

WARTON LECTURE ON ENGLISH POETRY

GEORGE CRABBE

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I APPROACH my subject today with a mixture of gratitude and humility for the honour that the British Academy has conferred upon me by asking me to deliver this year's Warton Lecture. In so doing, you confer honour not only upon me but also upon my subject, for it is fitting that George Crabbe should be remembered, in however small a way, in 1982, which marks the sesquicentenary of his death. The people of Trowbridge, as they rose to go about their various avocations on 3 February 1832, learnt that their aged and respected rector had died in the early hours of that day.

I begin, I hope not too morbidly, on that note of mortality because it speaks to us of what is particularly characteristic of Crabbe. He is not a 'graveyard poet', though he is at times possessed by death. The note of mortality in Crabbe, however, is more typically an acute awareness of the passage of time and of what time does to us. Indeed, Hazlitt in his essay in *The Spirit of the Age* said with easily recognizable uncharitableness of Crabbe: 'His Muse is not one of the *Daughters of Memory*, but the old toothless mumbling dame herself.' His characteristic flavour, I would claim, derives not from such random garrulous recollection but rather from mature reflection about life's manifold and mysterious ways. He is to be numbered rather with those who may in the broadest sense be called contemplative. He is not of that company described by Wordsworth of

poets [who] in . . . youth begin in gladness  
But thereof comes in the end despondency and madness.  
(*'Resolution and Independence'*, stanza vii)

I know that Crabbe has his poems of despondency and madness, but this is not his quintessential note.

I have 'lived' with Crabbe from youth as a postgraduate scholar through to middle age, and as the years, I would claim, enriched his work, so, I believe, they have enhanced my own appreciation of him. As one regards his contemporaries, one is struck by the way

in which the major Romantics did their best work in youth and gladness. Then they either died young at the probable height of their powers or else for all practical purposes burnt themselves out. Crabbe was different. The young man who published *The Village* in 1783 fell silent for over twenty years and did not reappear as a poet until 1807. By that time he was fifty-three. Then in three collections, *The Parish Register* of that year, *The Borough* (1810), and *Tales* (1812) he put forth the bulk of his work, and the culmination of that intense poetic activity, *Tales*, is increasingly considered to contain the best things he ever wrote. I want to argue from my own middle-aged point of view for Crabbe as a poet of middle age, a man endued with experience, who in his own words

walks the road of life along,  
And views the aims of its tumultuous throng:  
He finds what shapes the Proteus-passions take,  
And what strange waste of life and joy they make.

(*The Borough*, xxiv. 430-3)

*The Parish Register*, that record of time, aptly begins with a reference to the passage of time, to the simple passage of time:

The year revolves and I again explore  
The simple Annals of my Parish poor

(Part I, 'Baptisms', 1-2)

When we reach *Tales*, the epigraphs to the first in that collection have added a twist to the theme by quoting *Twelfth Night*'s

And thus the whirligig of time brings in his revenges.

(v. i. 362)

Though there is much in Crabbe to remind us of the writer of Ecclesiastes, for him life was more various and more profound than universal vanity. It was too valuable for any such despair, and hence his sorrow at what man does with his time and what time does to him. If youth is confident, 'Experience finds | Few of the scenes that lively hope designs' (*Tales*, vii. 173-4). A momentary lapse can produce sudden reversal and protracted retribution (e.g. *Tales*, xi—'Edward Shore'). Even without such error, one is likely to find no happiness prolonged, only those

times of pleasure that in life arise,  
Like spots in deserts, that delight, surprise,  
And to our wearied senses give the more,  
For all the waste behind us and before.

(*Tales of the Hall*, vi. 160-3)

The future is, rather, a matter of mystery and for apprehension:

Who may dare t'assert what *years* may bring,  
When wonders from the passing *hour* may spring?

(*Tales*, xvi. 47-8);

the past for various reasons a source of grief and remorse, of 'the sad farewell and the long good-night' (*Tales*, ii. 170). Even if time has not worked so wearingly, it will certainly have operated inexorably:

Time to the yielding mind his change imparts,  
He varies notions, and he alters hearts.

(*Tales*, ix. 190-1)

I spoke of Crabbe as a poet of reflection, and perhaps in this brief résumé of his view of the several aspects of time it is fair to conclude with a reference or two to his short poem which he actually entitled 'Reflections upon the Subject —'. He is considering a couplet of Claudian's which he translates:

What avails it, when shipwrecked, that error appears?  
Are the crimes we commit washed away by our tears?

In one stanza he comments that, though we profit from experience, we are only ready to apply our knowledge when it is too late and others who might benefit refuse to heed:

Yet thus when we our way discern,  
And can upon our care depend,  
To travel safely, when we learn,  
Behold! we're near our journey's end.  
We've trod the maze of error round,  
Long wand'ring in the winding glade;  
And, now the torch of truth is found,  
It only shows us where we stray'd.

(lines 21-8)

But, like Johnson emending Juvenal's conclusion in *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, Crabbe escapes despair by suggesting that

... all that's gained of all that's good,  
When time shall his weak frame destroy,  
(Their use then rightly understood)  
Shall man in happier state enjoy.

(lines 101-4)

Crabbe's first major treatment of the effects of time was from a Christian and specifically priestly point of view. *The Parish*

*Register* takes the three great physical facts of birth, copulation, death and sees in them, as does Eliot in *East Coker*, the rhythm of 'living in the living seasons'. It would be an anachronism to look to Crabbe, writing before the rise of Anglo-Catholicism in the Church of England, for a view of matrimony as 'A dignified and commodious sacrament', but he none the less sanctifies these three physical facts by means of the ecclesiastical record of baptisms, marriages, and burials.

His original plan would appear to have been strictly to confine himself to a single year,

What infant-members in my flock appear,  
 What pains I bless'd in the departed year;  
 And who, of old or young, or nymphs or swains,  
 Are lost to life, its pleasures and its pains.

(Part I, 'Baptisms', 3-6)

Generally speaking, he adhered quite strictly to this intention, but this does not prevent him from emphasizing the effects of time beyond this limited span. Even in his first example, the illegitimate child of the miller's daughter, Crabbe stretches back. This story of the love this girl had for her sailor-suitor in the face of parental opposition and who, faced by contrary pressures, ultimately 'Gave—not her hand—but ALL she could she gave' (Part I, line 76) begins before the year that Crabbe records. In describing her unwanted pregnancy Crabbe intensifies the pressure of time:

Day after day was pass'd in pains and grief;  
 Week follow'd week—and still was no relief.

(*ibid.*, lines 101-2)

The sailor has gone to fight and meets his death.

Partings are frequent in Crabbe, but more usually years of separation are followed by reunion. Indeed, we see how this pattern works with Richard and George as a framework device in *Tales of the Hall*—

The brothers met, who many a year had pass'd  
 Since their last meeting.

(I. 1-2)

Having met again, they reminisce—and we thereby see the force of what was Crabbe's own suggestion of a title for this collection—'Remembrances'. It was that same idea of attempting to bridge the years that led him to that large group of admittedly sketchy pieces in *Posthumous Tales* that go by the title, 'The Farewell and Return'. A letter to the Quaker, Mrs Leadbeater, with whom

Crabbe himself had re-established contact after the lapse of years, shows how in these brief tales he was fascinated by the difference between what his characters once were and what they eventually became. He wrote:

In my 'Farewell and Return' I suppose a young man to take leave of his native place, and to exchange *farewells* with his friends and acquaintance there—in short, with as many characters as I fancied I could manage. These, and their several situations and prospects, being briefly sketched, an interval is supposed to elapse; and our youth, a youth no more, *returns* to the scene of his early days. Twenty years have passed; and the interest, if there be any, consists in the completion, more or less unexpected, of the history of each person to whom he had originally bidden farewell.

(*Leadbeater Papers*, ii. 386, q. *Poetical Works* (1834), viii. 122)

This capacity to conduct a broad survey of the years is shown in Crabbe's first major departure from the original declared intention in *The Parish Register*. Towards the end of Part I ('Baptisms') we are told of Sir Richard Monday, born not in the year just gone but long before, found abandoned and brought up an orphan in the parish workhouse where he was 'pinch'd and pitied, thump'd and fed' (Part I, line 711). He rose in life, prospered, died, and left the parish of his youth £2 a quarter,

A stinted gift, that to the parish shows  
He kept in mind their bounty and their blows.

(Part I, lines 765-6)

The completed life permitted a total retrospect. It is this possibility which contributes to the power that Crabbe displays in the third and final section of *The Parish Register* ('Burials'), not least in such vignettes as those of Widow Goe, cut off in the midst of the busy-ness of her existence, 'Heaven in her eye and in her hand her keys' (iii. 184), and of the long-absent Lady of the Hall, whose grandiose and costly funeral contrasts so much with the desolation of the house and estate and the distress of the tenantry and the poor whose care over the years she had so long neglected.

The parson-poet reaches an end, but he is recalled by that symbol of relentless time:

But hark! e'en now I hear  
The bell of death, and know not whose to fear.

(Part III, lines 801-2)

He bids—'Go; of my sexton seek, Whose days are sped?' (iii. 807), and then comes the irony—it is the sexton himself who has died. Crabbe then recalls sexton Dibble surveying several lives, of the

various vicars he had served. When this is ended, the poem's coda presses home the truth that the events of a single year are a pattern *in parvo* of all human existence and particularly of *tempus fugit*:

Yes! he is gone and we are going all;  
Like flowers we wither, and like leaves we fall.

(Part III, lines 957-8)

Thereafter, in both *The Borough* and *Tales* Crabbe dealt less with death and the completed life. His vantage-point was, however, quite often to be found on the declining slopes of the human journey. It is in the later letters of *The Borough* when, having left the generalities of professions, trades, amusements, and the like, he displays again that interest in individuals which he had first shown in *The Parish Register*. It is here that we find Crabbe once again responding to the power and effects of time. He portrays the *roués* of the almshouse, Blaney, Clelia, Benbow, brought there by their own ill-directed courses. Amongst the poor of the borough there are Jachin, a life of righteousness and respect destroyed by 'sinful avarice and the spirit's pride' (Letter XIX); Ellen Orford, a life of suffering but also of acceptance (Letter XX); Abel Keene, a simple soul and victim of his own unstable temperament (Letter XXI).

Above all, there is Peter Grimes (Letter XXII) and his intense and to him apparently endless suffering. Crabbe emphasizes the boredom of too slowly passing time; he stresses the sameness of it all, ever repeating itself—

At the same times the same dull views to see, . . .  
. . . [the] dull, unvaried, sadd'ning sound; . . .  
Alone he was, the same dull scenes in view.

(*The Borough*, XXII. 173, 202, 217)

No English poet has known and loved the sea more than Crabbe, and he knew it better than to believe that all truth always rests in the old adage that time and tide wait for no man. In the crucifying tedium of Peter Grimes's existence tide, that symbol of time, often came not fast enough:

Thus by himself compell'd to live each day,  
To wait for certain hours the tide's delay.

(*ibid.*, lines 171-2)

And though no doubt, in Arnold's phrase, it brought 'the eternal note of sadness in', for Peter Grimes the tide was not imbued with

the tragic aura that those words suggest. For him the tide came through mud-banks, not in majesty, but lazily, revealing only 'In its hot slimy channel . . . small eels . . . [and] gaping muscles [amidst] the tuneless cry | Of fishing gull or clanging golden-eye' (ibid., lines 187, 188, 190, 194-5).

In these letters Crabbe had discovered the drama in a life. Though sometimes in his later work by comparison with 'Peter Grimes' the intensity dropped and the prolixity increased, Crabbe was never to lose what he had there found. Peter Grimes was extraordinary, as in another context Benjamin Britten has shown. The characters of *Tales* and *Tales of the Hall* are much more ordinary, but in their more extended portrayal they provide Crabbe with fuller opportunity than hitherto for exploiting his rare powers in the understanding of human psychology.

Peter Grimes suffers and dies. His successors in the later collections almost invariably suffer and live. Indeed, in *Tales of the Hall*, with which I shall not be concerned, story after story is occupied with long years of suffering, often the prolonged demise of married love. A moment's surrender has proved too awfully daring, or, as Crabbe more moralistically puts it,

Life's long troubles from those actions come  
In which a moment may decide our doom.

(*Tales of the Hall*, XIII. 792-3)

But for some there is not even the opportunity of making the mistake. I want now to look at *Tales* and to examine successively what does not happen, what does, with what results and what compensation.

What does not happen is set largely in the context of frustrated hope. In 'The Patron' (*Tales*, v) we read of the fantastically overweening aspirations of the young protégé of the nobleman for the hand of the nobleman's sister. His infatuation gives the lady some cause for passing pleasure in her conquest. Her departure for town constitutes for the young man desertion that ultimately turns his mind. It is a tale of immaturity that Crabbe summarizes in a single line:

Rash boy! what hope thy frantic mind invades.

(*Tales*, v. 182)

Of a more sober kind is the hope of which the widow tells as a corrective to the over-refined ambitions of the farmer's daughter

(*Tales*, vii). Experience qualifies hope as the widow narrates the long and long-frustrated love of her youth:

This was my twentieth year—at thirty-five  
Our hope was fainter, yet our love alive . . .  
Slow pass'd the heavy years, and each had more  
Pains and vexations than the years before.

(vii. 253-4, 259-60)

Her love is never to be blessed in marriage; her lover is sent abroad, is wounded at sea, and returns to die. The widow settles for marriage with another, in which there is no love, only esteem.

Consenting for the second-best, or even less than that, is the theme of 'Arabella' (*Tales*, ix), the central character in which insists at first upon the highest standards in the man she will marry:

His stainless virtue must all tests endure,  
His honour spotless, and his bosom pure.

(ix. 63-4)

Suitor after suitor comes and is rejected, and year after year passes by. Crabbe shrewdly notes:

Time to the yielding mind his change imparts,  
He varies notions, and he alters hearts.

(ix. 190-1)

When Arabella accepts a man whom her friend condemns for his alleged loose morals, her answer to the charge is now:

And what for virtue can I better do  
Than to reclaim him, if the charge be true?

(ix. 331-2)

Crabbe notices the implications of a conveniently changed idealism, but his experience of life and wisdom in judging allows him to do so with a wry smile.

I turn from what does not happen to what does, and I choose first an example in which we see how in his treatment of time Crabbe knows when to condense and when to expand. The sudden reversal of standing and the stress on the enormous consequence of brief ill-advised action is best brought out, he recognizes, by foreshortening and by closely juxtaposed consideration of the two contrary states of original happiness and subsequent but also consequent misery. Nigh on three hundred lines of 'Edward Shore' (*Tales*, xi) are devoted to Shore's



excessive trust in his own moral rectitude. It takes Crabbe only four lines to record the downfall. He does so in terms of time:

Painful it is to dwell on deeds of shame—  
The trying day was past, another came;  
The third was all remorse, confusion, dread,  
And (all too late!) our fallen hero fled.

(xi. 281-4)

Another eighty-odd lines describe Shore's new condition; then Crabbe skips:

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.

(xi. 372-5)

The last ninety lines provide a relentless account, a touch melodramatic perhaps in the interests of a determined moral, of Shore's decline into mild idiocy.

'Edward Shore' is constructed in a simple linear chronological progress. In 'The Confidant' (*Tales*, xvi) the momentary lapse has taken place years before. With but a passing reference to 'the distant hint or dark surmise' (xvi. 13) the first hundred lines tell of Anna's marriage, the next fifty of the early lapse of which her husband knows nothing; followed by a return to a history of her married state—

Mix'd with [her] fears—but light and transient these—  
Fled years of peace, prosperity and ease.

(xvi. 176-7)

But then, of course, the past catches up with her; the confidant who knows of the long-ago lapse re-enters Anna's life. There follows a prolonged and intense account of present sufferings as a result of Eliza's blackmail. Here the emphasis is not on the cause, the temptation, as it was in 'Edward Shore', but on the consequence, all the more terrible by contrast with the 'years of peace, prosperity and ease'. By contrast also with 'Edward Shore', this tale has a happy ending. The husband, puzzled by the change in his wife's demeanour, overhears the blackmail and obliquely but effectively reveals that he has done so by reciting a comparable Oriental tale. Thus by another momentary reversal Anna is restored to happiness and the blackmailer flees in disgrace.

To some extent I have anticipated the last two of my four questions, namely, with what results and what compensation?

Both the tales we have just considered describe lengthy suffering in varying degrees deserved, and in 'The Confidant' there is some compensation. There is also, however, the suffering that is not deserved, often, indeed, from characters such as Isaac Ashford in *The Parish Register* and others in later tales, for whom facing deprivation is a matter of endurance. Lucy in 'The Mother' (*Tales*, viii) suffers quietly through her parent's opposition to what the mother chooses to regard as an insufficiently ambitious choice in love. Before that her father had suffered for his inability to please the mother:

Twelve heavy years this patient soul sustain'd  
This wasp's attacks, and then her praise obtain'd,  
Graved on a marble tomb, where he at peace remain'd.

(viii. 62-4)

'Twelve heavy years' is so characteristically Crabbe: the suffering is not spectacular; it is just prolonged and inescapable.

If suffering is one of the effects that time works slowly and inexorably upon individuals, another is that slow coarsening which the conscience, once giving rein to ignoble purposes, is unable to stop or even to alleviate. Those who profess extremely high ideals, particularly those sectarians in whom Crabbe so often found such profession merely an attempt to distinguish themselves from the general run of humanity, are for him especial examples of this fossilizing process. One such is Fulham in the tale entitled 'The Struggles of Conscience' (*Tales*, xiv). Here Crabbe tells of a series of battles which Fulham fights with his conscience mixed with intervals of uneasy peace between, but

Conscience, more familiar with the view  
Of growing evils, less attentive grew.

(xiv. 256-7)

With short interspersed references to time Crabbe suggests the disturbed staccato-like nature of Fulham's life:

Thus had he quiet—but the time was brief,  
From his new triumph sprang a cause of grief.

(xiv. 260-1)

or again:

Now care subdued, and apprehensions gone,  
In peace our hero went aspiring on;  
But short the period—soon a quarrel rose.

(xiv. 294-6)

Ultimately conscience refuses to remain quiet, and Fulham's life, like that of so many of Crabbe's evil-doers, is given over to nightmare and frenzy.

In 'The Convert' (*Tales*, XIX) John Dighton experiences a highly emotional conversion during an illness. Before, we are told,

With spirit high John learn'd the world to brave,  
And in both senses was a ready knave.

(XIX. 29-30)

Going into the book trade (the story is based on the life of James Lackington), John sees and exploits the possibilities of selling works of which his strict religious associates disapproved. He counters them with the high spirit he had always possessed, and in due time moves over to spiritual unconcern and close to agnosticism. Crabbe insistently compares past and present by repeated allusion to John's earlier days, implying that as the years go by John himself, whatever he may wish, cannot simply dismiss the past. In his final speech John summarizes his career and concludes with a recognition of the futility to which it has led him:

Nor pleasure have I, nor a wish to please;  
Nor views, nor hopes, nor plans, nor taste have I,  
Yet sick of life, have no desire to die.

(XIX. 443-5)

I expressed my last question as 'with what compensation?'—compensation, not happiness, for even on those rare occasions when the end is comparatively happy, what has gone before has almost always been unlike and cannot be obliterated. Young though they are, that happy couple, Jesse Bourn and Colin Grey, have their troubles ere they find their peace (*Tales*, XIII). Latter joy, in fact, is seldom unalloyed and is often only muted recompense for what has gone before.

So far I have concentrated on what are predominantly histories of a single character. I want now to consider three tales of couples where Crabbe has given extended consideration to the progress and development of the relationships and thus has dealt with both the characters involved. The first, indeed, is one that produces latter joy. It is a farewell-and-return story, at the beginning of which he spells out explicitly the startling effects of regarding a life without the benefits of continuity. He insists that it is continuity

that enables us to make sense. Its absence creates a disturbing surprise:

The links that bind those various deeds are seen,  
And no mysterious void is left between.

But let these binding links be all destroy'd,  
All that through years he suffer'd or enjoy'd;  
Let that vast gap be made, and then behold—  
This was the youth, and he is thus when old;  
Then we at once the work of Time survey,  
And in an instant see a life's decay.

(*Tales*, II. 5-12)

The tale is 'The Parting Hour' and the scenario is a favourite one with Crabbe. Allen Booth and Judith Flemming, young lovers, are parted by the necessity for Allen to cross the seas to make his fortune. The poet doubtless had in mind his own brother, who sailed away and was seen no more, though he was subsequently heard of in Honduras and as having been compelled to leave Mexico and the family he had there. The sequence is as predictable as the scenario is familiar:

The youth no more  
Return'd exulting to his native shore;  
But forty years were past, and then there came  
A worn-out man with wither'd limbs and lame,  
His mind oppress'd with woes, and bent with age his frame.

(II. 183-7)

Crabbe emphasizes the temporal coincidence of the departure and return:

In an autumnal eve he left the beach,  
In such an eve he chanced the port to reach.

(II. 191-2)

Allen Booth is alone, and over the next ninety lines Crabbe stresses the oblivion of the past. He and his family are all but forgotten. Allen is alone not only in place, but also in time, an anachronism who can make no connections.

Then, of course, Judith hears of him; they meet, and human affinity is re-established. Crabbe recognizes that reunion is not merely an occasion for reminiscence or regaining the past, not just a matter of putting into place again some of the lost pieces of the jig-saw of life, but of forging once more the bonds of human affection:

'Now is there one to whom I can express  
My nature's weakness and my soul's distress.'

(II. 299-300)

Allen recounts at length to Judith his life-story—his marriage and his family, his prosperity and persecution, his enforced separation from wife and children. In all this Crabbe is illuminating the double sadness of Allen's life. Not only are we aware of what Allen and Judith have lost by their long separation, of the ambitions thwarted that had loomed so large in youth, but also we are forced to attend to Allen's loss of his family, all the more pathetic for being presented as the outcries of recognition of wife and children during Allen's musings, half-sleeping, half-awake, in the long days of his old age. The pathos is complete as he himself acknowledges the falsity in the final lines:

But see! he breaks the long-protracted theme,  
And wakes and cries—'My God!' 'twas but a dream.'

(II. 472-3)

The serenity of the ultimate reunion with Judith cannot compensate for the separation from those with whom there would be no reunion.

'Resentment' (*Tales*, xvii) is a tale not of reunion but of resolute apartness. The wife, defrauded by her husband but acquiring new riches from a wealthy uncle, sets up as Lady Bountiful to the poor of the neighbourhood, assisted in the work by a kindly, over-kindly, servant, Susan. The husband, now an aged pauper, returns to the story as the lady observes him eking out a living by transporting grit in baskets on his frail, under-fed donkey. She enquires as to his identity, but when Susan informs her, she shows the emotion that gives the title to the tale. Crabbe here manipulates time by the changes he rings on his mode of narration. Over the first three hundred and fifty lines we have the narrator's own account, providing the sense of the passage of time; then for the next hundred or so (342-454) time stops and in the very dramatic present we have a highly charged dialogue between mistress and maid, the one pleading, the other rejecting but ultimately ungraciously relenting. As one might guess, the final aspect of time takes its force from its brevity and suddenness, where we see that the change of heart has been all in vain. Susan goes to the husband's hovel and finds him dead. The lady has resented too long and relented too late. Crabbe reminds us thus that, whatever else we may control, time is not ours to play with or command.

Nevertheless, so long as time chooses to place itself at man's disposal, he (or in this case, she) may wreak havoc with it. The one tale which takes its title from an aspect of time is 'Procrastination' (*Tales*, iv), also a farewell-and-return tale. As with Allen Booth, Rupert is 'called in other clime' to work. The years pass by and Rupert returns, a poor man but expecting that Dinah, inheritor of her aunt's wealth, will accept him and that presumably they will live happily ever after. But, as we know, 'happily ever after' is not a state to look for in Crabbe. And, as we know also from the tale itself, Rupert is about to suffer sad disillusionment. In this story Crabbe does not, as elsewhere, pass swiftly from the farewell to the return. Here he rather traces the steadily accumulating spiritual sclerosis in Dinah as her mind and heart turn from thoughts of Rupert to thoughts of riches. That process is not undisturbed:

Sometimes the past would on her mind intrude,  
And then a conflict full of care ensued.

(iv. 126-7)

but the past can be modified to the required interpretation of the present:

The thoughts of Rupert on her mind would press,  
His worth she knew, but doubted his success;  
Of old she saw him heedless; what the boy  
Forbore to save, the man would not enjoy.

(iv. 128-31)

Time passes, things happen, but Dinah remains respectably unmoved:

She knew that mothers grieved, and widows wept,  
And she was sorry, said her prayers and slept.

(iv. 140-1)

Crabbe emphasizes the 'love of splendours' shown in rich furnishings and carpets and ornaments. Last in the catalogue of wealth, and significantly:

Above her head, all gorgeous to behold,  
A time-piece stood on feet of burnish'd gold;  
A stag's head crest adorn'd the pictured case,  
Through the pure crystal shone th'enamell'd face;  
And while on brilliants moved the hands of steel,  
It click'd from pray'r to pray'r, from meal to meal.

(iv. 174-9)

This smug regularity of time and custom is broken by the incursion of the returned sailor. The worldly positions of the two protagonists contrast. Rupert has returned as poor as he went. Their temporal perspectives also differ. To Dinah's

'The bloom of life, the strength of youth is fled.'  
(iv. 221)

Rupert's reply is:

'But time has left us something to enjoy.'  
(iv. 230)

Their ideas of the future differ also. To Rupert's hope of joys in this life the 'pious Dinah', as Crabbe calls her, claims only views of the hereafter:

'No! all my care is now to fit my mind  
For other spousal, and to die resign'd.'  
(iv. 243-4)

and:

His soul she loved, and hoped he had the grace  
To fix his thoughts upon a better place.  
(iv. 289-90)

In this tale Crabbe traced the years that intervened between the farewell and return in some detail, at least as they regarded Dinah. He also quite extensively delineated the passage of time in the characters' renewed but now distant relationship. Thereby he reinforces the corrosive effects of Dinah's love of splendour, avarice, respectability, and hypocrisy. Rupert is left to think through

earlier years,  
Through years of fruitless labour, to the day  
When all his earthly prospects died away.  
(iv. 328-30)

Dinah, as before but not wholly without 'some feeling touch of ancient tenderness' (iv. 339), goes on her way, but when that way brings Rupert in her path, she needs must choose another:

One way remain'd—the way the Levite took,  
Who without mercy could on misery look;  
(A way perceived by craft, approved by pride),  
She cross'd, and pass'd him on the other side.  
(iv. 346-9)

But change of place is not escape from time. That is impossible.

Crabbe prefaces this tale with an introduction on the way love ends. He speaks of those who are ill-matched, but finds

More luckless still their fate, who are the prey  
Of long-protracted hope and dull delay;  
'Mid plans of bliss the heavy hours pass on,  
Till love is wither'd, and till joy is gone.

(IV. 9-12)

Looking to the future, man proposes but time disposes, often most cruelly by nothing happening at all. As he looks to the past, man laments what has happened or what has not. In the opening letter of *The Borough* we read of that analogue of time, the tide:

With ceaseless motion comes and goes the tide,  
Flowing, it fills the channel vast and wide;  
Then back to sea, with strong majestic sweep  
It rolls, in ebb yet terrible and deep.

(Letter I, lines 37-40)

Crabbe saw man's life at the mercy of the comparable movements of time.

In that same letter he describes the destruction wrought by a winter storm at sea and the death of sailors, ending with the words:

Man must endure—let us submit and pray.

(Letter I, line 270)

That is not facile. It is a resigned, sombre, stoical, suffering but resilient view of life. That is why, though Crabbe may be passingly sardonic, this is not the final impression which his work leaves with us. He looks with steady and unmitigated gaze on what time does to men and women. He sees 'the strange waste of life and joy' around him, the suffering both acute and sub-acute, both deserved and not deserved; he neither minimizes pain nor hints at unlikely palliatives or escapes. He believed with Johnson that life is rather to be endured than enjoyed, but also like Johnson he did not ultimately accept that life is merely vanity. The Old Testament parallel is not with Ecclesiastes, but with the Book of Job.

Tragedy in Crabbe, as indeed it was with Job, is therefore more what we might recognize as modern than as classically heroic, residing not so much in nobility ending in death as in the experience of ordinary people living through disappointment and suffering, enduring the passage of time. Some may be overcome by their own evil and know it like Peter Grimes; some like Dinah may



be overcome without ever really facing their own evil. In those, however, who suffer and survive it is by bearing the ills of time with exemplary fortitude. That is like Job, and like Job again Crabbe sees through to the further side of tragedy. The fortitude is only possible in the instances he admires and applauds, because it is buttressed by faith. Only thus is time contained, and sometimes conquered.