

Crabbe, "Clutterbuck and Co."

MARION B. BRADY

The criticism of George Crabbe is informed, generally, by the assumption that his poems lack a history—that they show no growth or development in ideas or techniques. But strangely enough, the critics who take this position grant Crabbe importance in spite of his faults and limitations. They praise him as a great storyteller, they write with sensitivity and discernment about the significance of his themes, but unfortunately they say comparatively little about his techniques, about the way in which he communicates his values.

But many of Crabbe's poems reveal a conscious artist who deliberately used certain techniques to develop and sustain his effects. No doubt much of the negative criticism is valid. Crabbe wrote too much and with too little care. Many of his narratives are uneven and often poorly sustained, but he also wrote many fine and memorable poems that maintain a consistent level of achievement. Although Crabbe's awareness of the importance of technique can be illustrated by an examination of most of the mature tales beginning with *Tales in Verse*, it is my purpose in this paper to show how Crabbe uses tone to contribute meaning to the "Elder Brother's Tale" in *Tales of the Hall*. I shall attempt to come to grips with the following problem: Does Crabbe use tone in such a way as to produce the effects he intended—that is, does he consciously move from a deliberately heightened, romantic tone to a deliberately lowered, prosaic tone, or does he unknowingly fall from an extravagantly romantic tone to a ludicrously flat tone? In other words, does he consciously create varying tones that reveal his meaning in the "Elder Brother's Tale," or does he unconsciously create shifting tones that obscure his meaning?

The story of the "Elder Brother" is part of a group of stories framed by the following outline: Two half-brothers, who have remained strangers to each other since the days of their youth, meet shortly after both men have returned to their native village. George, the elder of the two, has recently retired after a long and successful career. Now wealthy, he returns

Mr. Brady is associate professor of English at New Mexico State University.

to the village of his boyhood and buys the "Hall," the most imposing structure in the village. He is pleased to possess the old place, for he has a great and sentimental fondness for the past. Therefore, he regrets that the "ancient walls" and the "stately avenue of elms" have been sacrificed to progress. In politics, he is a strong conservative who reproves the intolerance of

Those who believe they never can be free,
Except when fighting for their liberty;
Who by their very clamour and complaint
Invite coercion or enforce restraint.

George also understands the value of compromise. If man is to insure the stability of his public liberties, he must learn how to forego some of their advantages and all of their excesses. He must acknowledge an authority which limits his rights:

The public good must be a private care,
None all they would have, but all a share:
So we must freedom with restraint enjoy;
What crowds posses they will, uncheck'd, destroy.

George is moderate in opinions and seems contented—but from resignation rather than optimism. In fact, the subdued tone of the opening section seemingly helps to define George's chastened and subdued character. His half-brother, Richard, some fifteen years younger, is the son of an "Irish soldier," the second husband of George's mother. Richard has spent most of his adult life in the service of his country, a service that has left him poor and barely able to support his wife and children. He is too proud to solicit aid from his older brother; he hopes that his brother will take the initiative. Friends tell him that the owner of Binning Hall "loves him well and will be rejoiced to see him when he has no better thing in view." Finally they meet, and the intense emotion of their meeting changes gradually into a profound and lasting attachment. They find their mutual companionship very pleasant, and each day they relate some of their respective adventures and experiences to each other.

George begins by telling his experience as a lover—an experience with a tragic conclusion.

"What if I tell thee of a waste of time,
That on my spirit presses as a crime.

Wrote verses, it may be, and for one dear maid
The sober purposes of life delay'd.
From year to year the fruitless chase pursued. . . ."

At the age of twenty the elder brother managed to escape from the authority of his stepfather and went to live with a clergyman to whom his uncle (his official guardian) had entrusted his education. As George begins his story, the subdued and sincere tone of the introductory section of the tale is succeeded by a highly mocking and ironic tone—a tone that changes and varies throughout the poem. For Crabbe's method is to add meaning and concentration to George's story by constantly modifying the tone and by changing the perspective from which the story is told. George's topic, as he tells his brother, is the account of a madness, a "flight," a "disease." In his youth he dreamed as youth has rarely dreamed:

"I built me castles wondrous rich and rare,
Few castle-builders could with me compare;
The Hall, the palace, rose at my command,
And these I fill'd with objects great and grand.
Virtues sublime, that nowhere else would live,
Glory and pomp, that I alone could give;
Trophies and thrones by matchless valour gain'd,
Faith unreprov'd and chastity unstain'd;
With all that soothes the sense and charms the soul,
Came at my call, and were in my control."

There is something more than a little self-consciousness in his voice as he remembers his early naivete, his absolute and unthinking romanticism. Nevertheless, the elder brother goes on deliberately to emphasize and underline the "moonshine" in this picture of his power to build castles, by comparing it with the picture of himself as a boy:

"And who was I? a slender youth and tall,
In manner awkward, and with fortune small;
With visage pale, my motions quick and slow,
That fall and rising in the spirits show;
For none could more by outward signs express
What wise men lock within the mind's recess;
Had I within the mirror truth beheld,
I should have such presuming thought repell'd:
But awkward as I was, without the grace
That gives new beauty to a form or face,
Still I expected friends most true to prove,
And grateful, tender, warm, assiduous love"

The two quotations represent a radical contrast—a juxtaposition of opposites. Here and throughout the poem, Crabbe uses such “contrasts” as one of his basic organizing principles. The contrast between the awkward boy and his heroic dreams is succeeded by a contrast between the romantic boy and his realistic uncle, and both contrasts are succeeded finally by a contrast between the beautiful and virtuous Rosabella of George’s fancy and the sluttish Rosabella of actuality. Thus, the contrasts develop the varying tones of the poem, and the varying tones help to reveal the poem’s meaning. As we have noted, this first contrast—this first juxtaposition of opposites—is light and fanciful, and the tone it develops is one of self-mockery. George continues his account of his early romanticism by describing an isolated corner of Binning Park, which served as the setting for all his passionate meditations:

“To dream these dreams I chose a woody scene,
My guardian shade, the world and me between;
A green inclosure, where beside its bound
A thorny fence beset its beauties round . . .
And thus with knights and nymphs, in hall and bowers,
In war and love, I pass’d unnumber’d hours. . . .”

In this romantic setting, he confidently expects to find a “kindred heart,” a heart as constant and as kind as his own. And he expects to find a love who is a “Beauty; one of earth/ Of higher rank or nobler in her birth.” He sees, one evening in June, his “Lady of the Leaf”:

“One matchless face I saw . . .
Slender she was and tall: her fairy-feet
Bore her right onward to my shady seat . . .
Thus as I was musing:—Is this maid, divine
As she appears, to be this queen of mine?”

But with the arrival of his “fancy’s gracious queen,” the tone of the poem changes from the lightly mocking irony we have already seen, to a devastating, mock-heroic account of a hero saving his heroine from disaster:

“It soon appear’d, that while this nymph divine
Moved on, there met her rude uncivil kine,
Who knew her not—the damsel was not there
Who kept them—all obedient—in her care;
Strangers they thus defied and held in scorn,
And stood in threat’ning posture, hoof and horn;

While Susan—pail in hand—could stand the while
And prate with Daniel at a distant stile

Look to me loveliest of thy sex! and give
One cheering glance, and not a cow shall live;
For lo! this iron bar, this strenuous arm,
And those dear eyes to aid me as a charm. . . .

Say, goddess! say, on man or cow
Meanest thou now to perch—On neither now—
For, as I ponder'd, on their way appear'd
The Amazonian milker of the herd:
These at the wonted signals, made a stand,
And woo'd the nymph of the relieving hand;
Nor heeded now the man, who felt relief
Of other kind, and not unmix'd with grief;
For now he neither should his courage prove,
Nor in his dying moments boast his love."

There is something heartbreaking as well as ridiculous in this account of George's first meeting with Rosabella. His later ability to see the early experience as a sardonic joke does not disguise his continuing involvement in what must have been a tragedy for the young man, for he "lost" the young queen almost as soon as he found her. Life has not been easy for the elder brother, for life is not easy to live in Crabbe's world, even with the understanding that comes to a mature man. The lifelong attrition of little tragedies which the mature George realized and understood is not too different in its final effect from the high tragedy which the youthful George experienced.

But there can be little doubt about the tone of the "battle" and the perspective of the viewer, and there can be little doubt about Crabbe's deliberate intention to create that tone. The diction, the irony, the mock-heroic form of George's highly exaggerated and highly romantic account of the birth of love—and of a lady's rescue from the dragons of the meadow—deepen the narrator's self-mockery. Only an author—or a narrator—striving consciously for a sardonic and comic effect would discuss a trivial encounter with kine in a meadow as if it were an event of cosmic importance. In this scene Crabbe continues the coincidence of opposites which began with the comparison of the castle-builder of dreams and the awkward youth of actuality. For the kine are "cowed" not by "this iron bar, this strenuous arm," but by the relieving hand of the milkmaid. And Crabbe shows "Victory" deserting first the

youth and then the kine. The absolute ludicrousness of the scene and of George's romanticism is defined by the epic epithet which describes the milkmaid—"the nymph of the relieving hand"—the nymph who brought relief to both of the warring factions—the beau as well as the "belles." But the counterpoint of sincere feeling remains apparent behind the mockery. The elder brother feels, even when he is sixty years of age, the attraction that made him a "bounded slave" to Rosabella, willing to give her "time, duty, credit, honour, comfort."

George was rewarded for his courage by a "gracious smile," and he fancied himself loved by his lady. Then she disappeared from the scene—"no more the mansion held a form so fair." But George was determined to find her and, ultimately, to marry her, even if he had to search throughout the world in order to see her once again. "And I, at last, shall wed this fairest of the fair."

He went to work for his "thrifty" uncle and learned something of the principles and language of the business world. However, he continued his search for Rosabella; he rode endlessly over the hills of romance and the roads of Europe in search of his fair lady. Once again, Crabbe utilizes the pattern of contrasts which he began with the comparison of the boy and his dreams. In the usual coincidence of opposites the romantic young man is always accompanied by a grim realism in the form of his uncle.

"My thrifty uncle, now return'd, began
To stir within me what remained of man;
My powerful frenzy painted to the life,
And ask'd me if I took a dream to wife?"

But as the youth grows older, he changes—his romanticism is seemingly mellowed. Crabbe indicates his change by a change in the tone of the story. The mood changes from the romantically heightened, yet ironic, tone of the meeting in the meadow, into a mood—a tone—that reflects the marketplace. The diction that reflected the exaggerated posturings of an overly romantic boy is succeeded by the businesslike shorthand of the ledger book. I believe that Crabbe uses this change in tone to prepare the reader for George's next meeting with Rosabella. George must be prepared to evaluate his ideal. He needs the language of the marketplace for such an evaluation;

the language of matter-of-fact rationality must succeed the language of light-hearted romanticism. His uncle is his teacher:

"He his own books approved, and thought the pen
A useful instrument for trading men;
But judged a quill was never to be slit
Except to make it for a merchant fit:
He, when inform'd how men of taste could write,
Look'd on his ledger with supreme delight;
Then would he laugh, and, with insulting joy,
Tell me aloud, 'that's poetry, my boy;
These are your golden numbers,—them repeat,
The more you have, the more you'll find them sweet—
Their numbers move all hearts—no matter for their feet.
Sir, when a man composes in this style,
What is to him a critc's frown or smile?'"

The rhythm as well as the diction reflects Crabbe's purpose in this section of the poem. The rhythm is as neat and mechanical—as economical—as the entries in a ledger. The precise structure, the syntactical balance, the control, all mirror the "mercantile" qualities of exactness and order which the uncle tries to impose upon George. In a magnificent literary description, Crabbe reveals the uncle's love of "numbers," his preference for some books over others, some "realms of gold" over others. In fact, the "love" of the uncle for his ledgers seems to be a parody of George's love for Rosabella, for Crabbe shows how the same language can be used for both subjects—the golden language of "poetry" is easily adapted to either subject. Therefore, Crabbe implies much more than a mere similarity between the words in the two scenes. Perhaps the seeming versatility of the language is in reality only a reflection of the one identical character of the two subjects. Perhaps Rosabella's character should be defined in the terms so loved by George's uncle. In any event, George is completely identified with his new materialistic background before his second meeting with Rosabella. Significantly enough, the second meeting itself is part of a business transaction:

"Something one day occur'd about a bill
That was not drawn with true mercantile skill,
And I was ask'd and authorised to go
To seek the firm of Clutterbuck and Co."

But the office is closed, and George is sent to a country house

where the merchant spends his leisure time. George finds his lost lady in the merchant's hideaway.

The lines featuring "Clutterbuck and Co." are favorites of Crabbe's parodists and are frequently quoted as evidence of Crabbe's flat and monotonous style, but the quotation, and especially the prosaic tone of the quotation, is very appropriate to Crabbe's subject. For this scene is similar in many ways to George's first meeting with Rosabella, but this time a menial task is defined in menial terms. The reader gets a ledger book account of George's meeting with Rosabella, a proper account of the meeting between a romantic boy and the materialistic soul of his beloved. George is finally forced to see the unromantic truth about Rosabella; he sees her according to her "real" worth and not according to his romantic fancy—a worth made obvious by the very real background. Therefore, the diction and the tone it creates is one with the materialistic objects described. The language is made one with the articles themselves—with the room, the building, the furniture. The material objects are also made one with the materialistic, the now slatternly Rosabella:

"His room I saw, and must acknowledge, there
Were not the signs of cleanliness or care;

The shutters half unclosed, the curtains fell
Half down, and rested on the window-sill,
And thus, confusedly, made the room half visible . . .

There were strange sights and scents about the room,
Of food high season'd, and of strong perfumes.

Two unmatched sofas ample rents displayed,
Carpets and curtains are alike decay'd"

And then Rosabella, who is the merchant's paramour, enters the room. She is the mistress of this place—the personification of its "spirit":

"But is it she?—O! yes; the rose is dead,
All beauty, fragrance, freshness, glory fled;
But yet 'tis she—the same and not the same—
Who to my bower a heavenly being came;
Who waked my soul's first thought of real bliss,
Whom long I sought, and now I find her—this.
I cannot paint her—something I had seen
So pale and slim, and tawdry and unclean;

With haggard looks, of vice and woe the prey,
Laughing in languor, miserably gay;
Her face, where face appear'd was amply spread
By art's coarse pencil, with ill-chosen red,
The flower's fictitious bloom, the blushing of the dead."

In a series of very compact paradoxes, Crabbe emphasizes the basic paradox that underlies the whole poem; he uses oxymora to underline this new juxtaposition of the opposites featured in all of George's experiences with Rosabella—a coincidence of opposites focused with sudden and shocking effect. The new, older, saner George can see and be shocked by this image of the seeming harmony between beauty and ugliness. And the seeming contradictions of "laughing in languor" and "miserably gay" actually underscore the truth that George must learn to accept: he must see that the Rosabella of his dreams and the Rosabella of actuality are "the same and not the same." Crabbe's skill in using paradox to develop the tone of this section of the poem is a good illustration of his ability to make technique serve his purposes, for the tone reflects his meaning. Furthermore, the poem does not degenerate, in George's despair, into hollow-sounding exaggeration or embarrassing sentimentality. George's early romanticism is so conditioned and controlled by his experiences in the "mercantile" world that he is able to endure his disillusionment. Therefore, his tone, as he considers his loss and his disappointment, is not wild and hysterical but calm and reasoned. The "heroine of romance" asks coyly, ". . . has your heart been faithful?" The hero of commerce responds ironically,

"My faith must childish in your sight appear,
Who have been faithful—to how many, dear?"

But George and Rosabella soon confess their early attachment, and they begin to talk about a life together. For George's contempt changes to pity when Rosabella tells him of the difficulties and sorrows of her life; in fact, "all reproach and anger died away." And then, just for a moment, the tone of the story changes once again. In a scene that epitomizes all of the coincidences of opposites that have developed the tone, Crabbe combines that first romantic moment in the meadow—the moment when George first saw and idealized Rosabella—with the tawdry atmosphere of the banker's hideaway. In a

purely materialistic setting the purely materialistic Rosabella sings a sweet, romantic lyric:

“ ‘My Damon was the first to wake
The gentle flame that cannot die;
My Damon is the last to take
The faithful bosom’s softest sigh;
The life between is nothing worth,
O! cast it from thy thought away;
Think of the day that gave it birth,
And this its sweet returning day.

Buried be all that has been done,
Or say that naught is done amiss;
For who the dangerous path can shun
In such bewildering world as this?
But love can every fault forgive,
Or with the tender look reprove;
And now let naught in memory live,
But that we met, and that we love.’ ”

Alfred Ainger asserts that the story is marred by this “tasteless interpolation of a song which the unhappy girl sings to her lover.”¹ But I believe that Crabbe has simply shown us that an unrestrained romanticism is still strong in George and that George is still willing to surrender to the same kind of appeal that captured him during his first meeting with Rosabella. George’s early romantic posturing seemed ridiculous enough, but the same weakness is emphasized a thousand times by his second surrender. How pathetically easy it is for Rosabella to rekindle George’s old passion. She speaks to him of love—speaks the old romantic lines with a new voluptuous intonation—and he surrenders. He surrenders to the old romantic, literary ideal that he substitutes for the real Rosabella. Significantly enough, her romantic voice is aided by the Anacreontic verse Crabbe chooses for her song. Nothing else in the poem illustrates so well Crabbe’s ironic grasp of man’s romantic penchant for the ideal and the unseen. Crabbe’s conscious use of technique is emphasized also by this sudden juxtaposition of a charming, romantic lyric with the prosaic descriptions of materialism (in all its “evil effects”) which precede and follow it. Two extremes in human nature are defined by the tone. By the end of the poem, however, a new

¹Alfred Ainger, *Crabbe* (New York, 1903) p. 176.

and more thoroughly disciplined George will find some new position, some middle ground between the two extremes.

For the romantic dream fades. Ironically, and according to the inevitable pattern of contrasts, George's beautiful lady loves the ugliness in which she lives, and Rosabella soon confesses that she cannot leave her life of ease and indulgence for the tedium of a new life with George:

"Softn'd, I said—'Be mine the hand and heart,
If with your world you will consent to part.'
She would—she tried—Alas! she did not know
How deeply rooted evil habits grow:
She felt the truth upon her spirits press,
But wanted ease, indulgence, show, excess"

She dies soon after—seemingly a victim of the life she has chosen—a "vice-worn and sin-wrecked creature." George turns in his sorrow to a brief idolatry of the materialism that Rosabella had adored, partly because of his desire to overcome his grief and partly because of the fascination which materialism had for her. At length, however, he finds his "heart humbled and his mind cleared," and he returns to his native village, where he finds relief and repose.

The tale told by the elder brother, then, shows several changes in tone: changes which communicate the texture of his experience as well as the development of his character. The mocking irony which follows the introductory section defines George's early romantic inclinations, and the prosaic, matter-of-fact accounts of the later sections define his experiences with his uncle and his last meeting with Rosabella. Both are succeeded, in the final section, by a tone that shows some kind of a compromise between the two kinds of life and the two kinds of characters defined by the following tone:

"Yet much is lost, and not yet much is found,
But what remains, I would believe is sound;
That first wild passion, that last mean desire,
Are felt no more; but holier hopes require
A mind prepared and steady—my reform
Has fears like his, who, suffering in a storm,
Is on a rich, but unknown country cast,
The future fearing, while he feels the past;
But whose more cheerful mind, with hope imbued,
Sees through receding clouds the rising good."

Thus, the character of the elder brother is finally defined by a tone that reflects a compromise between romanticism and materialism—he is finally a chastened and understanding human being, and Crabbe simply uses the changes in tone to lead from one attitude and state of mind to another. Therefore, since the changes in tone correspond to a very definite psychological structure, it is very difficult to believe that Crabbe was not in control of his techniques throughout the poem and that the reference to "Clutterbuck and Co." was not as intentional as it is effective. The "Elder Brother's Tale" is not a weak poem, marred by lapses in tone; it is a strong poem, characterized and unified by a brilliant handling of tone. The "Clutterbuck and Co." excerpt is not an illustration of Crabbe's carelessness or of a tendency on his part to write prose. It is a very deliberate and successful attempt to fuse his language with his subject—to create the texture (and the tone) of materialism with his language. Furthermore, the shifts in tone do not represent any confusion or incoherence. The over-all or controlling tone of the poem is introduced with the George who tells the story, and it ends with his last words. The subdued emotion with which the poem opens hangs in the air and is seemingly suspended throughout the entire story: the "first wild passion" and the "last mean desire" are properly framed and evaluated by the sincere emotion that underlies the mocking voice, that underlies the matter-of-fact voice—the chastened emotion that George still feels whenever he talks about Rosabella. For as he ends his story, he admits that even with his mature understanding and with his final knowledge that "we must freedom with restraint enjoy," whenever he thinks of his youth, he realizes that "much is lost, and not yet much is found."