow, the reader only slowly realizes that Benbow is a sound critic meant to be taken seriously. In this case one has to infer Crabbe's own opinion from the conjunction of the opinions voiced by the narrator and Benbow. And what is his position? Surely the point is that Crabbe never defines his own attitude. Obviously he did not endorse Benbow entirely. But he was anxious to point out that the eighteenth century with its drinking squires was in many ways more fortunate than the nineteenth century with its narrow, grasping landlords. Through his use of voices, Crabbe has indicated the difficulty of attempting to define and judge the complex social issues involved in "agricultural progress." While the narrator may think he can morally condemn Benbow, the Letter reveals that such judgments over-simplify and distort the complexities of social problems.
To suggest that Crabbe employed his "man of straw" narrator consistently as an ironic mask would be a mistake, since in several cases Crabbe openly condemns social abuses in his own voice. In Letter VI however, on the subject of the law, he appears to waver between an objective and a critical approach, and for this reason the social criticism fails to make much of an impact on the reader. Crabbe himself seems unsure of the degree of seriousness to attach to corruption in the law.

At the beginning the narration is far from disinterested, for Crabbe brings to the discussion a personal reference when he states that the subject of the law touches his own interests. If he is careless, some litigious lawyer might make him account for the satire in his poetry:

-- Law shall I sing, or what to Law belongs?
Alas! there may be danger in such songs;
A foolish rhyme, 'tis said, a trifling thing,
The law found treason, for it touch'd the king
(VI. 31-34).

In order to involve the reader in the discussion of legal abuses, the narrator then gives the Letter an historical framework by showing how conditions in the law have altered since "George the Second's reign," a period in which he feels there were few fraudulent lawyers. The point I wish to stress at the moment is not whether this statement is correct, but the effect it has of placing the subject in a time sequence. If literature is not given a sense of historical continuity, discussion of social problems can
easily be rendered insignificant. Here Crabbe specifies the issues, thereby obtaining an immediacy which demands the reader's attention and sympathy.

In attacking lawyers for using the law to further their own ends, Crabbe was by no means making a new criticism. Lawyers had been a standard source of fun and criticism for centuries. That the law was a closed system, in which judges were bound to enforce precedents rather than to judge a case on its own merits, was a constant source of discussion in the eighteenth century, especially amongst those influenced by Locke's ideas on natural justice. Goldsmith's cynicism about lawyers is well known: "I rather fancy, Madam, that the times then were pretty much like our own; where a multiplicity of laws gives a judge as much power as a want of law; since he is ever sure to find among the number some to countenance his partiality." Similarly, Fielding many times indicted the legal profession. Like Crabbe, he made his criticism explicit and immediate, especially in one case in Tom Jones when he added a footnote:

This is a fact which I knew happen to a poor clergyman in Dorsetshire, by the villainy of an attorney who, not contented with the exorbitant costs to which the poor man was put by a single action, brought afterwards another action on the judgment, as it was called. A method frequently used to oppress the poor, and bring money into the pockets of attorneys, to the great scandal of the law, of the nation, of Christianity, and even of human nature itself (XVIII, vi).

Crabbe was by no means the first, and not the last, to oppose the legal profession.\footnote{Some years later Charles Dickens was to make the corruption of the law a principal theme of one of his greatest novels, \textit{Bleak House} (1852-1853).}

Crabbe however had no illusions that he was making innovations in his criticism of the law; he realized and acknowledged that the complaint against lawyers was an old one. After criticizing their devious methods, he pretends to have heard someone commenting on his hackneyed subject:

"Nay, this," you cry, "is common-place, the tale of petty tradesmen o'er their evening-ale. There are who, living by the legal pen, are held in honour -- 'honourable men!'"

(VI. 81-84.)

This admission on Crabbe's part, that he recognizes how widespread was such criticism of the law, ensures that his readers will not dismiss the subject as old fashioned. However even here Crabbe prepares the way for his own criticism of the law when he employs Mark Antony's ironic comment on the assassins -- "So are they all, all honourable men" -- to question the rejoinder that many in the legal profession are honourable.

It will be helpful to pause and note the number of "voices" one hears in the above quoted passage. First there is the voice of the narrator claiming that the legal profession is dishonest. Then a second voice intercedes (possibly that of the friend in the country?), insisting that the narrator is incorrect. Yet this second voice contains a third, for the irony of the phrase
"honourable men" is directed against the second speaker. The effect of these different "voices," aside from the humorous by-play, is to suggest how easily an over-simplified view of social abuses can be accepted. The reader is urged to re-examine his own beliefs.

Crabbe's first examples of fraudulent law establish immediately that he is not merely parroting commonplaces, but that he feels fired to write because of a contemporary social evil which he knows and dislikes. In his comments on the way parishes go to law over any and every case in which their responsibility is in doubt, he was striking at what we now can see to have been one of the great issues of the time:

There is a doubtful pauper, and we think
'Tis not with us to give him meat and drink;
There is a child, and 'tis not mighty clear
Whether the mother lived with us a year;
A road's indicted, and our seniors doubt
If in our proper boundary or without;
But what says our attorney? He our friend
Tells us 'tis just and manly to contend
(VI. 93-100).

In this short space Crabbe mentions three of the most troublesome duties of the parish. The first is the "doubtful pauper," about which there is little need to comment, since the records of the time are full of the thousands of cases in which parishes wrestled with the problem of responsibility. Although in theory the poor laws gave a subsistence to everyone in need, in actual fact, the Law of Settlement made it extremely difficult for those people who wished to move from one parish to another to gain the settlement necessary to entitle them to poor relief. About the
people who had at one time paid rates, and who later became "decayed housekeepers," there was little doubt; such people deserved weekly help or even an annual pension. But for most people, the day labourers, lodgers, and migrant workers, there was no settled policy. In parishes where the overseer was particularly harsh, the case would be taken to law to find a loophole which would enable the parish to deny responsibility. The Webbs note that "half the time of the Court" was spent "in splitting hairs as to pauper settlements." When the parish was threatened with the charge of a new pauper it "rushed to lodge an appeal... frequently persuaded by the village attorney."

The second case Crabbe mentions, that of the mother with child, was a particularly delicate one. Parishes attempted to keep out any new woman at all likely to give birth in the parish to a child she could not support, since under the law, the child


43 Henry Crabb Robinson noted the ludicrous and costly nature of this parish litigation: "I spent several hours at the Clerkenwell Sessions. A case came before the court ludicrous from the minuteness required in the examination. Was the pauper settled in Parish A or B? The house he occupied was in both parishes, and models both of the house and the bed in which the pauper slept were laid before the court, that it might ascertain how much of his body lay in each parish. The court held the pauper to be settled where his head (being the nobler part) lay, though one of his legs at least, and great part of his body, lay out of that parish." Entry for Dec. 7, 1815, of Diary, Reminiscences, and Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson, ed. Thomas Sadler, I, 506.

deserved a settlement in the parish of his birth. Many tales are told of women in the last stages of pregnancy being carted from one parish to another. Even the parish officials of Bath were alleged to peruse their female visitors with a keen eye to ensure that no poor children were likely to be born within the boundaries of the city.45

Crabbe's third example, the construction of roads, was also a subject of much litigation. The expanding commerce of the eighteenth century demanded better transportation facilities, with the result that a vast programme of road reconstruction was undertaken over the period from 1750 to 1810.46 The capital for many of the roads was raised on the turn-pike principle, and in certain instances the turn-pike could more than pay for itself. But in most cases, the construction of roads remained an onerous and expensive task laid on the parish by the central government. Wherever possible, parishes attempted to pass the responsibility for road building to their neighbours.

Although Crabbe's condemnation of the law is sweeping, his examples of litigation are so well chosen that his contemporaries

45 See, for instance, the elaborate arrangements Moll Flanders makes to convince the parish of Bath that she will be able to care for the child she is to have there. Moll Flanders, Shakespeare Head ed., I, 122.

must have felt the force of his criticism.\textsuperscript{47} The number of cases in which the parishes went to law over paupers is so large that one begins to wonder why more criticism was not aroused.\textsuperscript{48} In such cases the legal costs incurred invariably amounted to far more than the few shillings a week needed to maintain the pauper.\textsuperscript{49} Certainly the Hammonds endorse Crabbe's opinion that the lawyers cared little to see the pauper helped:

The lawyers who interested themselves in the poor were enlisted not in the defence of the rights of the commoners but in the defence of the purses of the parishes. For them the all-important question was not what rights the peasant had against his lord, but on which parish he had a claim for maintenance.\textsuperscript{50}

That lawyers could earn fortunes arguing over which parish was to support an illegitimate child or pauper became a grievance to many, but surprisingly enough, one finds few serious attacks on this social evil in the literature of the time.

\textsuperscript{47}Crabbe took a great interest in the way the rich could manipulate the law. His London Journal for the year 1817 contains the following entry for July 22nd: "Oxford Street politician, who assures me nothing can be more true, than that ministers send spies to Ireland with money to intoxicate the poor people; who are persuaded to enter into treason while drunk, are taken next morning to a magistrate, condemned on the evidence of the seducer, and executed before noon . . . ." Quoted from \textit{Life}, Ch. ix, p. 254.

\textsuperscript{48}The Webbs have noted: "Perhaps it would have been impossible by any ingenuity to contrive so prolific a source of litigation by any other means than a Law of Settlement . . . ." \textit{English Poor Law History}, Part 1, p. 347.

\textsuperscript{49}In the year ending March 25, 1834, "the sums expended in England and Wales in suits of law, removal of paupers, etc." amounted to £258,601.1s. See \textit{Ninth Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners} (1843), p. 34.

\textsuperscript{50}J.L. and Barbara Hammond, \textit{The Village Labourer}, p. 215.
In spite of Crabbe's admirable choice of abuses in the law, I would submit that the manner in which the criticisms are formulated does not convince the reader of the necessity of immediate action. The reason is that the narrator (and presumably Crabbe as well) is not prepared to lay the entire blame on the lawyers. Again and again Crabbe makes the point that the lawyers thrive only because man himself is selfish. When Crabbe introduces a good lawyer, Archer, we discover that he has seen so much of man's duplicity that he has become a cynic. Archer has been involved in so many devious cases:

And seen so much of both sides, and so long,
He thinks the bias of man's mind goes wrong.
Thus, though he's friendly, he is still severe,
Surly though kind, suspiciously sincere:
So much he's seen of baseness in the mind,
That, while a friend to man, he scorns mankind;
He knows the human heart, and sees with dread,
By slight temptation, how the strong are led;
He knows how interest can asunder rend
The bond of parent, master, guardian, friend,
To form a new and a degrading tie
'Twixt needy vice and tempting villany
(VI. 178-189).

In one sense the portrait of Lawyer Archer is a measure of Crabbe's grasp of the social situation. Unlike a writer such as Dickens (who was certainly much more a spokesmen for humanitarian reform), Crabbe never allows his "good" characters to become sentimental or "goody-goody." While Crabbe dislikes the lawyer Swallows who ingeniously cheat people out of their money, and is ready to criticize them, he also implies that people generally receive the type of lawyer they deserve.

When lawyer Swallow dupes the Dissenters out of their church
fund, the reader cannot wholly sympathize with the victims. Crabbe has shown that they were prepared to dupe themselves by believing that Swallow had actually become a convert:

To this some zealots lent an ear, and sought
How Swallow felt, then said "a change is wrought."
"Twas true there wanted all the signs of grace,
But there were strong professions in their place
(VI. 336-339).

These people can see that Swallow is a fraud: "He drank -- 'twas needful his poor nerves to brace; / He swore -- 'twas habit; he was grieved -- 'twas grace" (VI. 350-351), but so anxious are they to claim Swallow as a convert, and have him lay out their fund at interest, that they deceive themselves about his honesty. The reader is invited to criticize not only lawyer Swallow, but his clients as well. Even in the court case involving responsibility for the pauper, Crabbe begins by showing the villagers themselves ready to follow the line of least resistance. Their attorney has no trouble in persuading them to take the case to court. Thus if Crabbe points out the evils of corrupt lawyers, he also shows that large numbers of people in the borough implicitly support and perpetuate the evil. The lawyers not only create, but help to supply a demand for corrupt practices. It is interesting to note that Crabbe himself seems to have been a little inclined to lawyer Archer's point of view. Joanna Baillie noted: "I have sometimes remarked that, when a good or generous action has been much praised, he would say in a low voice, as to himself, something that insinuated a more mingled and worldly cause for it."\(^{51}\)

\(^{51}\)Letter from Joanna Baillie, n.d. Quoted from Life, Ch. x, p. 301.
In Letter VI Crabbe appears to be giving two distinct explanations for evil. The first is a social one, that the legal profession is corrupt and should be corrected. The second is perhaps best encompassed in the well-worn phrase "the fall of man"; here Crabbe sees the evil as an expected aspect of the world. The Letter offers both explanations, but the two never fuse artistically. At the end, one is left with a mixed reaction -- whether to dislike the lawyers for their corruption or whether to see their activities as evidence of the natural corruption of all mankind. As social criticism, the Letter fails to make much effect, but of course Crabbe's social criticism is only one aspect of his poetry. What the Letter fails to do in terms of social criticism is more than compensated for in its comédie humaine.

VI

Another example of this style of social criticism, but with greater weight and seriousness, occurs in Letter VII, in the commentary on quack physicians. In this case Crabbe appears to speak directly, casting off entirely the pose of an objective narrator. Like the corrupt lawyer, the quack occurred readily to

52 For a successful combination of the two explanations, see "Peter Grimes," and below, pp. 361-372.
anyone interested in lampooning social abuses. Crabbe's "daring tribe" had been the subject of satire for centuries; Restoration plays abound in quack physicians. The doctor called to care for Joseph Andrews when he was beaten and robbed on the highway is quite obviously such a quack (Joseph Andrews I, xiii & xv). In eighteenth century fiction the entrance of the quack doctor is almost stereotyped; invariably he begins his treatment of a patient by describing the disease as mortal in order to have an excuse if the patient died, or a high fee if he lived.

Nor was Crabbe's attack in The Borough his first tilt at the medical profession. In The Library (1781), he had devoted a large section to exposing the evils of fraudulent doctors. But there he had condemned in general terms the entire faculty, a method reminiscent of Augustan satire, rather than that of particularized social criticism:

\begin{quote}
What thought so wild, what airy dream so light,
That will not prompt a theorist to write?
What art so prevalent, what proof so strong,
That will convince him his attempt is wrong?
One in the solids finds each lurking ill,
Nor grants the passive fluids power to kill;
A learned friend some subtler reason brings
Absolves the channels, but condemns their springs;
The subtle nerves, that shun the doctor's eye,
Escape no more his subtler theory
\end{quote}

(lines 382-391).

While the quack occupies a ubiquitous place in the literature of the time, he is rarely treated seriously. Samuel Garth's The Dispensary (1699) is one of the few poems before Crabbe's to take the subject of corruption in medicine at all seriously. Garth's main intention is to parody the quarrel in the College of Physicians over the building of the London Dispensary; he treats the decline in medical standards as a side-issue.
The generalized satire on the medical profession in this early poem differs greatly from the social criticism of *The Borough*. In the latter poem, doctors are no longer merely a subject of humour, but a subject of serious social concern.

Aware that he was not the first person to oppose the charlatanism of the medical profession, Crabbe recognized the necessity of distinguishing his own serious criticism from the conventional satire. In part he accomplishes this by first calling attention to the usual picture of the country medicine seller:

> There was a time, when we beheld the quack,  
> On public stage, the licensed trade attack;  
> He made his labour'd speech with poor parade;  
> And then a laughing zany lent him aid.  
> Smiling we pass'd him, but we felt the while  
> Pity so much, that soon we ceased to smile;  
> Assured that fluent speech and flow'ry vest  
> Disguised the troubles of a man distress'd  
> (VII. 63-70).

This picture of the mountebank medicine seller is by no means a caricature; many of Crabbe's readers would remember having seen such "doctors." The *Connoisseur* for July 4, 1754, gives a description of such a medicine seller that agrees well with Crabbe's:

> About the middle of last month there came among us one of those gentlemen, who are famous for the cure of every distemper, and especially those pronounced incurable by the faculty. The vulgar call him a mountebank; -- but when I considered his impassioned speeches, and the extempore stage from which he uttered them, I was apt to compare him to Thespis and his cart. Again, when I beheld the Doctor dealing out his drugs, and at the same time saw his Merry-Andrew play over his tricks, it put me in mind of a tragi-comedy; where the pathetic and the ludicrous are so intimately connected, and the whole piece is so merry and so sad, that the
audience is at a loss whether they shall laugh or cry.54

Thus when Crabbe turns from the quack of "there was a time" to the modern quack of his own parish, the transition evokes a sense of historical continuity. By this means the sketch achieves immediacy and relevance:

But now our quacks are gamesters, and they play
With craft and skill to ruin and betray;
With monstrous promise they delude the mind,
And thrive on all that tortures human-kind

(VII. 71-74).

The emphasis on "now," and the many specific references which follow, give the reader the impression that Crabbe is describing actual malpractices. His doctor is no longer a paste-board figure of literature, but a characterization of an existing person.

Some of Crabbe's criticisms of the medical profession are fairly trite, indeed, confessedly so. His first description is of the young doctor busily engaged in writing a thesis, not because he has made a new discovery, not to transmit knowledge, but to make a name for himself. However the thesis-manufacturer is by no means Crabbe's chief interest, for as he says, "these are trifling evils." His main concern is to bring home to the public the serious consequences of allowing quack doctors to hand out unknown drugs (a topic of interest even today). One might think that in an age when doctors could not cure diseases anyway, and when many people relied upon folklore remedies, Crabbe is perhaps being too harsh. As G.E. Mingay has so rightly remarked: "Medical treatment was one of the few

human needs in which the wealthy classes had little or no advantage. Even the best medical advice and the most costly treatment were not necessarily more effective than simple care or old wives' remedies. Yet one must take care to note accurately the type of treatment and medicines to which Crabbe objected. He did not attack the village apothecary rich in his knowledge of helpful herbs and salves. As was seen in the case of Leah Cousins in "The Parish Register" (III. 635-730), Crabbe gives due praise to the accomplished village mid-wife, and satirizes the new town-doctor with his pretence of scientific knowledge.

Crabbe's attack was levelled against a new type of businessman, the unlicensed drug-makers and dispensers who lived off the sale of pretended wonder drugs. The reason he felt that these people were dangerous, in a way that the charlatan doctor of the early eighteenth century never could have been, was that they sold their drugs on a large scale as scientifically prepared medicine. Crabbe explains how these people invest large sums of money in newspaper advertising and then acquire famous and distinguished people to act as patrons to the drug. What particularly bothered Crabbe was the manner in which many of these people, entering


56 In fact Crabbe does not draw any distinction between the three classes of medical practitioners of this period: the physician, a member of the College of Surgeons and educated at Oxford, Cambridge or Trinity College, Dublin; the licensed doctor, trained on the continent or at one of the Scottish universities; and the apothecary. See D. Marshall, *English People in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 53.
business on a large scale, had become fabulously wealthy and influential. There may be some envy in the lines:

How strange to add, in this nefarious trade,
That men of parts are dupes by dunces made;
That creatures nature meant should clean our streets
Have purchased lands and mansions, parks and seats (VII. 91-94).

But they also express Crabbe's concern with the scale upon which the quacks operated.

It is difficult to assess whether Crabbe was correct in his diagnosis of what he felt to be an alarming rate of growth amongst these quack doctors. He certainly was not mistaken in his account of the reliance placed on panaceas.\(^57\) For instance, the Duke of Chandos experimented with many possible cures for his failing eyes, cures such as Portuguese snuff, urine and viper's fat.\(^58\) Crabbe of course had tried many different remedies for his wife's illness, and in later life, experimented with a wide number of "remedies" for his tic douloureux, including "Bark with Steel in large doses often repeated."\(^59\) Many of the household books on medicine had treatments for disease which were little if any better.\(^60\)

\(^57\) G.E. Mingay notes that "eighteenth-century letters and memoranda show a pervasive concern with health and an abiding interest in new remedies, however strange or fanciful." \textit{English Landed Society in the Eighteenth Century}, p. 221.


\(^59\) Letter to Elizabeth Charter, July 8, 1824, in \textit{The Romance of an Elderly Poet}, p. 268.

\(^60\) For instance, see William Buchan's \textit{Domestic Medicine} which ran through nineteen editions by 1805. Amongst the many humorous "statements of fact" is the following: "Intense thinking is so destructive to health, that few instances can be produced of studious persons who are strong and healthy." (London, 1805), p. 50.
Although it would seem logical that, with the increase in the number of newspapers at the end of the eighteenth century, quack medicines would flourish through the increased advertising, so far as I know, no one has yet undertaken a statistical study of the growth of quack medicines. Crabbé's account will have to be taken as tentative evidence for the moment.

Had Crabbé been consistent in maintaining his narrator's role of objective observer, he would merely have noted the phenomenon of the quack. As it is, he points out that one of the reasons the quacks thrive is that people are vain and foolish enough to trust them. In one sense the people receive only their just deserts. Yet interestingly enough, Crabbé does not allow the narrator to remain neutral. What forced Crabbé to drop his fundamentally laissez-faire narrator was the realization that the quacks, in using large scale advertising methods along with pseudo-scientific jargon, were gulling the people on an unprecedented scale. Thus early in the nineteenth century (much before the date usually given by economic historians), Crabbé realized that the power of the press formed an obstacle to individual choice which created the need for some type of organization to protect the best interests of the individual. Medical quackery, tolerated by writers such as Fielding and Smollett as yet another instance of man's self-deception, in Crabbé's work becomes the object of severe censure. With Crabbé, the quack is no longer portrayed as a fool playing his part in the

61 The history of medicine is only now being studied intensively. See E.P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class, p. 330.
charade of human existence, but as an external menace, threatening the well-being of society.

Crabbe mentions few of the different panaceas that were marketed. However he does notice and criticize the use of alcohol as a cordial and certain "pills" which would supposedly prevent venereal disease. About the pill: he feels that all the puffs amount to no more "in plainer English" than "if you mean to sin, / Fly to the drops, and instantly begin" (VII. 203-204). His anger is aroused most of all by the "sleeping cordial," presumably opium, which was given indiscriminately in various forms to men, women and children. Opium was widely used in the treatment of diseases at this time, a reason why so many people unwittingly became addicts. Mingay notes that laudanum was one of the few "reliable and effective" drugs which doctors possessed. Since Crabbe had himself begun taking opium some years previously, possibly his own experience had shown him the great danger consequent upon taking this drug.

No doubt one of the reasons why Crabbe's attack on the medical profession has such a ring of sincerity is that Crabbe had personal experience of medicine. It will be recalled that, trained as an apothecary, he had practised in Aldborough for a short time.


English Landed Society in the Eighteenth Century, p. 221.

Life, Ch. vii, p. 161. His son mentions that he began taking opium as a medicine in "his forty-sixth year" (i.e. 1800).
In *The Library* Crabbe had explained how he had entered medicine expecting to find scientific knowledge but soon discovered that the study of medicine could give him no such accuracy. Even at that time he had attempted to debunk his former teachers:

Ye first seducers of my easy heart,  
Who promised knowledge ye could not impart;  
Ye dull deluders, truth's destructive foes;  
Ye sons of fiction, clad in stupid prose;  
Ye treacherous leaders, who, yourselves in doubt,  
Light up false fires, and send us far about (lines 409-414).

While this criticism may seem strong, one must recall that doctors could not really *cure* diseases until the middle of the nineteenth century. The great reforms in medicine during the eighteenth century were in the building of dispensaries, isolating infectious diseases, and constructing better hospitals.  

Certainly one of the most important ways in which Crabbe's criticism of the medical profession differed from previous satires is his appreciation that the seriousness of the situation demanded immediate action. Earlier satires had rested content with making the doctor a figure of fun. Crabbe ends the Letter with a strong call to suppress the quacks. He suggests first that men of station and distinction should refrain from lending their names in support of the drugs. But he is practical enough to realize that his poem would little change the situation in this respect:

Alas! in vain is my contempt express'd;  
To stronger passions are their words address'd;  
To pain, to fear, to terror their appeal,  
To those who, weakly reasoning, strongly feel (VII. 280-283).

He then discusses the possibility of regulating the malpractices by creating new laws, but recognizes that "in this land of freedom, law is slack / With any being to commence attack" (VII. 286-287). Then, surprisingly enough, he turns to the men of science with the suggestion that they should be enlisted in the effort to expose the fraudulent basis of the panaceas:

Then let us trust to science -- there are those Who can their falsehoods and their frauds disclose, All their vile trash detect, and their low tricks expose (VII. 288-290).

This appeal to science to help defeat a social abuse must be one of the first of its kind.

With topics such as corruption in the law and medicine, the search for precedents is something of a red herring, since the topics are constantly being aired. Crabbe's contribution to the debate lies in the seriousness with which he approached the subject, and the type of remedies proposed. From Garth's description -- where "Harvy" in the shades of Elysium counsels the apothecaries to turn to "great Nassau" (King William) who would end corruption -- to Crabbe's plea -- that restrictive legislation should be passed and men of science expose the frauds -- is a long step. No doubt part of the change lies in literary convention. Garth chose to write in the mock heroic, Crabbe, the narrative tale. More

In The Dispensary Samuel Garth suggests that the corruption in the College of Physicians can be eliminated by taking the problem to the king. Garth envisages improvement as a result of the personal intercession of great men, rather than through new legislation.

I am of course not referring to the Baconian scientific ideal, nor to the science of les philosophes, which was to change and save the world. Crabbe has in mind the practical scientists, whose specialized knowledge may be employed on specific technical problems.
Importantly, Crabbe's presentation shows a new-found concern to correct abuses through literature. The early eighteenth century belief, so admirably expressed in Samuel Johnson's addition to Goldsmith's *The Traveller*, that man's happiness can be little affected by government legislation or social criticism, Crabbe has in large part resisted. Johnson maintained:

> How small of all that human hearts endure,  
> That part which laws or kings can cause or cure.  
> Still to ourselves in every place consign'd,  
> Our own felicity we make or find  

*The Traveller* lines 429-432).

While Crabbe would have been the last person to disagree with Johnson's belief that human happiness lies within the individual, he also recognized that many evils existed in society which men of good will, armed with the law and the facts of science, could alleviate. Crabbe also recognized that not all men possessed Johnson's strength of mind:

> This love of life, which in our nature rules,  
> To vile imposture makes us dupes and tools;  
> Then pain compels th' impatient soul to seize  
> On promised hopes of instantaneous ease;  
> And weakness too with every wish complies,  
> Worn out and won by importunities  

*VII. 128-133*.

Because one knows philosophically that man will always experience difficulties is no reason to permit drug manufacturers to take advantage of this situation by adding a few more troubles to man's load.

In the long run, Johnson's claim that men must search for happiness in their own hearts is undoubtedly correct. Yet Crabbe's concern is not so much with this philosophic-religious happiness as
with day-to-day matters such as health. And in order to achieve the type of happiness resulting from good health, obviously much could be done through the implementation of higher standards.

VII

While acknowledging that Crabbe's condemnation of the quack physician and crooked lawyer is clearly social criticism, one cannot help feeling that in choosing such stock figures Crabbe was following in a long tradition of Augustan satire rather than creating a new social voice. Nothing especially distinctive about the lawyer and quack links them to the particular problems of a coastal borough.\textsuperscript{68} They are characters that one would expect to find in any eighteenth century poem or novel, and as a result, Crabbe's criticism of them seems a trifle unexciting. Yet Crabbe's subjects are by no means always so general. In his attack on the borough workhouse (Letter XVIII), he describes and criticizes an institution which is highly particularized.

At first glance one might suspect that Crabbe included a description of the poorhouse in \textit{The Borough} in order to "cash in"

\textsuperscript{68}This is not to say that an artist cannot utilize stock subjects for great artistic purposes. Obviously in \textit{Bleak House} Dicken's use of the Court of Chancery to symbolize the general corruption of the world is a first-rate achievement.
on his famous description of the parish poorhouse in *The Village*. Certainly the description of the poorhouse in *The Village* was the best known section of Crabbe's poetry, largely the result of Knox's having included it in his much-read *Elegant Extracts*. Jeffrey, as well as many others, had singled out that description of the poorhouse as one of the high points of Crabbe's poetry. But a moment's thought will reveal that the type of poorhouse described in *The Borough* is very different from that formerly described in *The Village*. In the earlier poem Crabbe had included the description of the poorhouse in order to protest against squalid and unhealthy conditions:

Theirs is yon house that holds the parish poor,  
Whose walls of mud scarce bear the broken door;  
There, where the putrid vapours, flagging, play,  
And the dull wheel hums doleful through the day  
(*The Village* I. 228-231).

In *The Borough*, however, Crabbe's protest is aimed against the magnificent size of the poorhouse and the practice of herding the poor into one building, where they are forced to live estranged from their old friends and family. Whereas previously he had objected to the walls of mud, in *The Borough* he complains of palatial conditions. In some unpoetic lines prefixed to the Letter, Crabbe gave the following admonition to the rich:

Show not to the poor thy pride,  
Let their home a cottage be;  
Nor the feeble body hide  
In a palace fit for thes;  
Let him not about him see  
Lofty ceilings, ample halls,  
Or a gate his boundary be,  
Where nor friend or kinsman calls.

69 *The Edinburgh Review*, XII (1808), 131.
Certainly this warning against fitting out large houses for the poor seems a little odd, coming as it does after Crabbe's earlier criticism of the parish for allowing the poorhouse to be so mean.

The modern reader may well be a little startled by this sudden change of attitude. Since palatial workhouses were uncommon in Britain, he may also wonder if Crabbe's description of the poorhouse is correct. However Crabbe included in the Preface a short account of the Letter which offers a partial explanation of the scheme he is criticizing:

I am aware of the great difficulty of acquiring just notions on the maintenance and management of this class of our fellow-subjects [the poor], and I forbear to express any opinion of the various modes which have been discussed or adopted: of one method only I venture to give my sentiments, that of collecting the poor of a hundred into one building. This admission of a vast number of persons, of all ages and both sexes, of very different inclinations, habits, and capacities, into a society, must, at a first view, I conceive, be looked upon as a cause of both vice and misery; nor does any thing which I have heard or read invalidate the opinion; happily, it is not a prevailing one, as these houses are, I believe, still confined to that part of the kingdom where they originated.70

In a note to the 1834 edition of Poetical Works Crabbe's son adds that these "odious Houses of Industry" were to be found "only in

70 Poems by George Crabbe, I, 277. As a guide to later readers, Crabbe's son added this explanation in the form of a note to the 1834 edition of Poetical Works, III, 283, n. 1.
Suffolk, near the first founder's residence."71 From these notes one may infer that Crabbe was describing a type of workhouse characteristic of East Anglia, a supposition which is confirmed by modern scholarship. The Webbs note: "It was the General Mixed Workhouse of the Suffolk Corporations -- not, as is commonly assumed, of the ancient poorhouse of the parish -- of which Crabbe [in The Borough] gave such a terrible description."72 This explains the seeming discrepancy between the description of the poorhouse in The Village and that in The Borough. In the earlier poem, Crabbe had described the old style parish poorhouse, prevalent throughout England and Wales, while in The Borough he described the relatively new East Anglian experiment.73

In order to assess whether Crabbe's description and criticism of this new style of poorhouse74 is accurate, it will be helpful to know something of the history of these East Anglian workhouses. For this purpose, the best account is still to be found in Sidney and Beatrice Webb's English Poor Law History; Arthur Young's account in his General View of the Agriculture of the County of Suffolk (1794) will serve as a contemporary, if biased, view of these

73In his account of Isaac Ashford in "The Parish Register" Crabbe gave a description of yet another type of workhouse. There he presented a parish in which the overseers "contracted" the care of the poor to private individuals. These "contractors" agreed to supply the necessities of life to the poor at so much per head.
74These establishments were given several different names: "the workhouse," "house of industry," "house of correction," etc.
workhouses. The Webbs note that these houses of industry were originally set up as a result of the quite natural desire to reduce the high poor rates. The planners of the time felt that the cost of caring for the poor could be reduced if parishes were encouraged to pool their resources in order to construct a large workhouse capable of housing all the poor from the various parishes concerned. The idea was that the large size of the institution would permit the poor to work at profitable small-scale manufactures. Instead of giving the poor indiscriminate and often arbitrary doles, the parishes would use the money to set up a business in which the poor could be profitably employed. Grouped together into viable economic units the poor would no longer be a drain on the economy. An early experiment in Bristol seemed to suggest that the scheme was feasible, so in 1756, as a result of Admiral Vernon's energy and persistence, a local Act was passed "which set up, for these two Hundreds of Carlford and Colneis [in Suffolk], a new local governing body, empowered to erect a workhouse, and practically to take over, from the officers of the twenty-eight parishes concerned, the whole administration of the Poor Law."\(^7^5\) Apparently by 1785 the administration of the poor law over the greater part of Suffolk and Norfolk "had been withdrawn from the parish officers and vested in fourteen new bodies of Incorporated Guardians of the Poor."\(^7^6\)

In theory these new workhouses, clean, well planned and spacious, seemed to offer a far better alternative to the parish

\(^7^5\) _English Poor Law History, Part 1_, p. 126.

\(^7^6\) _English Poor Law History, Part 1_, p. 129.
dole. But the Webbs note that in almost all cases, although the house of industry flourished for a number of years, decreasing the number of paupers on poor relief and sometimes even making a profit on the manufactures, inevitably the level of administration fell and the house of industry suffered a decline. When the workhouses became unprofitable, the parishes found it more practicable to return to "out-relief," so that the houses of industry were occupied only by the very young, the old, the disabled and the few paupers the parishes preferred to send there.

Crabbe, who was certainly aware of the two different types of poor relief, assumes in his account that his readers will also understand the difference between the two. The narrator begins by describing the poor and the methods of relief in his own parish:

"Our poor how feed we?" -- To the most we give
A weekly dole, and at their homes they live; --
Others together dwell -- but when they come
To the low roof, they see a kind of home,
A social people whom they've ever known,
With their own thoughts and manners like their own
(XVIII. 5-10).

Obviously the narrator is describing the normal type of parish "out-relief" practised over most of England throughout the eighteenth century, indeed, until the time of the new Poor Law of 1834. After describing a number of poor people in his parish, the narrator suddenly addresses his friend, to whom he is giving the description of the borough, and says:

Your plan I love not; -- with a number you
Have placed your poor, your pitiable few;
There, in one house, throughout their lives to be --
The pauper-palace which they hate to see
(XVIII. 109-112).
When he then proceeds to describe the vast size of the workhouse, it becomes clear that he has in mind the house of industry of the Suffolk type.

Although Crabbe disliked these workhouses he took care to point out their good features. He acknowledged that the poor in such houses were well provided for, and that they were given ample opportunity to offer suggestions and express grievances. Perhaps recalling his previous objections in *The Village* to the squalid conditions in the old-style parish poorhouse, he agreed that hygienic standards in the new workhouse were high:

Be it agreed -- the poor who hither come
Partake of plenty, seldom found at home;
That airy rooms and decent beds are meant
To give the poor by day, by night, content
(XVIII. 119-122).

His main objection was to the way in which the poor of the workhouse were cut off from their old ways of life. At first sight this objection might seem somewhat trivial and sentimental, for after all, at a time when the poor rates were soaring, some sacrifices had to be made. Yet Crabbe's point is well taken, since in Hundreds where workhouses existed, it was usually the only means of poor relief. A person might require relief for many reasons: he might be old, disabled, infirm, orphaned, or simply out of work for a short time. The directors made no distinction. They placed all people requiring relief into one category, "the poor," and bundled them off to the house. In showing how the workhouse

77 All such statements are of course only broad generalizations. Even in those parishes where the policy was to send all paupers to the workhouse, no doubt one would still find the exceptional case of a widow or orphan allowed to remain on a weekly dole.
gave material comforts at the expense of man's best values, Crabbe pointed out the dangers inherent in such large institutions.

Critics of the workhouse were not long in observing that one of the main reasons the workhouses failed to operate effectively lay in their amateur administration. In many cases this criticism was true, since the administrators were the local squires and farmers who could not be bothered to attend meetings. However spokesmen for the scheme replied to the critics that supervision by interested persons was unnecessary:

The public is in no danger of losing at any time any of the advantages which a former zeal had promised, or a past vigilance had procured. For should that zeal hereafter abate, or that vigilance relax, the institution, by means of its General Rules, remains like a machine, which, having its springs of motion within itself, will with but an ordinary attention, and only common application, go on to perform without interruption its accustomed functions, and to produce without variation its usual benefits [my italics].

It was this machine-like aspect of the workhouse which Crabbe, as one of the scheme's opponents, disliked so much. With his own keen insight into the workings of men's minds he realized that if the workhouse were to be run like a machine, the poor would soon become prisoners. The following description depicts strongly the authoritarian character of such workhouses:

That giant-building, that high-bounding wall, Those bare-worn walks, that lofty thund'ring hall! That large loud clock, which tolls each dreaded hour; Those gates and locks, and all those signs of power: It is a prison, with a milder name, Which few inhabit without dread or shame

(XVIII. 113-118).

Quoted from English Poor Law History, Part I, p. 136.
Interestingly enough, when Thomas Hood in 1843 came to write his poem "The Workhouse Clock" he also pointed out the danger of attempting to rule by mechanical devices and general rules. Hood exclaimed:

Oh! that the Parish Powers,
Who regulate Labour's hours,
The daily amount of human trial,
Weariness, pain, and self-denial
Would turn from the artificial dial
That striketh ten or eleven,
And go, for once, by that older one
That stands in the light of Nature's sun,
And takes its time from Heaven.\(^7^9\)

Both Crabbe and Hood are criticizing the attempt on the part of the overseers to turn the workhouses into prisons. Nor was such criticism unwarranted. People such as Arthur Young believed that the poor were demanding too many rights, and in order to counteract this new spirit of independence, they advocated the repressive house of correction. Young commented that more parishes should build workhouses of the Suffolk variety because "the lower orders of the kingdom are now pressing on the next; and the toe of the peasant truly galls the kibe of the courtier."\(^8^0\) Crabbe however never feared the independence of the lower orders, and was not afraid of treating the poor as individuals.

In Crabbe's character sketches, one can see strongly imprinted his belief in the uniqueness of each person. Thus it is easy to see how the "general rules" of the workhouse, so highly

\(^7^9\)The Works of Thomas Hood, IX, 200-201.

\(^8^0\)General View of the Agriculture of the County of Suffolk (London, 1794), p. 92.
praised by its spokesmen, would be anathema to him:

Who govern here, by general rules must move,
Where ruthless custom rends the bond of love.
Nations, we know, have nature's law transgress'd,
And snatch'd the infant from the parent's breast;
But still for public good the boy was train'd,
The mother suffer'd, but the matron gain'd:
Here nature's outrage serves no cause to aid;
The ill is felt, but not the Spartan made
(XVIII. 187-194).

Crabbe's main point in his criticism of the large houses of industry is the idea which runs through so much of his poetry, that although the poor may be at the bottom of the social scale, this does not mean that they should be treated as less than human. Crabbe's objection is not the sentimentalist's aversion to organized charity. Many people disapproved of any sort of organized relief on the grounds that it prevented the Christian from practising individual charity. Crabbe's point is not that charity should be dispensed by individuals, but to individuals.

Crabbe was by no means the first person to object to the East Anglian workhouses, although he was certainly the first poet to do so. As was noticed earlier, the first experiments with the new-style workhouse were begun in 1756. From the beginning the scheme had many opponents, so that even if Crabbe was not drawn to make his protest from his own observations, he might easily have read one of the many pamphlets objecting to the scheme. For instance, George Rose declared his belief that workhouses should be abolished: "If proper employment shall be found for the poor at their own homes, workhouses will, but in a few instances, be necessary. . . ." The avowed policy of workhouses, in many instances, is a mixture of
maintenance, and punishment by imprisonment . . . ." Although Rose touches on economic reasons for abandoning the workhouse, his emphasis is humanitarian.

In challenging the value of these East Anglian workhouses, Crabbe, like Rose, rests his criticism almost entirely on humanitarian grounds. At the back of his mind he seems to have been thinking of the case of Isaac Ashford, described three years earlier in "The Parish Register." Near the end of the section on workhouses he describes a person very like Isaac, in order to show the injustice of sending such a person to the workhouse:

Here the good pauper, losing all the praise
By worthy deeds acquired in better days,
Breathes a few months; then, to his chamber led,
Expires, while strangers prattle round his bed
(XVIII. 211-214).

Ideas which are only implicit in "The Parish Register" are here developed further. It will be recalled that Isaac, although a "noble peasant" living an honest and hard-working life, had in his last days been confronted with the workhouse. Crabbe had "solved" the problem by having Isaac die before he actually had to enter the workhouse. Whereas in "The Parish Register" Crabbe only implied that a new scheme was needed to help people like Isaac, in The Borough he goes a step further to develop strongly the case that people such as Isaac should be provided for in their own homes.


82 "The Parish Register" III. 413-502. Also see above, pp. 217-220.
He argues that the poor should be given a reasonable pension which will allow them to live out their final years in comfort:

Much more shall real wants and cares of age
Our gentler passions in their cause engage. --
   Drooping and burthen'd with a weight of years,
What venerable ruin man appears!
   How worthy pity, love, respect, and grief --
He claims protection -- he compels relief; --

No! -- we will shield him from the storm he fears,
And when he falls, embalm him with our tears

(CXVIII. 231-241).

Crabbe does not outline any plan of poor relief, but rather asserts the humanitarian's belief in the right of the poor to claim relief.

A curious feature of Crabbe's portrayal of the workhouse is that he nowhere mentions the inmates being forced to work at some employment. Since the workhouses were established largely to "set the poor on work," this omission may seem strange. Crabbe confines his objections to the prison-like features of the workhouse. And perhaps to expect him to do more, is to expect the wrong things. Poets are rarely interested in writing what Leslie Stephen has termed "a Blue Book done into rhyme," in which everything about a particular social situation is developed in detail. Yet there may be a more substantial reason for this lack of description of the

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83 At New Lanark, Robert Owen had a system whereby, "those now employed at the establishment contribute to a fund which supports them when too ill to work, or superannuated . . . . After they have spent nearly half a century in unremitting industry, they should, if possible, enjoy a comfortable independence." See A New View of Society, Everyman ed., p. 59.

84 Leslie Stephen, Hours in a Library, II, 51. It is notorious that few of these "literary blue books" are able to survive. Even the proletarian novels of the 1920's are losing the significance they once enjoyed.
poor "set on work." Crabbe published The Borough in 1810. The Webbs suggest that by this time many of the houses of industry had already failed in the experiment to carry out manufactures. When the parishes realized that manufactures were no longer profitable, the workhouses ceased to be used as places of employment. If they were not torn down altogether, they were used as centres to which the unfit could be sent. The Webbs note:

As the expense per head in the House of Industry was high, each parish saw its way to save money by giving small doles of outdoor relief, rather than augment its numbers in the House. Finally, the quondam "House of Industry" became for the parishes only a sort of co-operative hospital for the sick, an orphan asylum for the deserted children, and a place to which the Overseers could send any able-bodied poor to whom they did not choose to allow the weekly dole.85

Crabbe's description of a workhouse of 1810 accords well with the description the Webbs give of them in their decline.

The difficult question of assessing whether Crabbe's criticism of the workhouse was valid still remains. William Page in The Victoria History of the Counties of England assumes a cautious approach to this question when he says:

The movement [for the construction of workhouses] found supporters among those who considered the spirit of the French Revolution not altogether absent from the English poor, and needing the chastening influence of restraint and enforced industry; many people, however, not least the poet Crabbe, regarded the innovation with horror and were in full sympathy with his denunciation . . . .

Both points of view appear to have been justified to a certain extent by immediate consequences.86

85 English Poor Law History, Part I, p. 139.

Page's concern for the pernicious influence of the French Revolution seems rather misplaced in a discussion of the value of houses of industry. The Webbs, on the other hand, while conceding that the workhouse experiment was a first move in the direction of much needed reform, side strongly with Crabbe's view that the workhouse was the wrong answer:

It is impossible to-day to realise how bad, under the unscientific administration of the period, was this institutional treatment of the children, the infirm and the aged. Presently it was found that residence in these institutions was equally disastrous to the able-bodied adults.87

That the workhouses failed in almost all instances seems to confirm Crabbe's conviction that they were poorly conceived. At a time when the institutionalization of large numbers of people was becoming popular as a treatment of social problems,88 it is of great interest to see Crabbe objecting to the scheme on the simple but profound basis of its inhumanity.

87 *English Poor Law History, Part 1,* p. 146.
88 Under the new Poor Law of 1834, the aim was to standardize treatment of the poor throughout the United Kingdom.
The arguments against workhouses, fraudulent medicine and dishonest lawyers indicate that Crabbe by no means always allowed his narrator to retain the pose of a detached observer. Indeed, so much space is devoted to the exposure of social abuses that at times Crabbe seems to be mounting a full scale attack on the treatment meted out by the rich to the poor. His conviction that few lawyers were honest, and that the law itself was a hopeless tangle, would seem to be leading him to the sort of conclusion reached by Goldsmith, that "Laws grind the poor, and rich men rule the law" (The Traveller line 386). But there is yet another element to consider. Although the narrator generally supports the poor in cases of social injustice, this does not prevent him from adopting a remarkably cheerful attitude about the general standard of living amongst the poor.

No attempt is made of course to disguise the fact that a large number of poor existed. In Letter III the narrator comments that the scholar could quickly find a position as curate because "the poor lie everywhere" (III. 225). The question was not whether there were poor, for the poor were so apparent everywhere that not even the most optimistic supporter of England's progress could deny their existence, but whether their lot was a hard and difficult one. The Reverend David Davies, rector of Barkham, Berkshire, was troubled enough by the plight of the poor to publish in 1795 The Case of the Labourers in Husbandry, in which he strongly pleaded the case of the agricultural labourer:
Yet even in this kingdom, distinguished as it is for humanity and political wisdom, they [the agricultural labourers] have been for some time past suffering peculiar hardships. To make their case known, and to claim for them the just recompense of their labour, is the chief purpose of this publication.89

The Reverend Davies believed that once the true condition of the agricultural labourer came to be known, it could not "fail to awaken the general compassion in their favour . . . and to procure for this deserving class of people able and zealous advocates, who will . . . rescue them from that abject state into which they are sunk."90 Davies serves as an excellent example of one of the many people who felt that the difficulties of life amongst the poor deserved greater attention, and that merely calling attention to their plight would bring action.

When one compares Davies' description of the poor with that of the narrator of The Borough, the two men appear to have been discussing different countries. At numerous points the narrator mentions the great happiness to be found in the lives of the poor. In Letter VIII he extolls the many opportunities for happiness which are open to the poor and denied the rich:

Then, to the wealthy you will see denied
Comforts and joys that with the poor abide:
There are who labour through the year, and yet
No more have gain'd than -- not to be in debt;
Who still maintain the same laborious course,
Yet pleasure hails them from some favourite source;

89The Rev. David Davies, The Case of the Labourers in Husbandry, p. 2.

90The Case of the Labourers in Husbandry, p. 4.
And health, amusements, children, wife or friend,  
With life's dull views their consolations blend  
(VIII. 39-46).

The happiness which the narrator finds in the lives of the poor:  
"Oft have I smiled the happy pride to see / Of humble tradesmen,  
in their evening glee" (VIII. 61-62), often has a distinctly  
Goldsmith-like quality.

One of the happiest men in the poem is the poor weaver;  
caring for little else but his moths and plants, he spends all his  
time botanizing. The narrator holds up the weaver as an example  
of a person containing within himself (in the Johnsonian sense)  
the means of his own happiness.\textsuperscript{91} The weaver's simple pleasures  
are alleged to be superior to those of the rich:  "He fears no  
bailiff's wrath, no baron's blame, / His is untax'd and undisputed  
game" (VIII. 88-89). Instead of mentioning the difficulties  
encountered by the weavers at this time, as their traditional skills  
were superseded by the new machinery at centres such as Norwich,  
the narrator sums up:

Thus may the poor the cheap indulgence seize,  
While the most wealthy pine and pray for ease;  
Content not always waits upon success,  
And more may he enjoy who profits less  
(VIII. 106-109).

Such a comment hardly accords with the Reverend Davies' description  
of the poor.

It could be argued, and in some instances quite fairly,  
\textsuperscript{91}Such attempts at reconciling the poor to their hardships were fairly common. See "On the Comforts enjoyed by the Cottagers compared to those of the Ancient Barons" in \textit{Annals of Agriculture}, XXVIII (London, 1797), pp. 352-353.
that in his descriptions of the happy life of the country peasant, the narrator is interested, not so much in contrasting the lives of specific poor people with the lives of specific rich people, as he is in juxtaposing two philosophies of life, a popular theme in eighteenth century literature. Again a comparison with Goldsmith is apposite. In The Traveller Goldsmith described how, after pursuing happiness over half of Europe, he found it amidst the simple life of the village. Likewise in The Borough the narrator develops the weaver as an exemplum of the virtues of the simple country life in order to point out the mistaken belief that happiness always lies elsewhere.

In Letter IX he cites as another example the man who went to India as a young boy to find his fortune. When this man returned to England as a nabob, happiness still eluded him. The narrator again contrasts the poor:

For ease alone, the wealth acquired is spent --
And spent in vain; enrich'd, aggrieve'd, he sees
The envied poor possess'd of joy and ease;
And now he flies from place to place, to gain
Strength for enjoyment, and still flies in vain
(IX. 66-70).

Sometimes the situation is altered slightly so that the poor only appear to be happy through the eyes of another individual. Describing a girls' school, the narrator portrays the young girls "in the smiling summer-eve" when, forced by the school to relax in their rooms, they "behold the poor (whom they conceive the bless'd) / Employ'd for hours, and grieved they cannot rest" (XXIV. 144-147). Here the narrator does not say that the poor are blessed, only that they seem so to the confined girls. He is making the familiar
eighteenth century comment that people in one class always think those in another are happier. The passage also reflects ironically on the girls' logic. They feel sorry that the hard-working poor cannot rest -- not realizing that such "rest" is the very reason they themselves are unhappy.

The narrator's belief that some of the poor are happy cannot be dismissed entirely as sentimentality. The quality of life is an important factor in determining happiness, and the amount of money a man has to spend or the number of his holidays is not necessarily of primary importance if he is employed at a satisfying job in a community where he is a respected member. Crabbe's example of the man who eschewed happiness for years in India to amass a fortune so that he could live at ease in England is pertinent. Such a man has obviously not lived as full a life as the weaver who spends his days at work he enjoys and in amusements which satisfy his curiosity and intellect. No one has made this point more convincingly than "George Bourne" in Change in the Village (1912) and The Wheelwright's Shop (1923) in his comments on the transition from the old-style tradesman with his traditional folk skills to the new-style "hand," working at a job he detests.

Several important critics of today, including F.R. Leavis and D.H. Lawrence, have deplored the loss of "mutuality" amongst the lower classes, and like Crabbe have insisted that the quality of a man's life is more important than his "standard of living."

Crabbe's point that many lower class people lived fuller and richer lives than those amongst the new bourgeoisie and decadent
aristocracy who lived only for the possession of material goods or sensual pleasures is no doubt true. Yet the narrator at times goes to the opposite extreme, and seems to say that all the poor were well cared for. Describing the merchant who is forced to apply for parish aid when he fails in his business, the narrator explains:

If these no pleasures nor enjoyments gain,
Still none their spirits nor their speech restrain;
They sigh at ease, 'mid comforts they complain.
The poor will grieve, the poor will weep and sigh,
Both when they know, and when they know not why;
But we our bounty with such care bestow,
That cause for grieving they shall seldom know
(XVIII. 102-108).

This merchant, once a powerful man in the borough, is hardly typical of the usual person on poor relief. That the parish would take especial care of such people is only to be expected. Like Blaney, the merchant would have "a manner" (today it might be a public school accent) which would establish him as the right sort of person to receive help from his peers in charge of the funds.

When the narrator maintains that the poor are cared for, that the parish bestows a "bounty," in one respect he is correct, since at this period the parish would probably be administering poor relief by the Speenhamland system. Under this system the poor were granted aid as soon as wages dropped below a certain fixed minimum. In one sense all the poor were looked after, since they were guaranteed a certain subsistence level. The difficulty was that the system tended to promote low wages and create large numbers of workers who, even at times of full employment, were forced to take aid from the parish. The result was a demoralized working class.
Yet the narrator makes no mention of these evils; instead he rather smugly insists that the lower classes are well off. As further evidence that the narrator found life amongst the poor relatively comfortable, it will be recalled that in Letter X the poor man's club is described as giving more happiness than the clubs of the rich. Certainly the narrator seems to be the sort of person who would never have bothered to read the Reverend Davies' study of the poor.

Regarding the narrator's opinion of the condition of the poor, the most telling observation of all occurs in Letter IX, when, describing a group of wealthy young people on a boating party, the narrator introduces a "weary rustic" returning home from a day of hard labour:

Who stops and gazes at such joyous crew,
And feels his envy rising at the view;
He the light speech and laugh indignant hears,
And feels more press'd by want, more vex'd by fears
(IX. 175-178).

In many of the other instances cited above one might argue that the narrator was to a certain degree praising the simple life of the poor as a means of correcting the dissatisfied longings of the wealthy. In such cases the reader was not invited to ask whether the poor in fact did live a happy life. But in this example the juxtaposition of the hard working rustic and the care-free rich raises questions of social justice. It will be noted that after meeting the party of rich people the peasant is more "press'd by want," indicating that even ordinarily his life is difficult.

It is all very well to point out that a happy peasant has a better
life than a foolish person of wealth who cannot use his money to advantage, but this argument cannot be used to justify the inequality of opportunity existing between rich and poor. Yet the narrator remains blind to the implications of the meeting between the poor peasant and the party of rich people. While the situation seems to demand some sort of comment on the injustice existing between rich and poor, the narrator rather lamely attempts to pacify the labourer:

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
(IX. 179-192).

The phrase "good fellow," as addressed to the peasant by the narrator, is unpleasantly reminiscent of the worst type of patronage. If the modern reader remains unsatisfied with the narrator's reply, it may be some consolation to know that Crabbe also seemed unsatisfied. At least he added the following footnote as an explanation: "This is not offered as a reasonable source of contentment, but as one motive for resignation: there would not be so much envy if there were more discernment" (IX, n. 5). The footnote suggests that although good grounds exist for the discontent of the poor, they should still remain resigned.
What is particularly bothersome about these passages is that *The Borough* contains so much else which indicates that Crabbe did not believe resignation to be desirable. Certainly he did not advocate resignation as an answer to the problem of the workhouse or to the unhappiness and injustice caused by fraudulent doctors and lawyers. Possibly some of the trouble is caused by the modern reader's twentieth century attitudes to social problems, his belief that social inequalities should be levelled as much as possible. 

*The Borough* of course never suggests that the existence of social injustice is an argument for social levelling. In fact, quite the opposite is true. Discussing the philosophy of the Dissenters, the narrator says:

> Men are not equal, and 'tis meet and right
> That robes and titles our respect excite;
> Order requires it; 'tis by vulgar pride
> That such regard is censured and denied
> (IV. 94-97).

The narrator, and presumably Crabbe as well, seems to endorse Samuel Johnson's much beloved idea of subordination. Blaney, the pornographer, is censured for levelling "every fence which law / And virtue fix to keep the mind in awe" (XIV. 154-155). Crabbe was never one to attempt to abolish class distinctions. In his early years in London Crabbe wrote several begging letters to members of the aristocracy. He obviously hated the thought of begging, but as he recorded in his Journal, he sincerely believed that the aristocracy deserved respect:

> You see, my dear Mira, to what our situation here may reduce us. Yet am I not conscious of losing the dignity becoming a man: some respect is due to the superiority
of station; and that I will always pay, but I cannot flatter or fawn, nor shall my humblest request be so presented.92

If this attitude of passive acceptance of all customs and authority is taken to its logical extreme, the end result must be a state of blind reaction. At this period a great number of people were ready to defend extremist conservative ideas. In one of her dialogues written to protect Britain against encroaching French anarchy, Hannah More defended England's "fences":

Your book tells you that we need obey no government but that of the people; and that we may fashion and alter the government according to our whimsies:

But mine tells me, "Let every one be subject to the higher powers, for all power is of God, the powers that be are ordained of God; whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God."93

At several points in The Borough the narrator seems to be in danger of enunciating a similar doctrine of blind obedience to power. As has been seen, he cheerfully admonishes the "weary rustic" not to worry that he is poor while others are rich. Similarly, at the end of her tragic life of misfortune, Ellen Orford reaches the conclusion that man must submit to everything: "but Ellen Orford knows, / That we

92 Entry for June 6, 1780. Quoted from Life, Ch. iii, p. 79. Yet as is well known, Crabbe's dedications to his poems are usually terribly obsequious. Moreover, with the exception of his first letter to Burke, most of his letters to the great show this same deferential (at times almost "cringing") tone.

93 Hannah More, Village Politics (1793), in The Works of Hannah More (London, 1853), II, 227. This pamphlet was published in 1793 as an attempt to counteract the influence of the ideas of the French revolution. The book which Hannah More refers to is Thomas Paine's Rights of Man. Her quotation is taken from The Epistle to the Romans, XIII, 1,2. The quotation differs slightly in wording from that of the King James version.
should humbly take what Heav'n bestows" (XX. 124-125). The narrator's avowed wish to give a detached observer's view of mankind appears at times to be turning him into a reactionary who opposes all types of change. Before considering how far Crabbe himself endorsed these opinions, I wish to look first at the manner in which Crabbe formulates his criticism of some of the other institutions of the borough.

IX

Because The Borough seems to endorse so many "safe" attitudes to the problems of the early nineteenth century -- the narrator claims that the unequal distribution of wealth is of benefit to the poor -- some of Crabbe's contemporaries were led to believe that his convictions were timid. For instance The Eclectic Review notes that the poem evinces "symptoms of that timid and servile spirit with which by some means or other Mr. Crabbe is infected." Curiously enough, while half this review is devoted to complaints about Crabbe's timidity, the other half condemns him for advancing corrupting principles. The reviewer was horrified by "the numerous instances, in which Mr. Crabbe has certainly not been prompted by an anxiety to employ his influence with the public

94 The Eclectic Review, VI (1810), 549.
in assisting the cause of virtue." 95 To condemn Crabbe for being both too daring and too timid seems a bit inconsistent.

Like many people who considered themselves progressives, this reviewer became angry when he found that Crabbe did not attack the proper things in the prescribed manner. Crabbe's refusal to endorse the status quo in the church is a good example of the type of criticism which the reviewer found unacceptable. As this example reveals something of Crabbe's unusual method of attack, it warrants a moment's notice. In Letter III Crabbe mocked the vicar while praising the curate, 96 leaving the reader with the distinct impression that their positions should be reversed, since the curate was the worthier man. 97 This situation by itself might have been acceptable, but what particularly annoyed the reviewer for The Eclectic Review was the fault Crabbe found in the vicar -- that he was not man enough, that he was too much a "male lily." Crabbe had addressed the vicar:

Ye lilies male! think (as your tea you sip,  
While the town small-talk flows from lip to lip;  
Intrigues half-gather'd, conversation-scrapes,  
Kitchen-cabals, and nursery-mishaps)  
If the vast world may not some scene produce,  
Some state, where your small talents might have use,  
Within seraglios you might harmless move,

95 The Eclectic Review, VI (1810), 557.

96 The discrepancy between the salaries of curates and those of the dignitaries of the church was often commented on by Radical reformers. See Thomas Paine, Rights of Man, Part I (London, 1792), p. 34.

97 Furthermore it is known that Crabbe himself was fully aware of the criticism implicit in his discussion of the curate and vicar. As he mentions in the Preface, the section on the curate was first composed to be read before a literary society for the express purpose of showing that poor clergymen required greater assistance. Poems by George Crabbe, I, 270.
'Mid ranks of beauty, and in haunts of love;
There from too daring man the treasures guard,
An easy duty, and its own reward;
Nature's soft substitutes, you there might save
From crime the tyrant, and from wrong the slave

(III. 69-80).

That Crabbe should apply to the vicar such a phrase as "nature's soft substitutes," with all its latent implications of homosexuality, profoundly shocked the reviewer. He felt that Crabbe might have been justified in attacking a man of the church had he been a reprobate, an outrage to religion, but he could not understand why Crabbe wished to criticize the vicar for being impotent (in all senses of the word).

The reviewer for The Christian Observer was also puzzled how to treat the sketch. He confessed that the vicar amused him, but suggested that Crabbe should have been more delicate:

We hate illiberality, and are not so narrow as to maintain, that every thing in which religion is concerned must be discussed with a solemn air and a grave countenance; but when a Christian and a clergyman has occasion to describe a gross neglect of every Christian duty, an utter disregard of the clerical functions, an insensibility even to clerical decorum, and the death of an unregenerate sinner, we at least expect him to mingle with his satire some gravity of censure, and some fervour of compassion.98

Although Crabbe's portrayal of the vicar began innocently enough, it soon aroused suspicions in the minds of the orthodox. Was it right to laugh at a representative of the church? If the curate really was the better man, might not people begin to ask whether the church was not in need of reform? The reviewer felt that Crabbe

98 The Christian Observer, X (1811), 505.
had invested the character of the vicar with such a degree of triviality that the sketch might well become dangerous to the interests of the church (in other words, the established interests of the Church of England). But surely Crabbe's point is justified, for the ineffective are as worthy of criticism as those who are deliberately immoral.

Given his own position in the Church of England, it is perhaps surprising to find Crabbe criticizing the church at all. Then too, when one considers the temper of the times (The Borough was published in 1810, in the midst of government repression of all criticism of church and government), Crabbe's attack seems all the more remarkable. At this time any person speaking against either church or government was automatically labelled a traitor and Jacobin.

Although some of Crabbe's readers may have felt uneasy about his attack on the church, none of them challenged Crabbe with being a traitor. Part of the reason for this no doubt lies in Crabbe's reputation as a "safe" vicar of the Church of England. But Crabbe's contemporaries also saw that his criticisms were not

99 This review was the cause of an argument between Crabbe and the editor. Crabbe's son says that the dispute arose over Crabbe's "Letter on Sects," and aroused a controversy "which appeared likely to become public." See Life, Ch. ix, pp. 198-199. He attempts to minimize the dispute, but clearly Crabbe's type of Christianity was far different from the orthodox views of The Christian Observer.

100 In 1801 Thomas Spence (1750-1814) was fined £50 and sent to prison for twelve months. His crime was that he recommended the abolition of private property in his pamphlet, The Restorer of Society to its Natural State (c. 1803). As a clergyman Crabbe had to be [Contd.
of the usual anti-establishment harangues, and because of this, they found it difficult to be angry with him for the usual reasons. Criticisms of the establishment were invariably pitched in slightly hysterical terms, stressing the malevolence of church and king. For the most part criticism of this type was probably untrue. The leaders of the country were repressive,\textsuperscript{101} but not intentionally wicked. They were too uninterested, too ineffectual to be otherwise.\textsuperscript{102} At this period George III was fast approaching insanity and the Prince Regent, with all his dissipation, could hardly have been less interested in the affairs of government. Crabbe saw clearly that the real enemy was not the malevolence of the powerful, but their impotence. His attacks on establishment figures are invariably on this ground. Instead of attempting to blast the establishment from without, Crabbe's poetry has the effect of undermining from within.

This technique can be seen, not only in the Letter on religion, but in the Letters on hospitals and alms-houses as well. To an early nineteenth century reader, Crabbe's borough must have

Contd.]
careful of what he said and did. In a letter to Miss Charter he explained how one of his parishioners had rebuked him for attending a play given by a company of comedians. See Letter to Miss Charter, August 23, 1815, in The Romance of an Elderly Poet, p. 102.

\textsuperscript{101}The repressive actions of these years culminated in 1819 in Peterloo and the Six Acts.

\textsuperscript{102}When F.M. Eden pressed his friend William Pitt to read his monumental work, The State of the Poor, Pitt finally gave the work to the brilliant young Canning to read. Canning spent his time parodying the bizarre names he found in the appendix. See J.L. & Barbara Hammond, The Village Labourer, p. 210.
seemed amazingly well supplied with welfare institutions. It has a system of parish out-relief, a private alms-house, lifeboats, a modern gaol and a hospital. If Chadwick's commissioners had investigated the borough, no doubt they would have received a favourable impression. Crabbe asks the interested observer to inspect the borough's pleasant alms-house:

Leave now our streets, and in yon plain behold
Those pleasant seats for the reduced and old;
A merchant's gift, whose wife and children died,
When he to saving all his powers applied
(XIII. 1-4).

But is this first impression of a benevolent and well-endowed alms-house borne out by the facts? Several things suggest that it is not. The first point to arouse suspicion is that the alms-house is not the gift of a magnanimous squire, but of an eccentric old man. Crabbe acknowledges that the benefactor was genuinely interested in helping other people, but he carefully points out that the benefactor built the alms-house while starving himself. This description of the eccentric bears a strong resemblance to the life of Thomas Day, the author of Sandford and Merton, who also had a taste "to give and spare."

Of course there was nothing wrong with someone like Day eccentrically wishing to live penuriously, while devoting all his money to charity. Robert Lovell Edgeworth has said that Day "was the most virtuous human being" he had ever known. And

103 Edwin Chadwick's Poor Law Commission of the early 1830's.
104 "Thomas Day" in the DNB.
Crabbe by no means condemns the merchant who lives Day's sort of life in order to build an alms-house. But Crabbe's picture of the benefactor is by no means the normal picture of the well-balanced country gentleman setting aside a portion of his income for the poor. In order for this alms-house to be built, one man had to deprive himself of everything.

Leaving aside for the moment the benefactor's eccentricities, one must admit that he created an admirable alms-house based on sound and generous principles:

Within the row are men who strove in vain,
Through years of trouble, wealth and ease to gain;
Less must they have than an appointed sum,
And freemen been, or hither must not come;
They should be decent and command respect
(Though needing fortune,) whom these doors protect,
And should for thirty dismal years have tried
For peace unfelt and competence denied
(XIII. 62-69).

Even Malthus would probably not have objected to such deserving people receiving a pension in recompense for a lifetime of effort. But again Crabbe disappoints those of his readers who were looking for confirmation of their belief that all was well with society. He once more develops the theme of the difference between appearance and reality when he shows how the practice of the alms-house differs from its precepts.

The success or failure of alms-houses depended almost wholly on their governors. The usual reason for their failure, and certainly the reason cited by Crabbe, was a lack of proper control at the administrative level. In Crabbe's house the original founder
had tried to prevent corruption by ruling that six guardian-directors were to administer its affairs at all times. In theory this idea seems excellent, but in Crabbe's version the original founder is succeeded by Sir Denys, a less than exemplary director. Yet Crabbe's portrayal of Sir Denys is of such a kind that people could accept the condemnation without feeling that Crabbe was a traitorous radical reformer. Sir Denys is not vicious or cruel; typical of many such autocrats, he is only inept. In a letter to Mary Leadbeater, Crabbe remarked that Sir Denys was "the nearest to real life" of all his characters. Sir Denys is the type of upper-class person who refuses to listen to evidence, but forces his own ill-thought-out opinions on the rest of the community by dint of brute force. Well-intentioned though he may have been, Sir Denys' inability to form judgments on the evidence produced must have made him appear an arbitrary monarch to the poor over whom he ruled:

View then this picture of a noble mind:
Let him be wise, magnanimous, and kind;
What was the wisdom? Was it not the frown
That keeps all question, all inquiry down?
His words were powerful and decisive all;
But his slow reasons came for no man's call.
"'Tis thus," he cried, no doubt with kind intent,
To give results and spare all argument.
(XIII. 132-139).

105 This idea of designating a number of directors to look after the affairs of the alms-house was widely followed in the workhouses as well. Thus Crabbe's alms-house is representative of the type of control imposed on a great many institutions for the poor.

106 Letter to Mary Leadbeater, December 1, 1816. Quoted from Life, Ch. ix, p. 232.
In order to show that Sir Denys is exactly the sort of man to gain the public's approbation, Crabbe develops a rhetorical structure in which the "voice of the public" is allowed to speak. The public is wildly enthusiastic about the various amenities that Sir Denys has given the town:

He raised the room that towers above the street,  
A public room where grateful parties meet;  
He first the life-boat plann'd; to him the place  
Is deep in debt -- 'twas he reviv'd the race;  
To every public act this hearty friend  
Would give with freedom or with frankness lend;  
His money built the jail, nor prisoner yet  
Sits at his ease, but he must feel the debt  
(XIII. 148-155).

Crabbe agrees with the public voice that in many ways Sir Denys is an admirable person, but the irony inherent in the repeated comment that the borough is "deep in debt" to Sir Denys reveals that the town may owe him more than just a debt of gratitude. They may owe him hard cash. That the "public voice" speaks these lines and not Crabbe or his narrator also indicates Crabbe's lack of complete approval of Sir Denys. The point is not that Crabbe disdains the public actions of Sir Denys; in fact he says, "I grant the whole, nor from one deed retract" (XIII. 159). But the emphasis upon these public actions has obscured the real character of Sir Denys, and has perhaps misled many people in their evaluation of his contribution to the community. Again Crabbe is asking the reader to make a sophisticated evaluation of a borough community; to do this one must step behind the external appearances of the borough to observe the real motives governing the actions of the borough rulers.
Our final opinion of Sir Denys depends to a large extent on the opinion we form of his directorship of the alms-house. Only in the following three Letters, when Crabbe shows how Sir Denys filled the vacancies in the alms-house, do we see some of the results of Sir Denys' term as director:

Three seats were vacant while Sir Denys reign'd;
And three such favourites their admission gain'd;
These let us view, still more to understand
The moral feelings of Sir Denys Brand
(XIII. 336-339).

Crabbe obviously meant his readers to form an opinion of "the moral feelings" of Sir Denys from his choice of the three inmates, and to judge the effectiveness of the alms-house by the type of person for whom it catered. The people whom Sir Denys chooses are certainly an odd group: Blaney, "a wealthy Heir, dissipated, and reduced to Poverty"; Clelia, a frivolous woman of pleasure; and Benbow, a literary descendant of Shakespeare's Bardolph. In permitting such people a place in the alms-house, Sir Denys has destroyed its original plan. The founder had meant it to be a place of refuge for those persons who went bankrupt in spite of their best efforts; Sir Denys has turned the house into a home for the dissipated upper classes. Yet as Crabbe acknowledges, Sir Denys is not a bad man; like the vicar, he is incapable of acting in the best interests of the community.

In his portrait of Sir Denys, Crabbe manages to overturn some of the conventional judgments of his time. In a Frances Burney novel, Sir Denys would have been portrayed as a vain but good man. In The Borough he becomes an insidious force weakening
society. On the other hand, Laughton, who succeeds Sir Denys in the position of guardian of the alms-house, is the sort of character generally portrayed in contemporary literature as dangerous:

At length, with power endued and wealthy grown,
Frailties and passions, long suppress'd, were shown;
Then, to provoke him was a dangerous thing;
His pride would punisb, and his temper sting;
His powerful hatred sought the avenging hour,
And his proud vengeance struck with all his power (XIII. 286-291).

In a Richardson novel, Laughton would have been portrayed as the arrogant and ruthless Sir Hargrave Pollexfen -- a man with no redeeming features. Yet Crabbe shows Laughton, with respect to the alms-house, fulfilling his duties: "He never to this quiet mansion sends / Subject unfit, in compliment to friends" (XIII. 326-327). Because of Laughton's ambition and cruelty, one would expect Crabbe to condemn him as a cause of social injustice. On the contrary, in this respect Laughton becomes an object of praise.

Crbbe's technique is to begin by pretending to be on one side of a question and then surreptitiously to change sides. In the case of the alms-house, he begins by praising its principles but then reveals that its function controverts these principles. While the alms-house is supposed to have six Guardians, Crabbe shows that: "Numbers are call'd to govern, but in fact / Only the powerful and assuming act" (XIII. 231-232). Superficially the alms-house may look like a model poorhouse; in fact it is ruled by two

107 Sir Charles Grandison (1754).
successive tyrants --- Sir Denys and Laughton. Neither is compassionate, and the best one can say for Laughton is that he does not send the wrong sort of person to the house. Systematically, while seeming to do the opposite, Crabbe demolishes our good opinion of the borough's alms-house -- society's ideal of the charitable institution.

If we can imagine the Poor Law Commissioners being pleased with the alms-house, then they would probably have been ecstatic over their tour of the hospital. In the records it would be recorded as the gift of a generous individual. The natural conclusion would be that once again man's Christian love for his brother had triumphed over self-interest. Chadwick would have noted that here was an instance where man felt responsible for those less fortunate than himself. Certainly the opening lines of the Letter suggest that the narrator wishes to see the hospital as the product of such charity:

An ardent spirit dwells with Christian love,
The eagle's vigour in the pitying dove;

... Hence yonder building rose

(XVII. 1-13).

Crabbe's purpose in exposing the two tyrants is similar to that of Samuel Bamford when he says: "I believe the dandy despots of our country often exceed the bounds prescribed by justice; were they more narrowly watched and exposed, as often as they deserve, their little dirty actions would not, at all events, so frequently shame the face of day." An Account of the Arrest and Imprisonment of Samuel Bamford... Written by Himself (Manchester, 1817), in The Autobiography of Samuel Bamford, ed. W.H. Chaloner (London, 1967), I, 332.
But is the word "hence" appropriate?

At first the narrator seems to indicate that it is, but when the question is asked, "How rose the building?" the answer reveals a different situation. True enough, the idea of the hospital was conceived by a genuinely pious man. But this man required finance, and so turned for help to a second man, a person filled with remorse for his ungenerous treatment of a brother. He contributes to the hospital as an act of penance. The third man to contribute is one who:

\[
\text{never grieves} \\
\text{For love that wounds or friendship that deceives;} \\
\text{His patient soul endures what Heav'n ordains,} \\
\text{But neither feels nor fears ideal pains} \\
\text{(XVII. 202-205).}
\]

And the fourth man to help is a type of utilitarian who gives funds to the hospital in order to balance his debit side of the ledger with God.

Crayze of course never criticizes these men for helping to build the hospital. The end is worthwhile:

\[
\text{Such are the guardians of this bless'd estate;} \\
\text{Whate'er without, they're praised within the gate;} \\
\text{That they are men, and have their faults, is true,} \\
\text{But here their worth alone appears in view:} \\
\text{The Muse indeed, who reads the very breast,} \\
\text{Has something of the secrets there express'd,} \\
\text{But yet in charity; -- and, when she sees} \\
\text{Such means for joy or comfort, health or ease,} \\
\text{And knows how much united minds effect,} \\
\text{She almost dreads their failings to detect;} \\
\text{But truth commands: -- in man's erroneous kind,} \\
\text{Virtues and frailties mingle in the mind;} \\
\text{Happy, when fears to public spirit move,} \\
\text{And even vices to the work of love!} \\
\text{(XVII. 264-277).}
\]
The point is that Crabbe wished to show that much of what passed with the public for pure charity was actually inspired by rather base motives. The hospital, which at the beginning of the poem was portrayed as the essence of Christian love, on closer examination is seen to be the result of mixed motives. The structure of the Letter suggests a continual movement away from perfection. At the beginning of the Letter, the narrator gives the view of the optimistic Christian who believes that Christian charity was transforming the injustices of British society. But the progression of the poem reveals that the highly praised Christian charity plays only a small role in the building of the hospital.

As a priest of the Church of England one of Crabbe's duties was to care for the sick, and thus he must have come to learn a great deal about the working of hospitals. When he visited Edinburgh in 1822, Crabbe was more interested in the Royal Infirmary and Bedlam than in the "historic sights" — much to the surprise of Lockhart who served as his guide:

Mr. Crabbe repeated his visits several times to the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh, and expressed great admiration of the manner in which the patients were treated. He also examined pretty minutely the interior of the Bedlam. I went with him both to the Castle and Queen Mary's apartment in Holyrood House; but he did not appear to care much about either. \(^{109}\)

Crabbe's knowledge of the social welfare institutions of his day was obviously fairly extensive, and one might have expected him to load his poems with minutiae. However he rarely develops his sketches of these institutions in any detail, since he prefers to

\(^{109}\)Letter from J. Gibson Lockhart to Crabbe's son, December 26, 1833. Quoted from Life, Ch. ix, p. 278.
emphasize their relation to the people they shelter and the people who help to build them.

If Crabbe had set out to show that the wealthy cared little for the poor, and that their much vaunted charity was only a salve to their own conscience, he would have been labelled a dangerous rebel. At this time many people were ready to join with Hannah More in singing hymns of praise to Britain's justice and humanity:

The French and we contending for liberty, Tom, is just as if thou and I were to pretend to run a race; thou to set out from the starting-post when I am in already; thou to have all the ground to travel, when I have reached the end. Why, we've got it, man! we've no race to run! we're there already!\[110\]

Very much in keeping with this optimism, Crabbe begins the Letter on Hospitals by allowing the narrator to present and praise this optimistic outlook. Although the narrator never loses his optimism, as the poem unfolds Crabbe reveals slowly that perhaps the optimism is unwarranted. I would suggest that in the light of the rest of the Letter, the opening lines in praise of charity become parody — parody of the facile optimism of the sort indulged in by Hannah More. To have criticized openly the institutions of Britain would have left Crabbe vulnerable to censure, and would have occasioned the confirmed patriots to sing "O the roast beef of Old England" all the more fervently. As an alternative, Crabbe practised the technique of attacking while seeming to praise.

\[110\]Hannah More, Village Politics, in Works, II, 228.
X

In a famous statement some years after the publication of *The Borough*, Byron said, "The truth is, that in these days the grand 'primum mobile' of England is cant; cant political, cant poetical, cant religious, cant moral; but always cant, multiplied through all the varieties of life."^111^ Whereas Byron understood and took the risk involved in tilting at the sacred cows of respectability, Crabbe chose to oppose this cant by pretending to say what was respectable, while in actual fact describing the opposite. During the first three decades of the nineteenth century, the pressure on writers to conform in their writings to certain conventions and styles was tremendous.^112^ Crabbe himself mentions "that great Blockhead the public," the censor of literature as well as conduct. He once defined the public as that "virtuous Monster, so delicate in its Apprehensions, so severe in its Judgment and so depraved in its own Indulgences."^113^ In order to obtain a hearing for his social ideas in the face of the "virtuous Monster," Crabbe developed the technique in which one voice in the poem is made to contradict another.

It has already been remarked how the narrator at several points in the poem appears to hold reactionary, or at least conservative views about the poor. I would suggest that many of


the sketches Crabbe offers of the poor overtly contradict the narrator's comments. Inevitably when the narrator remarks how well-off the poor appear, the following sketch proves the opposite to be true. At the beginning of Letter XVIII (already discussed in relation to the workhouse), the narrator describes the poor and the parish out-relief in fairly glowing terms. Yet before the end of the Letter is reached, this comfortable belief that the poor are well provided for is suddenly dispelled when the narrator turns to describe "the narrow row," where the poor live in terrible conditions. Interestingly enough this division of the Letter into two parts -- the first describing the poor who are comfortably off, and the second describing the poor in miserable conditions -- mirrors the same type of division which has already been noted in *The Village* and Part I of "The Parish Register."

In "The Parish Register" Crabbe had beckoned the reader to follow him into the poor sections of town where most people refused to go: "Come! search within, nor sight nor smell regard; / The true physician walks the foulest ward" (I. 212-213). In the second half of Letter XVIII of *The Borough* he also emphasizes that what he is about to describe is the little known side of life amongst the poor: "Here our reformers come not; none object / To paths polluted, or upbraid neglect" (XVIII. 274-275). In order for the parish to distribute poor relief effectively, the overseers were supposed to visit the poor. Crabbe is pointing out that since few officials bothered with the visits, consequently little was
known about those who were seriously and chronically poor.  

Whereas at the beginning of the Letter the narrator had implied that the poor were happy and well cared for, the descriptions of the poor at the end of the Letter indicate that they live a life which is apart from and relatively unknown to the rich. The fisherwoman is a good example:

But fearless yonder matron; she disdains
To sigh for zephyrs from ambrosial plains;
But mends her meshes torn, and pours her lay
All in the stifling fervour of the day.

Her naked children round the alley run,
And, roll'd in dust, are bronzed beneath the sun;
Or gambol round the dame, who, loosely dress'd,
Woos the coy breeze, to fan the open breast

(XVIII. 310-317).

As a young girl, she had been clean, decent and modest. But when she married a sailor, and had to live amidst the uproar of the row, she soon assumed habits fit for the row:

But, when a wife, she lost her former care,
Nor thought on charms, nor time for dress could spare;
Careless she found her friends who dwelt beside;
No rival beauty kept alive her pride:
Still in her bosom virtue keeps her place;
But decency is gone, the virtues' guard and grace

(XVIII. 322-327).

People such as this fisherwoman were not included in the "consciousness" of the eighteenth century gentleman. Crabbe's own visits to the homes of the poor had shown him a section of the poor that was virtually unknown to the average educated Englishman, and was to

114 Compare Samuel Bamford's statement: "That the gentry, or what were called the higher classes were too proud, or too indifferent to examine minutely into the abodes of poverty and distress, and that many of them were interested in returning a false or partial statement of things." An Account of the Arrest and Imprisonment of Samuel Bamford ... Written by Himself, in The Autobiography, I, 358.
remain so for at least several more decades. As Crabbe's son comments: "At Statham, and at all his successive country residences, my father continued to practice his original profession [of apothecary] among such poor people as chose to solicit his aid . . . . He grudged no personal fatigue to attend the sick bed of the peasant, in the double capacity of physician and priest."^{115}

The description of the tenement belies all the narrator's former optimism. Indeed the tenement is introduced as a contrast to the workhouse, for the tenement is also a large building, but without any of the good points of the workhouse. Crabbe criticizes strongly the man who bought the building cheaply after the former owner's bankruptcy and converted it into rooms for the very poor:

Nor will he sell, repair, or take it down;  
'Tis his -- what cares he for the talk of town?  
"No! he will let it to the poor -- a home  
Where he delights to see the creatures come."  
"They may be thieves;" -- "Well, so are richer men;" --  
"Or idlers, cheats, or prostitutes;" -- "What then?" --  
"Outcasts pursued by justice, vile and base;" --  
"They need the more his pity and the place."  
Convert to system his vain mind has built,  
He gives asylum to deceit and guilt  
(XVIII. 334-343).  

The criticism rests on the same grounds as that in The Village: such buildings allow the poorest and worst members of society to live together. The same point, in almost the same terms, is made in "The Parish Register" (I. 204-211). It seems unclear whether Crabbe is attacking the greed of this man in renting the house or his lack of sense in bringing so many vicious and disorderly people

^{115}Life, Ch. vi, p. 130.
together. Probably it is something of both.

The effect of this extended description of the filth of "the dusty row," is to overpower the narrator's previously optimistic remarks. In addition, the sketch incorporates several scathing allusions to the Goldsmith-like optimism of the earlier part of the Letter. In his description of the tenement the narrator says:

Above the fire, the mantel-shelf contains
Of china-ware some poor unmatch'd remains;
There many a tea-cup's gaudy fragment stands,
All placed by vanity's unwearied hands
(XVIII. 392-395).

This passage contains an obvious reference to Goldsmith's: "While broken tea-cups, wisely kept for shew, / Ranged o'er the chimney, glistened in a row" (Deserted Village lines 235-236). Where Goldsmith had used the teacups as a sign of the owner's frugality and industry, Crabbe allowed the cracked teacups to represent the broken lives of the poor.

The reason Crabbe can state at one moment that the poor are well cared for, and at the next, that they live in terrible conditions, is because he continually alters the focus of the poem. When the narrator praises the life of the poor, he is speaking of the "worthy poor," those who were respectable. But when he describes their miserable lot, he turns to people who were generally

116 Robert Southey, in Colloquy VII notes that many children work in manufactories "six days out of the seven, from morning till night," and asks, "Is it likely that the little they learn at school on the seventh, (which ought to be their day of recreation as well as rest,) should counteract the effects of such an education, when the moral atmosphere wherein they live and move and have their being, is as noxious to the soul, as the foul and tainted air which they inhale is to their bodily constitution?" Sir Thomas More: or Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society (London, 1829), I, 166.
totally ignored by even the most advanced and progressive thinkers of the day. One finds that even people such as Francis Jeffrey, who liked to think of themselves as reformers, were unable to accept that paupers and vagabonds were "worthy" of literary representation. Robert Southey noted the way people generally regarded the United Kingdom and its poor as being unrelated:

Understand me! I admit that improvements of the utmost value have been made, in the most important concerns: but I deny that the melioration has been general; and insist, on the contrary, that a considerable portion of the people are in a state, which, as relates to their physical condition, is greatly worsened, and, as touching their intellectual nature, is assuredly not improved.

When talking of the nation, and its giant strides in commerce and industry, most people commonly forgot about "the poor," the people composing one-half to three-quarters of the population of the United Kingdom.

As an example of the way in which Crabbe is able to use this implicit division of England into two nations, compare his description of the tenement with some lines from a scrap of verse Goldsmith included in The Citizen of the World:

A window patch'd with paper lent a ray,  
That dimly shew'd the state in which he lay;  
The sanded floor that grits beneath the tread;  
The humid wall with paltry pictures spread:

It will be recalled that Henry Fielding, one of the great humanitarians of the eighteenth century, utterly dismissed the vagabonds as beneath his notice.

Robert Southey, Sir Thomas More: or, Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society, Colloquy III, I, 46. Crabbe's son felt it necessary to apologize for recounting that part of Crabbe's life in which he lived obscurely in the country. See Life, Ch. vi, pp. 131-132.
The royal game of goose was there in view,
And the twelve rules the royal martyr drew;
The seasons fram'd with listing found a place,
And brave prince William shew'd his lamp-black face:
The morn was cold, he views with keen desire
The rusty grate, unconscious of a fire:
With beer and milk arrears the frieze was scor'd, 119
And five crack'd tea cups dress'd the chimney board.

Crabbe's description is too long to quote in full, but it begins:

That window view! -- oil'd paper and old glass
Stain the strong rays, which, though impeded, pass,

That floor, once oak, now pieced with fir unplaned,
Or, where not pieced, in places bored and stain'd;
That wall, once whiten'd, now an odious sight,

Where'er the floor allows an even space,
Chalking and marks of various games have place;

Above the fire, the mantel-shelf contains
Of china-ware some poor unmatch'd remains;
There many a tea-cup's gaudy fragment stands,
All placed by vanity's unwearied hands
(XVIII. 354-395).

When one compares the two passages, the similarity is seen to be
obvious and striking.120 What makes the comparison even more
interesting is that Goldsmith offers his verse as an example of the
way poetry should not be written! Goldsmith does not mention why
he felt such poetry to be ludicrous, but no doubt he believed the
house too mean to serve as an object of imitation. Crabbe treats
the same subject seriously, and so introduces to literature a new-

Works of Oliver Goldsmith, II, 129.

120. The first time this similarity between the two
passages was noted in print was in The Cambridge History of English
Literature (London, 1932), XI, 143.
found concern for the decadent and unrespectable sections of society.

Many of Crabbe's readers found themselves objecting to such scenes in Crabbe's poetry as being "low." Jeffrey was clearly puzzled by his reaction to the tenement. He recognized the quality of the poetry: "There is not, perhaps, in all English poetry a more complete and highly finished piece of painting . . . ." But he also felt that the sketch of the tenement was unnecessary: "The graphic powers of Mr. Crabbe, indeed, are too frequently wasted on unworthy subjects." But when one asks what were the worthy subjects Jeffrey wished to substitute, they turn out to be the good people and good scenes of the borough. Like Goldsmith, Jeffrey thought certain classes of people were eternally debarred from entering true poetry. Such people were, "the depraved, abject, diseased and neglected poor, -- creatures in whom every thing amiable or respectable has been extinguished by sordid passions or brutal debauchery." Jeffrey could not forgive Crabbe for giving his best poetry to the worst people and places. But this optimistic belief in a happy and contented lower class was only tenable if one took all one's examples from the respectable section. And since "polite society" recognized only these "worthy poor," and never saw the "unworthy poor" discussed in literature, it was

121 The Edinburgh Review, XVI (1810), 47.
122 The Edinburgh Review, XVI (1810), 38.
123 In Bleak House Dickens satirized this upper class belief that the very poor should be kept apart (and in subjection) when he showed how the court refused to allow Jo, the crossing sweeper, to give testimony because he did not know his catechism. Thomas Hood in his poem "The Bridge of Sighs" (1844) emphasized the need to see all people, even the poor woman who committed suicide, as equal human beings. See The Works of Thomas Hood, IX, 204-208.
not difficult for the myth about the happy poor to be sustained. The only way for Crabbe to dispel the myth was to portray what Jeffrey called "those festering heaps of moral filth and corruption." And this he did -- to the consternation of many.

Many of Crabbe's readers, Jeffrey included, failed to understand that these graphic sketches of people and places -- the tenement, for instance -- play a structural role in the poem, forming an ironic contrast to the narrator's glib optimism. The total effect of The Borough depends on the juxtaposition of life as the narrator would like to have it -- the conventional view that England's constitution was the best possible -- and Crabbe's realization of the horror and misery which lay below the surface of respectable society. But of course early nineteenth century life in a borough such as Crabbe's was not all poverty and misery, and Crabbe would have been incorrect had he shown it to be so. Crabbe's great merit as a social poet lies in his ability to allow his readers to see the bad aspects of society without denying their good counterparts. To deny or ignore Crabbe's representation of the tenement as being unsuitable to poetry is to fall prey to the great nineteenth century sin of cant. The Letter, which begins as a panegyric on the state of the poor, ends with the lines:

High hung at either end, and next the wall,
Two ancient mirrors show the forms of all,
In all their force; -- these aid them in their dress,
But, with the good, the evils too express,
Doubling each look of care, each token of distress
(XVIII. 404-408).

And Crabbe's poetry has the effect of these strange mirrors -- mirrors in which he portrays the good, but doubles "each look of care."

124 The Edinburgh Review, XVI (1810), 38.
Crabbe's ability to portray social situations in which the social criticism plays a subordinate role to the demands of artistic and psychological representation is a measure of his greatness as an artist. "Peter Grimes" offers an excellent example of implicit social criticism, in spite of, or perhaps because of, the narrator's objective reporting. At first sight "Peter Grimes" may appear to contain little, if any, social criticism. The central concern is with the story of Peter, and how he became an amoral person. Peter's nearest relation is to the villain of the gothic tale, someone without a social conscience, who feels no responsibility for friends or relations. Whereas the gothic novelist was anxious to show the villain as an aberration, someone outside the pale of humanity, Crabbe never condemns Peter. In fact Crabbe's attitude to Peter is difficult to define. On this subject, Howard Mills notes: "Crabbe never 'sums up' Grimes: he avoids analysing motives and impulses, suggesting that his cruelty is inexplicable in those terms and so even more horrifying."125

It is interesting to note that in Letter XX Crabbe compares his own work with that of the gothic novelists which was so popular at this period. Crabbe says:

To me, it seems, their females and their men
Are but the creatures of the author's pen;
Nay, creatures borrow'd and again convey'd
From book to book -- the shadows of a shade.
Life, if they'd search, would show them many a change,
The ruin sudden and the misery strange!

125 Howard Mills, George Crabbe, p. xxx.
With more of grievous, base, and dreadful things,
Than novelists relate or poet sings

(XX. 17-24).

Novelists such as Ann Radcliffe only toyed with the misery and
horror in which they indulged their characters; Crabbe attempted
to reveal that in both psychological and physical terms no one was
immune from the world of the bizarre and the macabre.

Like the villain in a gothic novel, Peter is cruel:

With greedy eye he look's 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

(XXII. 40-43).

Unlike the villain in a novel, who is in opposition to the law,
Peter finds that the law implicitly sanctions his cruelty. When
Peter decides that he needs someone to help with his fishing, a
person whom he can totally control, he does not have to turn kid-
napper and place his victim under lock and key. He simply applies
to a workhouse for an apprentice:

But no success could please his cruel soul,
He wish'd for one to trouble and control;
He wanted some obedient boy to stand
And bear the blow of his outrageous hand;
And hoped to find in some propitious hour
A feeling creature subject to his power.

Peter had heard there were in London then --
Still have they being! -- workhouse-clearing men,
Who, undisturb'd by feelings just or kind,
Would parish-boys to needy tradesmen bind;
They in their want a trifling sum would take,
And toiling slaves of piteous orphans make

(XXII. 53-64).

If Peter were a conventional fictional character, the novelist would
have condemned him as an outrage against mankind. Crabbe's
presentation shows that Peter's attitudes and assumptions are little
different from those of his countrymen.
The reader's first reaction to Peter's desire for a slave is to think that it must be wrong. But the narrator's matter-of-fact tone makes this seemingly easy condemnation extremely difficult. Peter's method of obtaining a slave is made to appear quite ordinary. A contemporary of Crabbe, with any knowledge of parish poor law practice, would have seen at once that Peter's desire for an apprentice-slave was not at all extraordinary.

The modern reader, unaware of the reasons for the extensive practice of apprenticing adopted in the late eighteenth century, may well miss some of the important implications of the tale unless a short explanation is given. M. Dorothy George notes:

"Apprenticeship, in one of its many forms, was still in the eighteenth century the most general way of giving a child a start in life."¹²⁶ In theory this system of apprenticeship was praiseworthy, since children were taught a trade; in practice it broke down badly. Until 1691 the Law of Settlement stated explicitly that children gained a settlement in the parish in which they were found. However the Act of 1691 created a new means by which parishes could free themselves from the onerous care of vagabond, bastard and pauper children. It recognized that a person having served an apprenticeship of at least forty days gained a settlement in the parish of his apprenticeship.¹²⁷ Dr. Burn described how, as a result of this new ruling, the overseers of populous parishes


¹²⁷ London Life in the XVIIIth Century, p. 224.
(especially those of London) made it their special object "to bind out poor children apprentices, no matter to whom, or to what trade, but to take especial care that the master lived in another parish." 

Of course not all cases of apprenticeship were of this type. Many businessmen and artisans took on apprentices with a genuine desire to teach them a trade. But by the end of the eighteenth century, when the poor rates were causing increasing concern, overseers had for some time been using the apprentice system as a means of disposing of large numbers of unwanted children.

The system was of course open to a vast amount of abuse. Because the parish officers were not interested in the welfare of the child, the poor apprentice had few, if any, safeguards. M. Dorothy George notes: "Any person, master or journeyman, man or woman, housekeeper or lodger, who would undertake to provide food, lodging and instruction, sometimes also clothes, medicines and washing, could take an apprentice, all the earnings of the apprentice, whether for the master or a third person, being the property of the master." 

What is perhaps more surprising than the abuses of the system is the way in which normally humanitarian people allowed the system to continue. Professor George points out that the great 


129 M. Dorothy George notes that there were in general two types of apprentices. The first was apprentice for education, and the second, apprentice for labour. It was in the second category that the overseers managed to dispose of unwanted children. Crabbe, it will be recalled, began his working life as an apprentice to a surgeon. Although he was supposed to have been an apprentice for education, his first master treated him as though he were an apprentice for labour.

defects of the apprentice system were widely known and accepted. From the beginning of the eighteenth century one can find a series of angry outcries against the bad treatment of apprentices. How was it then that the system remained unchanged? Ordinary people, even ordinary people of the eighteenth century, are not naturally cruel to children. The problem was to find a better system of "setting the poor on work." As no one could suggest a simpler method of employing all the unwanted children, the system of apprenticing remained. Thus the majority of people found themselves accepting the bad treatment of apprentices and even their mysterious disappearances. "The disappearance of an apprentice was too common a thing to provoke suspicion."

In his model factory at New Lanark, Robert Owen was one of the first people to refuse apprentice children; that he was still able to make a profit surprised everyone.

In developing Peter Grimes's cruelty to his apprentice boys, Crabbe was able to draw on his readers' common knowledge of the evils of the system. As M. Dorothy George notes, some of the cases of cruelty to apprentices, especially that of the notorious


134 Owen was one of the initiators of the first Factory Act of 1819. Amongst other reforms he wanted to prohibit the labour of young children.
Mrs. Brownrigg, had passed into common speech. Moreover it was well known that apprentices at seaports had a particularly difficult time. In 1733, "John Bennett, a fisherman of Hammersmith, killed his apprentice, a boy of eleven. The child had been beaten with a rope and a tiller, and the medical evidence was that he had 'died of wounds and want of looking after and hunger and cold together.'"

The reason for emphasizing this background is that the effect of "Peter Grimes" depends heavily on contemporary attitudes towards the cruelty of masters to apprentices. Throughout the Letter, Crabbe continually mentions how the "good people" and the overseers of the parish were prepared to give Peter every opportunity to exercise his cruelty. Peter does not have to pay the workhouse for the apprentice or pay the apprentice wages; the workhouse directors pay Peter to take the boy off their hands:

Such Peter sought, and, when a lad was found,
The sum was dealt him, and the slave was bound
(XXII. 65-66).

Any of Crabbe's simple-minded readers who wished to condemn Peter for his cruelty, would find themselves in a difficult position. Crabbe makes clear that the workhouse directors deserve as much blame as Peter. Even the "liberal" willing to find fault both with Peter and the workhouse directors might discover that he had been

135 Mrs. Brownrigg was especially notorious around mid-century after having treated four apprentice girls with horrid brutality. The Annual Register for 1809 still uses her name as a synonym for brutality, p. 413.

136 Quoted from London Life in the XVIIIth Century, p. 232.
taken in by Crabbe's subtlety. When Crabbe turns to describe Peter's treatment of the apprentice, he implicates the entire borough community in Peter's crime:

Some few in town observed in Peter's trap
A boy, with jacket blue and woollen cap;
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"

(XXII. 67-76).

Anyone believing that he had the right to condemn Peter would find from this description that, unless he had already raised his voice against the apprentice system, then he fell into the same category as the people of the borough who turned a blind eye.

The irony is made all the more explicit when one realizes that Crabbe has not chosen a bizarre incident, but one that his readers might easily hear of in their own day-to-day lives. Crabbe's son notes: "The original of Peter Grimes was an old fisherman of Aldborough, while Mr. Crabbe was practising there as a surgeon."\(^{137}\) And even if most of Crabbe's readers would never hear of this obscure fisherman in Aldborough, the press carried many other examples to catch their notice. For instance, the Annual Register for June 1801, carried the story of a master who had ill-treated his apprentice, Susannah Archer. Apparently this master had taken seventeen apprentices even though he was "so poor as not

\(^{137}\)Poetical Works, IV, 39, n. 1.
to be able to subsist himself." Lord Kenyon, who tried the case, asked the man, "Why beat these poor wretches when their bodily strength was not able to do as much work as you expected?" and mentioned that, "it appeared from the evidence of the neighbours that great wails [sic] appeared upon their backs, and their shrieks calling out for mercy were heard in the neighbourhood." In true Grimesian fashion, the man replied that he had "struck them with moderation." Lord Kenyon pointed out, however, that the situation was by no means all the master's fault: "The overseers ought to visit these places, and see they are properly taken care of, not once a year, but frequently. They stand in loco parentum. They are in the situation of parents with respect to these children, and should take the same care that parents would." It was not that people were unaware of the great cruelty of the apprentice system. Like Peter's neighbours, they "reason'd thus":

and some, on hearing cries,
Said calmly, "Grimes is at his exercise"
(XXII. 77-78).

In portraying Peter's mal-treatment of his apprentice, Crabbe is interested in showing the effect on the community as well as on the individual. Crabbe notes that Peter compelled the boy "by fear to lie, by need to steal" (line 91). Here Crabbe returns to the theme of "The Hall of Justice"; the apprentice system, he suggests, forced many young boys to break the law out of self-preservation.

As might be expected, Peter's apprentice cannot bear

138 The Annual Register (1801), "Chronicle" pp. 35-36.
his harsh treatment long, and after three years, he dies. Again Crabbe takes the opportunity of noticing how easily Peter can accomplish his design:

Another boy with equal ease was found,
The money granted, and the victim bound;
And what his fate? -- One night, it chanced he fell
From the boat's mast and perish'd in her well
(XXII. 102-105).

After this second death, the magistrates question Peter closely, "but sturdy Peter faced the matter out." Not until a third boy mysteriously dies do the borough people turn against Peter and the magistrates prevent him from taking more apprentices. Even then they do not recognize their own complicity in the crimes, but throw all the blame on Peter. As is well known, his exile slowly drives Peter mad, and he dies seeing hallucinations of the dead apprentices.

The implications of the tale are many, and it is not the purpose of this chapter to offer an exhaustive analysis. But in relation to the social criticism, it is important to point out how Crabbe manages to make his criticism through seemingly objective observation. At no point does Crabbe ever come forward to condemn either Peter or the apprentice system. At the end of the tale the reader cannot say that the disaster was entirely the fault of Peter or entirely the fault of society for allowing him to have apprentices. The narrator's tone suggests that much of what happens is the inevitable result of the way of the world, of a fateful conjunction of Peter's personality and social circumstances. Yet the ending of the poem is not totally pessimistic; one does not lay down the poem feeling that nothing can be done. The people of the town
may be blind; they may be slow to act; but they do have compassion. This is seen at the time Peter is dying:

Our gentle females, ever prompt to feel,
Perceived compassion on their anger steal;
His crimes they could not from their memories blot;
But they were grieved, and trembled at his lot

(XXII. 257-260).

These were the same women who, once they realised that Peter was treating his third apprentice badly, helped the boy as much as they could. Thus Crabbe shows a humanitarian feeling in his people, a compassion which could possibly help to change the system. Unfortunately this compassion in the people is generally veiled or impotent. Only occasionally does Crabbe allow it to act as an operative or saving force. As will be seen again in the story of "Ruth," Crabbe shows that the humanitarians, with their desire to alleviate suffering, rarely possess the power to make the necessary changes.

In "Peter Grimes," Crabbe presents the problem of the apprentice system with great clarity, leaving no doubt about the changes he feels are necessary for reform. But Crabbe never states that these changes should, or will, be made. In fact the poem reveals Crabbe's belief that such changes will always be difficult to effect. Partly this pessimism about the possibility of change may be a reaction to the over-optimism of liberal reformers. People like Thomas Paine and William Godwin believed

139 Tales of the Hall, Book V. See below, Ch. 8.
140 Interestingly enough, in 1816, six years after the publication of The Borough, an important Act was passed, which greatly discouraged apprentice labour.
that social problems had only to be clearly formulated to be solved. Paine once said: "On all such subjects [of reform] men have but to think, and they will neither act wrong nor be misled." Clearly such idealism has little in common with human experience. From his own observation, Crabbe knew well that habits played a large part in man's actions, and that little could be expected from wishful thinking about a sudden benevolent change in man's nature. Just as Crabbe reveals how complex and subtle are the causes behind Peter's actions, so he indicates that the evils of the apprentice system must be ultimately traced to the individual's mode of perceiving himself and his relations to others.

If one thinks of social criticism only in terms of those situations where an artist sets out to attack an abuse and recommend its correction, then "Peter Grimes" fails to qualify. But the definition of social poetry need not be so limited. In "Peter Grimes" Crabbe manages to delineate a social situation involving an abuse -- the apprentice system -- and at the same time suggest the reasons why the abuse has persisted so long. But the explanation is developed in terms of a human situation, which necessitates the blame being attributed to people, not to systems or officials. In so doing, Crabbe comes close to achieving the impossible, writing social criticism which does not place all the onus for the trouble on "society" but finds the fault in the very nature of man. The social reformer generally deals with the

social causes, the artist with the human. Only rarely are they combined successfully; and "Peter Grimes" is an excellent example of such a success.