It takes the village: crabbe and social consciousness

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George Crabbe’s The Village has long been perceived as a response to the flowery pastoral poetry of the late Eighteenth century, a genre marked by its praise of the countryside and the simple lives of shepherds and peasants. Indeed, Crabbe presents his dreary country village and the bleak existence of its rural poor using the same kinds of literary devices endemic to the traditional pastoral, suggesting his intent to lampoon this oft-misguided species of poetry. However, to analyze The Village as merely parody is to ignore the hefty social implications of the poem, which is ingenious in its employment of rhetorical strategies that speak to both the intellect and emotions of its audience. By tearing ownership of the countryside from the hands of the poet, enabling the reader to imaginatively explore the country setting, and hijacking traditional pastoral devices for his own use, Crabbe creates a forceful argument for the immediacy of the plight of the rural poor2E Crabbe’s portrayal of rural poverty in The Village clearly goes beyond mere parody of the genre of pastoral poetry, appealing to the conscience of the reader in order that he or she might empathize with or even actively work to alleviate the social ills of the peasant class. The first major strategy Crabbe employs in order to compel the reader to reconsider his or her views on rural life is to separate the pastoral poet from the peasant. From the very beginning of The Village, Crabbe tears ownership of the pastoral away from the poets who idealize it: “ Yes, thus the Muses sing of happy swains, / Because the Muses never knew their pains” (21-22). We are to understand that those who idealize the countryside and those who reside there live in separate worlds, and the pleasant view we receive in traditional pastoral poetry is ignorant of the harsh reality of rural poverty. Crabbe goes on to emphasize the different worlds through contrasting the poet’s depiction of

carefree country life and the reality of bleak peasant labor. He writes, “ They boast their peasant’s pipes; but peasants now / Resign their pipes and plod behind the plough” (23-24). Here, the light “ p” consonant sound of “ peasant” and “ pipes” transforms into the looming drumbeat of “ plod” and “ plow,” revealing a distinct break between the worlds of the poet and peasant. Furthermore, Crabbe creates distance between the poet and the peasant by illustrating the absurdity of a poet trying even to speak to a poor rural laborer: “ Can poets soothe you, when you pine for bread, / By winding myrtles round your ruin’d shed? / Can their light tales your weighty griefs o’erpower, Or glad with airy mirth the toilsome hour?” Clearly, “ airy mirth” is outside the language of those dealing with “ weighty griefs,” and thus traditional pastoral poetry is unable to communicate to or for the peasants who it claims to represent. Crabbe goes so far as to accuse those poets who create false images of peasant life of hypocrisy, suggesting that they personally look down upon the people who they claim to glorify. He writes, “ Oh! trifle not with wants you cannot feel, / Nor mock the misery of a stinted meal; / Homely, not wholesome, plain, not plenteous, such / As you who praise would never deign to touch” (168-71). That such elitist poets choose to falsely extol a class of people with whom they would not associate personally is beyond insincere, Crabbe contends, but ultimately insulting and cruel. But Crabbe does not merely analyze the pastoral poet and his subject externally. Suddenly addressing his audience directly, Crabbe challenges the reader to imaginatively explore a country cottage with his speaker and identify the source of carefree pastoral sentiment. Ye gentle souls, who dream of rural ease, Whom the smooth stream and smoother sonnet please; Go! if the peaceful cot your praises share, Go look within, and ask if peace be

there; If peace be his, that drooping weary sire; Or theirs, that offspring round their feeble fire; Or hers, that matron pale, whose trembling handTurns on the wretched hearth th' expiring brand! (172-79)This stanza is effective because it compels the reader to imaginatively place him or herself in the world of the pastoral poem, actively confronting the images of a wretched horse, poor cold children huddling around a fire, and their sickly mother. These jarring portraits contrast sharply with the " rural ease" sought by the pastoral poet, and allow the reader the sense that he or she is personally part of the process of discovery. Crabbe's involvement of the reader in the discovery of truth enables the kind of epiphany moment that is required for a true change of attitudes and beliefs. Crabbe further gains a measure of authority by allowing the reader to confront the moral decision of how one is to deal with the reality of pastoral poverty. He writes, " when amid such pleasing scenes I trace / The poor laborious natives of the place, / …While some, with feebler heads and fainter hearts, / Deplore their fortune, yet sustain their parts / Then shall I dare these real ills to hide / In tinsel trappings of poetic pride?" (41-48). Here, Crabbe allows the reader to imagine his or herself as poet deciding whether to propagate the false but satisfying pastoral aesthetic, described as " tinsel trappings," or whether to honestly confront the " real ills." By this point in the poem we already understand the importance of dealing with rural poverty in a forthright manner, but, by allowing us to make the decision imaginatively, Crabbe allows the reader ownership over such convictions. Another tactic Crabbe employs is hijacking standard devices of pastoral poetry to convince us of the seriousness of rural poverty. Even the most basic satire of The Village is imbued with social consciousness. One example occurs when Crabbe mocks

the pastoral poet's device of describing various flora and fauna, a device usually employed to create an image of countryside serenity and peace. Crabbe's village, however, is populated by dreary weeds that seem to rip and claw at one another. " There poppies nodding, mock the hope of toil, / There the blue bugloss paints the sterile soil; / Hardy and high, above the slender sheaf, / The slimy mallow waves her silky leaf; / O'er the young shoot the charlock throws a shade, / And clasping tares cling round the sickly blade," Crabbe writes (71-76). These plants do more than refute the implication of pastoral poetry that countryside beauty is universal, but provide a metaphor for the plight of the lowly peasant. That the image of the lowly mallow vainly raising its leaf while the blue bugloss looks down from on high is juxtaposed with images of the endless labor of peasants suggests a symbolic role for these plants, illustrating the real-life disdain of the rich for the suffering rural poor. The human characters populating Crabbe's village presented as simple folk, but are certainly not imbued with the carefree nature and folksy virtues that one would expect from a traditional pastoral poem. Crabbe describes the people of his village in animal terms, employing the naturalistic imagery of the pastoral to create an unexpected dissenting perspective: " Here joyless roam a wild amphibious race, / With sullen woe display'd in every face; / ...scowl at strangers with suspicious eye" (85-88). These peasants are not wistful or optimistic about their unfortunate circumstances, but hardened in anger at their fate. Crabbe's use of the animal imagery strikes us as painfully honest, and we understand that the pastoral poets have painted us a false picture. Crabbe goes so far as to hijack the concept of a carefree peasantry in depicting the actual order of things in the country. More specifically, he uses the word " play" to illustrate

the fact that peasants are not the masters of their pastoral world, but in fact subjects to the land and their labor. He first points out that “ few, amid the rural tribe, have time / To number syllables and play with rhyme,” asserting that peasants are not, in fact, carefree and in control (25-26). Quite to the contrary, it is the land and their labor which is the master: “ I… see the mid-day sun, with fervid ray, / On their bare heads and dewy temples play” (41-44). What is actually carefree in this image is the sun, which has no concern for the suffering of the laboring peasant. Like the blue bugloss up high, the sun is a reminder of the uncaring rich that have abandoned their rural poor. Finally, Crabbe poignantly breaks a rule of the genre of the pastoral, surprising us with the immediacy of the peasants’ plight by allowing these characters to speak for themselves. We are disheartened by the “ mutual murmurs” of the dying peasant and his “ cheerless spouse” (162-63), and shocked by the cries of the poor laborer who was once a cheerful youth, now forced to contend with a society that despises him. “ Oft you may see him, when he tends the sheep, / His winter charge, beneath the hillock weep; / … When, roused by rage and muttering in the morn / He mends the broken hedge with icy thorn” (200-5). The traditional pastoral imagery is broken by the voice of the peasant’s despair, and we understand that the pastoral poet who glamorizes the shepherd has only given us half-truths. The laborer is even allowed to respond indirectly to the poets, crying, “ A lonely wretched man, in pain I go, / None need my help, and none relieve my woe; / Then let my bones beneath the turf be laid, / And men forget the wretch they would not aid!” (222-25). By the placement of these lines, we understand the man to be referring both to poets, whose task it is to preserve memory, and to the rich, whose greed and lack of care for his life have led to his perpetual

impoverishment. The Village should be read as more than a simple parody of pastoral poetry its real genius lies in Crabbe's use of rhetorical strategies to call the reader's attention to questions of social ills regarding rural poverty. By wrenching ownership of the pastoral genre from the hands of the poets, allowing the reader to imaginatively experience the moral decision-making of pastoral poetry, and hijacking the form's trademark, among other tactics, Crabbe makes a compelling argument for the immediacy of the problem of rural poverty. With such an emphasis on social consciousness in Book I of The Village, one might expect Book II to expand upon the hardships experienced by poor country laborers and perhaps include some sort of outright call to action. Not so. In fact, Book II concerns itself primarily with pointing out the faults of the poor, as Crabbe claims, " So shall the man of power and pleasure see / In his own slave as vile a wretch as he" (439-40). Such an accusation brings us back to the original question of pastoral poetry, and one wonders if the genre did much to enable rich and educated landowners to ignore the pain and suffering of the rural peasants. If so, Crabbe's The Village has certainly put forth a valiant effort at rebuking the myths and falsehoods this category of literature had perpetuated. However, in such speculation lies the greater question of art's ability to generate social change, and whether such conversations in literature between genres and their parodies have tangible effects to the society in which they arose, or later generations of readers. In this case, I might venture to argue that Crabbe has indeed opened at least my eyes to the issue of artistic obfuscations of social ills; however, that is a topic for another paper.