

"NEVER BY PASSION QUITE POSSESSED"

A STUDY OF THE EXPRESSION  
OF THE CONFLICT BETWEEN  
'PASSION' AND 'REASON'  
IN THE POETRY OF GEORGE CRABBE

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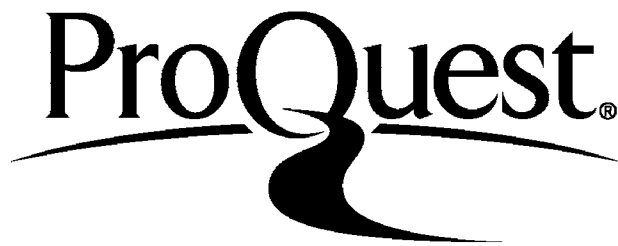
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## ABSTRACT

A study is made of the centrally important antithetical ideas of 'Passion' and 'Reason' in Crabbe's poetry. It is the conscious organization of these ideas that gives many of the tales an architectonic firmness. Furthermore, it is out of this basic conflict of 'Passion' and 'Reason', out of the tension that this conflict generates, that Crabbe creates narrative suspense, the sine qua non of story-telling. More so than any of Crabbe's perfunctory attempts at architectonics on the larger scale, the pervasive theme of 'Passion' and 'Reason' gives a certain unity to each collection of tales and to the poetry as a whole.

The non-couplet poetry is examined. Although as a body of work it is decidedly inferior in comparison with the couplet tales, it is seen as Crabbe's definite response to the 'Passion' in the new period of poetic writing; a writing that was to be characterized both by its expression of the poet's emotion and by its essential appeal to the emotion of the reader. Part of the non-couplet poetry, as indeed much of the material of the couplet tales, displays, in its prepossession with the expression of self, a further marked characteristic of the new poetic modes. A claim is substantiated that but for Crabbe's natural timidity on the one hand, and vocational, critical, and social pressures on the

other, much material probably similar to that of non-couplet poetry might have been published, instead of being destroyed.

The place of the sea as a vital and central part of Crabbe's poetical sensibility is studied. The sea in its literal-descriptive, emblematic, and metaphorical appearances in the poetry emerges as a 'correlative' of 'Passion'. The sea is intimately connected with this central idea, both as a nemesis for man's surrender to emotion, and as an 'emblem' of 'Passion' itself.

#### Notes

- (a) The place of a book's publication, both in the footnotes and in the bibliography, is cited only if it is other than London.
- (b) In quoting Crabbe's poetry from the Ward and Pollard editions I have not followed Crabbe's habit of placing quotation marks at the beginning of every line of direct speech. Again I have not transcribed Crabbe's idiosyncratic abbreviations as they are found in Mr. Pollard's New Poems.

## Chapter One

"Passion to reason will submit"<sup>1</sup>

The Thematic, Structural, and Narrative  
Importance of the Conflict between  
'Passion' and 'Reason' in the Tales

Introductory

The fact that the literature of the eighteenth century was obsessed with the idea of 'Reason' has become a critical commonplace. 'Reason', Defoe writes in 1702, 'governs Men when they are Masters of their Senses, as naturally as Fire flies upwards, or Water descends.'<sup>2</sup> For misanthropic Swift the Houyhnhnms, whose 'grand Maxim is, to cultivate Reason, and to be wholly governed by it',<sup>3</sup> were an ideal towards which European civilisation should strive. The optimistic, self-satisfied, world of Pope's Essay on Man is founded on the belief that man will 'Reason raise o'er Instinct,' for :

'In this 'tis God directs, in that 'tis Man.'<sup>4</sup>

Johnson's 'teacher of morality' in Rasselas really does 'discourse like an angel' :

1. "The Widow's Tale", Tales VII, 1.198.
2. Daniel Defoe, The Original Power of the Collective Body of the People of England, Examined and Allerted (1702), p. 8.
3. Jonathan Swift, Gulliver's Travels, Ed. Herbert Davies (Oxford 1959).
4. "Essay on Man", Epistle iii, ll. 97-8, The Poems of Alexander Pope, Vol. III (i), Ed. Maynard Mack, (1950).

... human nature is degraded and debased, when the lower faculties predominate over the higher; that when fancy, the parent of passion, usurps the dominion of the mind, nothing ensues but the natural effect of unlawful government, perturbation and confusion; that she betrays the fortresses of the intellect to rebels, and excites her children to sedition against reason, their lawful sovereign.<sup>1</sup>

Any extended discussion here of the multifarious meanings, and socio-philosophical implications of the word 'Reason' as it came down to Crabbe would be out of place. Johnson's Dictionary lists, under the noun 'Reason' alone, eleven meanings of the word.<sup>2</sup>

Mr. Lovejoy writes of the 'idea complex' of eighteenth-century rationalism thus :

It is not a system which you will find connectedly set forth by any one philosopher; it is rather a set of preconceptions which you will find taken for granted by most philosophers, and determining the opinions on all manner of subjects, of the majority of educated men for more than two centuries, ...<sup>3</sup>

The breadth of meaning in Crabbe's usage of the word 'Reason', and one of its equally elusive antonyms, 'Passion', will become evident in the examination of these ideas in his poetry.

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1. "Rasselas", The Works of Samuel Johnson, Ed. A. Murphy (1823-4), Vol. III, pp.351-2.
  2. The London unpaginated edition of 1755.
  3. A. O. Lovejoy, "The Parallel of Deism and Classicism", Essays in the History of Ideas, (Baltimore, 1948) p.78.

Crabbe, like Chaucer's Franklin, and for the same reason, was somewhat old-fashioned in his tastes for story-telling.<sup>1</sup> Apart from his year of trial in London and some later literary excursions to that city, Crabbe spent his life in the quiet parishes of Leicestershire and Wiltshire.<sup>2</sup> His best work belongs, undoubtedly, to the first quarter of the nineteenth century, a period in which England was seething with new philosophical and literary ideas. Yet Crabbe continues writing in sedate eighteenth century couplets and, more germane to this present discussion, uses the century-and-a-half-old<sup>3</sup> Lockean and Cartesian ideas of 'Reason's rule' as a focal point of thought and structure in his tales.

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1. Professor Hodgson has the following note on Chaucer's choice of the old-fashioned Breton lay for the Franklin: 'It is typical of Chaucer's imaginative attention to detail that he gave this outmoded kind of narrative to the white-haired country gentleman, the Franklin'. Phyllis Hodgson, The Franklin's Tale (1960), p.73.
  2. Cf. Hazlitt's remark: 'The situation of a country clergyman is not necessarily favourable to the cultivation of the Muse. He is set down, perhaps, as he thinks, in a small curacy for life, and he takes revenge by imprisoning the reader's imagination in luckless verse.' "The Spirit of the Age", The Complete Works of William Hazlitt, Ed. P. P. Howe (1930-4), Vol. XI, p.167.
  3. The basis of these ideas, of course, was much older: 'According to venerable theory, at least as old as Aristotle, reinforced by Stoicism and Christianity, and now re-emphasised by Descartes and Locke, man's essential nature was his rational soul.' Basil Willey, The Eighteenth Century Background (1905), p.101.

The eighteenth century mind monstrously underestimated the difficulty of being rational. It was as if a man should attribute disturbances in his cellar to a few rats, when really beneath his foundations flowed a subterranean river full of strange forms of life far less easy to control.<sup>1</sup>

Crabbe, like Swift and Johnson, was poignantly aware of those 'disturbances in his cellar'. He recognises fully the 'Yahoo' in man, and together with this recognition there is an awareness of the Herculean task involved in the acceptance of the life of 'Reason'. There is little in Crabbe's work of that 'metaphysical optimism',<sup>2</sup> that air of philosophic self-satisfaction and security which buoys up so much of eighteenth century poetry. He knows that it is instinctive for man to succumb to 'Passion': this knowledge is the source of that gentle sympathy with which his innumerable progeny of fallen men and women are depicted. The miseries of his early life in Aldeburgh and in London had left him with few illusions about the people he wrote of. Crabbe's assessment of the realities of European civilization would not perhaps have been as harshly extreme as that of the King of Brobdingnag (after Gulliver had related with pride the way of life of his fellow men) :

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1. L. Stephen, History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century (1902), Vol. II, p.341.
  2. Willey, op. cit., p.43.



I cannot but conclude the Bulk of your natives, to be the most pernicious Race of little odious Vermin that Nature ever suffered to crawl upon the Surface of the Earth.<sup>1</sup>

But on the other hand it was quite removed from Pope's optimistic visions (via Shaftesbury and Bolingbroke) of the possibilities of perfection in human nature :

God, in the nature of each being, finds  
Its proper bliss, and sets its proper bounds:

Man must :

Grasp the whole world of Reason, Life, and Sense,  
In one close system of Benevolence :<sup>2</sup>

This chapter will demonstrate the way in which the ideas of 'Passion' and 'Reason' lie at the very heart of the tales. In their ubiquitousness these ideas give the tales as a whole a thematic unity. The conflict between 'Passion' and 'Reason' provides a focal point of dramatic tension which is the mainspring of the action in the tales. Furthermore, the antithesis between these ideas, between, as we shall see, illusion and reality, and happiness that perennially dwindles to misery, serves as a basis of structure-by-contrast. Many of Crabbe's contemporary critics, amongst them his son, and his enthusiastic admirer, Edward Fitzgerald, denied

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1. Gulliver's Travels, op. cit., p. 132.

2. Essay on Man, op. cit., Epistle iii, ll. 109-10;  
Epistle iv, ll. 357-8.

the poet any ability at all in the structural organisation of his tales.<sup>1</sup>

I shall limit the terms of reference of this discussion by considering, in detail, only eight tales. Much of the nineteenth century periodical criticism of Crabbe's poetry, in particular, loses itself in generalities of the worst kind, by attempting to discuss within the narrow compass of a short article some twenty to thirty tales. Jeffrey's tedious summaries of tale after tale were typical of this kind of criticism.

Any serious discussion of Crabbe's art must, I believe, reduce itself to the individual tale. His various attempts at a link-framework for his tales were never satisfactory. Chaucer, himself, had found this an insurmountable problem; Crabbe had neither the kind of imagination that could 'tailor-make' the tale for the teller, nor the advantage of a mediaeval pilgrimage that could bring such

1. '... This insensibility to the beauty of order was a defect in his own mind; arising from what I must call his want of taste. There are, no doubt, very beautiful detached passages in his writings — passages apparently full of this very quality. It is not, however, in detached parts of a poem that the criterion of principle properly lies, but in the conduct of the whole; in the selection of the subject and its amplifications; in the relative disposition and comparative prominence of the parts ...' The Life of George Crabbe, By His Son (1947), p. 142, cited hereafter as Life.

Edward Fitzgerald speaks of Crabbe's 'characteristic disregard of form'. '... whether from lack or laxity of constructive skill, Crabbe is apt to wander and lose himself and his reader.' "Introduction", Readings in Crabbe (1882), p. viii and p. xi.

diverse characters into one company. The clergyman turning over the pages of The Parish Register, divided conveniently into Births, Deaths, and Marriages; the perfunctory use of the epistolary method of organisation used in The Borough; and the story-telling reunion of the long-separated brothers in Tales of the Hall: all of these essays in 'architectonics'<sup>1</sup> on a larger scale are commonplace and unconvincing in their naivete.

Thus, notwithstanding Jeffrey's suggestion that he turn his hand to 'an extended train of adventures',<sup>2</sup> Crabbe's forte remained the 'unit'<sup>3</sup> of the short story. In the Preface to the 1812 Tales, (in which Crabbe sensibly abandons any kind of link-framework) the poet shows himself to be acutely aware of his limitations in this respect. In answering Jeffrey's suggestion that he write what Crabbe understood to be some kind of epic poem, he says:

1. '... what distinguishes the artist from the mere amateur, says Goethe, is Architectonicè in the highest sense; that power of execution, which creates, forms, and constitutes ...' "Preface to Poems" (1853), p. 9, 11. 25-8, The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold, Vol. I. Ed. R. H. Super (Michigan, 1960).
2. Francis Jeffrey, "The Borough", The Edinburgh Review, Vol. XVI, April 1810, p. 55.
3. '... the unit of his [Crabbe's] art is truly the tale, ...' F. R. Leavis, Revaluation (1936), p. 128.  
And cf: 'It was a sound instinct that confined him to the compilation of separate stories'.  
W. L. Renwick, English Literature 1789-1815 (Oxford, 1963). p. 111.

'As Truth will paint it'<sup>1</sup>

The first group of three tales to be studied will show Crabbe's unqualified acceptance of the consequence of 'Passion' in man. He is not always ready to do this; indeed some of his worst artistic blunders are the result of an attempt to assert control by 'Reason' over that which defies control. Conversely, his best work lies in those tales, however racked with pain and violence they are, in which the potential destructiveness of 'Passion' is fearlessly explored.

George<sup>2</sup> comes of a long line of characters in the tales who become addicted, with disastrous consequences, to the fictions of 'Romance'.<sup>3</sup> For Crabbe, the realist, these 'tragic tales of lovers dead'<sup>4</sup> are always a source of fatal illusion in life. They represent a surrender to 'Passion', to fancy and unreality. Unlike John,<sup>5</sup> another avid reader of this genre, who becomes insane,

1. The Village I, l. 54.

2. "The Elder Brother", Tales of the Hall VII.

3. This word is used in its widest possible sense, as a story in verse, or prose, which is characterised by its unreality of circumstance, character and plot.

4. "The Elder Brother", op. cit., l. 67.

5. "The Patron", Tales V. John, too, is seen in this tale as succumbing to illusions of love and fame after the drug of :

'... doleful ballads, songs,  
Of lovers' sufferings and of ladies' wrongs; '  
ll. 13-14.

George will only suffer from the aftermath of a sharp encounter with the realities of life. Like Shakespeare's Count Orsino, George is in love with love; he even echoes Orsino in speaking of his 'fancy's gracious queen'.<sup>1</sup> This story of George's infatuation for a woman he has never spoken to is full of overtones of courtly love,<sup>2</sup> with all the unreality that this literary convention suggests.

As long as the tale relates only the 'Passion' of George, his foolish and comic submission to illusion, Crabbe, characteristically, is ready to indulge us in the humour of events. The superb character vignette of George's materialistically-minded uncle,<sup>3</sup> and the delightful scene of mock heroics in which George, the knight, 'saves' his lady from a herd of harmless cows, are some examples of this. But Crabbe's comic mood disappears completely when this 'Passion' threatens to ruin a young man's life. There is now even a hint of George's encroaching insanity :

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1. "Twelfth Night", Act, 5, Scene 1, l. 392. The Arden Shakespeare. Ed. Morton Luce, (1937).
  2. George loves Rosabella from afar; this love is unknown to her; he protects her in the face of danger; he is magnanimous in his readiness to forgive all.
  3. George's uncle provides a refreshing, earthy, contrast to his nephew, who is lost in a world of poetry. Speaking of the 'numbers' in his ledger he says to George :  
     'Sir, when a man composes in this style,  
     What is to him a critic's frown or smile?'  
 "The Elder Brother", op. cit., ll. 398-9.

It was a strong possession - strong and strange, ...  
The mind's disease, with all its strength, stole on ...  
And there were seasons, Richard, horrid hours  
Of mental suffering ! they o'erthrew my powers, ...<sup>1</sup>

In the eighteenth century manner, Crabbe is highly conscious of the need for the decorums of literary tact. Once Rosabella, the object of George's love, is discovered to be the mistress of his uncle's client, Crabbe's treatment of the issues involved becomes a markedly serious one.<sup>2</sup> At a similar turning-point in The Parish Clerk,<sup>3</sup> Crabbe is explicit about the matter :

Thus far the playful Muse has lent her aid,  
But now departs, of graver theme afraid;  
Her may we seek in more appropriate time —  
There is no jesting with distress and crime.<sup>4</sup>

At the point of discovery of Rosabella's true situation, the tale falls into the two contrasting sections of 'Passion' and 'Reason': the illusions generated by 'Passion', and the 'Reason' attained to by George's meeting with reality. The recurring phraseology<sup>5</sup> serves

1. "The Elder Brother", op. cit., 1.426, 1.430 and 11.432-3.
2. George's discovery of Rosabella is highly contrived. Crabbe, although he satirizes this and other time-honoured conventions of story-telling in the preamble to "Ellen Orford" (The Borough XX), is not himself averse to employing them. Cf. the final meeting of Henry and Cecelia in "Delay has Danger", Tales of The Hall XIII.
3. The Borough XIX.
4. Ibid., 11. 118-121.
5. E.g. George's relationship with Rosabella is referred to as 'that first wild passion', of which he says:  
                              ' ... my soul it drew  
                              From reason's path, ...'  
"The Elder Brother", op. cit., 1. 821 and 11. 350-1.

to remind us in precise terms of the issues involved; they likewise suggest dimensions of significance that go far beyond the simple events of the tale. The struggle here is between the rational and emotional in man: that cleavage which became so sharply defined in eighteenth century thinking. 'Sovereign reason'<sup>1</sup> is always the bulwark by means of which excess of any kind may be repulsed; it offers the good life as a reward for the control of 'Passion'. The disillusioned loneliness of a bachelor's life is all that George will suffer as a result of his folly. But it will be seen that a refusal to embrace the life of 'Reason' is not always so lightly dealt with: the sufferings of Phoebe Dawson<sup>2</sup>, Edward Shore<sup>3</sup> and Benbow<sup>4</sup> represent the norm in this respect.

The ever-present 'tension' in the tales, referred to in the introduction, is generated by the conflict between the forces of 'Passion' and 'Reason'. This conflict is illustrated here by the choice open to George: is he to take the way of 'Reason', which is represented by the materialist world of his uncle (no facile contrasts of black and white are involved); or will he continue to live in the dream world created imaginatively by 'Romance'

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1. "The Elder Brother", op. cit., 1.43.
  2. "Phoebe Dawson", Marriages, 11. 131-246, The Parish Register.
  3. "Edward Shore", Tales XI.
  4. "Benbow", The Borough XVI.

reading, and given form by his meeting with Rosabella? The interest in the outcome of this dramatic conflict of opposites is the motivating force behind Crabbe's narratives. It is primarily this conflict which creates, as E. M. Forster puts it, that 'atavistic' desire to know 'what happens next'.<sup>1</sup> Crabbe's addiction to novel-reading<sup>2</sup> had taught him all about suspense, that sine-qua-non of story-telling.

It is again this contrast between 'Passion' and 'Reason', between the rapture and the disenchantment of George, that gives this and so many other tales of Crabbe a firmness of construction. The technique of contrast, so central to Crabbe's poetry and to eighteenth century literature in general<sup>3</sup>, is here a basic structural device. Each half of the tale, as has been seen, is related with a 'consonance of tone'<sup>4</sup> that befits it. The realities discovered in the

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1. 'The primitive audiences was an audience of shock-heads, gaping round the camp-fire, fatigued with contending against the mammoth or the woolly rhinoceros, and only kept awake by suspense ... We are all like Scheherazade's husband, in that we want to know what happens next.'  
E. M. Forster, Aspects of the Novel (1963, Penguin Books), pp. 34-35.
  2. '... he was unwearied in reading; and he devoured without restraint whatever came into his hands, but especially works of fiction ...' Life., p. 113.
  3. Nowhere is this more in evidence than in the antithetical jingle of metre, rhythm, and diction, in the heroic couplet itself.
  4. Lilian Haddakin, The Poetry of Crabbe (1955), p. 81.



latter half of the tale provide an ironic comment on all that George has dreamed of: the courtly lady in her castle, of the illusion, turns out to be, in reality, an unrepentant slut.

With a further deftness of architectonic touch, Crabbe places, as a centre-piece between the two contrasting sections of the tale, a passage of 'functional description'. I consider that the art with which these descriptions are finished, and the sureness of touch with which they are placed at significant points in the tale, to be high-water marks in Crabbe's poetry. Here the description of slatternly Rosabella's room evokes with great economy the atmosphere of the house and the character of the relationship between its inhabitants.<sup>1</sup> It is the sight of this room and its significance which is the focal point of the story; for George it is a moment of self-recognition and change.<sup>2</sup>

Crabbe exploits to the full the richness and variety of the English epithet. The collocation of adjectives in these descriptions is always of central importance to the total impression made by the piece. Here, in their accumulative effect, adjectives such as:

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1. "The Elder Brother", op. cit., ll. 486-512.
  2. In pleasing contrast to the contrived meeting of George and Rosabella, referred to above, the outcome of this event does not belong to the world of 'Romance'. The knight's forgiveness proffered by George does not result in a 'happy end': the canker is seen to be too great. Rosabella is now unable to live any other kind of life.

'strange', 'high-season'd', 'strong', 'unmatched', 'large', 'careless', 'once-gilded' and 'troubled', convey strongly the sense of a situation in which the uncontrolled 'Passion' of Rosabella has resulted in physical and moral decay.

Tale after tale has its passage of 'functional description'. When a number of the passages have been discussed in the context of the tales in which they appear something will be said of the lack of critical understanding of their function as integral parts of an artistic whole. Jeffrey's 'heaped up circumstances'<sup>1</sup> was typical of the kind of contemporary criticism which was levelled at these descriptive passages. Contemporary critics were, it seems, concerned in the tradition of Johnson and Reynolds, with the theories of 'general nature'.

Edward Shore<sup>2</sup> is a character destroyed by 'seducing passions'<sup>3</sup> of a very different kind. The story of his intellectual 'pride' is a variation on a common eighteenth century religious and literary theme.<sup>4</sup> His ever-questioning intellect allows him no rest; it

1. Francis Jeffrey, "Poems 1807", The Edinburgh Review, Vol. XII, April 1808, p. 141.
2. "Edward Shore", op. cit.
3. Ibid., l. 11.
4. '... "Pride" was one of the most frequent and pregnant themes of what may be called the social psychology of the period.'  
Lovejoy, " 'Pride' in Eighteenth Century Thought", op. cit., p. 63.

"Superior natures with their puppets play,  
Till, bagg'd or buried, all are swept away".<sup>1</sup>

This inexorable process of physical and moral decay, here, through intellectual pride to adultery, drink, and finally to insanity, is to be found in many of Crabbe's tales. 'Inexorable', because he is so poignantly aware of human frailty; 'Reason', for Crabbe the realist, is rarely attained to. Perhaps this is why his poetry appeals on a profounder level than mere didactics which preach plain sense and sober judgement. Crabbe is fascinated by the 'Passions' in man, but can see them only as disintegrative.

The chronological 'then and now' method of structural organisation, which the theme of decay through passion allows, is a variation in the architectonics-by-contrast seen in The Elder Brother. Many of the earlier vignettes, such as Phoebe Dawson<sup>2</sup>

1. Ibid., ll. 364-5. Cf:

'As flies to wanton boys, are we to th'Gods;  
They kill us for their sport'

"King Lear", Act IV, Sc. I, ll. 36-7. Ed. Kenneth Muir,  
The Arden Shakespeare (1959). BASED ON THE EDITION BY W.J. CRAIG

The following parallels suggest that Crabbe had King Lear in mind as he wrote this tale: the act of adultery; the readiness of Edward's friend to forgive him; the negation of the concept of a 'world order'; and the similarity of names ('Edmund' and 'Edward').

2. The story of Phoebe Dawson is divided into two simply contrasted parts of 'then' and 'now', a flowering and a fading:

'Two summers since, I saw, at Lammas Fair,  
The sweetest flower that ever blossom'd there, ...'

and

'Lo ! now with red rent cloak and bonnet black, ...'

"Phoebe Dawson", op. cit., ll. 131-2 and 1.189.

and Sir Denys Brand<sup>1</sup> are elementary exercises in this antithetical structure. The details of the downward process to decay are irrelevant; what the man was and what he has become is the poet's concern. Crabbe is explicit about this method of organising his material :

Shall I proceed, and step by step relate  
The odious progress of a sinner's fate?  
No — let me rather hasten to the time  
(Sure to arrive) when misery waits on crime.<sup>2</sup>

In the case of Edward, the contrasts of promise and fulfilment are very sharp indeed. 'The higher they climb the harder they fall' runs the Hollywood saying; Crabbe puts the matter in less racy terms :

Reason, through anguish, shall her throne forsake,  
And strength of mind but stronger madness make.<sup>3</sup>

Edward's 'soaring mind' is contracted to a state of insane infantilism; a 'genius' becomes 'Silly Shore', the children's butt.

The only passage of description found in this tale is a very short but wholly characteristic example of the 'functional' manner in which Crabbe uses such description to evoke atmosphere, or

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1. The Borough XIII  
Sir Denys Brand's 'public bounty' and its contrast with the almshouse founder's love of 'giving in secret', provide the antithetical framework within which this character sketch is fixed.
  2. "Edward Shore", op. cit., 11. 372-5.
  3. Ibid., 11. 29-30.

suggest the direction which the action of the tale is going to take.<sup>1</sup> Edward's high-flown ideas on moral philosophy (all of which have hitherto, but now no longer, been the object of Crabbe's satire) are about to reduce themselves to an act of adultery with the wife of a close friend. As, in the description, the 'glowing landscape fades', so, we sense will the promise of Edward's genius.

Once the reader is attuned to Crabbe's manner of proceeding with the theme of 'Passion' and 'Reason', the desire to know 'what comes next' finds expression in one particular direction. After all, the question of the protagonist's response, or otherwise, to 'Reason's' call is hardly one that will be asked after a small number of the tales has been read. Anticipation lies, rather, in a wish to know the manner of the fall through 'Passion'. This fall becomes an inevitability. However 'painful it is to dwell on deeds of shame'<sup>2</sup>, Crabbe pursues the inexorable outcome of events.

1. Ibid., 11. <sup>23</sup>31-5.

A similarly short passage of 'functional description' is found in "Ellen Orford", after the heroine's fall :

"The earth a desert, tumult in the sea,  
The birds affrighted fled from tree to tree,  
Obscured the setting sun, and every thing like me;

"Ellen Orford", op. cit., 11. 195-7.

Some further examples are to be found in: "The Brothers" Tales XX, 11. 150-3, and "The Boat Race", Posthumous Tales XVIII (Farewell and Return), 11. 242-5.

2. "Edward Shore", op. cit., 1. 281.

Once the illusion has brought its tragedy, and the satiric manner recedes to the background, Crabbe is ready, like his good physician, to walk the foulest ward. Retribution, for the denial, by Edward, of the life of 'Reason', here the norm of religious faith and the moral values it affords, is far greater than the mere anguish of heart that George suffers.<sup>1</sup>

If Edward Shore falls through disregard of religion, Jachin<sup>2</sup>, on the contrary, sins in his puritanical excesses of religious fervour. Crabbe achieves great variety in the treatment of his theme. The control of 'Passion' by the reasoning faculty is highly desirable; but even this may be overdone, and with fatal consequence. Owen Dale had been so successful in repressing his natural self that he 'seem'd without a passion to proceed'.<sup>3</sup> The real man will burst out in a fit of destructive jealousy. Abel Keene 'had . . . so long his passions check'd'<sup>4</sup> that they finally engulfed him in a flood-tide.

The true personality of Jachin has been suppressed in puritanical habits of life: 'formal was his air and gate'<sup>5</sup>. His self-love is translated into a fanatical observance of religion, and into his demands for public respect and acknowledgement of this 'sacrifice'.

1. "The Elder Brother", op. cit.
2. "The Parish Clerk", op. cit.
3. "Sir Owen Dale", Tales of the Hall XII, 1.79.
4. "Abel Keene", The Borough XX, 1. 21.
5. "The Parish Clerk", op. cit., 1. 13.

Much like the play-going, somewhat avaricious<sup>1</sup> Rector Crabbe of Trowbridge, this man liked a good joke and 'sighed' for his lack of 'worldly wealth'; he also possessed a 'sprinkling' of the

1. Crabbe's biography is marked by an unusually large number of incidents which involve an over-urgent desire for money. They suggest that the early experiences of poverty were never erased from his consciousness. His attempt to sell his work for a higher price after accepting Murray's generous offer of three thousand pounds, is well known; but there were other incidents. This question of money is intimately connected with his whole attitude towards the writing of poetry, and his reasons for publication. It is known, for instance, that Poems 1807 was published largely because of financial pressures. Posthumous Tales was assured publication, because Crabbe thought it would be 'worth something'; he therefore made sure that his son was informed of the existence of the work. V. Life, ~~pp. 311~~, p.275). Crabbe was certainly no 'dedicated' poet in the Wordsworthian sense. Wordsworth's,

'... bond unknown to me  
Was given, that I should be, else sinning greatly,  
A dedicated spirit.'

(The Prelude, Book IV, ll. 335-7, Ed. E. De Selincourt Oxford, 1959) must be set against Crabbe's :

'... the muse would never visit till the purse  
was recruited; for say men what they will, she  
does not love empty pockets nor poor living.'

(Life, p.57).

and: 'He said writing paid him very well, and money was a great inducement to write'.

Mary Leadbeater, The Leadbeater Papers (1862), Vol. I, p.422;

Crabbe's deflation of Wordsworth's remark about the 'pains' of poetic creation is of interest here :

'I happened once to speak of pains as necessary to produce merit of a certain kind which I highly valued: his observation was — "It is not worth while".'

The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth, Ed. E. De Selincourt (Oxford, 1947), Vol. IV, p.460.

... My merit could they know,<sup>1</sup>  
And knew my need, how freely they'd bestow.

His conscience is appeased by a self-deceiving promise of good deeds. Crabbe refers to this casuistry as : 'reasons on his passion's side'.<sup>2</sup>

The steady progression towards a recognised end, which turns the illusions of religious martyrdom into the reality of a shabby theft, gives us the now recognisable form lent by the antithesis of 'Passion' and 'Reason'. Repression of one's real self is an illusion for Crabbe; here the result is a fanatic, life-denying, religious 'enthusiasm'. As in the case of George<sup>3</sup> and Edward,<sup>4</sup> the moral lesson is conveyed by an implicit call to compare and contrast the illusion and reality in the two sections of the tale. The ironies of the tale center around this contrast: Jachin, while successfully avoiding the relatively small sins with which he is tempted by his congregants, (the 'flowing bowl' and 'rosy lip')<sup>5</sup> is quite unable to restrain himself when the temptations are great. But for Jachin, whose sense of real sin has been dulled by self-delusion, the crucial battle with Satan had been waged and won over the temptations of drink and sex.

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1. Ibid., 11.160-1.

2. Ibid., 1.187.

3. "The Elder Brother", op. cit.

4. "Edward Shore", op. cit.

5. "The Parish Clerk", op. cit. 1.115.



landscape is described in order to make some point about man. In The Parish Clerk a lengthy passage of such description demonstrates Crabbe's superlative skill in projecting incident or feeling on to landscape :<sup>1</sup>

In each lone place, dejected and dismay'd,  
 Shrinking from view, his wasting form he laid;  
 Or to the restless sea and roaring wind  
 Gave the strong yearnings of a ruin'd mind.  
 On the broad beach, the silent summer day,  
 Stretch'd on some wreck, he wore his life away;  
 Or where the river mingles with the sea,  
 Or on the mud-bank by the elder-tree,  
 Or by the bounding marsh-dyke, there was he;

Significantly it is a setting by the 'restless sea' which Crabbe chooses in order to depict Jachin's decay. The shabbiness of the scene and the blight of the landscape are an emblematic reflection of all that is passing through the mind of the now broken Jachin. It is again the collocation of epithets (underlined above) that give the passage its power of evocation. The variety of purposes for which these passages of 'functional description' are employed may be seen in the three examples which have been discussed in detail in the respective tales. The description of Rosabella's room suggested all that Crabbe required us to know about her way of life; the evening landscape in Edward Shore evoked the atmosphere of the situation and pointed the direction towards which events were turning. Here a landscape is described in order to convey in concrete terms

1. "The Parish Clerk", op. cit., ll.270-8.

a state of mind.

The central place of Crabbe's fully developed dramatic dialogue in his poetry in general, and particularly its significant position in the structure of the narrative, will be discussed at a later point in this chapter. But The Parish Clerk illustrates well one important use that is made of monologue. Jachin is condemned mainly by his own words. His rantings against the worldly; the view of himself as an opponent of Satan; and the casuistry which leads to theft: these are some examples of monologue that reveal character. This technique, already in evidence in the early works, of allowing characters to reveal themselves in monologue, rather than a total reliance on straightforward narration, foreshadows the dialogue of the later tales. The monologues of Jachin are still voiced in stiff, rhyme-bound distiches; but the dialogues of the later work achieve a flexibility of line which is able to capture something of the rhythms of the spoken word.

The three tales discussed about are representative of an artistically truthful manner in which Crabbe can handle the theme of 'Passion' and 'Reason'. He is seen here as a writer who is fully prepared to confront his readers with the disintegrative realities of 'Passion' in man. Notwithstanding the restraint of the author and the limitations of his verse medium in being able to

convey such feeling as he does express, the essential appeal of these tales is to the emotions. The sufferings of George, Edward and Jachin are real because they are presented without sentiment and without didacticism. The death of James and Robert<sup>1</sup>, two brothers who kill each other in the darkness in the manner of an Elizabethan tragedy; Ruth's experiences which end with suicide by drowning<sup>2</sup>; John's illusions of grandeur that result, finally, in his death:<sup>3</sup> these are some further examples of tales that are charged with emotions of the kind that portend the melodramatic and pathetic elements of the nineteenth century novel, rather than characterizing the sedate and restrained couplet poetry of <sup>the</sup> earlier century. Indeed the paradox of Crabbe's best work is that its essential appeal is anything but ratiocinative. Our involvement in the fate of these people is not obtained because they are moral exempla of decay through 'Passion' (though perhaps Crabbe thought this to be the case). Our thoughts on leaving the tales are with the pictures of suffering that they so successfully evoke: Jachin's lonely death in an attic, or the childish babblings of Edward. Any moral lesson that may be gained from the fate of these characters seems to be of only secondary importance in the ethos

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1. "Smugglers and Poachers", Tales of the Hall XXI.
  2. "Ruth", Tales of the Hall V.
  3. "The Patron", op. cit.

of the tale. What is of importance is that in the tragic outcome of their experiences Crabbe conveys to us some sense of the vulnerability of mankind in the face of 'Passion'.

'The barren flattery of <sup>a</sup> rhyme'<sup>1</sup>

I turn now to a group of tales that are patently different in their approach to the theme of 'Passion' and 'Reason'. If the tales referred to above are representative of Crabbe's best work, these poems demonstrate some sad artistic blunders. The foregoing tales have implied in a realistic manner that the life of 'Reason' is by no means easily, or indeed commonly, attained to. The two tales discussed below suggest something that is quite at variance with this idea. What they appear to offer is a facile, and from an artistic point of view, an unsatisfying reconciliation of 'Passion' and 'Reason' ; a victory, without battle, of 'Sense' over 'Sensibility'. In these tales Crabbe retreats from his early promise in The Village to depict life :

'As Truth will paint it, and as Bards will not:'<sup>2</sup>

1. The Village, I, 1.58.

2. The Village, I, 1.54.

Sentiment,<sup>1</sup> that element in later eighteenth century literature which served so much to undermine Neo-Classical restraint, has crept into the work. The heat of 'Passion' and illusion cools into glib didacticism and gushing sentiment.

Like Jachin, Sir Owen Dale<sup>2</sup> is introduced to the reader as a character whose true self has been repressed. As is usually the case with people who attempt to repress the emotional side of their personality, Dale is highly intolerant of those lacking such strength :

'... he could pardon, but could not forgive.'<sup>3</sup>

It is this inability to forgive which is the 'Passion' or 'enthusiasm' of Sir Owen Dale. The 'grub-Icarus' image makes concrete in a most effective way the emotional change that takes place in him as he breaks through the self-imposed shell of illusion :

He, like th' imperfect creature who had shaped  
A shroud to hide him, had at length escaped;  
Changed from his grub-like state, to crawl no more,  
But a wing'd being, pleased and form'd to soar.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Tales of the Hall, published in 1819, is indeed marred by this characteristic. The now sixty-five year-old writer has mellowed considerably since those grim days in which The Village was written. You: 'spoiled the poet when you eas'd his heart', he tells the Duke of Rutland, in<sup>an</sup> early poem. "To His Grace The Duke of Rutland", Works, Vol. III, pp. 493-6, l.123.
  2. "Sir Owen Dale", op. cit.
  3. Ibid., l. 92.
  4. Ibid., ll.142-5.
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The dangers inherent in repression of this kind are made explicit in terms of the central theme of this thesis.

'Should these fierce passions — so we reason'd — break  
Their long-worn chain, what ravage will they make'.<sup>1</sup>

It is in the treatment here of this 'ravage' of 'Passion', recognised and manipulated artistically in the tales discussed above, that Crabbe fails. Again, the opening paragraph of verse<sup>2</sup> in its succession of balanced opposites, points to the theme and the issues it involves. These pairs of words will clarify yet further the quality of the antithesis between 'Passion' and 'Reason', as Crabbe sees it :

'passions'	- 'reason'd'
'ravage'	- 'chain'
'pride'	- 'prudence'
'revenge'	- 'reason'
'anger'	- 'persuasion'
'disorder'd'	- 'curb'
'passions'	- 'calm'

It is Crabbe's usual technique to present a character in great detail at the opening of the tale, as we have seen here, and then to show how that character reacts in a given situation. The young Camilla becomes the object of Dale's re-awakened sexual desires. This 'Passion' for her becomes so obsessive that it verges on insanity, when his love is unrequited. There is a strong connection

1. Ibid., 11. 95-6.

2. Ibid., 11. 95-102.

'... would act as he was won't to do,  
And bring his morals in his neighbour's view.'<sup>1</sup>

Thus the 'Passion' that Crabbe has so skilfully evoked is, so to say, swept under the carpet in a reconciliation of irreconcilables. Potentially the 'Passion' of Dale and Ellis is no less destructive than that of a Grimes or a Jachin; but the acceptance and recognition of this quality in man for what it really is, is here quite different. Crabbe has a tale called Resentment<sup>2</sup> in which a wife is swindled out of her money by her husband. Later, by her intransigence in refusing to forgive him, she allows her husband to suffer and die. The life of her servant Susan has also been one of suffering; but she has always turned the cheek and forgiven all. The didactics and sentiment<sup>3</sup> which created this character, who is a mere foil to the protagonist of the tale, have been allowed to engulf Sir Owen Dale. 'Passions' subside into an unconvincing readiness to forgive.

Crabbe is obviously fascinated by the idea of Christian forgiveness. He takes up the theme in Villars<sup>4</sup> and in The Confidant.<sup>5</sup> These tales are marred by this same easily-won reconciliation at the denouement. Villars plans revenge against a wife who has

1. Ibid., 11. 61-2.
2. Tales XVII.
3. V. ibid., 11. 386-90.
4. Posthumous Tales V.
5. Tales XVI.

that Anna will suffer the loss of her husband. The denouement, however, leads only down to anti-climax; the promise is not fulfilled.

Sir Owen Dale is further marred by its poor construction.

Once again the architectonic basis is one of contrast: here between the Pharaonic 'eye for an eye' justice that Dale seeks to mete out, and that of the Christian mercy shown by Ellis: between the 'Passion' of Dale's excess and the 'Reason' of Ellis' self-control. The crude juxtaposition of ideas, and the abrupt transition in the handling of the two strands of the plot, lack entirely the subtleties of design-by-contrast of say, The Widow's Tale.<sup>1</sup> The inset story of Ellis' adulterous wife is taken up late in the tale,<sup>2</sup> in an abrupt and unartistic manner; no satisfactory attempt is made to fully weave this story into the texture of the tale. The broken-backed structure of the tale suggests that sermon and fiction do not fuse well.

Crabbe's 'Dutchmanship'<sup>3</sup> is again observable in the passage of 'functional description' which so effectively evokes the atmosphere and character of the house to which Cecil and Alicia have fled.<sup>4</sup>

The usual concomitant collocation of significant epithets indicates

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1. Tales VII.
  2. "Sir Owen Dale", op. cit., at l. 499.
  3. George Saintsbury, The Peace of the Augustans (1916) p. 345.
  4. "Sir Owen Dale", op. cit., ll. 708-20.



the kind of impact that the sight of this room has had on Ellis.<sup>1</sup> Crabbe's minutiae of description in these passages are neither (to quote two other nineteenth century critics) 'inventories'<sup>2</sup> nor 'petty, vulgar, mean details',<sup>3</sup> but essential parts of Crabbe's story-telling stock-in-trade. It was suggested, when passages of similar character and significance were discussed, above, that this description stands at the tale's centre of gravity. It is Ellis' sight of this room, the shock he suffers and the sense of pity that he experiences, which represent the turning point in the tale. He will now turn from 'Passion' to 'Reason' and become :

'His passion's Lord and not his anger's slave';<sup>4</sup>

His conquest, without battle, of his feelings will influence Dale. Yes, even Crabbe's profusion of detail is invariably subordinated in a manner which fully preserves the integrity of the tale.

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1. E.g.: unceil'd, dark, cold, infectious, bleak, icy, ruin'd, unsavoury, wretched, void, relentless.
  2. George Gilfillan, "George Crabbe", Tait's Edinburgh Magazine, Vol. XIV, March 1847, p.143.
  3. Bagehot writes of Scott thus: 'He could not remove his firm and instructed genius into the domain of Arcadian unreality, but he was equally unable to dwell principally, peculiarly, or consecutively, on those petty, vulgar, mean details in which such a writer as Crabbe lives and breathes.'  
The Collected Works of Walter Bagehot, Ed. N. St. John-Stevas (1965), Vol. II, p.58.
  4. "Sir Owen Dale", op. cit., 1.896.

her father's way of life, and by his demand that she marry a local farmer. She turns to a refined widow for advice and for affirmation of her romantic ideas about life.<sup>1</sup> The ironic contrast on which the tale hinges, and which again welds it into a satisfying artistic whole, is between the romantic autobiography that she expects to hear from the widow, and the tale of distress that is in fact related; between the imagined idyll of the widow's cottage and the realities of her pitiful existence. The advice she receives from the widow is quite unexpected :

"Passion to reason will submit . . .  
All would be safe, did we at first inquire —  
Does reason sanction what our hearts desire?"<sup>2</sup>

A common-sense marriage with a 'rude farmer' is better than the uncertainties of a 'romantic' poverty :

"While you, exempt from want, despair, alarm,  
May wed — Oh ! take the farmer and the farm."<sup>3</sup>

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- (3) creature she is !  
Cf., for instance, Dunbar's The Twa Maryit Women and the Wedo.  
Much of the effect in this poem is achieved by the dichotomy between the courtly love form of the women's discussion, and its degenerate content.
1. Nancy, too, has been drugged by 'tales of woe and tenderness'.  
"The Widow's Tale", op. cit., l.113.
  2. Ibid., l.198 and ll.208-9.
  3. Ibid., ll.293-4.

At various points in the widow's narrative, Nancy interjects with an incorrect assumption of one kind or another. The character of her remarks serves to emphasise the naiveté of her illusions about life. Here Crabbe gives us a taste of that highly unparsonical humour with which he often surprises us. Nancy assumes that on the death of the widow's lover she was 'forced' (in the tradition of 'Romance') into some 'tyrant's power'.

"Force, my young friend, when forty years are fled,  
Is what a woman seldom has to dread;  
She needs no brazen locks nor guarding walls,<sup>1</sup>  
And seldom comes a lover, though she calls."<sup>1</sup>

But Nancy will progress from 'Passion' to 'Reason', from a belief that love is "A passion doom'd to reign, and irresistible", against which even 'the strongest reason fails'<sup>2</sup>; to acceptance of a sober and sane marriage with Henry Carr, the farmer. As Henry proposes, she feels 'no chilling dread, no thrilling joy'<sup>3</sup>; 'Romance' has faded into reality. In this manner once again 'Passion' is frozen: everything undesirable is parcelled up with ribbon in the jingling antitheses of the final distich:

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1. Ibid., 11.315-18.
  2. Ibid., 1.183 and 1.186.
  3. Ibid., 1.399.

A discussion of the now famous description<sup>1</sup> of the farmhouse meal with which Crabbe opens the tale, is an appropriate starting point for a wider assessment of Crabbe's 'architectonic' abilities. The graphic forcefulness and immediacy of this Brueghel-like scene are very great indeed :

... by the steaming beef he hungry sat,  
 And laid at once a pound upon his plate;  
 Hot from the field, her eager brother seized  
 An equal part, and hunger's rage appeased;  
 ... one huge wooden bowl before them stood,  
 Fill'd with huge balls of farinaceous food;  
 With bacon, mass saline, where never lean<sup>2</sup>  
 Beneath the brown and bristly rind was seen;

'A little coarse, and needless~~ly~~ minute', was Jeffrey's comment, in his review of Tales.<sup>3</sup> But this passage, notwithstanding its detailed character, has a highly functional purpose, and is fully integrated into the structural framework of the tale. It is indispensable if we are to appreciate the manner in which Nancy's delicate sensibility has been assaulted on her return to her father's farm. As in The Elder Brother and Sir Owen Dale this piece of 'functional description' is placed at a focal point of the story: at the point of clash between dream and reality. This passage stands at the

1. "The Widow's Tale", op. cit., ll. 7-30.

2. Ibid., ll. 9-12 and ll. 19-22.

3. Francis Jeffrey, "Tales", Edinburgh Review, Vol. XX November 1812, p. 390.

opening of the tale; its special effect is gained by placing the reader in medias res. This is in contrast to Crabbe's usual slow-motion start to his tales. The ballad narrative is perhaps an influence here.

Crabbe's use of the technique of contrast in general, and the effective placing of 'functional description' in particular, demonstrate that not only was he aware of problems of structure, but was adequately able to cope with them. Contemporary critics<sup>1</sup> of Crabbe's poetry denied him anything of the power of 'architectonics' that 'higher poetical duty',<sup>2</sup> as Arnold calls it. This criticism of structure centres mainly on Crabbe's detailed descriptions of landscape, interiors, and persons. The poet is accused of destroying the whole by insufficiently subordinating to it the part. The attitudes of George Crabbe, the son, and of Edward Fitzgerald, to this question have been quoted above<sup>3</sup>. Below are some further examples of this criticism :

The Dutch minuteness, the particularity so observable in Mr. Crabbe's delineations, ... not unfrequently destroys the poetical effect which would arise from the contemplation of a whole, by confining the attention to the curiously laboured and sometimes servile development of the parts.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Cf. a modern critic: Crabbe 'had the desultory mind of an opium-addict.' Renwick, *op. cit.*, p.110.
  2. "Preface to Poems" (1853), *op. cit.*, p.11.
  3. P. 10
  4. "The Borough", *Critical Review*, Vol. XX, 1810, p.294.

Teniers and Wilkie ... may minutely delineate pots, pans, and cabbages ... because all these things may be kept in due subordination to the principle purpose and leading effect ... In short stories, however, ...<sup>1</sup>

Accordingly, to make the picture in all things a perfect likeness, he very often enters into details that weary ...<sup>2</sup>

Our readers are well aware that from Mr. Crabbe they never are to expect a whole.<sup>3</sup>

This school of criticism, levelled against the particularity involved in numbering 'the streaks of the tulip'<sup>4</sup> is in the tradition of the critical theories of the 'general' and the 'particular' as espoused, for instance, by Johnson and Reynolds.<sup>5</sup> These theories

1. "Tales 1812", The Monthly Review, Vol. LIX, December 1812, p.353.

2. John Wilson, "Tales of the Hall", Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, Vol. V, July 1819, p.469.

3. "Tales of the Hall", British Critic, Vol. XII, September 1819, p.290.

4. ' "The business of the poet," said Imlac, "is to examine, not the individual, but the species; to remark general properties and large appearances; he does not number the streaks of the tulip ..." '.

Johnson, "Rasselas", op. cit., p.329.

and Cf :

'Great thoughts are always general, and consist in positions not limited by exceptions, and in descriptions not descending to minuteness.' "Life of Cowley", Johnson, Works, op. cit., Vol. IX, p.21.

5. ' ... the whole beauty and grandeur of the art consists, in my opinion, in being able to get above all singular forms, local customs, particularities, and details of every kind. '

Sir Joshua Reynolds, "The Third Discourse", Reynolds Discourses, Ed. E. Rhys, (1906), p.30.

And compare Reynold's comparison of the Italian and Dutch schools of painting: 'The Italian attends only to the invariable, the great and general ideas which are fixed and inherent in

were somewhat outmoded by the second decade of the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> These critics were surely giving voice to critical opinions that were imbibed in their boyhood. Indeed, Wimsatt and Brooks suggest that 'The doctrine of particularity became something like a rhetorical standard during the latter half of the 18th century, ...'<sup>2</sup>

### Comic Relief

I now pass on to a final group of three poems in which the theme of 'Passion' and 'Reason' is taken up in tales of comedy. The fears that surround this theme are distanced by laughter.

- (5) universal nature; the Dutch, on the contrary, to literal truth and a minute exactness in the detail, as I may say, of Nature modified by accident.  
The Idler, Vol. II, No. 79, p.150, Saturday Oct. 20th 1759. Three months after Rasselas appeared Reynolds expounded theories of 'generality' in The Idler, 76, 79 and 82.
1. A persuasive article by W. S. Ward, which is very well documented with examples from contemporary periodicals, points to the fact that the first two decades of the nineteenth century were, for social and political reasons, characterised by their critical conservatism. Mr. Ward describes this period as 'the twilight of Neo-Classicism' (p.398). W. S. Ward, "Some Aspects of the Conservative Attitude Towards Poetry in English Criticism", 1798-1820, ~~PM LA~~ Vol. LX, June 1945.
  2. W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., and C. Brooks, Literary Criticism (New York, 1957), p.315.  
 This statement is more fully substantiated in an article by Scott Elledge: "The Background and Development in English Criticism of the Theories of Generality and Particularity." P, M, L, A. Vol. LXII, March 1947, pp.147-182.

The Miracle Plays can have their high jinks even in The Harrowing of Hell pageant; but beneath the laughter the elements of fear remain. Crabbe withdraws his customary sympathy and allows his irony full rein in these tales. There is little anguish or suffering to be found here, but the tensions generated by the 'Passion' theme in the darker tales must affect our evaluation of his comic treatment of this same theme. As in the typical Shakespearean comedy in which shadow and light alternate, where fear pervades even the scene of high comedy, so Crabbe's ghostly shades of 'Passion' hover over what are essentially humorous tales.

The three tales that I have selected to illustrate my point are all from Tales. Although the range of comedy that this collection of tales affords is by no means unique, Edward Fitzgerald can write of the later Tales of the Hall :

'... of all the Poet's works this one alone does not leave a more or less melancholy impression upon me.'<sup>1</sup>

and

'It was mainly for the Humour's sake that I made my little work.'<sup>2</sup>

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1. "Readings in Crabbe", op. cit., p.vi.
  2. Letter to C. E. Norton dated May 1st, 1880.  
Letters of Edward Fitzgerald, Ed. W. A. Wright, (1894), Vol. II, p.281.



For one who always insists that neither Crabbe nor his poetry suffers from a 'constitutional gloom',<sup>1</sup> the suggestion that the elements of humour are confined to the one collection of tales which he chose for his "Readings" is very strange indeed.

The Lover's Journey<sup>2</sup> is based, structurally, on a threefold contrast between the reality and the illusion of what Orlando sees. As he journeys to meet his love, the most desolate of landscapes and the most lowly and vulgar of its inhabitants appear as delightful to the lover's eyes. Laura is not to be found when he arrives at her home; the pangs of jealousy that he is now to suffer will deeply affect his impressions of the landscape and of people. Now, Orlando makes an anxious journey in search of her and all that is truly beautiful appears to him as blighted. Finally, with Laura by his side, neither beauty nor blight seems to matter at all :

The mind was absent, and the vacant eye  
Wander'd o'er viewless scenes, that but appear'd to die.<sup>3</sup>

All three views are founded on illusion, on emotional extremes of one kind or another, or, to use Crabbe's own terminology, on

'Passion' :

1. 'His views of life are rational and sober, clouded sometimes by the shadows of constitutional gloom'.  
"Tales", Universal Magazine, Vol. XIX, February 1819, p.129.
2. Tales X.
3. Ibid., 11. 358-9.

It is the soul that sees; the outward eyes  
 Present the object, but the mind descries;  
 And thence delight, disgust, or cool indiff'rence rise:<sup>1</sup>

Critics<sup>2</sup> have pointed to the affinity between this idea and that expressed in Coleridge's Dejection : An Ode<sup>3</sup>. In Delay has Danger Crabbe expresses precisely the same idea after some lines of 'functional description'. Henry, now aware that he has been tricked into marriage with Fanny, watches the dawn rise. The attraction that this hour of the day had once had for him is quite gone.

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1. Ibid., l. 1-3.

2. R. L. Chamberlain's, for example (George Crabbe, New York, 1965, p.113). He also notes an explicit verbal reference to Coleridge's poem in the final lines of The Lover's Journey. Crabbe's taste in reading was not as conservative as one might be led to expect.

3. 'O Lady ! we receive but what we give,  
 And in our life alone does Nature live:  
 Ours is her wedding garment, ours her shroud ! '

"Dejection : An Ode", ll.47-9, The Complete Poetical Works of S. T. Coleridge, Ed. E. H. Coleridge, Vol. II (Oxford 1912). And cf. Ruskin's idea of the 'pathetic fallacy'. In reference to some lines from Kingsley's Alton Locke, he writes : 'The foam is not cruel, neither does it crawl. The state of mind which attributes to it these characters of a living creature is one in which the reason is unhinged by grief. All violent feelings have the same effect. They produce in us a falseness in all our impressions of exterior things, which I would generally characterize as the "pathetic fallacy".'  
Modern Painters (Vol. III, Part 4), The Works of John Ruskin, Ed. E. T. Cook and A. Wedderburn, 1904, Vol. V, p.205.

The succession of contrasts on which the tale is built is conceived in wholly ironic terms. For instance, Crabbe describes the bleakness and blight of the landscape, and then demonstrates the quality of the illusion in question by Orlando's ridiculous eulogy of precisely the same scene. Crabbe's description of one scene runs thus: 'fiercer grew the heat, ... Dust rose ... lanes of burning sand, ... thin crops ... uncultured land ... dry ... sterile soil ... thin-set rye.'<sup>1</sup> And now Orlando :

"How lovely this ! " the rapt Orlando said;  
 "With what delight is labouring man repaid !  
 The very lane has sweets that all admire,  
 The rambling suckling and the vigorous brier;  
 See ! Wholesome wormwood grows beside the way,  
 Where dew-press'd yet the dog-rose bends the spray;  
 Fresh herbs the fields, fair shrubs the banks adorn,  
 And snow-white bloom falls flaky from the thorn;  
 No fostering hand they need, no sheltering wall;  
 They spring uncultured and they bloom for all."<sup>2</sup>

The superlatives and the 'poetic diction' suggest a nature poetry written without an eye on the object. 'Vigorous brier' and 'wholesome wormwood' is the kind of cliché we would expect from a 'rapt' Orlando. These were the 'tinsel wrappings of poetic pride' which Crabbe inveighed against in The Village<sup>3</sup>. Pastoral Poetry and the diction which is an inseparable part of it are an illusion.

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1. "The Lover's Journey", op. cit., 11.46-51.
  2. Ibid., 11.52-61.
  3. The Village, 1, 1.48.

The pervading, gently-humourous irony reduces our fears for Orlando to a smile - one rarely laughs at anything Crabbe writes. Orlando's 'Passion' is not of the kind which is likely to cause harm to himself or other people. If at one point Orlando threatens to 'slight' and 'upbraid'<sup>1</sup> his lover; by the time he has reached her, 'gentler passions'<sup>2</sup> have taken their hold on him. Crabbe's comedy, in fact, is careful to concern itself with only these 'gentler passions'.

Sybil and Josiah<sup>3</sup> are both in their manner 'enthusiasts'. No doubt in the ethos of the serious tales, the emotional extremes which they pursue would have led to the destruction of not only their relationship but also of themselves. Here a triple framework of contrasting characters give the tale its structural firmness. The puritanical world of Jonas is evoked in great detail; it contrasts sharply with that of his gay, worldly, sister :

There were no changes, and amusements few;  
Here, all was varied, wonderful, and new;<sup>4</sup>

But now Crabbe is able to pass beyond the architectonic simplicities of juxtaposing 'Here' and 'There' ; Sybil and Josiah are the 'circle

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1. "The Lover's Journey", op. cit., 1.229.
  2. Ibid., 1.326.
  3. "The Frank Courtship", Tales VI.
  4. Ibid., 11.103-4.

within a circle'<sup>1</sup> that gives their story greater depth and significance.

Their story unfolds itself against a background of family and of sect.

Beyond these, however, lies yet a further contrast which likewise gives an added dimension of interest to the tale. The 'superior will' of intransigent Jonas is so overbearing that it threatens, for a moment, to darken the comedy. The 'peace' that reigned in his house was not one based on 'equal views and harmony of mind';

But it was that which one superior will  
Commands, by making all inferiors still;<sup>2</sup>

In contrast, Sybil, as a superscription to the tale from Much Ado About Nothing<sup>3</sup> suggests, will never accept this kind of relationship with a husband. Sybil demands the worship of a courtly lover: something which is no less an unpalatable extreme for Crabbe. Yet another addict of 'Romance' reading, her language itself is in the idiom of these 'soft tales of love':<sup>4</sup>

"I must be loved," said Sybil; "I must see  
The man in terrors who aspires to me;  
At my forbidding frown his heart must ache,  
His tongue must falter, and his frame must shake;  
... reason's self must for a time retire."<sup>5</sup>

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1. It is thus that Joan Bennet describes the design of George Eliot's novels. Crabbe, within the obvious limitations imposed by the short story, often achieves an effect which is similar. Joan Bennet, George Eliot (Cambridge, 1948), p.79.
  2. "The Frank Courtship", op. cit., 1.26 and 11. 29-30.
  3. Works, Vol. II, p.87.
  4. "The Frank Courtship", op. cit., 1.242.
  5. Ibid., 11.295-8 and 1.301.

A splendid 'Dutch interior' suggests, with great economy, the puritanical bent of the occupants of the house. Every object 'tells':

Neat was their house; each table, chair, and stool,  
 Stood in its place, or moving moved by rule;  
 No lively print or picture graced the room;  
 A plain brown paper lent its decent gloom;  
 There stood a clock, though small the owner's need —  
 For habit told when all things should proceed.<sup>1</sup>

The subtle force of the epithets, especially the tendentiously ironic 'decent', contributes much to the restrained urbanity that is so characteristic of Crabbe's satirical style. Puritanism takes the sobrieties of the way of 'Reason' to a life-denying extreme. While Sybil enjoys the gaiety and freedom of her Aunt's home, it is the well-regulated lifelessness evoked by the above description which remains in our minds. How, we ask, will Sybil, who 'to the world belongs'<sup>2</sup> ever re-adjust herself to her father's way of life?

These conflicting worlds of 'Passion' and 'Reason' establish the tensions of the tale: how and when, the reader waits to know, will the clash come? The story progresses unerringly to the climactic scene in which this 'collision' is expected to take place. But the world of comedy is not one of cataclysm. Within the frame of reference of comedy, Crabbe can work out the 'Golden Mean' of

1. Ibid., 11.47-50 and 11.65-6.

2. Ibid., 1.240.

concord by concession which, so he tells us in The Candidate, he admires:

Receive a bard, who, neither mad nor mean,  
Despises each extreme, and sails between;<sup>1</sup>

The first generation (Jonas and his sister) has been unable to achieve mutual respect, and have<sup>s</sup> lived ~~by~~<sup>in</sup> deceiving ~~each other~~.<sup>+</sup> Josiah and Sybil, however, will learn to allow 'Something for habits, manners, modes'<sup>2</sup>. 'Reason' has prevailed over their extremes. The 'happy end' of the denouement is achieved through pure comedy; there is nothing of the anti-climatic bathos with which we leave, for example, Sir Owen Dale, The Widow's Tale and Villars.

Much of the humour of The Frank Courtship is derived from the dialogue. The climactic point of the tale (the confrontation between Sybil and Josiah) is managed wholly in dialogue. Crabbe's early powers in the manipulation of monologue in order to reveal character have been mentioned above. I wish now to conclude this discussion by pointing to some examples of a more sophisticated, fully dramatic, dialogue.

1. "The Candidate", Works, Vol. I, pp.75-86, ll.21-2. Similar 'concord' of comedy is achieved in the less successfully comic tales of "The Preceptor Husband", Tales of the Hall IX, and "The Natural Death of Lover", Tales of the Hall XIV.
2. "The Frank Courtship", op. cit., 1.443.

The presentation of dialogue, an inherently objective manner of writing, comes as something of a relief in Crabbe's work: mercifully, it tends to reduce authorial comment to a desirable minimum. Unfortunately, in spite of a perceptibly growing power in the handling of the spoken word, little attempt is made at variation in the choice of diction: all his characters, peasant, or 'posh', express themselves in the same couplet-tailored, formalised diction. This short-coming is especially noticeable in his 'low' characters. The difficulty, one supposes, is for Crabbe to approach a colloquial idiom in a verse medium so full of rhetorical associations. However, as Crabbe develops an ability to 'kick over the traces' of the ten syllable line;<sup>1</sup> to break away from the 'rocking-horse' balancing of words, ideas, and prosody, within the line and couplet; and to achieve a syntax resembling natural word order; so he begins to capture the nuances of the spoken word. From Tales onward, dialogue, in one form or another, occupies a central position in his technique of story-telling.<sup>2</sup>

1. Leslie Stephen, "Crabbe"; Hours in a Library (4 vols.) (1907), Vol. II, p.210.
2. It is interesting to note, in connection with Crabbe's abilities in the use of dialogue, that during that fateful year in London, he 'composed two dramas.' (Life, p.45). They presumably disappeared, together with a vast amount of other material, in the periodic bonfires which he lit for the amusement of his children. The son also records his father's general interest in the theatre (ibid., pp.108-9; 79; 215). Crabbe's worldly habit of theatre-going, aroused no small amount of criticism amongst his parishioners at Trowbridge.



A favourite method of Crabbe's is to use dialogue to present a climactic point or an important scene. The immediacy, and swift-moving character of these points of climax make a forceful contrast to the slow-motion rendering of the minutiae of information which are given early in the tales. In The Frank Courtship, the antithetical worlds of Josiah and Sybil have been described in great detail. The description of the final confrontation between them is the vital scene which the denouement must supply. The sparkling dialogue between the lovers occupies some eighty lines of the tale. Any short quotation from this dialogue would do it an injustice. The humour of the piece is not derived, especially, from any line or couplet, but is cumulative. There is the double-entendre of 'patient' and 'doctor':

... "Fair maiden, art thou well?"  
 "Art thou physician?" she replied; "my hand,  
 My pulse, at least, shall be at thy command."<sup>1</sup>

The readiness to hurt each other by a witty sharpness of exchange :

' "Speakst thou at meeting?"<sup>2</sup>

Sybil asks after Josiah's puritanical jeremiad. This dialogue contains some verbal echoes from earlier parts of the tale which enhance the comedy of the piece. Josiah wears a 'pale brown coat'

1. "The Frank Courtship", op. cit., ll.367-9.

2. Ibid., l.414.

(Jonas' house; we remember, was decorated with 'a plain brown paper';<sup>1</sup> Sybil notes that Josiah wears a hat of 'broad rim' that hides a 'sober face'; this concurs with an earlier, authorial description of him :

Sober he was . . .  
A hat with ample verge his brows o'er spread.<sup>2</sup>

But the full significance of this passage of dialogue lies in its relation to the tale as a whole. Our enjoyment of the scene is derived essentially from the fact of its climactic position in the story; the point at which the two extremities of 'Passion', so powerfully evoked, (perhaps just a little too powerfully for pure comedy) come into conflict.

Delay has Danger uses dialogue in a similarly effective way.

The climactic confrontation between Henry and the demanding guardians of Fanny is presented almost wholly in a dialogue; this is surely the most successfully comic scene in the Crabbe canon. Poor Henry tries desperately to plead his innocence, but finds it quite impossible to do so in the face of the bluster of the steward and his wife. Quotation from this dialogue will demonstrate how malleable the couplet has now become in Crabbe's hands. Here is the steward's wife, the 'eminence grise', talking to Henry :

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1. Ibid., 1.348 and 1.50.
  2. Ibid., 1.153 and 1.157.

"O! we have watch'd you on from day to day,  
 'There go the lovers !' We were wont to say —  
 But why that look?" -

"Dear Madam, I implore  
 A single moment ! "

"I can give no more:  
 Here are your letters - 'thats a female pen,'  
 Said I to Famy - ' 'tis his sister's, then,'  
 Replied the maid. - No! never must you stray;  
 Or hide your wanderings, if you should, I pray;  
 I know, at least I fear, the best may err,  
 But keep the by-walks of your life from her:"<sup>1</sup>

The word order and idiom are that of speech: this is no small achievement within the limitations of the rhyme-bound poetic medium. Crabbe also catches something of the inconsecutiveness of the spoken word. The enjambement breaks through the tyranny of the distich; and he is able to move with dexterity between reported and direct speech within the single couplet, sometimes within the single line. An exchange of dialogue can take place within a single couplet. This kind of manipulation of the couplet attests to the degree of flexibility which Crabbe has achieved in the use of his staple metre.

Some other tales in which Crabbe employs dialogue in order to give added poignancy and immediacy to a climactic point may be briefly mentioned.<sup>2</sup> The final dialogue between George and

1. "Delay has Danger", *op. cit.*, 11.613-22.
2. "The Natural Death of Love". (Tales of the Hall XIV), one of Crabbe's least successful poems, is rendered wholly in dialogue. It is an example of what the reader misses by the absence of an omniscient narration which guides, indeed often prods us, in the desired moral direction. But for all their didactics, one would not wish the tales to be without those drily humorous, witty, ironic, sympathetic, and even, sometimes, profound, authorial comments. They add a further and vital dimension to the tales.

Rosabella<sup>1</sup> takes place, as has been suggested earlier, at a crucial point of the story. The Family of Love<sup>2</sup>, a rather slow-moving tale, is saved partly by a series of monologues in which the members of the Dyson family reveal their egoism. The revelations of this tale's denouement are again rendered in dialogue. In Procrastination<sup>3</sup> the awaited meeting of Rupert and Dina is heightened by the immediacy which the spoken word gives to the scene.

Arabella,<sup>4</sup> a typical 'bluestocking'<sup>5</sup> of the period, is guilty of that ubiquitous eighteenth century sin, 'pride'. A delightful couplet likens her to the lofty spire of her town:

... strangers, coming, all were taught to<sup>?</sup> admire:  
The learned lady, and the lofty spire.<sup>6</sup>

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1. "The Elder Brother", op. cit.
  2. Posthumous Tales, II.
  3. Tales IV.
  4. "Arabella", Tales IX.
  5. Elizabeth Vesey, the first 'queen' of the 'Bluestockings', said of her followers, that few of them were free from: 'the female frailty of displaying more learning than is necessary or graceful.'  
Quoted by Mrs. H. G. Aldis in "The Bluestockings", Cambridge History of English Literature (Ed. A. W. Ward and A. R. Waller) (Cambridge, 1953), Vol. XI, p.345.  
Cf. Arabella who:  
    '... dared to read, and dared to say she read;  
    Not the last novel, not the new-born play;  
    Not the mere trash and scandal of the day;  
    ...  
    She studied Berkeley, Bacon, Hobbes, and Locke.'  
Ibid., 11.24-6, and 1.28.
  6. Ibid., 11.35-6.

Unlike Sybil and Josiah, who finally learned to allow: 'something for habits, manners, modes,<sup>1</sup>

She no allowance made for sex or times  
Of Lax opinion — crimes were ever crimes;<sup>2</sup>

Arabella's story is a comic treatment of a recurrent theme in Crabbe's work: 'Passion' or 'Enthusiasm' is modified by the realities of experience gained by the passing of time. Time 'steals from virtue her asperities'<sup>3</sup>; Crabbe tells us in one of those imaginative lines which, for a moment at least, take us soaring high above the muddy flats of Aldeburgh. But the ethos of Crabbe's comedy allows characters to survive, unscathed, their encounter with life's realities.

Structurally the tale again divides visibly<sup>4</sup> into the two contrasting halves of illusion and reality, with ironical echoes that ring across both of these sections. The contrast of 'then' and 'now' in Arabella's life is not a subject of sorrow but one of satire.

While she is young, Arabella is courted by many eligible suitors; they are all dismissed because they fail to satisfy her illusions about the kind of man who will be worthy of her. When, however,

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1. "The Frank Courtship", op. cit., 1.443.

2. "Arabella", op. cit., 11.65-6.

3. Ibid., 1.215.

4. 'Twelve brilliant years were passed,' (Ibid., 1.226) is the point of this division.

... Twelve brilliant years were past<sup>1</sup>  
 ... each with less of glory than the last;

Arabella is obliged to be far less demanding in her choice of a husband. These 'echoes' that sound through the 'illusion' and 'reality' sections of the tale emphasise the extent of Arabella's self-deceit, and serve to bind the story into a pleasing artistic whole. The requests of Edward, an early suitor, are deferred month by month; it finally transpires that he has a bastard offspring. He now, of course, can no longer be considered as a husband. Later, and in contrast to his affair, Arabella 'in compassion took off week by week' from the time left to her marriage with Beswell, a highly undesirable suitor. Beswell, worse than Edward, has a 'race' of 'brown, ugly bastards'<sup>2</sup>; but Arabella now finds a religious justification for her marriage:

She spoke, nor more her holy work delay'd  
 'Twas time to lend an erring mortal aid:<sup>3</sup>

The tale is infused with ironies of this kind; they create an atmosphere of comedy in which compromise is possible. In his descriptions of the various suitors, Crabbe allows himself the exaggerations of caricature, something which is not to be found in

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1. Ibid., 11.226-7.

2. Ibid., 11.299-300.

3. Ibid., 11.333-4.

his serious work. But comedy or no, this tale is pervaded by a sense of uneasiness which is, perhaps, characterized by the high-minded note which Crabbe saw fit to append to the tale.<sup>1</sup> He obviously feels unsure about the comic treatment which he has given to his invariably serious handling of the theme of 'Passion' and 'Reason'. Arabella marries a man whom she detests, and she will carry into her marriage a sense of hurt pride. Her religious self-denial will mean martyrdom not for her, but for Beswell. The close of the tale is overcast with shadow: it is not easy for Crabbe to bring the conflict of 'Passion' and 'Reason' to a sequel of happy compromise.

The element of comedy in Crabbe's work, and its range and variety, have been seen to be wide, has always been seriously underestimated. It would seem that as a writer he has never quite recovered from the impression that those gloomy and didactic passages from The Village, which were published in Elegant Extracts,<sup>2</sup> left on the schoolboys who read them. Southey, writing to a friend in 1808 (before even The Borough had been published) recalls reading these passages. His memory is of pictures which

1. Works, Vol. II, p. 133.

2. The passages from The Village in Vicesimus Knox's 1801 edition of Elegant Extracts are: Bk. I: 11.218-317. Bk. II: 11.87-106.

a contrast and a relief to that downward 'curve' of the Crabbe story: the decay which the failure to control 'Passion' brings in its wake.

The thrust and point of the heroic couplet, gained largely through rhyme and stress, is used with dexterity; it produces Crabbe's very special brand of satire. This 'amiable satire'<sup>1</sup> this 'mixture of satire and sympathy'<sup>2</sup>, is never personal, or, to any real extent, cutting, in say the manner of Dryden. Crabbe, so much like Johnson<sup>3</sup> in this respect, is poignantly aware of both his own and human frailty<sup>4</sup>; unlike the true satirist he is rarely able to achieve the required distance from his subject. 'Satire and

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1. '... that amiable satire which at once laughs at and loves ...' T. N. Talford, "An Attempt to Estimate the Poetical Talent of the Present Age", The Pamphleteer, Vol. V, No. 10, 1815, p.441.
  2. Edinburgh Review, July 1819, loc. cit., p.123.
  3. G. B. Hill, referring to the failure of the flying machine inventor in Rasselas, writes: 'Johnson is content with giving the artist a ducking. Voltaire would have crippled him for life at the very least'. Johnson's Rasselas (Oxford, 1887), p. 165 (note 53). Crabbe, of course, is quite ready to follow his sinners along the path of self-destruction, but only after he has discarded his satirical pen.
  4. Crabbe speaks of himself as :  
     'A fellow-sinner, who must rather dread  
     The bolt, than hurl it an another's head.'  
 "Schools", The Borough XXIV, 11.458-9.



is there evidence of any wide reading beyond fiction (especially the novels he devoured so voraciously), and the 'basic reading' required for a clergyman of unsophisticated congregations. One feels, rather, that Crabbe simply accepted as a 'donnée' this unrefined, clear-cut, black and white, contrast of emotion and intellect which came down to him through his reading of eighteenth-century literature.

The ubiquity of this set of ideas gives Crabbe's work a thematic unity: a unity of greater profundity and significance than any of those clumsy attempts at link-frameworks for the four collections of his tales. Insofar as his central theme of 'Passion' and 'Reason' links him to the ideas of the century in which he was born, it sounds an echo that reverberates far beyond the mere simplicities of the stories that are told. His theme is that of Gulliver's Travels, Rasselas and The Essay on Man, with their Neo-Classical emphasis on the need for man, the only one of God's creatures to be gifted with 'Reason', to exercise control over his behaviour.

Finally, we have seen that Crabbe's innumerable variations on his central theme give, as we follow the inevitable downward movement from illusion to reality, a visible structure to the tales. The tensions generated by 'Passion' and 'Reason' give the stories,

their necessary dramatic conflict. 'Make 'em laugh, make 'em cry, make 'em wait' is good advice to the actor;<sup>1</sup> but it is also good advice to the story-teller. Crabbe knew the value of 'making 'em wait', of creating the suspense that allows the reader to put the story down only at the point of its close. Will Henry realise the trap that has been set for him before it is too late?<sup>2</sup> Can George's uncle bring his nephew to see reality before he is destroyed by his adolescent dream?<sup>3</sup> How corrosive an effect on her love for Rupert will an aunt's inheritance have on Dina?<sup>4</sup> These are the questions that 'wait' to be answered in the respective tales. The structure of the tales leads us unerringly on to the climax, usually a clash of 'Passion' and 'Reason', which presents dramatically the answers to questions which the tale has raised.

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1. V. Kathleen Tillotson, Novels of the Eighteen Forties (Oxford, 1954), p.21, where this famous quotation is referred to as 'traditional advice of the old actor'.
  2. "Delay has Danger", op. cit.
  3. "The Elder Brother", op. cit.
  4. "Procrastination", op. cit.

## Chapter Two

'The Moonshine's Lure'<sup>1</sup>

A Study, with special reference to the non-couplet poetry, of Crabbe's response to the 'Passion' of an age of poetic transition

Introductory

'... 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.'<sup>2</sup>

In the final analysis we shall never know how deep Crabbe really ventured into this 'interdicted space' of 'Passion'. But the evidence of some fifty poems and fragments of poems, which are not written in the staple heroic couplets, show Crabbe, in spite of the cultural isolation of his circumstances, to have been profoundly affected by the new literary modes of the turn of the eighteenth century.

The evidence for his readiness to expose himself to the new literary and philosophical ideas of his time is by no means confined to a discussion of the non-couplet poetry. The central and pervading interest of Crabbe's tales in characterization ('Romanticism was nothing if not introspective'<sup>3</sup>) has been adequately emphasised by

1. 'He could not always draw his own curtains so firmly against the moonshine's lure'. F. L. Lucas' metaphor sums up in one sentence what I want to say in this chapter; indeed what I want to say in the whole thesis.  
F. L. Lucas, "The Poet of Prose", Life and Letters (1934), p.193.
2. "Preface" to Poems of 1807, Works, Vol. I, p.98.
3. R. L. Brett, Crabbe (1956), p.33.

critics. Crabbe's psychological insight into motivation of character is expressive of a preoccupation with the individual 'particular' being, rather than with the Neo-Classical 'general'. In this respect the tales look forward to the nineteenth century novel, rather than back to the satirical character-sketches of Dryden and Pope.

The members of those polite literary circles in London and Edinburgh who were shocked by the appearance of Wordsworth's The Idiot Boy were also revolted by Crabbe's early interest in 'low' characters. The Village, The Parish Register, and The Borough, in particular, are haunted by those 'Wordsworthian' outcast figures; the fallen woman, the decrepit, failing, old man, the fugitive from justice, poverty-stricken people, and sinners of every kind. The discussion of the tales has shown the essential Crabbe character to be one who is ready to sacrifice all for a 'Passion', of one kind or another. Crabbe, himself, emerges as a writer who desired, but unlike most of his characters rarely dared, to commit, himself to 'sensibility'. Many of the 'middling class' characters which Crabbe writes of from The Borough, onwards may be seen as precursors of the 'Romantic' hero: the man inhibited by, and at odds with, the society around him.

Furthermore, there is within the couplet tales ample evidence

of a predominant interest in subjects that were relatively alien to this most cerebral and least spontaneous of poetic measures. The tales are preoccupied with dreams, insanity, and physical passion; with the 'Gothic' elements of the supernatural and macabre; with introverted melancholy, and the exploration and expression of self. The classical writers of the couplet had not ventured into such realms; in the later eighteenth century such subject matter had been of only peripheral interest to the maker of the couplets.

Crabbe, like Matthew Arnold, would sing like a 'Callicles'; but he is allowed only to rhyme in shackling couplets. His cry, only faintly heard, is that of 'Empedocles':

Oh, that I could glow like this mountain!  
Oh, that my heart bounded with the swell of the sea!<sup>1</sup>

The comparison with the poetry of Arnold is not a gratuitous one: the same tensions and conflicts between feeling and cerebration, discoverable in Crabbe's work, are those which make Arnold's poetry so exciting to read. The moral and literary prudishness that characterize the years of the turn of the eighteenth century; the political and religious bigotry of the English climate of opinion in the years which succeeded the French Revolution, had no small

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1. "Empedocles ~~and~~ <sup>On</sup> Etna", 11.323-4. The Poems of Matthew Arnold. Ed. Kenneth Allott (1965).

effect on the kind of poetry that Crabbe chose for publication. He had achieved, by moving from a position as apothecary's apprentice to that of a celebrated writer, the seemingly impossible. The rigidly stratified society of his day provides us with few such examples. But Crabbe was haunted by his lowly past: a timid and self-conscious man with little belief in his abilities, he curled up into his shell at the slightest criticism. A pinched, unhappy childhood and youth had left the kind of mark on his sensibility which only occasionally, and invariably in his private writings, allowed his imagination to soar skywards.

'The high imagination belongs to those who, knowing themselves, as Crabbe did, still are free, as Crabbe was not'.<sup>1</sup>

I wish to make no exaggerated claims for the non-couplet poems that will be discussed in this section. In many cases these poems were never intended for publication; because of this they were never subjected to the polish and revision of the collections of tales. Notwithstanding this fact, poems like Sir Eustace Grey, The World of Dreams, and Hester<sup>2</sup> are as readable as anything that Crabbe wrote in heroic couplets. But if no great intrinsic merit can be

1. Geoffrey Grigson, "Introduction", Selected Poems of Crabbe, (1950), p. 9.
2. Arthur Pollard (Ed.) New Poems (Liverpool, 1960).

in Smugglers and Poachers; and the deep pathos of Phoebe Dawson, and The Parting Hour.

This chapter will follow a division along the following lines. For the purposes of discussion the non-couplet poetry may be divided into narrative and 'lyric' kinds. The narrative poems will be related to Crabbe's larger body of tales in order to show to what extent their themes and subject matter are common to all his work. The 'lyric' poems, although a part of Crabbe's work which is pedestrian in conception, are of special interest: they show the poet as ready to use poetry as an expression of self. This essentially 'Romantic' characteristic will likewise be seen to have its counterpart in the tales. The chapter closes with a detailed analysis of those personal, vocational, and social factors which inhibited Crabbe as a writer; and, it will be debated, which prevented him from publishing much of what he wrote. He destroyed a great deal of unpublished manuscript.

'I can well remember more than one grand cremation — not in the chimney, for the bulk of paper to be consumed would have endangered the house ...'<sup>1</sup>

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1. Life, p. 116.

humour'<sup>1</sup>, which Jeffrey had noted and was to note, in the main body of Crabbe's work, are totally absent from these poems. An unalleviated high seriousness of treatment suggests that Crabbe was writing of matters which held no small fear for him. Here, after all, he ventures into that 'interdicted space' from which the ogres of 'Passion' continually threaten to encroach upon his cherished territory of commonsense and 'Reason'. When in 1812 Jeffrey reviewed Tales, he expressed disappointment that this collection of poems did not contain more of the 'deep and tragical passions' of Sir Eustace Grey and The Gipsy Woman (The Hall of Justice). His wish was for tales such as these; tales which would contain 'less jocularly than prevails in the rest of his writings'.<sup>2</sup>

Behind Crabbe's essays in the use of fuller and looser verse rhythms lay the rumblings that turned to a roar with the publication of Percy's Reliques in 1765. Joseph Warton's Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope (1756) and Young's Conjectures on Original Composition were the overtures to :

1. Francis Jeffrey, "Poems 1807", The Edinburgh Review, Vol. XII, April 1808, p.132.
2. Edinburgh Review, November 1812, loc. cit., p.278. Sir Eustace Grey and The Hall of Justice are the only two poems of the group to be published in Crabbe's lifetime. Both poems appeared in 1807.



'The melody of our verse has been perhaps carried to its utmost perfection . . . The public has seen all that art can do, and they want the more striking efforts of wild, original, enthusiastic genius.'<sup>1</sup>

Some of the poems under consideration are patently influenced, both in form and content, by the traditional ballad. Percy's Reliques had gone into several editions by the turn of the century; these volumes, together with Lyrical Ballads, and Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border no doubt formed part of Crabbe's wide reading of contemporary literature. His voracious reading of the poetry of his age is attested to by his biographer, and by countless references in his poetry.

The two 'opium' poems, Sir Eustace Grey and The World of Dreams, by far the best work in this group, may usefully be compared. The latter was published in 1834 as part of The Posthumous Tales. Both poems are written in octosyllabic verse with an intricate, interlacing rhyme scheme of ababbcbc.<sup>2</sup> The vocabulary of these poems, and indeed of others to be discussed here, is remarkable for its freedom from 'poetic diction'. The rhetorical associations of Crabbe's favoured verse medium were too strong even for this realist poet; only when he had cast off the bonds of the couplet was he able to free himself, almost entirely, from the stylised diction that is an inseparable

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1. Letter from William Shenstone to John MacGowan, dated September 24, 1761. The Letters of William Shenstone, Ed. Marjorie Williams, (Oxford, 1939) p. 596.
  2. As Ainger points out, the fifty five eight line stanzas of complex construction make it very difficult to believe Crabbe's claim that Sir Eustace Grey was completed at one sitting. Alfred Ainger, Crabbe, (1903), p. 88.
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His son tells us that he continued from this time to take 'a constant but slightly increasing dose'.<sup>1</sup> His biographer, at times rather too anxious to present his father in a wholly respectable light, takes particular pains at this point in his narrative to suggest that nothing unconventional in Crabbe's behaviour resulted from the taking of the drug.<sup>2</sup> Certainly the son makes no attempt to associate this addiction with say, the highly uncharacteristic World of Dreams : a poem which he, himself, was publishing for the first time, together with the biography of his father. But this may simply be attributed to his innate inability to respond to poetry in general, and to his father's poetry in particular.<sup>3</sup>

Edward Fitzgerald, referring to the opium, has the following manuscript note in his copy of Crabbe's poems: 'it probably influenced his dreams, for better or worse. ... see also the World of Dreams, and Sir Eustace Grey'.<sup>4</sup> But as far as we know, and the biographical

1. Life, p.138.

2. 'Nothing kills like reverence,' writes E. M. Forster with reference to biographies. Although he denies that Crabbe's "Life" suffers from this fault, Forster goes on to list a number of significant omissions from this biography. "Introduction", The Life of George Crabbe : By his Son, (Oxford 1932) p.x.

3. Fitzgerald, a close friend of Crabbe's son, writes of him thus: '... my old George rather hating Poetry — as he called Verse ... never having read his Father's from the time of editing it in 1834 till drawn to them by me a dozen years later.' Letter to Leslie Stephen dated April 9th 1883: More Letters of Edward Fitzgerald, Ed. A. W. Wright (1901) p.282.

4. Huchon refers to George Crabbe, the son, as: 'a non-poetical clergyman, who appears in too many places, with his characteristic reserve'. René Huchon, George Crabbe and his Times, (1907) p.viii

4. V. Ainger, op. cit., p.80.

data available are extensive by any comparison, Crabbe was never addicted to the extent that Coleridge and De Quincey were. The self-restraint, the moderation, that he preaches throughout his work, with regard to opium at least, seems to have been practised. Unlike Coleridge<sup>1</sup>, he did not allow opium to ruin his life; but what price was paid for this in terms of mental and physical suffering we shall never know. Not, of course, that suffering is a necessary concomitant to the taking of opium, Elizabeth Schneider in her book on Coleridge has written of the medical evidence that suggests that an addict's life may be lived out in a perfectly normal way, provided that the doses are regulated with moderation.<sup>2</sup> It will be seen that the evidence for, at least, two poems having been written under the imaginative stimulus of opium, is fairly conclusive. But one may well ask why there are only two such poems. Crabbe had taken opium over a period of some 30 years. We may assume with some confidence that there were many more poems of this character amongst those that he sent up in flames.

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1. 'Opium more than any other cause has been held responsible for the failure of Coleridge both to fulfil all <sup>the</sup> promise of his genius and to win his everyday living by steady labors.' Elizabeth Schneider, Coleridge, Opium and Kubla Khan (Chicago, 1953) p. 31.
  2. Ibid. pp. 31-2. She in fact cites Crabbe and William Wilberforce as addicts of this type. 'In general, the conclusions bear out the belief of Wilberforce and Crabbe that addiction of itself has little or no deteriorating effect.' Ibid., p. 33.

There was I fix'd, I know not how,  
 Condemn'd for untold years to stay;  
 Yet years were not; — one dreadful now  
 Endured no change of night and day;<sup>1</sup>

The nightmare experience of the fall from great heights is common to both writers. De Quincey writes: 'I ran into pagodas, and was fixed for centuries at the summit ...'.<sup>2</sup> Of the 'two fiends of darkness' who pursue Sir Eustace, he says that :

They hung me on a bough so small,  
 The rook could build her nest no higher;  
 They fix'd me on the trembling ball  
 That crowns the steeple's quiv'ring spire;<sup>3</sup>

And the poet in his nightmare:

'I tumble from the loftiest tower.'<sup>4</sup>

The phantasmagoric shifts of scene, a hypersensitivity to light, and the vision of vast expanses of water are likewise common to the opium dreams of De Quincey and the Crabbe poems. A later discussion<sup>5</sup> of the place of the sea, will show it to be of seminal importance in the work of Crabbe; its appearance in these opium poems is therefore of particular interest. The sea both in the "Confessions" and in the poems finds place as a nemesis symbol.

1. Sir Eustace Grey, ll. 204-7.
2. De Quincey, "Confessions", op. cit., p. 442.
3. Sir Eustace Grey, ll. 276-80.  
and cf. : the 'Angels of darkness fierce and strong' who pursued the poet in The World of Dreams (1.28).
4. Ibid., 1.201.
5. V. Chapter 3 below.

These poems are infused with the idea of guilt and the expiation of guilt. Here is one of De Quincey's visions of horror:

'... the sea appeared paved with innumerable faces, upturned to the heavens; faces, imploring, wrathful, despairing; ... infinite was my agitation. ... the weight of twenty Atlantics was upon me, or the oppression of inexpiable guilt.'<sup>1</sup>

In a passage of The World of Dreams, which I shall have occasion to quote in full later on, the sea appears as a life-destroying force.<sup>2</sup>

The illusion is one of a 'delicious quiet' 'Beside the summer sea': the reality is 'the peril of the meeting flood'. The image of the sea is present in Sir Eustace's account of his delusions:

On sand, where ebbs and flows the flood,  
Midway they place and bade me die;  
Propp'd on my staff, I stoutly stood,  
When the swift waves came rolling by;  
And high they rose, and still more high,  
Till my lips drank the bitter brine;  
I sobb'd convulsed, then cast mine eye  
And saw the tides' re-flowing sign.<sup>3</sup>

The nature of Sir Eustace's sin is made explicit: his pride had made him ungrateful to God. In an act of passion, he had killed his wife's lover, and was indirectly responsible for his wife's death. Crabbe is not precisely explicit about the character of the poet's sin in World of Dreams. But the horrific experiences to which he is

1. De Quincey, "Confessions", op. cit., p.441 and p.446.
2. The World of Dreams, ll. 97-112.
3. Sir Eustace Grey, ll.300-5.



Jachin's 'ruin'd mind' of 'weakness and . . . guilt' is made poetically concrete in the mouldering seascape that appears again in The Parish Clerk.<sup>1</sup> In some inexplicable way the blight of nature which he sees around him is the consequence of his own sin. All these experiences have a transcendental quality about them which is quite out of keeping with a poet who claims that his poetry is designed to appeal to the

. . . plain and sober judgment of . . . readers,  
rather than to their fancy and imagination.<sup>2</sup>

Very probably as a result of the opium habit, Crabbe experienced a recurring nightmare in which there appeared a group of insolent boys who could not be thrashed because they were made of leather; 'he was followed and hooted' by them. Huchon, quoting a Fitzgerald manuscript On World of Dreams writes; Crabbe

would sometimes reply, when he was asked whether he had slept well, "The leather-lads have been at me again."<sup>3</sup>

The fear of being shamed, the guilt dream, is far too common to warrant particular notice. But this recurrent nightmare is especially significant for a man who had moved from toting casks

1. Op. cit., ll.270-82.

2. "Preface" to Tales, Works, Vol. II, p.9.

3. Huchon, op. cit., p.374; and cf. 'The Dream of the Condemned Felon. Here the nightmare of the hunted man appears again:

'There crowds go with him, follow and precede;  
Some heartless shout, some pity, all condemn.'

"Prisons!" op. cit., ll.268-9.

at Slaughden Bay to the company of England's/literati. Crabbe, leading  
 from all accounts,<sup>1</sup> had never really felt at ease in such company.

Seated with those I never sought — ...  
 Majestic, frozen, solemn, still;  
 They wake my fears, my wits appal,  
 And with both scorn and terror fill.

Thus run some lines in World of Dreams<sup>2</sup> which, more specifically,  
 might relate to those early humiliations at Belvoir Castle. Crabbe  
 himself would have understood this line of criticism; he realized  
 what twentieth century psychology has verified, that our dreams  
 are:

Composed of all [we] knew, and all [we] read,  
 Heard, or conceived, the living and the dead.<sup>3</sup>

In his London Journal of 1817, Crabbe makes a further  
 reference to these horrifying dreams. 'Baxter's mortifying spirits'  
 of the poem are specifically mentioned.

Awake, I had been with the high, the apparently  
 happy ... Asleep, all was misery and degradation,  
 not my own only, but of those who had been.<sup>4</sup>

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1. For example, Fitzgerald's account of Crabbe's manner  
 in company :

'Crabbe never showed himself in Company, ...  
 his Company manner was exactly the reverse of  
 his Books: almost, as Moore says, "douceureux";  
 the apologetic politeness of the old School over-done,  
 as by one who was not born to it.'

Letter to C. E. Norton. Dated February 1st, 1877.

Fitzgerald Letters, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 215.

2. World of Dreams, 1. 219 and 11. 222-4.

3. "Silford Hall; or the Happy Day", Posthumous Tales I, 11. 667-8.

4. Life, p. 220. Cf. 'Baxter's sprites my soul abuse'.  
World of Dreams, 1. 11.



Lockhart reports Crabbe as saying to Lady Scott:

"I should have lost many a good hit, had I not set down,  
at once, things that occurred to me in my dreams".<sup>1</sup>

How many of those guilt-ridden beings who move across Crabbe's  
accusing landscapes are the product of such 'hits'?

Mr. Crutwell, a very modern critic, goes rather far in  
describing The World of Dreams as a 'phantasmagoria of the whole  
of Crabbe's essential life'; 'his insecurity, sensitiveness, and even  
his suppressed sensuality'.<sup>2</sup> But the poem does to a certain extent  
substantiate this thesis. The appearance of the workhouse as part of  
these fleeting fantasies is particularly significant:

Shall I a coat and badge receive,  
And sit among those crippled men,  
And not go forth without the leave  
Of him — and ask it humbly then —  
Who reigns in this infernal den.<sup>3</sup>

Crabbe had written passionately in The Village about the injustices of  
the workhouse. The workhouse recurs in his work as a place of the  
ultimate degradation to which a man can descend. As an institution  
it symbolises for the poet the dread of a return to the poverty he had  
known.

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1. Letter to George Crabbe, the son; London, December 26, 1833.  
Life, pp.241-6.
  2. Patrick Crutwell, "The Last Augustan", The Hudson Review,  
Vol. VII, 1954-5, p.541 and p.545.
  3. World of Dreams, ll.265-9.

The World of Dreams does not rely solely on the association of ideas to give the poem its shape; the structural basis is one of contrast. It is perhaps these architectonics - of - contrast, the organizing principle of many of the tales, which have led critics like ~~Mrs.~~<sup>Dr.</sup> Haddakin to speak of the contrived air of the poem.<sup>1</sup> The Crabbe sequence of events that moves from dream to reality, from 'Passion' to 'Reason' is now a familiar one:

Ah! brief enjoyment! — Pleasure dies  
E'en in its birth, and turns to pain:<sup>2</sup>

The poem is largely made up of a series of such movements, in which the dream sours into a grim reality: friends become strangers; a garden in blossom becomes the dreaded workhouse; the beautiful flower turns into the fearful mandrake of myth.

...                                    Whatever I can find  
Grows mean and worthless as I view:<sup>3</sup>

Another of these sequences involves a brother 'lost in youth'. The brothers met in 'conscious love' but, writes the poet:

'He quits me — spurns me — with disdain!'<sup>4</sup>

There is a meeting with a long-loved woman: but 'all affection asks [is] denied'.<sup>5</sup> This meeting recalls George's search for Rosabella,

1. '... the stuff of his [Crabbe's] dreams needed to be arranged or worked up in some way.' Lilian Haddakin, The Poetry of Crabbe (1955), p. 31.
2. World of Dreams, ll. 77-8.
3. Ibid., ll. 169-70.
4. Ibid., l. 80.
5. Ibid., l. 144 which reads:  
'Is all affection asks denied?'

I suggest, lies in the manner in which the insane visions of Grey are cast. The World of Dreams is related with all the immediacy of a first-person narration; in this poem the presentation is dramatic, however perfunctory: 'Scene --- A Mad-House. Persons - Visitor, Physician, and Patient'.<sup>1</sup> Any suggestion that this dream world of delirium and supernatural activity can actually be part of a normal being's experience is refuted by the dramatic distancing of events: Sir Eustace is after all a madman. The irrational and transcendental may form a part of creative writing; but they must, for the sake of respectability, be brought into the orbit of everyday, fully comprehended, experience. In the manner of Mrs. Radcliffe's 'Gothic' novels, the untenable and unreasonable must be fully explained. The choric voices of 'Reason' in the form of the 'visitor' and physician, and especially the didactic cant of the latter, serve to return us to earth after Grey's flights of madness.

Would we not suffer pain and grief,  
To have our reason sound and sure?  
Then let us keep our bosoms pure,  
Our fancy's favourite flights suppress;<sup>2</sup>

It is then, in the more spontaneous and uninhibited presentation of 'interdicted space' that the World of Dreams differs from Sir Eustace Grey. Sir Eustace's accounts of his hallucinations, which

1. Sir Eustace Grey, Works Vol. I, p. 328.
2. Ibid., ll. 430-3.

perhaps owe something to Sarah Crabbe's encroaching insanity, have to be 'wrapped up', so to speak, for presentation to the public. All this is not to suggest that the poem was badly received. Its good critical reception, perhaps, reflects the particular interest of the period in mental illness. Broman notes that a very large number of treatises on the subject of mental aberration were published at this time.<sup>1</sup> The dramatic 'wrappings' and the didactic excrescences add little to the artistry of this poem; the fall through 'Passion' is a Crabbe commonplace. What, however, is interesting and unusual is the account of Grey's insane visions; these visions link the poem with The World of Dreams. Once again those images of degradation appear;

... I've ran  
Where Bedlam's crazy crew conspire  
Against the life of reasoning man.<sup>2</sup>

The prison, the 'gipsy crew', and the dunghill as a source of food, are likewise evocations of that fear of a return to those early years of poverty; a fear that haunts the whole of Crabbe's poetry. Sir Eustace like the protagonist of The World of Dreams, is relentlessly transported across ever-changing dream landscape.<sup>3</sup> The sea,

1. W. E. Broman, "Factors in Crabbe's Eminence in the early Nineteenth Century", Modern Philology, Vol. LI, August 1953, p.49.
2. Sir Eustace Grey, ll.289-91.
3. Part of the landscape, like that of Coleridge's The Ancient Mariner (1798) is polar.

as a destroyer of life, makes its inevitable appearance. The  
boundless plain

'Where nothing fed, nor breathed, nor grew'<sup>1</sup>

is surely that of the marshy flats of Crabbe's native Aldeburgh.

The withering blight of these flats provides a setting in many tales;  
it is a place;

Where the thin harvest waves its wither'd ears;  
Rank weeds, that every art and care defy,<sup>2</sup>  
Reign o'er the land and rob the blighted rye:

A description of some ruins which stand on this 'boundless  
plain', are part of a passage that is, as a whole, an 'emblem'  
of Grey's decaying, darkening, mind. The chaste simplicity of  
the last two lines of this passage almost belies the imaginative  
beauty of the metaphor:

... the grey moss had form'd a bed,  
And clothed the crumbling spoils of time.<sup>3</sup>

John Murray, Crabbe's publisher, was perhaps also referring to  
this marked characteristic of the poet's work when he observed that  
in conversation Crabbe said ' " ... uncommon things in so natural  
and easy a way, that he often lost the credit for them" '.<sup>4</sup>

Sir Eustace Grey is characterized, even more markedly than

World of Dreams, by a proliferation of images and by an enthusiasm

1. Sir Eustace Grey, 1.194.
2. The Village I, ll.66-8.
3. Sir Eustace Grey, ll.202-3.
4. V. Ainger, op. cit., p.31.

of language. One supposes that Crabbe's claim that his poetry is 'without an atmosphere'<sup>1</sup> refers, partly at least, to his refusal in the couplet tales to over-indulge himself in flights of imagery. Indeed the norm in Crabbe's imagery is usually a plodding, extended simile: as obvious an excrescence as a patch of sacking on a cloth of silk. Thus the profuseness in Sir Eustace Grey of simile, metaphor, and personification, is especially striking. Much of the imagery is commonplace; it relies (as in the ballads) on its force rather than on its subtlety for effect:

' "Full be his cup, with evil fraught," '

In the power of the 'fiends of darkness', Sir Eustace was:

'An infant in a giant's hand'

He is imprisoned in a fen:

There never trod the foot of men;  
There flock'd the fowl in wint'ry flight;  
There danced the moor's deceitful light  
Above the pool where sedges grow;<sup>2</sup>

The light image in the last example is unusually sensuous for a Crabbe metaphor.<sup>3</sup> This quotation also shows how Crabbe has caught the repetitive incantation of the ballad.<sup>4</sup> The striking, if somewhat

1. "Preface" to Tales, op. cit. p.10.

2. Sir Eustace Grey, l.170; l.219; ll.270-73.

3. Cf. ll.220-1 and l.238, for examples of a sensitivity to light. Such a sensitivity is characteristic of the opium dream. V. Discussion above (Chapter 2, p.84ff).

4. And cf. the following stanzas of Sir Eustace Grey, and the next quotation below, for similar repetition.

commonplace, images, and the monosyllabic simplicity of the diction, create the kind of racy style that is wholly in keeping with the mental condition of the protagonist, and the ballad-like superlatives of the events: murder, adultery, death, and madness. The octosyllabics of Grey race on, often with the insane inconsequence, with a lightness and a speed that Crabbe can attain to only outside the medium of the couplet. The 'enthusiastic' hyperbole of description in which everything is 'high', 'swift', 'deep' and great in number, is in consonance with the distortions of size which the opium addict experiences in his dreams. The diction of this poem expands towards such hyperbole:

I've been of thousand devils caught,  
 And thrust into that horrid place,  
 Where reign dismay, despair, disgrace;  
 Furies with iron fangs were there,  
 To torture that accursed race,  
 Doom'd to dismay, disgrace, despair.<sup>1</sup>

One wonders how much Crabbe held back behind the urbanity and reserve of his couplets.

Another vision poem which has much in common with Sir Eustace Grey and World of Dreams is Where am I now.<sup>2</sup>

Mr. Pollard suggests that it belongs to the period 1819 to 1822.<sup>3</sup>

1. Sir Eustace Grey, ll. 310-15.
2. Pollard, op. cit.
3. Ibid., p. 5.

Like World of Dreams, this poem remained unpublished in Crabbe's lifetime: it had to wait until 1960 for publication. In content and atmosphere it recalls the dream-like inconsequence of World of Dreams; but, apart from an unusual awareness of, and sensitivity to light,<sup>1</sup> there is little conclusive evidence to suggest that its composition owes anything to the opium habit.

As in the case of the two opium poems, 'the mind wanders in worlds above'. This 'shifting scene' of the mind has its parallel in an astonishing variety of metres and stanzaic arrangements. The arbitrary movement from metre to metre, from one stanza form to another is, ~~however~~<sup>one feels</sup>, accident rather than ~~art~~<sup>design</sup>. But the chief interest of the poem lies once again in the strange reveries which seem to bring us so very near to the man himself: that ostensibly staid parson behind those interminable rows of faceless couplets. It is as if they are assembled as rows of soldiers to protect this man's 'essential life' from all who would know more of it than

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1. E. g. 'And these <sup>tall</sup> stately Trees, on which the Rays  
Of the Moon fall? They have their foliage dyed  
With that sweet Light' that now the Branches hide ...'

Ibid., ll. 12-14.

'And Every Light is of a lovely Hue,  
Rich, rosy red ! or fair celestial blue !'

Where am I Now ll. 46-7.

'A thousand Lights

Burst from the antique Windows ...'

Ibid., ll. 52-3.



the dramatic character of the verse tale allows. Those steely verse patterns are floodgates which would hold back the torrential 'Passion' of uncertainty, insecurity, and lack of control, that the World of Dreams reveals. The ingredients here are those of Where Am I Now.

At the centre of this guilt-ridden poem stands an encounter with Satan<sup>1</sup> in which the protagonist is accused of the sin of 'Passion':

"Thou knowst there is a strong Desire  
That lives in thy unquiet Breast."<sup>2</sup>

Satan departs but the 'Hisses and Laughter mingled' of 'mocking Spirits' continue to torment him in his guilt.<sup>3</sup> Again there is the fear of the humble man being shamed in a 'noble' house: the deer in the park are 'objects for increasing fear'; the protagonist is 'much afraid' before his entry into the house.<sup>4</sup> The uncertainty

1. Crabbe, as noted above (Chapter 1, p.25 ) had satirized in the character of Jachin ("The Parish Clerk", op. cit.) the Methodist illusion of the single man's encounter with Satan. There takes place here what appears to be the poet's own encounter with Satan. In this case the rebuke for this assumption of pride, the idea that Satan would bother himself with the individual, comes from the devil:

' "O! fool to judge that He who could rebell  
Against the highest! would with Mortals dwell,  
And tempt an abject Being, such as thou!" '

Where Am I Now, Pollard, op. cit., ll.190-2.

2. Ibid., ll.171-2.
3. Ibid., l.216 and l.214.
4. Ibid., l.59ff and l.112

The ultimate terror for Crabbe is faced in all three of these poems: the loss of self-control, or, more precisely, the loss of the faculty of 'Reason'.

The Insanity of Ambitious Love<sup>1</sup> was completed in 1816, and was not published until 1960. This poem was written during the years in which Tales of the Hall was being composed and was possibly intended for inclusion in this collection.

Sometimes he sketches a tale, intended for one of his regular collections, in octosyllabic metre, or in Spenserian stanzas. Then, in the course of the four or five stages through which his first effort passed before it was sent to press, he reverts to couplets.<sup>2</sup>

Huchon's observation, which unfortunately, he substantiates by only one example<sup>3</sup>, is of basic importance to this discussion: it suggests, contrary to the accepted idea, that the heroic couplet was not Crabbe's 'natural' medium of poetic expression. Crabbe's 'conversion' of other, freer, verse forms into heroic couplets might be seen as an attempt to dissociate his work from the more excitable poetry of some of his contemporaries.

1. Pollard, op. cit.; V. ibid. p.3 for the chronological details of this poem.
2. Huchon, op. cit., p.487.
3. A rough draft of The Elder Brother (op. cit.) written in octosyllabics. I have not seen any further examples in those manuscripts which I have been able to look at. It is interesting to note that The Elder Brother, itself, was added while the collection was actually on the press. Crabbe obviously had some doubts about the inclusion of this tale of passion. V. Huchon, op. cit. p.406 (a note).

The parallels between The Insanity of Ambitious Love, the World of Dreams, and Where Am I Now, suggest, I believe, why the last-named poem was never included in Tales of the Hall. A dramatic persona is employed, as in Sir Eustace Grey, in order to remove any suggestion of a connection between what is related, and the author himself. One is struck in this poem both by an unaccustomed sensuality and by the sensuousness of the description. The feeling is, however, that both of these characteristics are latent in the poetry as a whole. One would like to believe that with the use of the freer and fuller verse rhythms<sup>1</sup>, something resembling rapture awakes in the Crabbe couplet machine. How, with long acquaintance with his verse does one come to relish such a surprise as:

... her Eyes were like the Drops  
That shine upon the ripen'd Sloe.<sup>2</sup>

1. Apart from the first 45 lines of heroic couplets, this poem is arranged in 8-line stanzas of alternately rhymed octosyllabic verse. Whatever Crabbe achieved inflexibility by enjambement in his later couplets, the freedom and speed that this form allows are patently greater: the less frequent recurrence of the rhyme word, and the shorter line, are the factors that ensure this.
2. The Insanity of Ambitious Love, Pollard, op. cit., II. 124-5. In a letter to Mrs. Leadbeater dated 30th October 1817, Crabbe writes of his work in progress on Tales of the Hall: 'I hope to copy my now scattered papers within about three months: there are with these some things in the manner of 'Sir Eustace Grey.' (Leadbeater, op. cit. p. 350 Vol. II). Was one of these 'things' The Insanity of Ambitious Love? The manuscript of the poem is dated November 28th 1816. (V. Pollard, op. cit., p. 2).

of licentiousness, sexual and otherwise, finds expression in a number of poems. In The Lover's Journey, the gipsies are seen by the poet as wholly given to 'Passion':

What shame and grief, what punishment and pain,  
Sport of fierce passions, must each child sustain . . . <sup>1</sup>

The 'vagrant' in Hall of Justice is a gipsy; it is against the background of gipsy life that her sins are committed. The horrors of Sir Eustace's degradation include a time of wandering 'with a gipsy crew'. <sup>2</sup>

In his delusion, the protagonist, like Arnold's 'Scholar Gipsy', is attracted to the gipsy band by stories of their life of 'Passion'. He leaves behind him the degradations of factory life:

"Where Springs and Spindles rattling rang,  
And whizzing Wheels, a noisy row" <sup>3</sup>

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1. Op.cit., ll. 192-3.

2. Sir Eustace Grey, ll. 297.

3. "Insanity of Ambitious Love", Pollard, op.cit., ll. 74-5. This passage as a whole is one of the few descriptions which Crabbe gives us of factory life. This is quite characteristic of a poet who consistently refuses to write of something he has not seen or experienced personally. The Industrial Revolution 'stimulated by scientific invention and a rising population [had] entered decisively on that headlong career that shows no sign of weakening even today' (G. M. Trevelyan English Social History, 1948, p. 375.) This revolution which took place in Crabbe's lifetime might not have taken place as far as his poetry is concerned. This is equally true of the French Revolution. Crabbe, as we shall see, liked to keep himself out of troubled waters. Pollard points out that these lines are probably the product of Crabbe's visit to the Doncaster mills of his friend Cartwright (Pollard, op.cit., p. 168; and V. Life p. 117).

in order to satisfy 'a strong persuasive call'. This band is presided over by an enchantress whose image is evoked in terms of a highly unparsonical sensuality. Perhaps Crabbe had Shakespeare's Cleopatra in mind.<sup>1</sup> She is 'swarthy' with sloe-black eyes: the mediaeval and traditional colours of the harlot; she is an 'enchantress', 'wild', and a 'Sybil';

"... the Beauty all admire, ...  
The Height ! the Fulness of Desire ..."<sup>2</sup>

This woman of changing shapes is the same figure of the tempter who appears in Where Am I Now as a monk. The choice before him here (compare the workhouse in World of Dreams) is between the debasement of industrial life and the 'Poet's dream'; he chooses the latter, a vision of gipsy 'Passion', as seen by an insane protagonist :

"His Flights were all the true poetic breed;"

"My feelings I must all obey;"

"So I the prompting heart obey'd,  
As to ~~the~~ varying bliss it led;"<sup>3</sup>

He is thus saved by an escape to a world of feeling and imagination:  
the very thing which Crabbe condemns in many of his tales.

1. A 'running' image in this play connects Cleopatra with the swarthy colours associated with the mediaeval harlot.
2. "Insanity of Ambitious Love", Pollard, op.cit., 1.138 and 1.140.
3. Ibid., 1.28; 1.210; 11.352-3.

These 'visions profligate and vain' (for such the inevitable didacticism of the close suggests they are)<sup>1</sup> have only 'association as a structural device'. This, Chamberlain<sup>2</sup> feels, is the organizing principle of Hester, Sir Eustace Grey and Hall of Justice. In Insanity of Ambitious Love the mind of the protagonist wanders in an uncontrolled fashion. Twice in the poem he attempts to restrain his outpourings:

"But where my Story?"<sup>1</sup>

"Do I not in my Story <sup>s</sup>tray?"<sup>3</sup>

This 'stream of consciousness' technique of organising the material conveys most successfully the insane visions of the protagonist; visions which become progressively wilder. This again was not the kind of poetry that would be likely to enhance the hard-won social respectability of the Rector of Trowbridge.

Joseph's Dream, written in octosyllabics of alternate rhyme in stanzas of unequal length, was published in 1905. In this dream Joseph sees himself passing from the position of slave to that of ruler. These experiences are those of Crabbe himself:

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1. Ibid., 1.377.

2. R. L. Chamberlain, George Crabbe, (New York, 1965) p.57.

3. "Insanity of Ambitious Love", Pollard, op. cit., 1.149 and 1.208.

Alternate Smiles and Frowns of Friends and Foes;  
 Temptations, Trials, Favours, Perils, Pains;  
 But in each shifting Scene  
 Was he, that self-same, Youth, still virtuous, still serene.  
 ...  
 Acting as ever in his mother's sight;<sup>1</sup>

Joseph attains power, and he marries; but the dream of plenty must end:

He saw far off Egyptian Turrets gleam,  
 And wept his cruel Fate, and longed again to dream.<sup>2</sup>

How many such rags-to-riches dreams did Crabbe have as he worked, deeply humiliated, among the wares at Slaughden Bay?

Joseph too is warmed by the 'flame' of passion, but the story of his infatuation for the 'princess fair' ends in respectabilities of marriage. An interesting dialogue takes place before a painting of the biblical Joseph and Potiphar's wife, in the autobiographical Silford Hall.<sup>3</sup> The boy is acutely embarrassed both by the picture and by the question which his guide puts to him:

"... Had you been Joseph, boy !  
 Would you have been so peevish and so coy ?"  
 He replies, blushing :  
 "His mother told him he should pray for grace."

The dread of falling victim to sexual passion, as so many of his characters do, is as strong in Crabbe's mind as that fear and guilt

1. Joseph's Dream, ll.17-20 and l.44.

2. Ibid., ll.87-8.

3. "Silford Hall", op. cit., ll.396-7 and l.399.

he connects with drink. His mother, 'deeply religious in her turn of mind,<sup>1</sup> exercised an important influence on his life. This fact is attested to both in his biography, and elsewhere in Silford Hall.<sup>2</sup>

Crabbe rarely takes up a biblical story in his tales, so perhaps his choice of the Joseph story is not wholly fortuitous. The rags-to-riches motif, which obsessed Dickens, and through which perhaps he too exorcised the fear that there might be a return to the blacking factory, is not a central one in Crabbe's work. But these poems give much evidence of the presence of this latent fear of a return to poverty.

Hester and Hall of Justice, like Sir Eustace Grey, can be dated definitely to Crabbe's generation of silence.<sup>3</sup> Hall of Justice appeared with the 1807 poems and Hester, which is found in ms. in the Murray Collection, is clearly dated 'Glemham 1804'. Nowhere else does Crabbe show us quite so clearly the extent to which he has imbibed the ballad, both in form and in content. But, after all, Crabbe's tastes in poetry were developed in the century of Thomas Percy and other would-be 'tidiers up' of the ballads; poems, Percy tells us, that in that 'polished age . . . will require great allowances

1. Life, p.4.

2. Ibid., p.94 and "Silford Hall" op. cit., ll.146-155.

3. Hester has a ballad metre of alternate eight and six iambic lines, in stanzas of varying length. The lines rhyme alternately. Hall of Justice is written in octosyllabics with alternate rhyme.



to be made for them'.<sup>1</sup> Crabbe is not only a little uneasy and self-conscious about the 'swing and sweep'<sup>2</sup> of the ballad movement; but perhaps too, like Percy, afraid lest the accusation of 'immoral and indecent'<sup>3</sup> be levelled at the work. Crabbe's means of 'tidying up', of making respectable, his ballads is to infuse them with didactic cant and append notes which attempt to rationalize the supernatural events of the story.

Both Hester and Hall of Justice relate the story of the fall of two women. Violence, murder, prostitution, madness, and the supernatural, are the materials of the storyteller; this onslaught on our feelings by means of pathos and horror is of course the 'hot and strong' way in which the ballad-maker proceeds. 'It is very nervous - very shocking - and very powerfully represented', was Jeffrey's comment on the Hall of Justice.<sup>4</sup> Though himself a 'worthy supporter of the old poetical establishment', Jeffrey, in speaking of the poem, refers to Crabbe's 'great mastery of the tragic passions

1. Thomas Percy, Reliques of Ancient English Poetry, Ed. H. B. Wheatley, 1876, Vol. I, p.8.
2. George Saintsbury, A History of English Prosody, Vol. II (1908), p.526. It will be seen that because of a lack of self-confidence Crabbe delayed for a number of years the publication of Hall of Justice. One of his characteristically apologetic Preface notes is written in connection with this poem: '... how far I may have conformed to rules of more importance must be left to the less partial judgment of the readers.' "Preface" to Poems of 1807, op.cit., p.98.
3. "Reliques", op.cit., Vol. I, p.15.
4. Edinburgh Review, Vol. XII, April 1808, loc. cit., p.149.

of pity and horror'.<sup>1</sup> The age in which the sine-qua-non of poetic excellence was to be the power to impassion the reader had been ushered in.

The holiday from the couplet again allows Crabbe to use a simple, effective diction which is wholly in consonance with the characters of Hester and the Gipsy: they both relate their own stories. Both poems, but Hester especially, catch the unique way in which the ballad-writer describes with circumlocutory naivete: the sleet is 'wild and wintry'; the flood is, 'deep and winding'; the sight of the castle walls is 'proud and gorgeous'.<sup>2</sup> In Hall of Justice, Aaron's father's look is 'dark and dreadful'; the widowed vagrant is 'vile and poor'; the ghost's approach is 'slow and mournful'.<sup>3</sup>

This simplicity of the diction has its correlative here, as in the case of the other non-couplet poems, in the imagery. The following are two examples of the usual use of simile in Crabbe's poetry. In the tradition of much of eighteenth century poetry, the more cerebral simile is the prevalent form of imagery in his work. His extended similes, though long-winded and laboured, are often 'witty' and ingenious in a ratiocinated way:

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1. Ibid., pp.150-1.
  2. "Hester", Pollard, op. cit., 1.27; 1.65; 1.96.
  3. Hall of Justice, 1.77(I)  
1.18(II)  
1.70(I)

" God allow,  
 The great avenger, just and good,  
 A wife to break her marriage vow,  
 A son to shed his father's blood!"<sup>1</sup>

But the writer of the traditional ballad probably believed in the innumerable transcendental happenings that haunt those poems; Crabbe, ostensibly at least, did not. Nothing is more typical of the author than the heavy-handed note appended to the passage which describes the appearance of the ghost in Hall of Justice: 'The state of mind here described will account for a vision of this nature, without having recourse to any supernatural appearance.'<sup>2</sup> Had Hester been published in his lifetime, no doubt Crabbe would have devised for it a similar note. Like Johnson, Crabbe had a strong hankering after ghost stories, but he too considered that :  
 '... he who tells nothing exceeding the bounds of probability has a right to demand that they should believe him, who cannot contradict him.'<sup>3</sup> Crabbe is always on guard against the imputation of 'enthusiasm' of any kind. Sir Eustace Grey, published together with Hall of Justice, also has an explanatory 'sign-post'. Grey, when the

1. Hall of Justice, ll.41-44 (I)
2. Works, Vol. I, p.257.
3. "Preface to the Translation of Father Lobo's Voyage to Abyssinia", Johnson, Works, op. cit., Vol. II, p.265.

'Passion' of his madness is spent, finds mental rest in his conversion to Methodism; Crabbe just cannot leave well alone: 'a sober and rational conversion could not have happened while the disorder of the brain continued'.<sup>1</sup> He is saying in effect that only a madman could become a convert to Methodism.

Another example of this kind of bathetic deflation in a non-couplet poem is to be found in 'Twas in a Country.<sup>2</sup> The story is of a malcontent's 'Passion' for revenge which sweetens into amity. This poem has little to recommend it; it is of interest here because it provides a further example of Crabbe's disengagement from any suggestion of his belief in the supernatural. The squire's mysterious ally is suspected of being a demon of some kind. But Crabbe consistently restrains himself from revelling in the imaginative possibilities of such a situation. The self-searching rationalisation of events which is the protagonist's reaction to this transcendental appearance is quite the norm in Crabbe's Tales. The success of Peter Grimes, for example, lies partly in Crabbe's readiness to throw aside bit and rein, and allow his natural predilection for the

1. Works, Vol. I, p.251.

2. V. R. Huchon, "Two Unpublished Poems of Crabbe" Monthly Review, Vol. XIV, March, 1904. pp.119-137. The stanza of this poem is rhyme royal, though the final line of certain stanzas is an hexameter.

irrational all the freedom it requires. We are not let down with such excrescences as :

"Was it the devil?" said the doubtful Squire,  
"For on the point unsettled is my creed" <sup>1</sup>

This ambivalence of attitude again finds expression in the Squire's dream debate. It is only through the distance afforded by the license of the dream, that Crabbe will permit the real doubts to appear :

... he was in debate  
If spirits spake to mortals, and the theme  
Vex'd him e'en in sleeping; loth he felt to state  
The new opinions he imbib'd of late:  
"Reason," he cried, "no doubt denies the thing,  
But who shall proofs against experience bring?" <sup>2</sup>

Of course, by the end of the tale, every doubt has been swept aside.

Like Mrs. Radcliffe, Crabbe cannot wholeheartedly accept the supernatural: all such phenomena have to be laboriously rationalized before the story is over. The best thing about this trundling <sup>poem, a</sup> essay in the rhyme-royal stanza, is a piece of 'functional description' which serves to objectify these doubts and fears of the transcendental; this passage closes thus:

Small streams on either side were heard to flow,  
And flying clouds, trees, lanes, and dropping springs  
Gave birth to thoughts of immaterial things. <sup>3</sup>

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1. 'Twas in a Country, Ibid., ll. 392-3.
  2. Ibid., ll. 505-10.
  3. Ibid., ll. 417-18.

This timidity in the handling of transcendental phenomena is no less characteristic of Crabbe's work as a whole. Lady Barbara and The Cathedral Walk,<sup>1</sup> for instance, are two couplet tales in which ghosts make their appearance. The depth of characterization and the finish of the verse suggest that Crabbe was especially interested in the story of Lady Barbara. Once the tale, itself, is under way, he allows himself to become fully absorbed in the irrational experiences of the heroine. But when the link story is taken up again, the process of denial begins. Chamberlain writes, 'without any reference beyond his unpublished thesis, that Crabbe was planning a series of tales of the supernatural.'<sup>2</sup> On two occasions he asks Elizabeth Chater, in his correspondence with her, for this type of material:

'By the Way can you give me any short stories, especially of Ghosts and Apparitions, ...'<sup>3</sup>

In a later letter to her, he enquires about a 'real-life' ghost story, which he believes he had heard from Elizabeth herself: '... one loves Forbidden Fruits of all kinds I am afraid'.<sup>4</sup> At least two other ghost stories, The Doctor's Ghost and Misery remain in manuscript.<sup>5</sup>

1. Tales of the Hall XVI and XX.
2. Chamberlain, op. cit., p.141.
3. Undated letter (internal evidence suggests the spring of 1816). Broadley and Jerrold, op. cit., p.130.
4. Letter dated February 5th, 1818, Ibid., p.202.
5. V. Chamberlain, op.cit., p.141.

The Cathedral Walk is a parody of these tales of fantasy. In this tale Crabbe is distancing his fears and half-beliefs in the supernatural by laughter. The 'ghost' of the heroine's departed lover turns out to be no more than a grave robber: very much a character of flesh and bone.

In conclusion, two other non-couplet tales may be mentioned briefly: In a Neat Cottage and Joseph and Jesse.<sup>1</sup> In a Neat Cottage is, apart from ~~Fragment Written at Midnight~~<sup>2</sup>, Crabbe's only essay in blank verse.<sup>3</sup> The piece as a whole is rough and unfinished<sup>4</sup>, but occasionally Crabbe can use the greater freedom of this verse-form and momentarily take wing. The poem suggests something of the fear of the sea that obsesses those who live by its shores.

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1. Pollard, op. cit.
  2. Works, Vol. I.
  3. It is surprising that Mr. Pollard should cite "In a Neat Cottage" as the 'only example of Crabbe's blank verse' known to him. Op. cit., p. 12.
  4. This is true of most of the poems in Mr. Pollard's volume. Mrs. Haddakin, in her review of this work has referred to it as a 'salvage operation' (Modern Language Review, Vol. LVII, 1960, p. 92). Crabbe has always been accused of 'writing too much and revising too little', (George Crabbe : An Anthology, Ed. F. D. Lucas, (Cambridge, 1933) p. xxxii), but any comparison of the Pollard collection of poems with the polish and finish of, say, Tales would show how much is owed to painstaking revision. There is ample evidence to show that Crabbe did revise his work.

Here, significantly, it is the fury of the sea in its sublime 'Byronic' aspect that breathes life into the verse:

... above the Ridge  
 Stoney and Steep, the giant Billows threw  
 Their foaming [?force] ! and dreadful was the Sight  
 Of clashing Waves as far as Eye could reach,  
 And sounds of blended Horror ! as they raked <sup>1</sup>  
 The rolling fleet far down the lengthen'd shore.

Joseph and Jesse is written in octosyllabic quatrains of alternate rhyme. While this further essay in the ballad kind is also a story of high passions, its temperature rarely rises above the tepid. For too much is said; too little is done. In this respect it reverses the ballad's manner of proceeding with the narrative. Jesse, without finding a husband, loses her virtue. She gives birth to a child and kills it. The narrator is one who has loved Jesse, but has been rejected by her. How much the ballad-maker might have made of this situation; but Crabbe has to build his story on the firm foundations of a moral. It is these moralising long<sup>u</sup>eurs that prevent him from getting on with the story. They treat, as one might expect, of those dangerous 'Passions' that are seen at work in the story :

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1. In a <sup>n</sup>Great Cottage, Pollard, op. cit., ll.116-21.  
 The square brackets are those of the editor.



which is far wider than that of Jane Austen's novels. More specifically he is a writer who is ready to 'dwell on guilt and misery',<sup>1</sup> to make an appeal which is primarily to the emotions. But this appeal is so often followed by recrimination of some kind. The fear of being misconstrued brings the appended notes of Sir Eustace Grey and Hall of Justice; it is the motivating force, for instance, behind the didactic close of Hester. When we have enjoyed the 'dream', the 'fancy', the 'enchantment' the 'wonders' of the Hester story, we do not wish to descend quickly and violently (however rationally) to those muddy flats of Aldeburgh.

### The 'Lyric' Poems

Mrs. Haddakin, quoting T. S. Eliot, suggests that :

'the poetic tradition in which he [Crabbe] grew up would encourage him to keep "the mind which creates" distinct from "the man who suffers."'<sup>2</sup>

The couplet tales teem with what are patently autobiographical experiences. Although the verse tale, as an objective manner of creative writing <sup>AS</sup> ~~is~~ is to be found outside the dramatic genres themselves, tends to blur the fact, Crabbe's presence in these stories is a recurring one. The above assumption would likewise

2. Haddakin, op. cit., p.15.

1. Jane Austen, Mansfield Park, Chap. XVII, The Novels of Jane Austen, Ed. R. W. Chapman (1953), Vol. III, p.461.

A.B. numbering of notes is reversed.

\*note  
transposition  
of notes

exclude some fifty 'lyrical'<sup>1</sup> poems which are a direct expression of the poet's self.

'Restraint, propriety, an absence of emphasis, consideration for others and the desire to give them pleasure, a willingness to subordinate what is merely personal or private or a matter of "self expression" in favour of what is generally interesting and universally intelligible in polite society, ...'<sup>2</sup>

It was in such a tradition of writing poetry that Crabbe grew up; but the influences of the new poetic modes, which were to encourage a personal expression of feeling, are apparent in his work.

'Complex and baffling as Romanticism is to define, there can be little doubt that the heart of it, at least in the literature of the period to which we attach the label, was what Keats in some observation on the poetical character once described as the "egotistical sublime" - the cult of original, distinctive personality, the impassioned belief in individualism, the use of poetry primarily for self-projection, self-analysis, self-assertion ... The first and foremost article of the Romantic creed was the affirmation of a god-like "I" ...'<sup>3</sup>

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1. I use this term in a limited sense; in no wise can Crabbe be said to be a 'musical' poet. The poems which are considered here are 'lyrics' only in the sense that they are preoccupied with the thoughts and especially the feelings of a single speaker; invariably these <sup>poems</sup> are of limited length. 'Nature had given him a poor ear' (Life, p.26). 'You are correct respecting my Want of musical Taste ... (Letter to Elizabeth Chater, 1818. Broadley and Jerrold, op.cit., p.215). For some further remarks on this subject see Huchon, op.cit., note 4. pp.478-9.
  2. Professor James Sutherland, A Preface to Eighteenth Century Poetry. (Oxford, 1948), pp.65-6. This quotation refers to the art of polite conversation which Mr. Sutherland relates to ~~the~~ certain qualities in the poetry, prose and architecture, of the century.
  3. E. C. Pettet, On the Poetry of Keats (Cambridge 1957). pp.282-3.

This is not to say that we have anything of Byron's 'pageant' of the 'bleeding heart'<sup>1</sup> in Crabbe's work; but his significant response to one of the characteristic poetical manifestations of his time is not to be ignored.

This group of 'lyrical' poems, a clear expression of the poet's self, is visibly related to the theme of 'Passion'. Here we shall see Crabbe as a man very much able to give way to his emotions in the expression of his innermost thoughts and feelings. It is surely significant that he should choose to do so mainly through the medium of the lighter, liberating verse forms and metres. Because these poems are only a very small part of Crabbe's total work, indeed one must admit that they are only a trivial part in comparison with the artistic achievement of the tales, an attempt will be made to relate them in terms of the experiences they record, to the couplet tales. As in the case of the non-couplet tales, no great claims can be made for these poems.<sup>2</sup> Some of them belong to Crabbe's early years; all of them are too limited and self-conscious to be able to really sing out: Crabbe cannot free himself entirely from the syntax, vocabulary and

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1. Matthew Arnold, "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse", 1.136. Works, op.cit.,
  2. Hazlitt makes an interesting distinction between Crabbe's 'poems' (presumably he refers, amongst other things, to those of these 'lyrics' which were then published) and his 'Tales': 'Mr. Crabbe's Tales are more readable than his Poems.' "Spirit of the Age", op.cit., p.168.

rhyme of the heroic couplet. A number of these 'lyrics' are actually written in heroic couplets.

This collection of some fifty poems is something of a poetical autobiography. The dates of many of them must remain conjectural, but in many cases the internal evidence of a given poem may suggest to what period of Crabbe's well-documented biography it belongs. Only a handful of these poems were actually published in his lifetime.

In April 1780, Crabbe staked all on a poetic career and left Aldeburgh for London. Poverty, indignities and degradation of every kind awaited him there. Life in his native town had become insupportable. Of 'time' Crabbe wrote in the year of his departure:

It calls the duns to crowd my hapless gate;  
It tells my heart my paralysing tale  
Of hours to come, when Misery must prevail.<sup>1</sup>

An undated poem,<sup>2</sup> which, if it does not actually belong to the time of the poet's departure from those shores 'where guilt and famine reign',<sup>3</sup> very probably refers to that event :

What ! live forever buried thus, ...  
My Spirit prompts, my Heart desires,  
My will consents, my Youth requires ...

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1. Time, ll. 16-18.
  2. "The Prodigal Going" Works, Vol. III, pp. 517-18.
  3. The Village I, l. 123.

A poem written on his birthday in the same year gives full expression to the sadness of those days he had spent under his father's roof. He was a mere twentyfour years but could see little chance of a mitigation of his circumstances :

Trembling and poor, I saw the light,  
New waking from unconscious night;  
Trembling and poor I still remain,  
To meet unconscious night again. <sup>1</sup>

A theme which was to pervade the whole of his poetry and many of his sermons <sup>2</sup> has its genesis in some of these early poems: joy or pleasure in life can at best be something that is ephemeral.

Think ye, the joys, that fill our early day,  
Are the poor prelude to some full repast? ...  
The jovial swain that yokes the morning team,  
And all the verdure of the field enjoys,  
See him, how languid, when the noontide beam  
Plays on his brow, and all his force destroys. <sup>3</sup>

In Infancy : A Fragment Crabbe looks back fifty years <sup>4</sup> to his childhood and to some of its experiences. This poem is wholly characteristic of his outlook on life. The interesting part of this

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1. "My Birthday", ll.5-8.
  2. E.g. 'Does this pleasure that the world giveth, balance pain, sorrow, disappointment and sickness? ... Pain, care, grief, trouble, sickness, loss, disappointment, and the fear of death, all of them, nay any of them, can at any time chase away our unstable pleasures, and crush the tender and feeble tribe of our amusements, vanities, and relaxations, ...'  
Hastings, op.cit., Sermon 3, pp.24-51.
  3. "Life", ll.1-2 and ll.5-10.
  4. V. Life, p.7.

one of the poems which is mentioned in this work. Life is

'Deception's Child' which :

Gives us her fairer Side, and gives no more;  
The rest we seek in our reflecting view  
Of Self, and Guilt's o'erheard Soliloquy.<sup>1</sup>

In his tour of some other poetry, Crabbe attempts to define the character of his own muse: his 'song' is seen as 'Cold inspiration on a Winter's night'.<sup>2</sup> This poem, which Ward dates at 'about 1779'<sup>3</sup> was written long before Crabbe was to emerge from the bitterness of those early years, and write many things that were not 'wintry thoughts'.

This poem, in a reference to Thomson, provides an interesting comment on the non-couplet verse of Crabbe; verse which attempted to free itself from the rhetorical and learned, associations of the heroic couplet:

Hard is the Task to strip the Muse's Wing  
Of Learning's plume, yet leave enough to charm;<sup>4</sup>

It suggests a feeling of nakedness that perhaps Crabbe felt in appearing before the public without the 'plume' of his staple verse form.

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1. Midnight, ll.483-5.
  2. Ibid., l.132.
  3. Works, Vol. I, p.47.
  4. Midnight, ll.97-8.

Chatterton, with a less happy outcome, had experienced ten years earlier. The stoicism and self-control that find so poignant an expression in his London Journal, and in his private prayers were, no doubt, the factors that allowed him to survive that terrible year in London. Crabbe, like Johnson, and in the eighteenth-century tradition of decorum, kept his intimately personal feelings and thoughts in diaries and journals which were never intended for publication. The 'distillations' of the poetry, itself ensure that anguished personal expression does not often make its appearance.

The following are two quotations from his London Journal :

'Oh! Sally, how I want you!' ... <sup>1</sup>

'... I know not how totally to banish hope, and yet can't encourage it. What a day will to-morrow be to me! a day of bread and expectation. Ah, dear Mira, my hopes are flying; I see now my attempt in its darkest side' ... <sup>2</sup>

The Journal belongs to the year 1780; it does give a very emotional expression of the suffering which Crabbe was subjected to during his year in London. Only these extremes of anguish allow the man to reveal his feelings. In a characteristic sea simile the poet sees himself :

1. The Poet's Journal entry for May 12th, 1780. Ibid., p.57. Crabbe's son included only 'fragments' (Ibid., p.49) of his father's Journal. We may be fairly certain that those parts of the Journal which might have revealed quite a different man have not been included in the biography.
2. Ibid., entry for: May 22nd, 1780, p.64.

Like some poor bark on the rough ocean lost,  
 My rudder broken, and my compass lost, ...  
 What have I left in such tempestuous sea?<sup>1</sup>

He is:

'a bard untrained in all but misery's school'.<sup>2</sup>

In An Epistle to a Friend the poet claims the innocence of his muse - even after a period in London.

The Muse I court ne'er fawn'd on venal souls,  
 Whom suppliants angle, and poor praise controls;  
 She, yet unskill'd in all but fancy's dream,  
 Sang to the woods, and Mira was her theme.<sup>3</sup>

But one suspects that Crabbe's 'muse' was not quite so innocent as he claims it to be. The letter to Shelbourne which accompanied the panegyric (from which the foregoing quotation was taken) is both fawning and crafty. The poverty-stricken poet mentions Lord North, the Prime Minister, and his refusal of help: Shelbourne was one of the leading members of the opposition.

One of the few poems in this section which were actually published by Crabbe himself is Reflections; published, perhaps, because of its tepidity rather than in spite of it. It has all the smugness of a 'look we have come through' piece of writing. In the

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1. Drifting\* 11.1-3. An asterisk following a poem of Crabbe will indicate that its title is the choice of Ward, the editor of Works.
  2. To the Right Honourable the Earl of Shelbourne, 1.19. Epistle to a Friend was likewise written for the Earl, but no help from him was to be forthcoming.
  3. Epistle to a Friend 11.7-10.



1807 poems it is placed, probably not by accident, before Sir Eustace Grey to assure readers that any connection between the author and the insane rantings of Sir Eustace is coincidental. The poem, written in octosyllabics of alternate rhyme, sings of the poet's conquest over youthful 'Passion'. Crabbe had by now won acclaim for The Village; he had been ordained a priest and was a respectable country clergyman. He would naturally wish to live down anything that was dubious about his past :

Now 'tis our boast that we can quell  
The wildest passions in their rage;  
Can their destructive force repel,  
And their impetuous wrath assuage:

These 'Passions' were :

'The glory and disgrace of youth'.

But

... now Reason guides  
The mind, sole judge in all debate;<sup>1</sup>

Crabbe's son wrote thus of his father's chaplaincy to the

Duke of Rutland :

'He always seemed to shrink from going into oral details on the subject. The numberless allusions to the nature of a literary dependent's existence in a great lord's house, which occur in my father's writings, ... are ... quite enough

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1. Reflections, ll.45-8; 1.2; ll.89-90.

to lead any one ... to the conclusion that ... the situation he filled at Belvoir was attended with many painful circumstances, and productive in his mind of some of the acutest sensations of wounded pride that have ever been traced by any pen.<sup>1</sup>

It is only from the poetry itself that we can trace something of this 'wounded pride'. Crabbe himself, and also his son go out of their way to deny any suggestion that Rutland and his family were responsible for any unfair treatment of the chaplain. If George Crabbe the younger knew more about this period of his father's life than the tendentious remarks quoted above, he is not ready to tell us.<sup>2</sup> I shall elsewhere have occasion to refer to these experiences as they find expression in the tales; I am concerned here with the few 'lyrics' which probably allude to Crabbe's two-and-a-half year stay at Belvoir Castle.

Oh ! had I but a little hut  
That I might hide my head in;  
Where never guest might dare molest,  
Unwelcome or unbidden.

I'd take the jokes of other folks  
And mine should then succeed'em  
Nor would I chide a little pride,  
Or heed a little freedom.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Life, p.99.

2. 'I have heard my father mention few occurrences in this period of his life; and if I had, the privacy of a family is not to be invaded because of its public station.'  
Ibid., p.101.

3. From Belvoir Castle\*, ll. 1-8.

A reduction to what is virtually monosyllabic simplicity is rare in Crabbe's poetry. The pride of a man that has clearly been hurt is thus conveyed with greater poignancy. Of Hamlet's Horatio Crabbe writes meaningfully :

'Aspiring; yet he never gave  
Himself to watch a Patron's Will;<sup>1</sup>

Crabbe, by way of dedications and poetry, notably in the second sycophantic part of The Village, had given his pen in flattery of the Duke of Rutland. Thus some lines from A Drawing take on special significance

They who have Wealth may hire an Artist's Hand.  
And may the Gallery and the Hall supply;<sup>2</sup>

A poem of Crabbe's, published for the first time in Notes and Queries<sup>3</sup>, is likewise concerned with patronage. Mr. Davenport, who came across this poem in a contemporary magazine, suggests that it might refer to the offer of the Chaplaincy at Belvoir. As the <sup>R</sup>mechant <sub>^</sub> dreams of the gains yet to flow in :

So he some distant prospect sees  
Who gazes on a Patron's smile,  
And if he finds it hard to please,  
That pleasant view his cares beguile.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Horatio\*, ll.13-14.
  2. A Drawing, By the Hon. Mrs. Smith (Eliza Forrester), ll.9-10.
  3. (of 31st December 1938) The Poem originally appeared in The Literary Gazette and Journal of the Belles Lettres August 16th, 1817, p.104.
  4. Ibid., ll.5-8.

The expression of personal anguish, however restrained, is there. One senses that it is almost an embarrassment for the poet to use the superlative 'tremendous', as he does, in description of the moment.

There is not space, neither would the material justify it, for an analysis of the many poems and fragments of this kind; however, two more groups of poems of importance will be mentioned for the light that they throw on Crabbe's character.

There has been much critical speculation on the nature of Crabbe's religious beliefs. Many critics are inclined to believe that his Christian piety did not run very deep at all. He

"floated into the haven of the Anglican Ministry and such various provisions as patrons could supply, - curacies, chaplaincies, parishes."<sup>1</sup>

E. M. Forster speaks of an 'atmosphere' in the poems which is 'sub-Christian'.<sup>2</sup> '... is not it odd,' Lockhart asks his wife, 'what a total want of religion there is in the writings of the poetical parson? I mean all religious feeling'.<sup>3</sup> Any lengthy discussion of such a problem lies outside the terms of reference of this thesis. But if Crabbe is in need of any evidence for his defence on this question, the following group of lyrics, written before he could have had any knowledge of his future career, would provide part of it.

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1. H. J. C. Grierson and J. C. Smith, A Critical History of English Poetry, (1944), p.246.
  2. Life, (with introduction by E. M. Forster) op. cit., p.xvii.
  3. Letter from J. G. Lockhart to Scott's wife dated August 25th, 1825.

In a way this charmingly simple 'lyric' which works out a parallel between the Resurrection and the rebirth of the year at Springtime, is an epitome of Crabbe's religious beliefs; beliefs which are wholly traditional and uncomplicated by any theological wrangling.<sup>1</sup> The Resurrection, The Sacrament and prayer: these are the cornerstones, and it is of these that Crabbe chooses to write:

I do believe, that, God of light !  
 Thou didst to earth descend,  
 With Satan and with Sin to fight -  
 Our great, our only friend.

I know thou did'st ordain for me,  
 Thy creature, bread and wine;  
 The depth of grace I cannot see,  
 But worship the design.<sup>2</sup>

The sober stillness of the night  
 That fills the silent air,  
 And all that breathes along the shore,  
 Invite to silent prayer.<sup>3</sup>

'The depth of grace I cannot see'; any interest in the mystical lay beyond Crabbe's interests; it is with the simplicities of the 'design' that his poetry, sermons, and prayers, are concerned. Delving and probing into problems of theology would have required the

1. The following quotation from one of the ms. sermons in the Murray Collection makes this point clear: 'In all our **Difficulties** we have Guides, the light of Reason, the Holy Scriptures, and our Conscientious and Inward Monitors'. Arthur Pollard, "George Crabbe's Theology", Church Quarterly Review, July-September, 1956, p.314.
2. The Sacrament, ll.13-20.
3. Night, ll.5-8.

kind of involvement that Crabbe disliked. 'For Crabbe the ecclesia Anglicana represented a middle way'<sup>1</sup> which he always sought so ardently. A letter on theological controversy to his son George, who was also a clergyman, makes this point clear:

... 'my Way is to study the Point ... by myself and such Books as I would consult and even then I leave off as soon as I feel in any degree confused.'

'Your method appears to be rational ... yet you [we] must not expect ... absolute conviction ... [I] rest in the Kind of conviction which I have ... I do not however oppose myself to further Light ... but I am afraid to seek it, in the Way of Argument and Controversy ... I rest quietly in those Facts which Reason assents to unforced ...'<sup>2</sup>

It is 'the Hope that Faith imparts'<sup>3</sup> that allows Crabbe to bear the sufferings of this world, which he sees as an inevitable consequence of man's fall.

... that which now such Grief and Sorrow brings  
 Shall be the Solace of the Heart it wrings.  
 We our Impressions from the Moment take,  
 And know not why we grieve, till we Awake.<sup>4</sup>

There is a reason for our suffering which in good time will be revealed;  
 man is required only to believe :

- 
1. Pollard, "Crabbe's Theology", op. cit., p.316.
  2. Letter to his son, George Crabbe dated 4th February, 1831. F. Link. "Three Crabbe Letters", English Language Notes, March, 1965, pp.205-6. The square brackets are those of F. Link.
  3. Rest in the Lord\*, 1.36.
  4. Momentary Grief\*, 11.5-8.

"Dost thou believe," the Saviour said;  
 The trembling parent look'd around;  
 A thousand Wonders he survey'd,  
 And Hope and kindling faith he found.  
 The Sick, the blind, the Deaf, and Lame,  
 All whole and sound and light became;  
 He knew such power could not deceive  
 And answer'd, joyful, "I believe."<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Crabbe's life is that flare-up of romantic yearnings in his old age. This event provides further evidence for the existence of that subterranean stream that seethed beneath the surface of an ostensibly tranquil life. 'I have, though at considerable distances, six female friends unknown to each other, but all dear, very dear to me.' He wrote this to Mrs. Leadbeater, one of the six correspondents. The correspondence with Elizabeth Chater<sup>R</sup> has been collected by Broadley and Jerrold; it records this period of Crabbe's life in detail. But apart from these fairly innocuous exchanges of letters, Crabbe actually became engaged to a Charlotte Ridout in 1814; the engagement was broken off in the same year. At the time Crabbe was sixty years of age.

The death of his wife in 1813 had left Crabbe an intensely lonely man. His correspondence with Elizabeth Chater<sup>R</sup> contains very many references to this sense of loneliness.

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1. Belief and Unbelief\*, ll. 1-8.

'I cannot bear to belong to nobody.'

'There is something inexpressibly heavy and miserable in the feeling, as I do, alone in the bustle of Society.'<sup>1</sup>

After his wife's death, which could only have been a relief, Crabbe visits Parham, where he had once courted 'Mira' :

The night-bird's song that sweetly floats  
On this soft gloom - this balmy air,  
Brings to the mind her sweeter notes  
That I again must never hear.<sup>2</sup>

Revival\* suggests something of the mild sense of guilt that surrounded these stirrings of a 'second youth' in Crabbe. His life had been haunted by gossip; he surely did not relish a new outbreak of this epidemic at Trowbridge. As in his poetry, so in real life: Crabbe found it difficult to give full rein to his feelings. The whole correspondence with Elizabeth Chater, were it not pathetic, would be laughable. He persistently puts off any suggestion that they actually meet. This courtly love romance with a distant lady was the kind that would avoid gossip, while allowing him to give full expression to that sentimental vein of his personality. He appeared to seek, by writing to so many women, the safety of a crowd.

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1. Letter dated August 23rd 1815: p.103 and letter dated July 3rd 1815: 93.  
Broadley and Jerrold, op. cit.
  2. Parham Revisited\*, ll.5-8.



Say, can there be a Second Spring  
 Thus fair and frail, so gay and brief;  
 Will Time the autumnal Blossom bring  
 To glow beside the with'ring Leaf?  
 No, no ! the Voice of Nature cries:  
 "The Flower that's dead for ever dies."<sup>1</sup>

The 'lyrics' which relate to this period are full of expressions of unrequited love: sometimes real, sometimes imagined, one feels. But the hurt endured by the snub of a young woman for an old man was real enough. Crabbe writes of such an experience in a number of poems. He was actually deserted by a 'Miss W' for a younger man. In spite of the good humour with which he writes of the matter to Elizabeth Chater<sup>2</sup>, he has obviously been deeply hurt.

Unhappy is the wretch who feels  
 The trembling lover's ardent flame,  
 And yet the treacherous hope conceals  
 By using Friendship's colder name.<sup>3</sup>

When hearts approach, and thoughts unite -  
 Then is, indeed, the time to feel,  
 But, Laura ! not a time to write.<sup>4</sup>

A ring to me Cecilia sends -  
 And what to show? - that we are friends;  
 That she with favour reads my lays,  
 And sends a token of her praise:  
 Such as the nun, with heart of snow,  
 Might on her confessor bestow;<sup>5</sup>

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1. Revival\*, ll. 1-6.
  2. V. Letter to Elizabeth Charter dated May 5th, 1815, Broadlèy and Jerrold, op. cit., pp. 81-6.
  3. "The Friend in Love", ll. 1-4.
  4. To a Lady Who Desired Some Verses at Parting ll. 14-16.
  5. On Receiving from a Lady A Present of a Ring, ll. 1-6.

The poet thinks of returning a similar gift but sees the folly of doing so :

"No more of giving rings:

Remember, thirty years are gone,  
Old Friend, since you presented one !"<sup>1</sup>

These and other poems which present Crabbe as the ardent, but unrequited lover were written, no doubt, with tongue in cheek. If they were not, one must conclude by saying that better love poetry is written in the third form of school. His biographer is, as usual, restrained in his remarks about this 'pardonable sort of weakness' in his father:

... 'though love might be out of the question, I believe he inspired feelings of no ordinary regard in more than one of the fair objects of his vain devotion'.<sup>2</sup>

Sufficient examples have been given to indicate the way in which Crabbe used the 'lyric' as a means of direct self-expression. There is nothing of the exhibitionism of Byron in these poems; neither is there the introspection and self-analysis of Wordsworth or Coleridge. Sadly, too, there is nothing of the lyrical achievement<sup>3</sup> of these three poets. But they do indicate Crabbe's readiness to expose himself to the new modes of poetic writing: poetry which

1. On Receiving From a Lady a Present of a Ring  
ll. 16-18.

2. Life, p. 193.

3. One delightful lyric in the manner of Burns (it is a lyric without the qualifying inverted commas) has not been mentioned at all: Jane Adair. (Works vol. III)

was laying greater stress on the expression of the individual writer's emotions, and moving away from the conception of poetry as an imitation of the 'general' or 'ideal' in human nature. Crabbe, for reasons that are outlined in full in the last section of this chapter, was far too self-consciously inhibited in his use of the lyric form.

This discussion of the place of the man in his work would be incomplete without mention of the marked autobiographical element in the tales themselves. Keats<sup>1</sup> saw poetic drama as the most objective form of creative writing: the verse tale would surely have been a second choice. Crabbe's tales, especially the later collections in which dialogue plays a central part, become more and more dramatic in presentation. This fact has tended to blur the presence of the 'man who suffers' in his work. Recurring themes, situations, and characters do appear which, without any special pleading, may be attributed to the poet's own trials and experiences. 'Every poem in Tales reflects identifiable events or acquaintances out of Crabbe's life ...'<sup>2</sup> Chamberlain's remark is true of Crabbe's work in general. Indeed Crabbe's persistent refusal to write of matters which lay beyond the pale of his experience is a source of his artistic strength. Rather than discuss the innumerable personal references in

1. V. Pettet, op. cit., p.283.

2. Chamberlain, op. cit., p.133.

the work as a whole, it is more germane to my thesis to take up some motifs, minor and major, which pervade his work. These motifs provide a further insight into the hopes, fears, and sufferings of the man.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that Crabbe is obsessed, in his poetry, by the depravity of drunkenness. The reasons are not hard to trace: the home of his childhood was destroyed by a father besotted with drink. At the best of times, Crabbe the father was 'a man of imperious temper and violent passions';<sup>1</sup> Huchon describes him as a 'hard drinker, at home and abroad.'<sup>2</sup> Scenes of violence were the background to a relationship of hate that developed between son and father.<sup>3</sup> E. M. Forster has suggested that the subsequent feelings of guilt that as a result of this relationship pursued Crabbe, find expression in Peter Grimes :

'... it is clear that while he was writing Peter Grimes Crabbe was obsessed with the notion of two generations of males being unkind to one another and vicariously punishing unkindness.'<sup>4</sup>

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1. Life, p.7.
  2. Huchon, op. cit., p.20.
  3. The Village contains references to the lawlessness and violence in the countryside which was the result of drunkenness :  
Bk. I, ll.89-91.  
Bk. II, ll.33-8.
  4. E. M. Forster, Two Cheers for Democracy (1951) p.188.

In dream and in reverie Grimes is haunted by the ghost of his father whom he had struck as a youth. In a disturbing uncanny, psychological entanglement, Grimes is at once Crabbe himself, and Crabbe the elder: the boy who struck his father, and the master to whom on the stormy voyage to London, the terrified apprentice 'clung affrighten'd' :

The boat grew leaky and the wind was strong,  
Rough was the passage and the time was long;  
His liquor fail'd, and Peter's wrath arose -  
No more is known ...<sup>1</sup>

The motif of the cruel parent recurs in Silford Hall, in Ruth and, if one can accept the uncanny 'distillation' process of artistic creation, in The Mother.<sup>2</sup>

Crabbe, himself, had a conscience about those days in which he succumbed to the 'temptations'<sup>3</sup> of the alehouse. His youthful misbehaviour in this respect, contributed to his difficulties when in 1787 he returned as curate to his native Aldeburgh.<sup>4</sup> E. M. Forster mentions, in the introduction to an edition of the biography<sup>5</sup>, that Crabbe's mother was not quite so devout and pure as her son and grandson liked to make her out to be. She had been married once before and (sin of sins !) had kept a public house. This is of interest because these details are excluded from the biography.

1. "Peter Grimes", op. cit., ll. 145-49.
2. Tales VIII.
3. Life, p. 94.
4. V. Huchon, op. cit., pp. 133-4.
5. V. Life (with introduction by E. M. Forster) op. cit., p. xiv.

The early Inebriety is wholly preoccupied with the subject of drink. A slavish imitation of Pope, wholly in the eighteenth-century didactic-satirical tradition of verse writing, this poem contains many of the faults of which Crabbe hardly ever rid his couplets: the straining of the syntax in order to manipulate into place those dull monosyllabic rhymes; those timid nouns which persistently refuse to venture out unless chaperoned by an epithet;<sup>1</sup> and worst of all the inane puns and word jingles which haunt even his mature work.

A passage that bristles with that 'gaudiness and inane phraseology'<sup>of the kind</sup> which Wordsworth<sup>2</sup> was some years later to condemn, describes a drunken boor lurching home at night to disturb his wife and child :

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1.       Saintsbury's note on what he calls the 'gradus epithet' of the decasyllabic couplet is of interest here; especially as we know that Crabbe's rough drafts of his tales were sometimes written in octosyllabics. Saintsbury refers to it as 'a drastic but dangerous device for securing the undulating penetration of the line ... the filling or padding ... which, when overdone is perhaps the worst blemish of the style. There are passages ... in The Dispensary and The Rape of the Lock where you can convert the decasyllable into the octosyllable for several lines together without detriment to sense or poetry, by simply taking out these specious superfluities.'
  2.       "History of English Prosody" ~~op. cit.~~, Vol. II, pp.449-50.
  2.       "Advertisement to the Lyrical Ballads, 1798", Wordsworth Works, ~~op. cit.~~, Vol. II, p.382.

In vain the 'waken'd infant's accents shrill  
 The humble regions of the cottage fill;  
 In vain the Cricket chirps the mansion through,  
 'Tis war, and Blood and Battle must ensue.<sup>1</sup>

Inebriety contains the seed of Crabbe's lifelong attitude towards drunkenness. Like 'Romance' reading, dreams, and reverie, it represents a desertion of the real, a concession to the 'Passion' of unreality.

That pilot Reason, in the erring Soul,  
 Is lost, is blinded in the steaming Bowl, ...  
 Discretion dies with Reason, ...<sup>2</sup>

Grimes drinks to forget his unhappiness with himself; Benbow<sup>3</sup> is dissipated by Drink; Hester's 'Lord' dies of it; David Morris uses liquor in order to forget the sins he has committed:

"If Conscience murmured, and his spirits failed,  
 These Wine inflamed, and over that prevailed."<sup>4</sup>

At the social meetings of The Borough's inhabitants, wine turns the 'pleasures of the night' to 'mischief' :

Anger, Abuses, Malice loudly rails,  
 Revenge awakes, and Anarchy prevails:<sup>5</sup>

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1. Inebriety I, ll.78-81.
  2. Ibid., II, ll.15-16 and l.19.
  3. The Borough XVI.
  4. "David Morris", Pollard, op. cit., ll.551-2.  
 Edward Shore uses drink in the same way, wine is :  
 'the opiate guilt applies to grief'.  
Edward Shore, op. cit., l.339.
  5. "Clubs and Social Meetings", The Borough X, ll.229-31.

By drink men are: 'soon transform'd and fitted for the sties'.<sup>1</sup>  
 The harsh consonants of these lines give the sense an echo in the  
 sound. These drinking riots were no doubt personal experiences.  
 As has been noted, one of the few childhood memories that Crabbe  
 is able to evoke in his poetry is a boat trip which ends in a drunken  
 brawl.<sup>2</sup>

This drunkenness motif is an expression of personal hurt  
 and hatred. Like some similar motifs, which I now refer to, it again  
 refutes any suggestion that the poetry is 'too uniformly reasonable  
 and calm'<sup>3</sup>; or the poet Campell's idea of Crabbe as a 'placid stream'.<sup>4</sup>  
 'The psychic adventures of Crabbe'<sup>5</sup> in these tales produce the kind of  
 tension in the work that one considers specifically modern. It is the  
 tension that is generated in the process of an artist coming to terms  
 with his material. A significant aspect of Crabbe's artistic  
 development is his growing ability to keep the required artistic distance  
 from his poetry. The Village, The Parish Register, and The Borough  
 are too full of the pain of Crabbe's living. By the Tales of 1812,

1. "Inns", The Borough XI, l. 136.
2. Infancy - A Fragment
3. Huchon, op. cit., p. 479.
4. Letter of Thomas Campell to George Crabbe, the son, Life, p. 212.
5. 'The psychic adventures of Crabbe, both pale and lurid, have always figured among the subjects of his poetry' Chamberlain, op. cit., p. 164.



Crabbe is generally a happier man and able to subordinate most, but not all, of his personal wounds to the objectivity required by his art. The parallel I would make is a scene like that of Ursula Brangwen's classroom battle in The Rainbow of D. H. Lawrence.<sup>1</sup> Matthew Arnold, perhaps, would have seen it as a scene 'in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done'.<sup>2</sup> The assault on the reader's feelings is excessively great; Lawrence has been unable to submerge a personal experience beneath an artistic presentation. The disgust of The Village, the cruelties and sufferings of Abel Keene, Grimes, Phoebe Dawson, and the condemned felon, are some examples of this in Crabbe's early work. It is difficult to understand how these tales were ever corseted into couplets; how the 'Passion' of self-pity was translated into the 'Reason' of objectivity which the couplet medium affords. What a poet has to say about his own work is, of course, often misleading; but it is interesting to note that Crabbe himself was aware of this artistic problem. In a letter to Elizabeth Charter we find him rejecting a story because it 'is unmixed with anything that call [s] off the Mind from its pain.'<sup>3</sup>

1. D. H. Lawrence, The Rainbow (Penguin Edition; 1949), Chap. 13, pp.401-406.
2. "Preface to Poems" (1853) op. cit., p.3, ll.1-2.
3. Letter dated May 1st, 1816. Broadley and Jerrold, op. cit., p.136.

The references in the non-couplet poetry to his experiences at Belvoir Castle have been noted. From his grovelling dedications to the apologetic convolutions of the prefaces, Crabbe's work is marked by those expressions of insecurity of a man who had done what was seemingly impossible in his time: a fairy-tale ascent from the company of the labourers of Slaughden Bay to that of England's leading writers in the famous drawing room of John Murray. The humiliations of Belvoir left an indelible impression on a sensitive personality. The position of subservience in which he found himself becomes, in the tales, an epitome of all that the poor but talented man must endure if he is to rely for advancement on the wealthy patron. Were there not these many allusions in the poetry to the degradation suffered by a patron's dependent, the restrained hints of his biographer<sup>1</sup> would alone arouse suspicion that all was not well for Crabbe at Belvoir.

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1. V. pp.132-3 ~~ABOVE~~ ABOVE  
 In a letter to Scott, (Life, pp.109-10) Crabbe refers obliquely to some promises of Rutland that remained unfulfilled. In spite of all these grievances, however, Crabbe, now an established poet, can in 1819 dedicate his Tales of the Hall to the Duchess of Rutland. The dedication is as fulsome an eulogy as he ever penned. Of the generations of Rutland he has known, Crabbe writes: 'I have experienced unvaried favour - I have felt undiminished respect'. (Works, Vol. II, p.295). But perhaps this dedication is but a further expression of the warmth and mellowness that pervades his last published work; it shows a willingness, in deference to a continued connection with the Rutlands, to forget the slights of those earlier years.

The Patron is the most significant record of the Belvoir experience. As a tale its architectonic back is badly broken by the length of the father's letter to an erring son; it is meant to be, supposedly, an antidote of 'Reason' to the 'Passion' of the son. But this story of a would-be poet's exaggerated ideas about himself and his poetry is related with all the immediacy (and much of the pain) of actual experience. It follows the structural pattern of those tales discussed in Chapter One: John's illusions of grandeur fade into the realities of a death of shame. John's subsequent visits in search of favour, even after he had been cast out by his patron, no doubt recall the experiences of Crabbe in London<sup>1</sup> while attempting to get his poetry published :

At a tall building, trembling, he appear'd  
 And his low rap was indistinctly heard;  
 A well-known servant came - "A while," said he,  
 "Be pleased to wait; my lord has company."<sup>2</sup>

It is tempting to smile at the eternal mating of adjective and noun: often the epithets are no more than mere expletives; but sometimes, as here, the qualifier is used with all the tendentiousness that Pope is capable of. For the man 'trembling' in his humility, the building is 'tall'; the 'low' hesitant 'rap' is a further expression of this humility.

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1. Sir Eustace Grey, now fallen from his position of wealth, is driven from the doors of the rich by 'menials'. The experience was obviously a traumatic one for Crabbe. Sir Eustace Grey, l. 187.
  2. "The Patron", op. cit., ll. 520-3.

is voiced in Monday's worthless legacy to the parish.<sup>1</sup>

The sense of hurt pride, an undying consciousness of the class from which he had risen, and above all a sense of obligation to repress his real feelings and desires: these emotions are gathered up into the pervading motif of the dependent-patron relationship. Arabella's<sup>2</sup> love for Rupert rots, after years of service and flattery, into a love of money and property. Jesse<sup>3</sup> leaves her past lover in hopes of favours from a rich friend of her dead father; her encounter with the intrigue and sychophancy which surround this rich woman, brings her back to Colin. The examples are many. Perhaps the most interesting one, because the most sustained and subtle, is that of the link-story of Tales of the Hall. The development of the relationship between the brothers, which is what lies at the heart of this story, is one of Richard's lessening suspicion of George. His fear is that his rich brother will regard him as a financial dependent.

"Well ! here I am; and, brother, take you heed,  
I am not come to flatter you and feed;  
You shall no soother, fawner, hearer find,  
I will not brush your coat, nor smooth your mind; ...

I will not earn my dinner when I dine,  
By taking all your sentiments for mine;  
Nor watch the guiding notions of your eye,  
Before I venture question or reply;"<sup>4</sup>

1. "Births", The Parish Register, ll.761-6.
2. Arabella, op. cit.
3. "Jesse and Colin", Tales XIII.
4. "The Hall", Tales of the Hall I, ll. 312-15 and ll. 320-3.

It is significant that a now mellowed Crabbe should bring this story to a happy fair<sup>y</sup>-tale conclusion.

George and Richard of Tales of the Hall are a contrasted pair which roughly corresponds to the ideas of 'Passion and Reason'. 'Roughly' because by now Crabbe has attained to a far greater subtlety in his use of architectonic contrast. Throughout the poetry are found pairs of characters which represent these two ever-conflicting facets of Crabbe's personality. They are the 'you and I' of T. S. Eliot's Alfred Prufrock<sup>1</sup>: the timid and the extrovert; the poet of Peter Grimes and The Elder Brother, and the frightened rector of Moston and Trowbridge; the sea of 'Passion' and the couplet of 'Reason'. Without wishing to press the matter too far, for, as we have seen, Crabbe is inevitably in control of himself and his poetry, these characters may be seen as an expression of a divided self.

George, in spite of, or perhaps because of, those experiences related in The Elder Brother, is a conservative in politics, and a conformist in religion; a man whose tastes lie in 'indulgence' but not in 'excess'. He treads the via media of Crabbe :

The constitution was the ark that he  
Join'd to support with zeal and sanctity;

- 
1. T. S. Eliot, The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, Collected Poems 1909-1962, (1963).

Both George and his 'pastor' are :

Convinced that they who would the truth obtain  
By disputation, find their efforts vain;  
The church he view'd as liberal minds will view,  
And there he fix'd his principles and pew.<sup>1</sup>

Richard, by no means a revolutionary, ('he look'd on change with some religious fear') is 'By nature generous, open, daring, free'. Like most of Crabbe's contemporary poets 'He felt for France as Freedom's children feel'.<sup>2</sup> In matters of religion he found it difficult to decide where right lay; but the 'something' he was able to 'distil' from conflicting opinions :

... served him for his daily use,  
And kept his lively passions from abuse;<sup>3</sup>

This contrast is found again in the story of Lucy and Jane<sup>4</sup> :

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1. "The Hall", op. cit., ll. 168-9 and ll. 136-9.  
The last line of the quotation is a delightful example of Crabbe's use of zeugma. In his too generous use of verbal jingle and zeugma, Crabbe tends to cloy the appetite by over-feeding. Here it suggests, together with the alliteration, a jibe at the stuffiness of George's views.
  2. Ibid., l. 252; 1. 220; 1. 247.
  3. Ibid., ll. 230-1.
  4. "The Sisters", op. cit.  
Lucy and Jane remind us of two better known contemporaries: the sisters Elinor and Marianne in Sense and Sensibility. This parallel suggests but one aspect of the close affinities between Crabbe and Jane Austen. The theme of 'Passion' and 'Reason' is equally as central to the work of the novelist. Jane Austen, after all, offered to marry Crabbe !

they are studies in the impulsive and rational of the temperament. Jane, through grief of circumstance, begins to lose control of her mind. Crabbe, even in Tales of the Hall, is not free of this shadow that hangs over his early work. The correlation in Crabbe's mind between 'enthusiasm' and insanity, referred to elsewhere in this thesis, is again made explicit in Jane's character. Lucy is able, with 'Reason's' aid, to support the catastrophe that befalls them; Jane, who is governed by her emotions, is unable to do so. The tale closes with Lucy's 'song': the product of a now addled mind. This 'lyric', notwithstanding the cliché of an almost Keatsian lushness, is quite an astonishing achievement for Crabbe :

"Let me not have this gloomy view,  
About my room, around my bed;  
But morning roses, wet with dew,  
To cool my burning brows instead."<sup>1</sup>

1. Ibid., ll.837-40.  
This 'lyric' came as something of a surprise to Crabbe's critics. Jeffrey regrets the poet 'should have indulged us so seldom in those higher lyrical effusions' (Edinburgh Review, July 1819, loc. cit., p.136). These 'exquisite lines ... will be read with astonishment by those who are only acquainted with Mr. Crabbe's muse in her slipshod heroic shamble. We recollect no composition of the same kind in our language which has [a] ... nicer attuned melody. ("Tales of the Hall", British Critic, Vol. XII (2nd Series), 1819, p.294). Crabbe, it appears, was equally surprised at the criticism: he writes to Elizabeth Charter of those critics 'who have praised me into some Reputation for writing Lyrical verses, that is to say, Songs, a Talent with which I did not previously flatter myself that I was in Possession of ...'. Letter dated October 1819. Broadley and Jerrold, op.cit., pp.240-41.

The octosyllabic eight-line stanza has only two rhymes: an unusually close-knit stanzaic arrangement.

Other such pairs of characters, other than those already mentioned in Chapter One, may be referred to in passing: all of these examples serve to substantiate the idea of the psychic conflict between 'Passion' and 'Reason'. The brothers in Smugglers and Poachers; Abel Keene and his sister; the lady and her maid in Resentment; Stephen<sup>1</sup>, Grimes, and John<sup>2</sup>, and their respective fathers.

The 'lyrics' which were inspired by Crabbe's Indian summer of romance have their counterpart in the tales. There can be no doubt that it is this episode in Crabbe's life which accounts for the central preoccupation of Tales of the Hall<sup>3</sup> with, as Jeffrey puts it, the 'amorous' and the sentimental.<sup>4</sup> This collection of tales, almost in its entirety, is concerned with questions of love and marriage.

1. "The Learned Boy", Tales XXI.
2. "The Patron", op. cit.
3. Work on this collection of tales began 'soon after his arrival at Trowbridge' (1814). It 'occupied Crabbe for four years'. Huchon, op. cit., p.403.
4. Edinburgh Review, July 1819, loc. cit., p.126. Jeffrey continues '... if Mr. Crabbe's amatory propensities continue to increase with his years, as they have done, the bard of Lalla Rookh may still have a formidable rival'. Ibid., p.129. and cf: 'old age ... seems to have mellowed and softened his feelings'. Blackwoods Edinburgh Magazine, Vol. V, 1819, loc. cit., p.483.



More than any of the other collections of tales, Tales of the Hall is markedly autobiographical. Chamberlain has gone so far as to compare it, in this respect, with The Prelude and Childe Harold.<sup>1</sup>

Sir Owen Dale's story is a variation on the proverbial 'there's no fool like an old fool'. Crabbe, indeed, at the time of writing these stories was behaving like an 'old fool'. Surely Miss 'W's' desertion of him, which was referred to earlier<sup>2</sup> is reflected in this tale. Dale, an ageing widower, is encouraged in his advances to the coquettish Camilla. When, however, Camilla realises that she is playing with fire, she attempts to withdraw :

And still she grew more cool in her replies,  
And talk'd of age and improprieties.<sup>3</sup>

The stories of Tales of the Hall reflect with all the immediacy that is the product of personal feeling and experience, the jealousies and passions of this period of the poet's life: both those that were real and those that were desired, and evoked by fantasy. His son, in an uncharacteristically frank note, relates Crabbe's propensity for jealousy to events in The Lover's Journey :

'... truth compels me to say, that he was by no means free from the less amiable signs of a strong attachment - jealousy'.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Chamberlain, op. cit., pp.143-4.
  2. V. above p. 141.
  3. "Sir Owen Dale", op. cit., ll.231-2.
  4. Life, pp.32-3.

unrequited love for a young woman.

The many examples, both from the non-couplet poetry and otherwise, illustrate conclusively the presence of the man in his work. They refute the suggestion of a nineteenth century critic, who, anxious to pigeon-hole Crabbe into the eighteenth century traditions of poetic writing observes that :

'His writings have not been egotistical - (we use the word in its strict sense) that is to say, he has not talked about himself in them ...'<sup>1</sup>

While Crabbe has little in his writing of the intense subjectivity of Byron or Wordsworth, he is certainly not, in the words of James Joyce: 'The artist ... refined out of existence ... paring his fingernails.'<sup>2</sup> Crabbe attempts no elaborate 'distillation' of personal feelings and experiences<sup>3</sup>.

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1. "Life of George Crabbe", New England Magazine, Vol. VIII, March, 1835, p.215.
  2. 'The artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails.'  
James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, (Penguin Books, 1960), p.215.

The Suppression of "Passion"

The following coda, to an essay which has shown what Crabbe was able to write when allowing himself to make a partial surrender to 'Passion', may be excused the luxury of an hypothesis. How different might the course of Crabbe's poetic career have been? Is it not odd that a poet, who in so many respects reveals a knowledge of, and a readiness to expose himself to, those radical changes in poetic writing that took place between Blake's Songs of Innocence and Byron's death, should have left so small a number of poems outside of the couplet tradition? How strange that only two or three poems should suggest the influence of opium: Crabbe had been taking the drug for over forty years. Why did he destroy so much of his work in those periodic cremations of his work? What was the quality, character, and the quantity of this work? The answer to all these questions must be largely hypothetical.

There is ample evidence to suggest that Crabbe, by nature a timid and retiring person, was to a great extent inhibited by certain social factors. The flowering of his poetry took place in a period which is characterized by its moral, social and political conservatism. Crabbe, after an insupportably difficult start in life,

had obtained a living and respectability in the church, His position as a clergyman was, for many years, a precarious one. Undoubtedly this fact instilled in him the necessity of keeping his poetry free of anything that might be considered, in the religious connotations of the word, 'enthusiastic'. Furthermore, it was at the persuasion of some of his best friends and most sympathetic critics that Crabbe destroyed, suppressed and altered his writings.

The reactionary character of those years in England that succeeded the French Revolution, has been well documented. It is the age of Pitt's Combination Act and of the Luddites; of the unjust and protective Corn Laws of 1815, and of Peterloo. When in London, Crabbe himself had witnessed the Gordon Riots.<sup>1</sup> This is the period of the anti-Jacobin repression in which, G. M. Trevelyan writes, ' "it was safer to be a felon than a reformer" '.<sup>2</sup> An exceedingly unrepresentative government was using the time-dishonoured political weapon of an external threat in order to impede the progress of reforms at home. Hunger, chaos, cruelty, and violence formed the background against which governmental repression in all walks of life was imperative if the political, social, and religious status quo was to be retained. The great writer is

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1. Life, pp.71-4.

2. Quoted in English Social History, ~~op. cit.~~, p.472.

able to transcend his period, to work independently of its ephemeral tastes and prejudices; Crabbe was not able, neither could he afford to ignore this 'zeitgeist'. Crutwell<sup>1</sup> speaks of the age as

'the most prudish in English Literature. Evangelical piety, horror at the dreadful doings of the French, ... and above all, perhaps, the dominating presence of the 'Bluestockings', a female intelligentsia, impenetrably virtuous and superlatively delicate'.

It would require no special pleading to suppose that Crabbe, a naturally reticent man, found the ethos in which he wrote an intimidating one.

'... this period, like many another era in time of national crisis, made literary criticism the hand-  
maiden of politics, religion, and morality.'<sup>2</sup>

It is the age of The Eclectic Review which will provide material, so the prospectus of its first edition tells us, with which

'the heads of well regulated families and schools, may communicate literary instruction to the young and inexperienced, without the danger of inflaming their passions, or of corrupting their principles'.<sup>3</sup>

It is the ethos of these years that produced the slashing criticism of the 'Romantics' in The Anti-Jacobin, The Quarterly Review and

1. "The Last Augustan", loc. cit., p.554.
2. W. S. Ward, "Conservative Attitudes" loc. cit., p.386.
3. "Prospectus", The Eclectic Review, Vol. I, Pt. I, January, 1805, p.2.

bumbling apologies of a frightened little man: the writings of one who gained a certain masochistic pleasure from self-denigration. His reading public had to be constantly reminded of the gratitude of a poet who had risen from nothing and nowhere to a position, as Hazlitt put it, of 'one of the most popular and admired of our living authors'.<sup>1</sup>

This 'Uriah Heep' facet of Crabbe's nature is the least likeable.

'Familiar with disappointment, he shall not be much surprised to find that he has mistaken his talent'.

Thus Crabbe speaks of himself in the prose preamble to Inebriety.<sup>2</sup>

Now while this 'I'm ever so 'umble' stance is forgivable, perhaps, in a poet who stands at the very doubtful outset of his career; it is unpardonable in a man who had attained such heights as Crabbe had by 1819. Concrete public recognition had come in the form of John Murray's three thousand pound payment for his works: no mean sum to pay for poetry in 1818. In fact Murray was to lose heavily on the bargain, but that is another story. Burke, on receiving a manuscript of The Village for perusal, comments very tactfully on this aspect of Crabbe's writing:

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1. "Spirit of the Age", op. cit., p.164.
  2. "To the Reader", Works, Vol. I, p.75.

his inability to treat of religious and patriotic themes. He insists that there is nothing 'invidious or offensive' in his work; and he is careful to deny any claim to be a writer of imaginative poetry. He is at all times concerned to dissociate himself and his work from any revolutionary or 'enthusiastic' leanings. The 'image', to use the jargon of the modern advertiser, that he wishes to project, is one of a thoroughly conventional poet. 'I have no peculiar notion to defend, no poetical heterodoxy to support, nor theory of any kind to vindicate or oppose ...'<sup>1</sup> The date of this preface is 1819; the 'poetical heterodoxy', that Crabbe writes of, was at its height, it had even attained to a degree of acceptance and respectability. But perhaps Crabbe, tucked remotely away in Trowbridge, was unaware of this. These prefaces provided an admirable target for the Smith parodies :

For, in the statistical view of life and manners which I occasionally present, my clerical profession has taught me how extremely improper it would be, by any allusion, however slight, to give any uneasiness, however trivial, to any individual, however foolish or wicked.<sup>2</sup>

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1. "Preface" to Tales of the Hall, Works, Vol. II, p.298.
  2. J. and H. Smith, Rejected Addresses and Other Poems, Ed. E. Sargent (New York, 1871), p.370.

But before casting off the 'poor' as a subject fit for poetry, Crabbe had seen it as necessary to free his muse from something far more precious to him. Crabbe tells us that his mind '... at a very early period wandered into the fairy-land of the imagination'.<sup>1</sup> The 'Romance' of his beloved Spenser was crushed under the yoke of realism: life as Crabbe had found it replaced life as he had dreamed of it. The new poetic product was more sober and cold; it belonged to the world of 'Reason' :

Ah ! happy he who thus, in magic themes,  
 O'er worlds bewitch'd in early rapture dreams,  
 Where wild Enchantment waves her potent wand,  
 And Fancy's beauties fill her fairy land;  
 Where doubtful objects strange desires excite,  
 And Fear and Ignorance afford delight.  
 But lost, for ever lost, to me those joys,  
 Which Reason scatters, and which Time destroys -  
 Too dearly bought: ...<sup>2</sup>

The addiction to Spenserian, 'Romance' reading, has been seen in many characters of Crabbe to be a source of destructive illusion.

The Nancys, the Johns, the Sybils, and the Georges<sup>3</sup> are perhaps

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1. George Crabbe, "Biographical Account of the Rev. George Crabbe, L.L.B.", New Monthly Magazine, Vol. IV, January 1816, p.512.
  2. The Library ll.565-73.
  3. "The Widow's Tale", op. cit.  
 "The Patron", op. cit.  
 "The Frank Courtship", op. cit.  
 "The Elder Brother", op. cit.



embodiments of a cathartic rationalization of Crabbe's feelings. The literature which these characters read is that which their creator revelled in, and would have loved to have written. These stories of fall through illusion serve to exorcise such a desire. But the burden of literary realism did not entirely destroy the impulse for that 'bliss in sensibility'.<sup>1</sup> The improbable situations and coincidental meetings, the loves and the sentimentalities, reveal something of that irrepressible 'strain of romance in his nature'; they also remind us that in time he lived 'a generation nearer than Johnson to the Romantic Revival.'<sup>2</sup>

But in another respect, Crabbe was as old-fashioned as could be. Johnson's famous letter to Chesterfield is held to have symbolically tolled the death knell of patronage. But Crabbe was writing obsequious dedications to his patrons, counterparts to apologetic prefaces, and grovelling letters to the great, as late as 1819. Dedications were surely passé by that time. Notwithstanding the sycophantic conventions of these excrescences, Crabbe's dedications are distasteful. Johnson, who read and corrected The Village, wrote thus to Reynolds :

1. "The Maid's Story", Tales of the Hall XI, 1.965.
2. F. L. Lucas, "The Poet of Prose", op. cit., p.195.

'His dedication will be least liked: it were better to contract it into a short sprightly address'.<sup>1</sup>

Crabbe's career as a priest, from the time he was ordained a Deacon in 1781 to the time he finally settled down and was accepted in Trowbridge, was a hectic, if not precarious one. The details of his movements have been well documented by his biographer, and further substantiated by Huchon. Nothing has been said, however, about the feelings of a man, by nature insecure, and unsure of himself, who found that for various reasons, he was obliged to change his congregation six times, or more, in the space of thirty years.

There was trouble from the start, at Aldeburgh: the new curate was to discover the wisdom of the biblical advice about prophets in their own city<sup>2</sup>:

'What right, people said, has he to come and lecture his fellow-townsmen, this upstart whom we have known as a fisherman in his father's boat, as a common labourer, like all his belongings ... a ... clumsy apothecary<sup>3</sup> who killed his patients or gave them herbs gathered on the marshes instead of drugs?'

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1. Letter dated March 4th; 1783. Life, p.104. Johnson's distaste for dedications is of course well-known; 'Nothing has so much degraded literature from its natural rank, as the practice of indecent and promiscuous dedication.' "Rambler", 136, Johnson, Works op.cit. Vol. V, p.413. And cf. his dictionary definition of 'Dedication': (a good example of personal bias in this work): 'a servile address to a patron'. 1755 Dictionary, op.cit.
  2. 'A prophet is not without honour, save in his own country, and in his own house'. Matthew 13 : 57.
  3. Huchon, op.cit., p.133.

More than enough has been said about the period Crabbe spent as Ducal Chaplain at Belvoir Castle. At Muston, mainly because of Crabbe's act of pluralism which absented him from the place for twelve years, relations with his congregants were never happy. While their shepherd had been tending other flocks in Parham, Suffolk, and attempting 'to live in yeoman style'<sup>1</sup>, the 'spiritual influenza'<sup>2</sup> of Methodism had spread among the people of Muston. Crabbe's career ended there with the ringing of the bells to welcome his successor 'before he himself had left the residence'.<sup>3</sup>

At Rendham, his third change of location in Suffolk (Parham to Glenham to Rendham) he was accused of being (no less !) a Jacobin. A rumour of this had spread sufficiently for it to reach Muston. This probably contributed to the hostile reception that was given Crabbe on his return. His son answers this preposterous accusation thus:

'As to the term Jacobin, I shall say only one word. None could have been less fitly applied to him at any period of his life'.<sup>4</sup>

Although the eighteen years spent as rector of Trowbridge proved to be happy ones, Crabbe's initial reception there was far from a pleasant one. This situation was not entirely Crabbe's fault.

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1. Life, (with introduction by E. M. Forster) op. cit., p.vii.
  2. The term is Crabbe's.  
V. "Preface" to The Borough op. cit., p.271.
  3. Life, p.183.
  4. Life, p.149.

'Violations' of clerical decorum in the form of visits to a concert, a ball, or even a play served to substantiate rumours, which had preceded him to Trowbridge, of his 'dissipated' habits. Two further skirmishes complete this tale of woe: one with the Bishop of Lincoln over the question of Crabbe's plurality: part of the general awakening to such abuses at the turn of the eighteenth century. The second involved the Duke of Rutland, in the matter of Crabbe's transfer to Trowbridge.<sup>1</sup> Enough has been said to suggest a stormy, unsettled, clerical life. Like the general inhibiting ethos of the period, Crabbe's precarious position in the church must have affected what he wrote, or more important, what he chose to publish.

'How can so contemptible a being as the editor of the Examiner newspaper presume to talk of his poetical capabilities, when the germ of all true poetry is religion and patriotism?'<sup>2</sup>

This criticism of Leigh Hunt was written a decade after the preface of Crabbe, about to be quoted, appeared; but the sentiment is not uncharacteristic of the first quarter of the nineteenth century. This brand of criticism no doubt succeeded in intimidating braver men than Crabbe who carried, in addition, the burden of priesthood. The

1. V. Huchon, op. cit., p.373 ff.

2. "Foliage; or, Poems Original and Translated by Leigh Hunt", New Monthly Magazine, Vol. X, September 1818. p.163.

demand for greater moral and religious content in his work dogged him throughout his writing life. The 1807 preface contains a long tedious apology for his inability to write on religious and patriotic themes.<sup>1</sup> The pangs of conscience about such matters are expressed again in the "Preface" of Tales. Even if religious themes do not appear in his poetry, Crabbe says, nothing will be found that 'offends against the more important precepts of morality and religion'.<sup>2</sup> The apologetic prefaces were not enough: in answer to moralistic and religious criticism of The Parish Clerk, Crabbe appends a long note of self-defence.<sup>3</sup>

The Eclectic Review was forever nagging at Crabbe about religious matters.

'It is obvious, that in reference to productions of a writer of acknowledged talent and established fame ... the moral tendency of what proceeds from his pen, forms the most interesting consideration ... Mr. Crabbe has laid himself so very open to severe censure by the injurious and even irreligious tendency of some of his former Tales ...'<sup>4</sup>

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1. Works, Vol. I, pp.96-7.
  2. Ibid., Vol. II, p.12.
  3. This note is not found in the Ward edition.  
V. Life and Poems of the Rev. George Crabbe (8 Vols) 1834, Vol. III, p.311.
  4. "Tales of the Hall", The Eclectic Review, Vol. XIII (New Series) Jan. 1820, pp.114-15.

... 'without recognition from Neo-classical criticism, and only by sufferance of the respectable, the stream of English narrative verse continued during the eighteenth century, continued either by bowing to the didactic demands of the moralists or by boldly following a course outside the purlieus of cultivation and propriety.'<sup>1</sup>

What Crabbe really felt about these matters could be written only in a private letter :

'There are, I believe, what we call the peculiarities of the profession; so that, without any other intimation, we should know the religious opinions of the writer: but this, with me, is neither an objection to the work nor a dimunition of its value.'<sup>2</sup>

I believe that it was under pressures such as these that Crabbe marred his work with didacticism. Sufficient reference has been made, in passing, to this aspect of his work. It is didacticism which does more to reduce the stature of Crabbe's tales than any other single factor. He did not possess the religious sensibility of Smart or Cowper that could produce their kind of devotional poetry; he certainly never burned with their religious fervour. But it was no difficulty, as a sop to the critics, to append a few meaningless couplets to his tales: particular note has already been made of the characteristic didactic close. These moralistic babblings

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1. PMWA J. W. Draper, "The Metrical Tale in XVIII-Century England", ~~PMLA~~ Vol. LII, June, 1937, p.397.

2. Letter to Mrs. Leadbeater dated 26th March, 1824. Leadbeater, op. cit., Vol. II, p.385.

publication of Hester<sup>1</sup> or The World of Dreams. How many changes of text were there like those made to The Library (not, one must admit, with great loss even to the most ardent Crabbe enthusiast) on its reappearance in 1807? How different might the tales, as we know them, have appeared? An article by R. L. Chamberlain contains a detailed study of the changes made to The Library. His summary of the matter may be quoted as directly relevant to this argument. These changes were made in order to protect himself

'against those philosophical implications of Darwin's publications which by the last decade of the eighteenth century it had become inconceivable for a clergyman to approve or even tolerate'.<sup>2</sup>

"My friends ... had always an ascendancy over me," said Crabbe.<sup>3</sup> It might indeed be said of him that some of his best friends were his worst enemies. In 1797 Crabbe had a botanical treatise, which he was very enthusiastic about, ready for publication. On the advice of John Davies, a friend; it was thrown into the fire. (Davies,) to quote Huchon, 'objected that a savant could not, on pain of losing caste, write in any language but Latin'.<sup>4</sup> For a man who had

1. 'Such an extended, candid and penetrating study of sexual debauchery, must have been rare in its time'.  
Pollard, op. cit., pp.12-13.
2. R. L. Chamberlain, "George Crabbe and Darwin's Amorous Plants", Journal of English and Germanic Philology, Vol. LXI, 1962, p.852.
3. Life, p.28.
4. Huchon, op. cit. p.205.

chanced everything in an attempt to achieve success as a poet, twenty-two years of silence are incredible. We know that he continued to write during the period that lies between the publication of The Newspaper (1785) and Poems 1807; much of this material was burnt in those periodic garden bonfires that his son writes of. What really lies between the couplets of 1785 and those of 1807 can only be the subject of speculation. To me it seems that the Parish Register of 1807 evolves naturally from The Village of 1783. Did it really take Crabbe twenty-four years to produce the character sketch of Widow Goe from the character sketch of the village labourer? Is it not valid on the basis of the evidence assembled here to see this interim period as one of artistic conflict? A period in which feeling was corseted into couplet; 'Passion' subdued by 'Reason'; years in which new forms and new content in his poetry found their way to the bonfire. In 1807, it was only at the pleading of Charles Fox, and <sup>because of a need for</sup> ~~at the imperatives of~~ money, that Crabbe published at all.

But in 1799 Crabbe had a volume of poetry ready for publication. The subjects of these stories were all 'of an almost romantic kind which would have revealed a very different Crabbe to the man we know'.<sup>1</sup> This is commitment indeed from Huchon, who,

1. Ibid., p.206.



aside in Northanger Abbey.<sup>1</sup>

'Let us not desert one another; we are an injured body. Although our productions have afforded more extensive and unaffected pleasure than those of any other literary corporation in the world, no species of composition has been so much decried'.<sup>1</sup>

The prospectus of the Eclectic Review, another mentor of Crabbe, promises that 'The refuse of the circulating library, and of the theatre, will be excluded'<sup>2</sup> from the chaste pages of this periodical.

'Periodical Critics', Crabbe wrote to Elizabeth Charter, 'dictate to us all more than perhaps any of us are willing to allow'.<sup>3</sup>

It is not a difficult matter to trace the influence of these critics on Crabbe's writing; sometimes indeed this influence was for the good.

The objections to the wholly-sordid descriptions of rural life in

The Village brought a change of tone in The Parish Register:

it attempts to show some of the more positive aspects of country life.

The comments on the viciousness of some early characters like

Benbow, Grimes, and Jachin produce a mellowing into love story

and an injection of humour, in Tales. No doubt the abortive link

story of Tales of the Hall was an answer to Jeffrey's earlier criticism

1. Jane Austen Works, op. cit., Vol. V, Chap. V, p.37.
2. 'Prospectus', Eclectic Review, loc. cit., p.2.
3. Letter dated October 1819, Broadley and Jerrold, op. cit., p.241.

of The Borough which called for 'an extended train of adventures'.<sup>1</sup>  
 The criticism of Gifford and Jeffrey, among others of the Neo-Classical 'general' school, of Crabbe's particularized description, might account for the later sparsity of 'Functional Description': one of the most subtle and original aspects of Crabbe's art.

Burke, Fox, and Johnson, all honourable critics of Jeffrey 'old school', had in their time all tampered with and criticized Crabbe's work. Their suggestions for correction and change were, it appears, accepted without question. Those were the critics that probably formed Crabbe's ideas on the decorous in literature. One wonders, for instance, what considerations surrounded his hesitance<sup>2</sup> in including The Elder Brother in Tales of the Hall. This tale is certainly one of the most daringly 'Romantic' of Crabbe's poems.

This accumulation of evidence, social, critical, occupational and personal, suggests then something of those forces that must have inhibited Crabbe's writing in general, and the choice of work for publication, in particular.

1. Crabbe's 'great talents for narration . . . might be turned to admirable account in maintaining the interest, and enhancing, the probability of an extended train of adventures.'  
The Edinburgh Review, Vol. XVI, 1810, loc. cit., p.55.
2. V. Huchon, op. cit., p.406.

that there are similar themes, ideas, and tensions in the remaining nine-tenths of his work. So much of Crabbe criticism has been satisfied to see him as a quaint relic of the eighteenth century, who, in some unaccountable way, reached the zenith of his popularity at the height of the 'Romantic' period.

Much of the energy and vitality of the tales is generated by the seething currents of feeling, and tensions that underlay the ostensibly quiet surface of the tales. The 'conflict' of my title, is the product of Crabbe's attempt to rationalize the new ideas and sensibilities of his age; to bring into the orbit of his own framework of values the irrational, and the emotional. He clings to an old order of understanding as a bulwark against the anarchic forces of the new within himself and without. Crutwell with an ironic play on words that Crabbe would have appreciated, speaks about the poet's 'rational piety' <sup>1</sup>. This 'piety' had to be paid for by the suppression of much that was natural and spontaneous. In order to 'let [his] numbers flow discreetly', <sup>2</sup> much of the original in the man was kept in trammels;

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1. "The Last Augustan", loc. cit., p.534.

2. 'Then let my numbers flow discreetly on.'

"Professions - Law", The Borough VI, 1.49.

'... there is ... in his poetry the suggestion of a virtual Romanticism that has been repressed, the play in conflict of a suffering sensibility, and of an imagination resolutely bent under the yoke of the real'.<sup>1</sup>

What makes Crabbe essentially different from the 'Romantics' proper is that in an age of disintegrating standards; a period in which war, confusions, riot, and poverty had destroyed all semblance of an ordered society; Crabbe is still obsessed, no less than Pope, with an assumed ordered and stable world, presided over by a beneficent God. Crabbe lays the sin of the assertion of 'Passion' at the door of the individual; the 'Romantics' see the limitations that society imposes as the origin of this sin. But while Crabbe's didactic condemnation is 'Augustan', his evergreen sympathy belongs to the awakened sensibilities of the new age.

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1. E. Legouis and L. Cazamian, A History of English Literature, 1951, p.970.

## Chapter Three

"The restless ocean, emblem of my mind"<sup>1</sup>

The Place of the Sea in Crabbe's Poetry  
as a Correlative of 'Passion'

Introductory

The sea is both a vital and central part of Crabbe's poetic sensibility. The relationship between the question of 'Passion', as it has been discussed, and the sea, as it appears in the poetry, is an integral one. I suggest that the sea emerges as a kind of 'objective correlative'<sup>2</sup>: a 'verbal equivalent for states of mind and feeling'.<sup>3</sup> The qualificatory 'kind of' is used advisedly: I am aware of the critical minefield in which one treads by choosing to employ this term. Essentially, it is the lack of any ready critical label for this highly poetic use to which the sea is put in Crabbe's work that obliges me to tread on such dangerous ground. But the use of the term is a literal one. I do not believe that Crabbe was really aware of the pervading presence of the sea in his poetry; if he was, there is little or no

1. Fragment, Written at Midnight, l. 8.

2. 'The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative"; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion, ...'  
T. S. Eliot, "Hamlet" (1919), Selected Essays (1958), p. 145.

3. T. S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921), ibid., p. 289.

mention of it in his writings. Because there was no predetermined or conscious plan about the place of the sea, there is no necessity to construct any complex theory about the matter. Deep subtlety in the poetry is not a quality to be looked for. The sea becomes, unknowingly, a 'correlative' of certain emotions which Crabbe, as a poet like Eliot who aspires to an art that is impersonal, would choose to translate into the objective form of a symbol. As such a symbol, the sea becomes, so to speak, a means of releasing emotion anonymously.

The literal-descriptive, the symbolic, and the metaphorical appearance of the sea, three purely arbitrary categories in which I shall discuss the subject, serve as an 'equation'<sup>1</sup> for all <sup>that</sup> horrified Crabbe in the world about him and in his own psyche. The sea is connected with a large group of words that ring again and again throughout the poetry: 'passion', 'fancy', 'will', 'dream', 'rapture', 'wild', 'romantic', 'thrilling'. As antitheses to 'Reason' these words and ideas suggest the uncontrolled, and uncircumscribed, and therefore, the malevolent in macrocosm of society and the microcosm of his own being. Using one of the most recurrent epithets to describe the sea, Crabbe calls it :

'The restless ocean, emblem of my mind;'<sup>2</sup>

1. Ezra Pound, Spirit of Romance (1964) p.5.  
Here Pound, to whom it is suggested by critics that Eliot is indebted for the idea of the 'objective correlative', speaks of the need for 'equations for the human emotions'.
2. Fragment, Written at Midnight, l.8.

This explicit reference to the sea as an 'emblem' in the poetry is not, unfortunately, developed any further; neither in the poem in question, or elsewhere in Crabbe's work. But Crabbe, as the discussion in Chapter One indicated, was acutely aware of the poetic value of an emblematic object, interior, or landscape: a value which lends colouring and significance beyond any merely literal description. The broken, withered, tree on which as a boy the village labourer climbed is now only a 'sad emblem'<sup>1</sup> of his decrepit old age. It seems, however, that this very early awareness of such matters was not consciously or consistently exploited as far as the sea is concerned. As has been suggested, the use of 'functional description' in general, is a development of this 'emblem' idea.

'Many lovers of Nature and of poetry have commented with surprise on the slow development of the poetic appreciation of mountains. It is, perhaps, even more strange that English poetry should have been still slower in its discovery of the ocean. It is as if English poets from Dryden to Byron had all lived inland ... The ocean waited for Turner and Byron and Shelley.'<sup>2</sup>

Myra Reynold's remark in her book, which claims a knowledge of Crabbe's poetry, is a surprising one. Apart from the force it

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1. The Village, 1, 1.187.
  2. Myra Reynolds, The Treatment of Nature in English Poetry, (Chicago, 1909) pp.342-3.

generates as a symbol, the literal-descriptive presence of the sea in the poetry, in all the bleakness that is characteristic of the German Ocean as it smashes against the shores of Aldeburgh, enriches and unifies a large part of Crabbe's work.

The extensive biographical data that are available suggest that there is every reason why the sea should loom so largely, bringing, as one critic puts it, 'a vigour, movement, depth, and terror' to the quiet beauty of Crabbe's Suffolk landscape.<sup>1</sup> The awful symbol of the sea destroys any facile suggestion of a simple quiet in the poetry. 'The sea,' Ainger writes, was Aldeburgh's 'most fatal enemy'.

The gradual encroachments of that irresistible power had in the course of two centuries buried a large portion of the ancient Borough beneath the waves'.<sup>2</sup>

Crabbe grew up a witness to the continued destruction and disappearance of house and land before the onslaught of the sea.

I have often heard my father describe a tremendous spring-tide of, I think, the 1st of January, 1779, when eleven houses here were at once demolished; and he saw the breakers dash over the roofs, curl around the walls, and crush all to ruin.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Brett, op. cit., p.40.
  2. Ainger, op. cit., p.4.
  3. Life, p.8.



The consequent decay of Aldeburgh from its position as a thriving port left the town the squalid and lawless place it is depicted as in Crabbe's poetry. A passage in The Village suggests that the sea was inextricably connected in the poet's mind with the physical and moral decay of the town and its inhabitants. In April, 1780, Crabbe 'fled' from Aldeburgh to seek his fortune as a poet.

Fled from the shores where guilt and famine reign,  
 And cried, Ah! hapless they who still remain;  
 Who still remain to hear the ocean roar,  
 Whose greedy waves devour the lessening shore;  
 Till some fierce tide, with more imperious sway,  
 Sweeps the low hut and all it holds away;  
 When the sad tenant weeps from door to door  
 And begs a poor protection from the poor !<sup>1</sup>

Like Dickens, Crabbe had his blacking factory.<sup>2</sup> His memories of Aldeburgh, and Slaughden Bay in particular, were bitter and even traumatic.

Much of the force that created The Village was generated by plain dislike of his surroundings.<sup>3</sup>

The intensity of that story [Peter Grimes]<sup>4</sup> is the intensity of Crabbe's hatred for Aldeburgh.

The disgust with place and circumstance pervades The Parish Register

1. The Village, 1, ll.123-30.
2. V. Edmund Wilson, The Wound and the Bow (Cambridge, Mass. 1941). "The Two Scrooges" (pp.1-104) contains a discussion of the traumatic effect of Dickens' blacking-factory experience.
3. Renwick, op. cit., p.109.
4. Ibid., p.112.

and The Borough<sup>1</sup> no less than The Village; it is only in Tales that a mellowing becomes perceptible. In the latter half of 1775, after two unhappy and unrewarding apprenticeships, Crabbe returned to Aldeburgh to find himself once more employed :

... in labours which he abhorred ... He said long after, that he remembered with regret the fretfulness and indignation wherewith he submitted to these drudgeries, ...

His son makes two references to the degradation and humiliation which Crabbe experienced when obliged both as a boy and a young man to work in the warehouse at Slaughden<sup>3</sup> Quay. A passage in The Borough describes this quay. The epithets, always of significance in Crabbe's descriptions, and here pejorative in character, suggest something of the impact the place had made on a sensitive boy.<sup>4</sup>

The poverty of those years in Aldeburgh; the deaths of four infant brothers and sisters;<sup>5</sup> the drunkenness and violence of

1. The Borough was Aldeburgh. In a letter to Elizabeth Charter he describes the town of his birth thus: '... a Suffolk Borough which helped me to my Scenery and some of my Characters in the Poem which I have called by that Name; it is also that place in which I first saw any Object, and one of the first which I beheld was probably a stormy sea ...' Dated 9th November 1824. Broadley and Jerrold, op.cit., pp.271-2.
2. Life, pp.16-17.
3. Ibid., p.19 and p.26.
4. e.g. 'bounded', 'narrowed', 'miry', 'lumbering', 'loud', 'angry'. The Borough, I, ll.73-77.
5. The death of an 'infant sister' (Huchon points out that in fact it was a brother, op.cit., p.7, note 2) appears to have deeply

his father; the antagonism met with on his unhappy return as curate; these experiences instilled within the poet a deep-seated bitterness towards the place of his birth and its inhabitants. For Crabbe Aldeburgh is the sea. The opening letter of The Borough carries the title, General Description; but the three hundred lines of verse are dominated by descriptions of the sea, the port, the ocean storm, and the shipwreck. Indeed, this sea and the flat, sterile, bleakness of the seascape envelop The Borough as a whole. It is, perhaps, the pervading presence of this backcloth that gives this lumbering poem of some four thousand couplets an element of unity where the perfunctory use of the epistolary method of organization fails miserably to do so.

So the sea emerges, in some inexplicable but highly poetic way, as a symbol of those hates, fears, and sufferings of childhood and youth; in a wider context, as a symbol of all that is hostile and malevolent towards man. The sea is vital as a 'betrayers and a destroyer'; it is 'linked in Crabbe's mind with the brutality and misery of those who lived by it'.<sup>1</sup> 'Fair seed-time had my soul',

(5) affected Crabbe, the boy. Some fifty years later he was to write about the matter thus :

'Though greater anguish I have since endured -  
Some heal'd in part, some never to be cured:  
Yet was there something in that first-born ill,  
So new, so strange, that memory feels it still!'

"Infancy - a Fragment", ll. 61-4.

1. Crutwell, "The Last Augustan", op. cit., p. 539. And cf.:  
'This sea, the unkempt village, and the insolent, insensitive

Wordsworth wrote of his youth; but Crabbe experienced:

No schoolday-wealth that roll'd in silver tides.<sup>1</sup>

And, consequently, how fundamentally different are their views of nature. Wordsworth's nature is a Lady Bountiful; for Crabbe the blight of the natural landscape gave only with a 'niggard hand'.<sup>2</sup>

As one watches, even today, those dirty, muddy, breakers roll on to the shores of Aldeburgh, Crabbe's choice of metaphor, in description of his youth, becomes most meaningful.

But Crabbe's relationship with Aldeburgh, like the ambivalence of Dickens' attitude towards his villains, hated yet loved, is a complex one.<sup>3</sup> The 'strong local scent of tar and bulge-water'<sup>4</sup> pervades all of the poetry; even that which was written in those comfortable inland parishes of Leicestershire and Wiltshire. It is the genus loci of Aldeburgh and its ~~surrounds~~<sup>environs</sup> that vitalizes all his descriptions of place and landscape:

- 
- (1) natives of this "frowning" coast were all in league against the struggling, sensitive doctor.<sup>1</sup>  
Chamberlain, op. cit., pp. 32-3.
1. An Epistle to a Friend, l. 30.
2. The Village I, l. 131.
3. Cf. James Joyce's similar attitude towards the city of his birth, an attitude epitomised by "Dear Dirty Dublin".  
Ulysses (1962), p. 183.
4. Hazlitt, "Spirit of the Age", op. cit., p. 168.

What I thought I could best describe, that I attempted:- the sea, and the country in the immediate vicinity; ...<sup>1</sup>

In 1787, by now a staid curate at Stathern, Crabbe rode sixty miles on horseback in order to satisfy an insatiable, Masfieldian longing to be near the sea, his 'favourite element'.<sup>2</sup> His biographer records vividly the ecstasy of his father as he carried his son into the sea at Aldeburgh on one of the periodic visits to that place.<sup>3</sup> Crabbe could write of the sea to a friend in the following, highly Wordsworthian, terms:

... that first great Object of my admiration and indeed the first of my Notice. I was an Infant Worshipper of its Glory, ...<sup>4</sup>

Edward Fitzgerald, who through a long friendship with the poet's son acquired an intimate knowledge of Crabbe, writes of :

... that old familiar sea, which (with all its sad associations) the Poet never liked to leave far behind him.<sup>5</sup>

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1. "Preface" to The Borough Works, Vol. I, p.268.
  2. Life, p.265.
  3. Ibid., p.126.
  4. Letter to Elizabeth Charter dated 14th September 1818. Broadley and Jerrold, op. cit., p.217.
  5. "Introduction", Readings In Crabbe, op. cit., p.v.

"to the Ocean gave  
 My mind, and thoughts as restless as the wave ...  
 I loved to walk where none had walk'd before,  
 About the rocks that ran along the shore; ...  
 Here I had favourite stations, where I stood  
 And heard the murmurs of the ocean-flood,  
 With not a sound beside, except when flew  
 Aloft the lapwing, or the grey curlew ... "1

Thus Richard describes his youthful pleasures to his brother.

Rachel, made insane by the supposed loss of David, makes her home by the sea. She believed that the sea had destroyed her lover, yet she found solace by its shores. For Rachel, like Crabbe :

I loved the winds that sweep  
 O'er the wild heath, and curl the restless deep.<sup>2</sup>

Some further biographical details are germane to this discussion. Two of Crabbe's younger brothers took to sea and were both lost to the family. John was set adrift in an open boat after a mutiny of slaves on board his ship. William, apart from a chance meeting with an Aldeburgh sailor after having taken to the high seas, was never heard of again. Crabbe, himself, came very near to drowning while bathing alone. If one is to judge from the poignancy and immediacy of a passage of poetry that obviously records this experience, the incident left a deep mark on Crabbe's psyche.

1. Life, p.16. Apart from the first two lines of the quotation this passage appears in "Adventures of Richard", Tales of the Hall IV, ll.447 ff.
2. "Rachel" Posthumous Tales, IV. ll.111-12.

The moment that Crabbe experiences emotional excitation, there is enjambement :

"All was confused above, beneath, around;  
 All sounds of terror; no distinguished sound  
 Could reach me, now on sweeping surges tost,  
 And then between the rising billows lost;  
 An undefined sensation stopp'd my breath;  
Disord'd views and threat'ning signs of death  
 Met in one moment, and a terror gave -  
 I cannot paint it - to the moving grave."<sup>1</sup>

The experience was a traumatic one :

"Can I, my brother - ought I to forget  
 That night of terror? No ! it threatens yet."<sup>2</sup>

It is interesting to note that Crabbe's accident in fact took place in a river.<sup>3</sup> Richard, a patently autobiographical figure, is thrown overboard while his ship is at sea. The incident has been distilled into a poetic experience in which the poet struggles for his life, against the sea. The passage as a whole runs into some fifty lines - many of them run-on; the nervous jerk of their movement conveys successfully the drowning man's growing struggle for breath. All that Crabbe thought and felt about the sea may be summed up by some of the epithets that make up the description of this experience. Some have been underlined below; 'dark' 'dreadful'

1. "Adventures of Richard", op. cit., ll.209-16.
2. Ibid., ll.242-3.
3. V. Life, pp.33-4.

'wild' 'confused' 'mighty' 'yawning' 'vague' may be added to the list.

In discussing the place of the sea in the poetry, the arbitrary distinction will be made between its literal-descriptive, symbolic, and metaphorical appearance. In each case it will be suggested that the sea is presented in a 'significant' manner: that it is, in fact, a poetical embodiment of everything that is antithetical to those 'Augustan' positives to which Crabbe clung so bravely. The sea is 'Passion': a force which threatens to destroy the bastions of 'Reason', judgement, control, and moderation. For the purposes of this discussion, for as such they appear in Crabbe's poetry, river, water, and sea will be treated as parts of one integrated symbolic whole.

### Literal Description

Crabbe seascapes are rarely of the calm, blue and untroubled variety. When in fact the sea does appear as placid and harmless the descriptions are, I believe, significantly conventional and lifeless.

There was a moonlit eve, serenely cool,  
When the vast ocean seem'd a mighty pool;  
Save the small rippling waves that gently beat,  
We scarcely heard them falling, at our feet.<sup>1</sup>

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1. "The Maid's Story", Tales of the Hall XI, ll. 988-91.



The inanity of the lame monosyllabic rhyme words suggests the perfunctory; in the final rhyme of these two bathetic distiches the sense, one suspects, has become an echo to the sound. But most important, the conventionality of almost every epithet used here is conclusive evidence of Crabbe's perfunctory interest in the piece of description. The discussions of Crabbe's use of 'functional description' shows that he is especially masterful in exploiting the richness and variety of the English adjective to give an accumulative power to a passage of description.

A similar example is found in that very stormy, salt-caked, first 'letter' of The Borough. The sea is described in the tranquillity of a 'summer noon'.<sup>1</sup> After a few lines of pedestrian description, Crabbe lapses into one of his notorious scientific analyses of natural phenomena. Mercifully, these prosaics are usually demoted to the rank of footnotes. These sketches of the sea in a quiet mood are always short; in this case one senses that Crabbe is anxious to turn to the description of a very different kind of sea. The passage closes with a self-conscious questioning of the imaginary correspondent to whom these letters are addressed :

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1. "General Description", The Borough I, ll. 173-189.

Art thou not present, this calm scene before, ...<sup>1</sup>

The inference is that the poet is unsure of his ability to describe the placidity of the sea in a sufficiently convincing manner.

No, for Crabbe, the real sea was the formidable 'awakened giant', that lashed the shores of Aldeburgh. In a strange way, it is the yoke of his 'realism' that prevents Crabbe from describing the sea in any but its stormy aspect. The seascape is but part of a total view of a nature that is cruel and destructive; the creation of a God without mercy towards the descendants of a fallen Adam. This is what lies behind his attack on pastoral poetry in The Village :

... shall I dare these real ills to hide  
In tinsel trappings of poetic pride?<sup>2</sup>

The sea can be seen in such 'tinsel trappings' of tranquillity only in the visions of a madman, in the fancy bred on 'Romance', or in a dream. The felon's dream as he waits for execution is of visions that never were or will be.<sup>3</sup> The descriptions of nature are the very antithesis of those given in The Village. The natural scenery

1. Ibid., l.187.

2. The Village, **1**, ll.47-8.

3. "Prisons", The Borough XXIII, 284-332.

And cf. The 'flower embanked stream' of the madman's vision in Insanity of Ambitious Love. 'The View was that which Poets dream'.

Pollard, op. cit., ll.296-99.

is that of Orlando's love-sick day dream in The Lover's Journey; here too the 'poetic diction' suggests the falsity of a pastoral landscape. The pallid description of the sea is in accord with the style of the passage as a whole: the ocean 'smiling'; the waves 'faintly full'; the ships 'softly sinking in the sleepy sea'; The monosyllabic rhymes are again in evidence. In World of Dreams, Crabbe juxtaposes, in two successive stanzas, the tranquil and the turbulent sea; but it is only the latter that has any reality for him :

Beside the summer sea I stand,  
Where the slow billows swelling shine.  
How beautiful this pearly sand,  
That waves, and winds, and years refine !  
Be this delicious quiet mine - . . .

Yet, I remember not that sea, . . .

What is 'remembered' is the 'opposing tide', 'The peril of the meeting flood!', 'the clinging mud'.<sup>1</sup>

Significantly, Crabbe's descriptions of seascape become animated, immediate, and whole in an architectonic sense, only when the sea is caught in all the fury of the storm. Many early critics remarked on his apparent inability to produce in his descriptions anything of the mystery, magnificence or 'sublime' in external nature.

Crabbe

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1. World of Dreams, ll. 97-101 and 1.106.

All where the eye delights, yet dreads to roam,  
 The breaking billows cast the flying foam  
 Upon the billows rising - all the deep  
 Is restless change; the waves so swell'd and steep,  
 Breathing and sinking, and the sunken swells,  
 Not one, one moment, in its station dwells.  
 But, nearer land, you may the billows trace,  
 As if contending in their waterychase;  
 May watch the mightiest till the shoal they reach,  
 Then break and hurry to their utmost stretch;  
 Curl'd as they come, they strike with furious force,  
 And then, re-flowing, take their grating course,  
 Raking the rounded flints, which ages past  
 Roll'd by their rage, and shall to ages last.  
     Far off, the petrel in the troubled way  
     Swims with her brood, or flutters in the spray;<sup>1</sup>

Here Crabbe creates a quickened descriptive whole which is not marred by what an American reviewer fond of superlatives has called 'revolting accuracy'.<sup>2</sup> In an uncharacteristic manner we are given a view as a panoramic sweep of the eye has seen it. The usual Crabbe description, as has been seen often enough, is characterized by its microscopic minutiae. The enjambement and general flexibility of these lines show Crabbe approaching the verse paragraph of some of Pope's later work. The epithets again suggest the 'Passion' of the sea:

1.      The Borough, 1, ll.200-15.  
         Cf. Holme's interesting, but, I think, erroneous observation on this letter, as a whole: 'The majesty and grandeur of the sea are lost sight of in mere fear of its effects'.  
         J. W. Holme, "The Treatment of Nature in Crabbe",  
         Primitiae : Essays in English Literature by Students of Liverpool University, 1912, p.50.
2.      "British Poetry at the Close of the Last Century",  
         North American Review, Vol. 42, 1836, p.63.

its power, greatness, and instability. The length of the quotation allows us to see that Crabbe had learnt from Dryden and Pope the trick of moving the caesura in order to avoid the 'rocking-horse' effect of monotony.

In tale after tale the seascape or the surrounding flat marshland of Aldeburgh makes its appearance. The bleak, wild, and barren landscape is a befitting backcloth for those guilt-ridden characters of Crabbe to move across. It is the scene in which Villars<sup>1</sup> proposes to carry out his act of 'Passion'. He chooses, as the place into which he will entice a wife that has deserted him:

A large old mansion suffer'd to decay ...  
 Dark elms around the constant herons bred;  
 Those the marsh dykes, the neighbouring ocean, fed;  
 Rocks near the coast no shipping would allow,  
 And stubborn heath around forbad the plough; ...  
 One level sadness ! marsh, and heath, and sea,  
 And, save these high dark elms, nor plant nor tree.<sup>2</sup>

Before Abel Keene, now a melancholy victim of his 'Passion', hangs himself, he is seen :

... on the beach reclined,  
 Or causeless walking in the wint'ry wind;  
 And, when it raised a loud and angry sea,  
 He stood and gazed, in wretched reverie;<sup>3</sup>

- 
1. Villars, op. cit.
  2. Ibid., ll.401-10.
  3. "Abel Keene", op. cit., ll.191-4.

The sea-shore is a place for Crabbe's brooding outcasts to wander in unhindered solitude. Of David Morris, we learn :

"His Haunts the distant Wood, the neighbouring Shore,  
The winding bank that bound the marshy Moor,  
Nor less the River's strong and sweeping flood,  
Bare to the blast, but chos'n for solitude."<sup>1</sup>

In this preoccupation with the wild, uncultured, 'picturesque' aspect of nature, Crabbe is at one with some of his more excitable contemporaries. The relish of the 'Romantic' poets for such settings has become a critical commonplace :

'The taste for mountains and cataracts, for tempests and floods, for the turbulence of the stormy, and the tortured and fractured surfaces of the earth, has rightly been associated with romanticism.'<sup>2</sup>

'The romantic poets, sooner or later, make much of the wild aspects of nature.'<sup>3</sup>

By Crabbe's time the concept of natural beauty was no longer confined to the shaped, the symmetrical, and the decorous. Delight was now taken in those very facets of nature which Johnson saw as the negation of a criterion of beauty that was timeless and unvariable; pleasure was taken in precisely those

'accidental blemishes and excrescences which are continually varying the surface of Nature's works.'<sup>4</sup>

1. "David Morris", Pollard, *op. cit.*, ll.24-7.
2. Sutherland, *Preface to Eighteenth Century Poetry*, *op. cit.*, p.112.
3. J. W. Beach, *The Concept of Nature in Nineteenth Century Poetry* (New York, 1956), p.34.
4. "To the Idler", No. 82 Saturday 10th November 1759. *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, Vol. II, Eds. J. W. Bullett and L. F. Powell, 1963, p.255.

In one other important respect is Crabbe's interest in natural description, which as we have seen meant the seascape he knew so well, close to that of his 'Romantic' contemporaries. His descriptions of external nature are especially distinguished by their local colour; the genius loci of Aldeburgh never deserted him. The backdrop of Crabbe's poetry, like that of say Scott and Wordsworth, belongs to a very definite place. The classical nature poetry of the eighteenth century could hardly be ascribed to a particular area. It was, and had to be, a 'general' nature, representative of all places at all times.

It has been stated on more than one occasion in this thesis that Crabbe rarely uses description per se. His description, whether of landscape, interior or person, is not designed to draw attention to its own poetic worth; but rather to evoke atmosphere, reflect mood, or point direction of events. For this reason it might be claimed that the term 'literal description' is an unsatisfactory one for many of the landscapes which have been discussed in this section. But Crabbe's descriptions, and that of landscape in particular, gain poetic power by making their artistic effect on two levels, literal and (to use Crabbe's own term) 'emblematic'. Crabbe's 'functional description' was fully discussed in Chapter One, above. To take, for

example, the passage just quoted from Villars. First of all the description serves to give place and name to airy nothings of the fictitious narrative. Descriptions of landscape and interior are the essential materials of the realist writer's art: they offer a backcloth of substance for the unlikely activities of those characters who move through these stories; they make our suspension of disbelief the easier to implement. In this case it is the mansion in which the crime of Villars is to take place that is made the more real by the minute description of its setting. But the description also suggests something more subtly functional. The decay of the mansion and the blight of the seascape are 'emblems' of the sterility of Villar's 'Passion'. The rocks of the sea and the 'stubborn heath' are, like Villars, capable only of destroying things. This seascape is also a reflection of Villar's state of mind after his wife's desertion.

The passage is introduced thus :

At once his spirit with his fortune fell  
 To the last ebb . . .  
 From henceforth all things fell into neglect -  
 The mind no more alert, the form no more erect.<sup>1</sup>

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1. "Villars", op. cit., ll. 394-98.



### The Sea as a Symbol

'Man must endure', Crabbe tells us, 'let us submit and pray.'<sup>1</sup> The idea that man as a fallen being must suffer and endure the miseries of his temporal existence is a thread which runs through the whole texture of Crabbe's poetry and sermons. The natural world in general and the sea in particular are seen symbolically, as forces which are hostile to man. The aid of these forces is invoked in order to ensure the bitterness of man's suffering on earth. Crabbe, with reference to the sea, writes of :

The treasures and the wealth it owes  
To human misery ...<sup>2</sup>

'Angry', 'false', 'threatening', 'fatal', 'turning', 'wild' are some recurring epithets with which Crabbe describes the sea.

Rarely is there any expression of pleasure in nature:

Crabbe can see only its pitiless, anti-human, aspects. His countryside, unlike that of James Thomson, or Cowper, is the creation of a merciless God :

God made the country, and man made the town.  
What wonder then that health and virtue, gifts  
That can alone make sweet the bitter draught  
That life holds out to all, should most abound  
And least be threaten'd in the fields and groves?<sup>3</sup>

1. "General Description", The Borough, I, 1.270.
2. The World of Dreams, ll.165-6.
3. William Cowper, The Task, Bk. 1, ll.749-53.  
The Poetical Works Ed. H. S. Milford (Oxford, 1963).

Crabbe had not, to the extent which Cowper had, experienced life in the metropolis; he was unaware of a reality brought about by the Industrial Revolution that was far worse than that of the village as he knew it. Crabbe seems as naive about the greater evils of industrial life as Fielding was about the realities of rural living. For Fielding the countryside remained a haven to which, as a reward, the heroes and the heroines of his novels might peacefully retire after their trials and adventures.<sup>1</sup> But for Crabbe the bosom of nature was no place for the nymphs and swains of pastoral poetry to conduct their amours. The peasant finds it impossible to live, let alone love :

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 care and art defy,  
Reign o'er the land, and rob the blighted rye:  
Their thistles stretch their prickly arms afar,  
And to the ragged infant threaten war;<sup>2</sup>

From this sense of the innate enmity of the natural world, the sea emerges as a recurrent symbol of malevolence. It is the chaos that lay at the periphery of the reason-ordered world of the 'Augustans'. As a force which threatens man, the sea pervades the

- 
1. E.g.: Joseph and Fanny (Joseph Andrews); Tom and Sophia (Tom Jones).
  2. The Village, I, ll. 63-70.

In that strange, opium-clouded, poem, Sir Eustace Grey, the demented protagonist is hounded and tormented by 'two fiends of darkness'. Part of this guilt-ridden nightmare experience, involves a death by drowning :

They set me where the seas retire,  
But drown with their returning tide;<sup>1</sup>

The story of Rachel<sup>2</sup> whose insanity was the outcome of her lover's supposed death at sea was referred to earlier,

On the eve of Charles' wedding to Elizabeth<sup>3</sup> a boat race is held. The inexorable course of events in these tales which begins in hope of joy and culminates in sadness repeats itself once again :

... and never morn more bright  
Rose on the river, nor so proud a sight;<sup>4</sup>

By evening the buoyant mood has been replaced by:

A sullen sound was heard along the deep,  
The stormy spirit rousing from his sleep;  
The porpoise rolling on the troubled wave,  
Unwieldy tokens of his pleasure gave;<sup>5</sup>

- 
1. Sir Eustace Grey, pp.280-1.
  2. "Rachel", op. cit.
  3. "The Boat Race", op. cit.
  4. Ibid., ll.163-4.
  5. "The Boat Race", op. cit., ll.203-6.

Charles, and Elizabeth's father are drowned. The chance, meaningless, death by water recurs so often in the tales that it acquires a symbolic force. This sequence of events has a parallel in the story related in the 'Amusements' letter of The Borough.<sup>1</sup> A picnic of friends begins in gaiety and ends in near disaster when the party of trippers is left stranded on an island which becomes submerged at high tide. It is a macabre sequel to a letter which bears the title, Amusements.

Dark and more dark, more wet, more cold it grew,  
And the most lively bade to hope adieu;  
Children, by love then lifted from the seas,  
Felt not the waters at the parents' knees,  
But wept aloud; the wind increased the sound,  
And the cold billows as they broke around. 2

The moment is conveyed with great immediacy; the picture of children being lifted out of the water is a deeply pathetic one. But the prospect of ending his tale with a mass drowning of men, women and children was obviously too horrifying for this essentially gentle man. The party is rescued at the twelfth hour by some sailors. Even the 'most giddy' of the rescued people, Crabbe concludes ironically, as they reach the safety of the shore:

Think of their danger, and their GOD ~~adore~~ adore. 3

- 
1. The Borough IX.
  2. Ibid., ll.277-282.
  3. "Amusements", op. cit., l.296.

The sea casts a giant shadow of warning against the act of 'Passion'; as a symbol it is at once an embodiment of this aspect of human nature, and a power capable of destroying any illusory hopes that 'Passion' may engender. Richard,<sup>1</sup> as he concludes the account of his miraculous escape from death by drowning at sea, says:

Oft in times when passion strives to reign,  
When duty feebly holds the slacken'd chain,  
When Reason slumbers, then remembrance draws,<sup>2</sup>  
This view of death, and folly makes a pause - ...

Worn out by his tour of Silford Hall, Peter falls asleep. His 'passive fancy' creates, in his dream, the 'fleshless forms' of 'Romance'. But the pygmy queens, the fairies, and caliphs are swept away by the roar of the sea, which awakens the boy to reality and 'Reason':

... As they fled,  
The mountain loadstone rear'd its fatal head,  
And drew the iron-bolted ships on shore,  
Where he distinctly heard the billows roar,  
Mix'd with a living voice ...<sup>3</sup>

The 'rustic infidel's' 'enthusiasm' is of quite another, more serious kind:

... he believed in neither God nor Ghost;  
That, when the sod upon the sinner press'd,  
He, like the saint, had everlasting rest;<sup>4</sup>

- 
1. "Adventures of Richard", op. cit.
  2. Ibid., ll. 250-53.
  3. "Silford Hall", op. cit., ll. 679-83.
  4. "Baptisms", The Parish Register I, ll. 794-6.

The retribution for such sin is much greater too:

The ditch was deep - the rain had caused a flood -  
The foot-bridge fail'd - he plunged beneath the deep,  
And slept, if truth were his, th' eternal sleep.<sup>1</sup>

What, perhaps, lies behind this symbol of the sea is the horror in Crabbe's mind of a second apocalyptic Flood. Occasionally, as in the story of the trippers,<sup>2</sup> there is an overt reference to the connection of the symbol with the Noah story. Crabbe sees the first Flood as having destroyed the beauty that once existed in man himself and the natural world he inhabits :

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; ...  
Since vice the world subdued and waters drown'd,  
Auburn and Eden can no more be found.<sup>3</sup>

In the intimately personal, Insanity of Ambitious Love<sup>4</sup> the madman's vision of the ultimate horror of the inferno includes, needless to say, the destroying sea :

"Deep we descended, down the Cave.  
The storm was heard, the Air was cold, ...  
Wild Eagles scream'd the rocks around,  
Wild Waves beat sadly on the Shore,  
...

1. Ibid., ll. 821-3.
2. "Amusements", op. cit. l. 206ff.
3. "Baptisms" The Parish Register I, ll. 15-18 and ll. 25-6.  
The reference here to Goldsmith's Deserted Village continues the ironies of The Village.
4. Pollard, op. cit.

... half starv'd Wives approach'd to weep  
For men compell'd to slave at Sea.

...

I saw the Ships, and from the deck  
Men dropt into the rav'nous tide,  
I saw the Ship itself a Wreck,  
And many struggling [sic] Wretches died;  
I saw the Fishers, how they plied  
Their cold laborious Arts for bread,  
They tried and fail'd, and still they tried,  
By Misery cloath'd, by Meaness fed.<sup>1</sup>

Apposite to this discussion of the sea as a symbolic force in nature that betrays and destroys is an extended simile which appears in The Parting Hour.<sup>2</sup> Crabbe sees the incoming tide as sinister and overpowering; it threatens to drown unwary, pleasure-seeking children who walk on its shore. Here this tide is likened to the surge of those barely understood feelings of sexuality in young people: 'Passions' which threaten loss of self control. A fuller discussion of Crabbe's sea imagery will suggest the intimate connection between the sea and the surrender to 'Passion'. Judith and Allen, the protagonists of this tale, are separated for life by the 'false seas'.<sup>3</sup>

The symbolic presence of the sea in the poetry is a constant one. For the narrator of the Farewell and Return<sup>4</sup> stories who

1. Ibid., ll.216-17, ll.220-1, ll.238-9, ll.248-255.
2. Tales II, ll.68-73.
3. Ibid., l.100.
4. Posthumous Tales VI - XXII.

returns after twenty years to his native town, everything has changed beyond recognition. Hopes and dreams fade into reality.

But :

One object only is the same; the sight  
Of the wide Ocean ...<sup>1</sup>

In the same way it is the salt of Crabbe's ever-formidable sea that infuses tale after tale. As a symbol, the sea in the poetry is not definable in any facile, straightforward terms: faithful to the concept of a symbol the sea means many things for Crabbe.

But whatever its significance it is connected, in an almost intangible way, with that 'Passion' within himself and in others, that was so greatly feared. It is not an evasion of further definition to say that to analyse a symbol, to attempt to wring out its last drop of meaning, is to wholly destroy its poetic beauty.

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1. "Farewell and Return", Posthumous Tales VI, ll.89-90.  
'... there's Littleness in all', reads a variant of these lines,  
'Yet is the Shore the same, the same the Sea'.  
Works, III, p.539.



It is this desire for 'transparency of treatment', or to use Crabbe's own words, an 'actuality of relation' or 'nudity of description',<sup>1</sup> that makes him so self-conscious about the use of even simile and metaphor, those basic and time-honoured tools of the poet's craft. George, about to introduce a water metaphor as part of a character sketch, excuses himself by saying :

"Were I a poet, I would say, he brings  
To recollection some impetuous springs;"<sup>2</sup>

Richard, as he is about to describe Rachel's miserable plight claims that he needs

"To borrow simile to paint her woes,"<sup>3</sup>

This is precisely what Crabbe himself, in his inhibited way of using simile and metaphor, seems to be doing. His images usually appear in the poetry as 'borrowed', ratiocinated, excrescences, rather than something spontaneous that has welled up from the unconscious mind. This coldly utilitarian attitude towards imagery which sees it as merely a decorative afterthought is characteristic of the poetic tradition in which Crabbe was working. I. A. Richards,<sup>4</sup> speaks of the

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1. "Preface" to Tales op.cit., p.10.
  2. "Boys at School", Tales of the Hall III, ll.35-6.
  3. "Smugglers and Poachers", op. cit., l.12.
  4. I. A. Richards, The Philosophy of Rhetoric, 1936, p.100.

18th century assumptions that figures are a mere embellishment or added beauty and that the plain meaning, the tenor<sup>1</sup> is what alone really matters and is something that "regardless of the figures," might be gathered by the patient reader.

Jeffrey was apparently close to the mark when he observed that Crabbe's

similes are almost all elaborate and ingenious, and rather seem to be furnished from the efforts of a fanciful mind, than to be exhaled by the spontaneous ferment of a heated imagination.<sup>2</sup>

Mr. Crabbe was very much struck with the sagacity of this remark. On reading it, he said, "Jeffrey is quite right: my usual method has been to think of such illustrations, and insert them after finishing the tale."<sup>3</sup>

Examples of such extended similes are to be found throughout the tales.<sup>4</sup> Crabbe's usual method is to set these similes out as separate verse paragraphs. Thus both visually, and in terms of their content, these passages appear as excrescences which are designed

1. Richards defines his very useful terms for the two components of the metaphor thus: '... the tenor, as I am calling it - the underlying idea or principal subject which the vehicle or figure means'.
- Ibid., p.97.
2. "Tales 1812" Edinburgh Review, loc.cit., Vol. XX, November 1812, p.304.
3. Note appended to "The Brothers" Tales of the Hall II. The last four words of this quotation appear in this edition, in italics.
4. Crabbe's Life and Poems (1834) op.cit. Vol. VI, p.36.  
e.g. "Hester" Pollard, op.cit., ll.405-17.  
"The Dumb Orators", op.cit., ll.368-385.  
"The Family of Love", op.cit., ll.342-351.  
"Barnaby, The Shopman", Posthumous Tales VIII, ll.59-68.

to call attention to themselves. Crabbe's 'bit of gold lace on a farmer's homespun coat'<sup>1</sup> conforms to the Johnsonian idea of the extended simile:

That it may be complete, it is required to exhibit,  
independently of its references, a pleasing image;  
for a simile is said to be a short episode.<sup>2</sup>

In general, Crabbe's addiction to the extended simile is a paradox: this choice of the most elaborate and decorative form of simile is hardly in accord with his 'poetry without an atmosphere' view of his work.

Again, in accordance with the poetic tradition in which he was writing, Crabbe, in his choice of images, has a marked preference for the ordinary simile rather than the metaphor.<sup>3</sup> This preference for simile, which, in its tendency to 'clarify' rather than 'suggest'<sup>4</sup> is in keeping, as the extended simile is not, with Crabbe's idea of his poetry as being the sober product of ratiocination. The

desire for perspicuity is as much the hallmark of Crabbe's imagery

1. Leslie Stephen, Hours in a Library (3 Vols), 1909, Vol. II, p.44.
2. "Life of Pope", Johnson Works, op. cit. Vol. XI, p.177.
3. '...each period has its characteristic kind of metaphoric method. Neo-Classical poetry, for example, is characterized by the simile, ...'  
R. Wellete and A. Warren. Theory of Literature, 1961, p.203.
4. '...What simile loses in suggestiveness it gains in clearness'  
S. J. Brown, The World of Imagery, 1927, p.121. and cf.:  
'...clearness comes in with it, [the introductory word of the simile] but something of warmth goes out ... metaphor ... heightens the mood, whilst the simile too often checks it ...'  
J. G. Jennings, An Essay on Metaphor in Poetry, Glasgow, 1915, pp.33-4

as it is of his diction. The clear-cut edges of the image restrain any flight of the imagination. Nevertheless, he can occasionally surprise us with a bizarre 'metaphysical' conceit :

For the<sup>re</sup> are minds whom first we must excite  
And urge to feeling, ere they can unite;  
As we may hard and stubborn metals beat  
And blend together, if we duly heat.<sup>1</sup>

and :

... "sordid pictures from the fancy pass,  
As the breath startles from the polish'd glass."<sup>2</sup>

These similes, although highly effective in their context, are patently not 'exhaled by the spontaneous ferment of a heated imagination'.

This brief survey of Crabbe's imagery in general is necessary in order to place the sea image in perspective. It is easy, particularly with the suggestive literal-descriptive and symbolic appearance of the sea in the poetry, to overstate the unique character of the sea image. But the sea imagery does emerge as more personal and more spontaneous. In this respect it is a 'Romantic' image, one of 'Passion', a product of the less conscious side of poetic creation; an expression of the poet's individual and unique experience. In its pervasiveness the sea image acquires a value that is symbolic rather than merely decorative of descriptive. The sea image, alone, is used continually

1. "The Hall" Tales of the Hall I, ll. 7-10.
2. "The Widow's Tale", op. cit., ll. 106-7.

and, to a great extent, consistently, throughout the poetry.

Auden in The Enchafed Flood has written on the depth and ambivalence of the sea image in writers from Horace to Melville.<sup>1</sup>

Jennings speaks of it as an image as old as the poet's art itself :

The metaphor is one of the oldest in the world,  
and is the property of all poets.<sup>2</sup>

Because of the prolific nature of this image, it becomes extremely difficult to appraise Crabbe's pattern of sea images as being wholly personal, and therefore of significance, to his work. Any such claim that is made must lie ultimately, not so much in the single appearance of any sea image, but in the emergence of a distinct and consistent pattern. Criticism of Caroline Spurgeon's<sup>3</sup> work on Shakespeare's imagery points to the need to discriminate between a current and conventional use of an image, and the image which is uniquely personal to the poet.<sup>4</sup> I have endeavoured to exclude from my discussion any sea or water images that seem to be the common property of many

1. W. H. Auden, The Enchafed Flood, 1951.

2. Jennings, op. cit., p.55-6, and cf.:

'It is a commonplace that the sea has exercised a profound influence on English poetry, and not merely as an object evoking description and emotion but also as a source of imagery and as a symbol.'

J. Bourke, The Sea as a Symbol in English Poetry, Eton, 1954, p.1.

3. E.g. Shakespeare's Imagery and What it Tells Us, New York, 1936.

4. E.g. Hornstein: '...it must be proved by the collector of statistics in metaphor that such comparisons did not circulate in the general current of trite proverb and comparison from which all daily speech draws, ...'

'An Analysis of Imagery', P.M.L.A., Vol. 57, September 1942, pp. 652-3.

poets or that have become 'worn' or 'dead' images.

Sometimes Crabbe's images of sea and river are used, as in Arnold's poetry, to convey in a general way the 'sense of the character and quality of life, its meaning and its issues'.<sup>1</sup> This category of image emphasises yet again Crabbe's view of temporal existence as one of suffering and endurance. Drifting,\* a poetic fragment, is one of a number of poems that record those early years of hardship before Crabbe's fateful meeting with Burke. The fragment as a whole is a sustained simile in which the writer is likened to :

... some poor bark on the rough ocean tost,  
My rudder broken, and my compass lost,  
My sails the coarsest, and too thin to last, ...  
Life's ocean teems with foes to my frail bark, ...'<sup>2</sup>

After baptism those children listed in the Parish Register set sail on 'life's rough sea' :<sup>3</sup>

Where passions soon, like powerful winds, will rage,  
And prudence, wearied, with their strength engage.<sup>4</sup>

In an extended simile in Midnight the sea appears once again as a force by which man is destined to be destroyed. 'Life' is :

1. H. C. Diffin, Arnold the Poet, 1962, p.39.  
But see Arnold's more specific use of the sea metaphor:  
'Self-swayed our feelings ebb and swell -  
Thou lov'st no more; - Farewell ! Farewell !  
Isolation. To Marguerite, II. 11-12.  
Arnold, Poetic Works, op.cit.
2. Drifting, ll. 1-3 and l. 9.
3. "Baptisms", op.cit., l.824.
4. Ibid., ll.826-7.

illusion and madness in the individual, and disorder and destruction in society as a whole.

"O ! how the passions, insolent and strong,  
Bear our weak minds their rapid course along;  
Make us the madness of their will obey;  
Then die, and leave us to our griefs a prey !" <sup>1</sup>

In Storm and Calm, an extended simile compares the 'force of love', its 'passion', with the 'threatening tempests', the 'angry winds', those 'furious powers' of the sea. <sup>2</sup> In the Widow's Tale Nancy's mentor warns of the 'chilling dread' and 'thrilling joy' of romantic love that may overcome one's power of 'Reason'. No

... joys from love uncheck'd by prudence flow. <sup>3</sup>

Sir Owen Dale, whose love for Camilla has been unrequited, plans to exact revenge. He dreams of Camilla 'with her soul on fire' and :

" ... lost on passion's never resting sea,  
Hopeless and helpless." <sup>4</sup>

The aspiring poet in The Patron is the victim of illusions of grandeur in matters of class, politics, and love. His father's warnings, the 'Reason' element in the tale, are cast in a metaphor of the sea.

The ever-turbulent sea of Crabbe's descriptions is the sea of his

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1. "Sir Owen Dale", op. cit., ll. 63-6.
  2. "Storm and Calm", Works, Vol. III, pp. 396-7.
  3. "The Widow's Tale", op. cit., l. 211.
  4. "Sir Owen Dale", op. cit., l. 303 and ll. 310-11.

metaphoric 'vehicle' :

"Such are thy dangers; - yet, if thou canst steer  
Past all perils, all the quicksands clear,  
Then thou may'st profit; but if ~~the~~ storms prevail, ..." <sup>1</sup>

In The Candidate, Crabbe describes his own career as a poet, in figurative terms. His struggle is with 'fatal floods'; the rocks are seen as 'extremes' of 'Passion' between which he would choose to sail. <sup>2</sup>

The sea has been seen as a symbol both of 'Passion' and a nemesis for the act of 'Passion'. The Lear-figure in Midnight is guilty of murder. Relief from such guilt can be only fleeting :

Like to the fearfull rest the Vessell feels  
In the dread chasm of the tempestuous Sea,  
Arch'd by the Wave that pauses o'er the Gulph,  
While Sea-men urge their momentary prayer,  
And with Heart-shrinking Horror view their Grave. <sup>3</sup>

The image is a frightening one; it perhaps describes an experience which Crabbe had heard related in his wanderings among the Aldeburgh fishermen. The 'mad'ning Spirit' of drunkenness, that anathema of Crabbe is seen as one who :

Swims in the seas of error and explores,  
Through midnight mists, the fluctuating Shores;  
From wave to wave in rocky Channel glides,  
And sinks in woe, or on presumption slides; <sup>4</sup>

- 
1. "The Patron", Tales ~~IV~~. ll.404-6.
  2. The Candidate, ll.1-22.
  3. Midnight, ll.402-406.
  4. Inebriety, ll.7-10.



The 'pilot Reason' has been cast overboard by the 'Passion' of drink.

Prudent, rational, Lucy<sup>1</sup> will sustain the blow of poverty and that of a lover's desertion, when her sister goes mad. Lucy, unlike Jane, is a victim neither of illusion, or 'enthusiasm' ;

"She read not much of high heroic deeds,  
Where man the measure of man's power exceeds; ...  
Nor did she dare to launch on seas unknown,  
In search of truth by some adventurers shown,"<sup>2</sup>

Crabbe, the clergyman, was a life-long enemy of those Methodistic 'conversions' of 'Passion'; conversions to a faith that itself was based on emotion rather than 'Reason'. Here, characteristically, the abstract idea of 'faith' is made concrete in terms of 'bridges' and 'tides'. 'Faith' based on 'feelings' is not lasting or reliable :

As heaviest weights the deepest rivers pass,  
While icy chains fast bind the solid mass:  
So, born of feelings, faith remains secure,  
Long as their firmness and their strength endure;  
But, when the waters in their channel glide,  
A bridge must bear us o'er the threat'ning tide;  
Such bridge is reason, and their faith relies,  
Whether the varying spirits fall or rise.<sup>3</sup>

Edward Shore's intellectual self-delusion eventually reduces him to a state of insane infantilism. This insanity is the product of a

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1. "The Sisters", op. cit.
  2. Ibid., ll. 163-4 and ll. 169-70.
  3. "The Convert", Tales XIX, ll. 95-102.

The freedom and wildness of nature must be 'methodised' by the art of man. The image is a parallel one to that of the eighteenth century garden in its ordered symmetry. Richard is much impressed by the sight of a 'large fleet' in sail. The ship is seen as a symbol of man's attempt to place control over nature's wildness; a symbol of the victory of 'art' over 'nature' 'Reason' over 'Passion' :

" ... where does man evince his full control  
O'er subject matter, where displays the soul  
Its mightiest energies with more effect  
Than when her powers that moving mass direct?  
Than when man guides the ship that art has made,  
And makes the wind and waters yield him aid?"<sup>1</sup>

How very different were Byron's feelings for the sea :

There is a society where none intrudes  
By the deep sea, and music in its roar ...  
Man marks the earth with ruin - his control  
Stops with the shore<sup>2</sup>

It is significant that a description of primeval Britain (a rare flight of the imagination for Crabbe) should include the sea as an epitome

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1. "Adventures of Richard (concluded)", op. cit. 11.184-89.
  2. "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage" The Works of Lord Byron. Ed. E. H. Coleridge, Vol. II, Canto IV. CLXXVIII. For 'Romantic writers ... What exists is the Trivial. Unhappy, Unjust, City, ... from which the only escape is to the wild, lonely, but still vital sea.' Auden, op. cit., p.32.

of the barbarous and untamed:

The sea was heard around the waste to howl;  
 The night-wolf answer'd to the whooting [sic] owl;  
 And all was wretched ...<sup>1</sup>

It can be claimed that many of these examples of sea images have parallels in other English poets, contemporary, and otherwise. It must be said again, that if the significance of the sea image lies anywhere it is not so much in the freshness or originality of its single appearance but in its accumulative force. With a knowledge of the poet's very special feelings for the sea, it should evoke no surprise that it is the sea image, alone, which emerges as a recurrent one in the poetry. The echo of this image as it rings through the poetry is consistent in its sound. The sea is intimately connected with the idea of 'Passion'; it is in this context that the image invariably appears. It is in this persistence and recurrence that the image acquires the power of a symbol.

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1. "The Natural Death of Love", op. cit., ll. 397-99.
  2. Cf. Warren and Wellek.  
 'An image' may be invoked once as a metaphor,  
 but if it persistently recurs, ... it becomes a  
 symbol, ...!  
op. cit., p. 194.

This pervasive literal-descriptive, symbolic, and metaphoric presence of the sea gives the poetry as a whole a certain unity. The sea and the seascape are always there: as grim and foreboding as the poet's view of life itself. But the significance of the place that the sea occupies in Crabbe's poetry lies beyond this: as a leitmotiv, its persistence is a constant reminder of those central conflicting forces at work in the tales. More specifically, it is a 'correlative' of 'Passion', that giant shadow that looms over the work and over the man! a shadow that threatens both microcosmic and macrocosmic disorder. Grigson<sup>1</sup> speaks of Crabbe's poetical biography as being a fight between sea and couplet :

How much did judgement in Crabbe cramp and damage  
the original within him?

Crabbe forced ocean into couplet ...<sup>2</sup>

- 
1. G. Grigson (Ed.), Selected Poems of George Crabbe, 1950. This anthology is yet another attempt, in the wrong-headed tradition of Edward Fitzgerald's Readings in Crabbe (op. cit.), to water the tales down to 'readable' proportions. Jeffrey, although he went to the other extreme in his reviews, was absolutely right: when he remarked of the Crabbe tales: '... the pattern of his arabesque is so large, that there is no getting a fair specimen of it without taking in a good space.' Edinburgh Review, July 1819, loc. cit., p.140.
  2. Grigson, op. cit., p.10.

This in figurative and over-simplified terms is what this thesis has been about; it is this conflict, the result of a personal need to force sea into couplet that gives a new dimension of meaning, and a tension, to the tales which has never been fully analysed. There have been many hints, but never a full discussion of a psychological tussle in the work which we like to consider as characteristic of modern literature. If on the whole, as Grigson suggests, it is the couplet, or 'Reason' which prevails against the sea; it is, nevertheless, the sea that remains as one of those 'strange jewels that glitter through Crabbe [ 's ]<sup>1</sup> work. He could no more keep in check the sea-flood that washes through his poetry than he could those elements of 'Passion' that infuse character, plot, and circumstance.

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1. Ibid., p.13.

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