

"WEARY OF THE PIPE OF TITYRUS":
CHALLENGES TO THE PASTORAL IDEAL
IN THREE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY POEMS

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By

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines three poems, all of which challenged the prevailing tendency to idealize rural life in eighteenth-century poetry. Stephen Duck's The Thresher's Labour offers an account of rural life from the perspective of a thresher, and the "speaker" uses his unique perspective to demolish the pastoral myth that rural life was a life of ease and leisure. Oliver Goldsmith's The Deserted Village contrasts an idealized version of the past with the intolerable present in order to emphasize the transformed nature of country life, as well as to critique the forces which caused the transformation. His gloomy account of contemporary village life challenges the deeply-rooted tendency to envision the countryside as an immutable retreat from urban corruption. George Crabbe's The Village attacks the pastoral tradition and the tendency to sentimentalize the plight of the poor by offering a harsh, unsentimental account of village life. Together these three poems constitute versions of eighteenth-century "anti-pastoral."

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

How Blessed is He, who leads a Country Life,
Unvex'd with anxious Cares, and void of Strife!
John Dryden, "To My Honour'd Kinsman John Driden" (1700)

Many eighteenth-century writers shared John Dryden's belief that rural life was "Blessed," carefree and virtuous. Indeed, in an essay on agriculture entitled "Some Thoughts on Agriculture, both Ancient and Modern; with an account of the Honour due to an English Farmer" published in The Universal Visitor in February 1756, Samuel Johnson makes the following observation:

Luxury, avarice, injustice, violence, and ambition, take up their ordinary residence in populous cities; while the hard and laborious life of the husbandman will not admit of these vices. The honest farmer lives in a wise and happy state, which inclines him to justice, temperance, sobriety, sincerity, and every virtue that can dignify human nature. (qtd. in Sambrook Eighteenth Century 75)

Poets in particular never tired of celebrating the simplicity, innocence, virtue and "naturalness" of rural life. In much eighteenth-century poetry, agricultural workers or "hinds" were idyllicly depicted as leading uncomplicated, useful lives in which they dwelt in complete felicity and harmony with the natural world.

Often, rural life was seen to be "virtuous" and "innocent" in comparison to urban life. There was a deeply-rooted ideological tendency to view the city as the embodiment and the source of the vice and corruption which afflicted human kind:

"Rank abundance breeds/In gross and pamper'd cities sloth and lust,/And wantonness and gluttonous excess" (Cowper, The Task I.686-88). The country afforded relief from such oppression and "pomp" by offering both a physical and an intellectual escape from the unbearable values of the city. However, equally prevalent was the tendency to see country life as preferable to any alternative lifestyle, intrinsically, as well as relatively, delightful and innocent. Thomas Tickell articulated this idea in Guardian No. 22 (1713) when he declared:

When we paint, describe, or any way indulge our Fancy, the Country is the Scene that supplies us with the most lovely Images. This State was that wherein God placed Adam when in Paradise; nor could all the fanciful Wits of Antiquity imagine any thing that could administer more exquisite Delight in their Elysium. (qtd. in Stephens 107)

The tendency to idealize and sentimentalize country life was a compelling and powerful one which endured throughout the eighteenth-century, although, as Raymond Williams demonstrates in The Country and the City (1973), it was not exclusive to that period.

Williams also argues that it was during the eighteenth century that poetic images of rural contentment and felicity received some of their most powerful challenges. Williams analyzed poetry in political terms, and one of the central arguments in The Country and the City is that throughout the eighteenth century, poetry played an ambivalent role in relation to what he called the "social order": poets using poetry to endorse, defend and maintain status quo values; but poets also

using poetry to critique status quo values. Often, images of "contented toil," pastoral leisure and rural games were used as much to exemplify the benevolence and good management of political and social figures -- such as landowners, patrons and monarchs -- as they were simply to indulge that ancient impulse to see the country as delightful and refreshing. But what about poems dedicated to dismantling pastoral myths, poems whose primary aim is to demonstrate that the country is no longer (though it may once have been) a retreat from corruption and urban values?

This thesis examines in detail three such poems: Stephen Duck's The Thresher's Labour (1736); Oliver Goldsmith's The Deserted Village (1770); and George Crabbe's The Village (1783). While all three poems have different emphases and are written from different perspectives, they all exhibit in varying degrees the tendency to "counter pastoral," to challenge the powerful ideology which emphasized only the idyllic side of rural life and which led poets -- even when they knew the difference -- to typify the English countryside as "an exact counterpart to the Virgilian ideal" (Worster 9). As a result, all three poems need -- and indeed demand -- to be read in the context of both the eighteenth-century pastoral and georgic traditions.

There are many "definitions" of the pastoral, but I have found the one offered by M.H. Abrams to be the most useful. He claims the pastoral is "an elaborately conventional poem expressing an urban poet's nostalgic image of the peace and simplicity of the life of shepherds and other rural folk in an idealized natural setting" (127). The pastoral was an ancient literary form that derived from the Greeks.

Theocritus (c. 270 B.C.) wrote a number of idylls celebrating the pleasures of husbandry, love and beauty in the natural world. Virgil's Eclogues (c. 37 B.C.) were written in imitation of Theocritus' idylls, and Virgil uses many of the same celebratory themes or conventions. However, in the Eclogues, there are allusions, albeit oblique ones, to the complex, corrupt, encroaching forces beyond the idealized world of which the poet is writing. It is the implicit threat of such forces that in Virgil's Eclogue I, for example, makes country life appear that much sweeter, simpler and more innocent. As W.W. Greg notes, "only when the shepherd songs ceased to be the outcome of unalloyed pastoral conditions did they become distinctively pastoral" (23).

As Abrams's definition indicates, the pastoral was not just a straightforward portrait of rural life; it was an intricately constructed, stylized and literary version of rural life. A poet could randomly record impressions of country living, but unless those impressions were organized in a very particular and formal way, he or she could not call the resulting verse "pastoral." As Thomas Tickell succinctly observed in Guardian No. 22: "It is not enough that he [the poet] write about the Country; he must give us what is agreeable in the Scene and hide what is wretched" (qtd. in Stephens 106). This insistence on presenting the "agreeable" and suppressing the "wretched" is inextricably linked to the function the pastoral performed in the early Augustan period. Like any literary form, the pastoral, although it entertained a fixed notion of country life, was by no means absolute. By the eighteenth century, the didactic and allegorical features of the pastoral, which had been

so integral to the Renaissance and Elizabethan pastoral, had all but disappeared¹.

Poets no longer sought to "instruct" their readers through the pastoral. Instead, they now thought the primary purpose of the pastoral was to "delight" and "amuse the Fancy" of its readers (qtd. in Stephens 106).

Early eighteenth-century pastoral poetry in particular tended to be prescriptive and exclusionary, privileging aesthetic perfection over social and historical "realism" and imitation over innovation. René Rapin's influential Dissertio de Carmine Pastorali (1659) had been translated into English by Thomas Creech in 1684. As Annabel Patterson argues, Rapin's theory of pastoral poetry disregarded the historical subtext and visionary elements of Virgil's Eclogues in favour of a generic, esoteric, formalist approach to the pastoral which emphasized only its ideal nature (200-04). Rapin was equally offended by the "excessive rusticity" of Theocritus and felt any base or "low" references to the practical matters of rural life should also be eliminated from the ideal pastoral (200). The result, as Patterson notes, was "the theory of a genre conceived purely in abstraction" (199), for Rapin's theory did not reflect the true, complex, dialectal character of Virgil's Eclogues.

A very young Alexander Pope enthusiastically embraced many of Rapin's ideas about pastoral poetry. Pope, like Rapin, believed that the requisite qualities for

¹ J.E. Congleton notes that Rapin, who is deemed the most influential critic on eighteenth-century English pastoral theory, mentions allegory only once in his Dissertio; but Sir Philip Sidney in The Art of Poetry had declared that the only value in the pastoral was its moral and allegorical applications.

ideal pastoral were "simplicity, brevity and delicacy" (Discourse 25). As a result, imagery and conventions which fostered a sense of delicacy and delight, such as the shepherd as lover, were considered highly appropriate to the pastoral genre; while "base" (read realistic) imagery was considered "unfit" because it would not delight the reader. The code of literary propriety was so strict that while a shepherd could complain about the fact that he had lost a goat, he could never be depicted milking one. The result was a poetry of "rural life" that eschewed mentioning its practical aspects. This is also true of "naturalized" pastoral poetry. The fact that poets such as Ambrose Philips introduced indigenous vegetation in their pastorals did not actually change the preoccupations of the people within the poems; "shepherds" still talked of unrequited love and engaged in contests of wit; the difference in Philips's poems is that they now did so under mighty oaks instead of olive trees.

The "English georgic" was a literary form peculiar to the eighteenth century. It is much harder to define than the pastoral; in fact, Margaret Anne Doody argues that "post-Virgilian Georgic" was "a poetic idea rather than a genre" (116). "Georgic" literally means a poem about farmers, and examples of the English georgic "derive from Virgil, whose Georgics, written basically as a treatise on Italian agriculture, showed an extraordinary vitality in the eighteenth century" (Chalker 1). The georgic should have been the ideal literary alternative for describing the practical matters of rural life. However, John Barrell argues that the georgic "in its peculiarly English manifestation, [was] not so much a vision of rural life alternative to the

Pastoral, as...complementary to it" (Dark Side 12). Barrell believes this was so because "the harshness of the reality was carefully mitigated by an ornate diction" (12). Dryden's 1697 translation of Virgil's Georgics was immensely popular in the eighteenth century and generated fresh interest in Virgil's great "middle" poem. In 1708, John Philips wrote his own "georgic," Cyder, and although he imitated Virgil's (and Dryden's) elevated style, he set the poem in the English, not the Italian, countryside. There followed a host of other "English georgics," all written in imitation of Virgil's Georgics. Poems such as John Dyer's The Fleece (1757) and James Thomson's The Seasons (1726-46) are characterized by their lofty language and style, their sentimental attitudes toward rural labour and those who performed it, their idealization of the simplicity and harmony of rural life and their "aesthetic containment" of poverty (Patterson 197). Even though georgic poems did describe actual rural activities such as sheep-shearing and cyder-making, the poet's lofty diction and elevated style, which he employed to both disguise and compensate for the "lowness" of the subject matter, meant that these mundane activities were often altered beyond recognition.

If poets wished to write poetry that glorified country life, they could use the pastoral or georgic forms. But if they wished to offer a harsher perspective of country life, a perspective that could not be comfortably expressed within the parameters of the pastoral and georgic, then they had to move beyond the confines of these forms. Poets such as Stephen Duck and George Crabbe reacted against the

restrictiveness of the pastoral and georgic traditions, albeit for different reasons, and they deliberately set their poems in opposition to those traditions. The result is a form of "anti-pastoral" poetry.

Stephen Duck's The Thresher's Labour is one of the first important examples of rural poetry actually written by an agricultural worker -- in this case a thresher. Duck creates a poetic persona who actually performs the labours that pastoral poets had only described at a distance (if they had described them at all!). As a result, an experience of rural life and labour is recounted exclusively from the labourers' point of view. Duck uses his immediate perspective to challenge the manner in which pastoral poets tended to portray rural life. He offers a harsh account of the labourers' relationship with their Master, and describes the threshers' labours, woes and small joys in a fresh, straightforward manner which emphasizes the rigour and the hardships of country living.

The Village, too, challenges pastoral and georgic representations of rural life, but it does so much more assertively than Duck's poem. Crabbe offers a version of rural life that is the antithesis of the pastoral ideal. Pastoral poetry emphasised the ease, delight and harmony of rural life; Crabbe stresses its hardships, poverty and struggles, all of which he describes in excruciating detail. Crabbe's rural world is a grasping and cruel one, but the bleakness in his poem is as much the product of his own pessimism about human nature as it is the result of his endeavours to reveal the pastoral's "fraudulent" nature.

The Deserted Village is the most complex poem in this study. The poem offers a depressing account of contemporary rural life in which the country no longer affords a retreat from urban vice and corruption. The forces of agricultural expansion and enclosure have made exiles of the "bold" peasants who had once called the country their home, and their eviction has completely destroyed the poet's delight and pleasure in the country. This pessimistic view of contemporary life is complicated by the poet's sentimental "memories" of past village life, which rely on pastoral imagery for their "naturalness." But, ultimately, the pastoral vision of the past is dismantled within the poem by the uncompromisingly gloomy depiction of the present.

I chose poems for this thesis which I felt to be both intrinsically interesting and complex, as well as representative of certain important trends. That being said, I also acknowledge the role that serendipity has played in my selection of poems. James Thomson's The Seasons (1726-46), Thomas Gray's Elegy Written in A Country Churchyard (1751) and William Cowper's The Task (1785), just to name three obvious examples, pose similar dilemmas and challenges and offer portraits of rural life that are equally rich and compelling; but it was my readings of these three poems which initially generated the intellectual framework for this thesis and, for better or for worse, it was with these three I decided to stay. My readings of these poems have been greatly influenced by Raymond Williams's The Country and the City (1973). It is my hope that I have expanded on and illuminated some of the problems and paradoxes that he raises in his very important book.

CHAPTER TWO

"To Sing the Toils of Each Revolving Year": Stephen Duck Promotes an Alternative Poetry of Rural Life

Twentieth-century critics generally consider The Thresher's Labour (1736) to be Stephen's Duck's finest and most innovative poem. In an article in Cornhill Magazine in June 1903, Attenborough declares it "one of the most popular poems in the language, both among the cultured class and the great mass of people" (qtd. in Davis 131). Rose Mary Davis, who has written the most comprehensive study of Duck's life and work, claims it "contains some of the most vivid passages found anywhere in his work" (131), while Rayner Unwin maintains that the poem "is undoubtedly the work by which he should be remembered" (59). Among more recent critics, Gustav Klaus deems the poem "a landmark in the history of English poetry" (13), Raymond Williams praises the poem's unextinguished "simple power" (88) and Linda Zionkowski contends that the poem is "significant" and that it "breaks new ground" (96). Such critical assessments indicate that the poem is innovative not just in relation to Duck's oeuvre, but in relation to the poetry of rural life in general. It is my aim in this chapter to examine The Thresher's Labour and assess Stephen Duck's contribution to the poetry of rural life, with particular focus on how his construction of the figure of the rural labourer in the landscape and his depiction of rural social relations symbolizes a departure from traditional pastoral and georgic representations.

Stephen Duck spent his early life "in the midst of Poverty and Labour" working as a farm labourer in Wiltshire (Duck Poems x). According to Joseph Spence, who wrote an account of his life for the authorized version of Poems on Several Occasions (1736), he was early possessed by a zealous desire for literature and learning. He carried copies of the Spectator with him to work, "labouring harder than anyone else" that he might be able to read them at noon "without injuring his Master," and he often "set to his books at Night" after a hard day of labouring in the fields (xiv). His scholarly pursuits and occasional verse attracted the admiration of local clergy and eventually the attention of Queen Caroline herself, whose celebrated patronage of Duck began in 1730 when Lord Macclesfield read his verses to her in the drawing room of Windsor Castle. Betty Rizzo argues that Caroline's motives for patronizing Duck were somewhat calculating, and that she endorsed the "thresher-poet" primarily to show Alexander Pope, who treated the Queen in an impertinent and disrespectful fashion, that "genius" will be rewarded at her court only when it is combined with deference and respectful gratitude (244-45). But the Queen precipitated interest in Duck by promising to reward those courtiers who subscribed to his book of poems, and many at court deemed him "the greatest poet of the age" (Rizzo 245). When Poems on Several Occasions was published in 1736, it had numerous impressive subscribers, including the Prince of Wales.

Although Duck's poetry was enthusiastically endorsed by the political elite, it was denounced by contemporary literary culture which felt both amused and

affronted that someone of Duck's "station" would actually attempt to write poetry. While Queen Caroline and the court had proclaimed Duck a literary talent, literary culture refused to legitimate him. Parodies of Duck's work which ridiculed both his "lowly" profession and lack of natural "genius" surfaced in the Grub-street Journal and other magazines¹. By ostracising and ridiculing Duck, writers such as Pope and Swift guaranteed that he remained relegated to the margins of literary culture while simultaneously rendering the poetic judgement and taste of Queen Caroline and her court questionable.

A brief survey of Duck's poetry reveals that most of it is tedious and repetitive, derivative in content and exasperatingly obsequious in tone. Robert Southey's comment that Duck's "talents for poetry were imitative rather than inventive" best summarizes critical opinion (113). Yet Linda Zionkowski finds the imitative element in Duck's poetry significant because it demonstrates that "[d]espite class boundaries, Duck and his patrons shared the same canon and held common beliefs about what constitutes poetry" (93). Duck's choice of poetic subjects and forms almost invariably affirmed and mirrored his readership's literary beliefs and tastes. Ironically, this is true even of his most "innovative" poem. In his "Account of

¹ One such parody occurred in A Collection of Pieces in Verse and Prose which have been publish'd on Occasion of the Dunciad (1732) where a James Miller wrote the following: "Laborious Duck! who with Prodigious Pain/Has thresh'd from thy course, tough, hard-yielding brain,/A most abundant Crop of golden Grain" (qtd. in Davis 51). For a detailed account of these parodies, see Stephen Duck, The Thresher Poet (1926) by Rose Mary Davis.

the Author," Joseph Spence informs us that the idea for The Thresher's Labour did not even originate with Duck; rather, it "was given him by one of those who first encourag'd him" (xv). Thankfully, the poem does not suffer because of it. The Thresher's Labour was written in the late 1720s, when Duck was still "undiscovered" by Queen Caroline and is refreshingly free of the self-abasement and exorbitant praise of his patron which saturated his later verse.

Even if the idea of writing The Thresher's Labour did not originate with Duck, he deserves credit for the fresh approach he takes to the subject of his own labours. As Morag Shiach notes, The Thresher's Labour is not an easy poem to classify, for it does not fall within the parameters of the two forms that eighteenth-century poets most commonly used to describe rural life: the pastoral and the georgic (48). The poem is evidently not pastoral, as it fails to emphasize the ease and delight of country life. But neither is it a georgic, if at least one accepts Joseph Addison's definition of this poetic form as "some part of the science of husbandry put into a pleasing dress, and set off with all the Beauties and Embellishments of Poetry" (4). For Addison, as for other eighteenth-century critics and poets, the georgic was distinguished as much by its style as by its concern with "the science of husbandry"; in fact, in "An Essay on Virgil's Georgics" (1697), Addison actually claims that Works and Days cannot be considered a georgic because Hesiod had "much more of the Husbandman than the Poet in his temper" and tended to use the language of the ploughman as opposed to that of the poet (8). The tradition of the English georgic is

best seen in works such as John Dyer's The Fleece (1757) and John Philips's Cyder (1708), which were strongly influenced by the language of Dryden's translation of Virgil's Georgics, published in 1697. These poems employ an elevated diction and a lofty style to describe even the simplest and most mundane of activities. Consider Philip's inflated description of cyder-making:

Now, now's the time; e'er hasty Suns forbid
To work, disburthen thou thy sapless Wood
Of its rich Progeny; the turgid Fruit
Abounds with mellow Liquor; (251)

Duck did make a few self-conscious attempts to appropriate the lofty, elevated language found in the georgic form², but generally his diction is simple, straightforward and unassuming:

BUT when the scorching Sun is mounted high,
And no kind Barns with friendly Shade are nigh;
Our weary Scythes entangle in the Grass,
While Streams of Sweat run trickling down apace.³
(120-23)

Also missing from The Thresher's Labour is the lofty optimism which seems endemic to the English georgic. Duck's speaker is more interested in documenting the

² He particularly does so in the 1736 version of the poem where, in the Preface to Poems on Several Occasions, he admits to having "translated" some of his verse into this language (viii). As a result of these "translations," the threshers do not reap "corn" but "Ceres Gifts" and they break into a "briny sweat" due not to the "sun's" but to "Phoebus'" rays (14, 260).

³ Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from The Thresher's Labour are from the version of the poem published in Poems on Several Occasions (1736) and are identified by line number.

subjective hardships and difficulties of his profession than he is in objectively speculating on the value that may eventually spring from those long hours in the field.

A difference in tone and attitude is also what distinguishes The Thresher's Labour from John Gay's mock-pastoral poem The Shepherd's Week (1714). Margaret Anne Doody notes that while Gay does deal with some of the common concerns of rural dwellers, they are merely a source of fun for him (106). Gay was a proponent of neoclassical pastoral and was attempting through his parody to demonstrate the absurdity of writing poetry about the realities of country life. In his satiric Preface to The Shepherd's Week, he mockingly guarantees that "[t]hou wilt not find my Shepherdesses idly piping on oaten Reeds, but milking the Kine, tying up the Sheaves, or if the Hogs are astray driving them to their Styes" (91). His descriptions of country folk and their presumed interests and concerns are light-hearted and often ridiculous. Gay claims to dismiss the idea that honest descriptions of the English countryside are worthy "of a British Poet's imitation" (90). Yet both John Barrell and Margaret Anne Doody detect some unevenness in Gay's poem (Dark Side 55-56; 105). In places, The Shepherd's Week does not seem parodic at all, but rather a straightforward, affectionate account of country concerns and people:

If in the Soil you guide the crooked Share,
Your early Breakfast is my constant Care.
And when with even Hand you strow the Grain,
I fright the thievish Rookes from off the Plain.
("Tuesday; or, The Ditty" 51-54)

It must be emphasized that these moments are few and fleeting, however, and are overshadowed by the boisterous and sometimes bawdy high jinks of shepherds and shepherdesses with foolish names like Buxoma and Lobbin Clout.

The fact that Duck was unable to use either the pastoral or georgic forms to express what he wished to say about life and labour in the country reflects in part the lack of literary models available to those writing outside "polite" literary culture (Zionkowski 97). Before Stephen Duck wrote The Thresher's Labour, those poets who wished to describe the concerns of rural life more immediately and "realistically" had no literary model which they could imitate. The Thresher's Labour filled this void and "inspired" a host of other poets, particularly poor working-class men and women, who also attempted to "sing the Toils of each revolving Year" and record their own stories of labour in verse (8)⁴. Duck's poem is important because it is one of the first poems in the eighteenth century to recount the experience of labour exclusively from the labourer's point of view. Moreover, it deals with the subject of rural labour solemnly and with dignity instead of ignoring it, inflating it beyond recognition or treating it as a joke. And it is one of the first attempts by the labouring poor at self-representation in poetry.

⁴ These poets included Mary Collier who wrote The Woman's Labour: An Epistle to Mr. Stephen Duck (1739) and Robert Tattersal who penned The Bricklayer's Labours (1734).

II.

The Thresher's Labour represents a departure from conventional pastoral and georgic representations because, in the words of Donna Landry, it is written from "inside the experience of rural labour, instead of from without, in the Virgilian manner" (Muses 22). In most pastoral and georgic verse, the "I" or speaker in the poem tended to detach and often elevate himself from the rural community of which he was writing. While the poet observed the labours of others, he ultimately did not share in them, and even sympathetic descriptions of rural dwellers seemed distant and remote from their everyday concerns. Moreover, the labourers were seldom granted their own voice; more often, they were "spoken for" by the poet. As a result, the "swains" appeared static because events tended to be recounted primarily from the poet's point of view. For example, in The Seasons, even though the speaker experiences a dizzying, often conflicting spectrum of emotions toward the landscape and the people in it, the "hinds" themselves remain imperturbably cheerful, regardless of season or the hardships that come their way:

while the cottage-hind
 Hangs o'er the enlivening blaze, and taleful there
 Recounts his simple frolic: much he talks,
 And much he laughs, nor recks the storm that blows
 Without, and rattles on his humble roof.
 (Winter 89-93)

Even the shepherd's tragic death in the storm is described solely from the point of view of the observer (Winter 276-321).

This mental distance dissolves in The Thresher's Labour for the poet and worker have become one. Not only does Duck's speaker identify strongly with the workers in the poem; his use of first person plural and first person plural possessive pronouns reveals that he considers himself one of them, an unashamed participant in the labours of which he is writing:

When sooty Pease we thresh, you scarce can know
Our native Colour, as from work we go:
The Sweat, the Dust, and suffocating Smoak,
Make us so much like Ethiopians look, (62-65)

There are no social or economic distinctions made between the "I" of the poet and the workers in this poetic landscape, for the poet appears to share the same values as the workers. In fact, the only occasion when Duck's poetic persona disengages himself from his collective narrative and speaks in an individual voice -- an "I" as opposed to a "we" -- is when he is making use of epic simile, a stylized poetic device. Such moments perhaps reflect the speaker's self-consciousness about his "new" role as poet.

Indeed, one of the distinctive features of The Thresher's Labour is that it offers a collective as opposed to an individual experience of labour. Duck assumes an uniformity of experience that is not restricted to the public activities of threshing and reaping; the threshers also have uniform private lives, where "good expecting wives" serve supper and everyone falls into bed to dream restless dreams. But it is the work day that the speaker is most intent on describing. He captures the threshers' immediate, temporal feelings as they progress through the predictable "stages" of their

work, from their initial fierce energy and enthusiasm at the dawn of the day to their fatigue and disillusionment at its end. These stages are not just restricted to the working day; they also extend to the agricultural year. Duck's speaker convincingly describes the surge of excitement the threshers feel as "Winter hides his hoary Head" and it is time for their labours to begin once more (82). The master is called "our welcome Master" even though less than ten lines before (during the preceding autumn), the threshers had wished they could drown out his harsh words with their noisy tools (88, 76-77). The news that they are to work once more is a source of joy. The erratic emotions the threshers experience toward their work gives them a complexity missing in the static, one-dimensional portraits found in pastoral and georgic verse.

Duck's attack on the pastoral is more blatant at times. In fact, The Thresher's Labour is one of the first important examples of anti-pastoral verse in English literature. In lines 50 to 60, Duck critiques common pastoral conventions, including the shepherds' ritualistic engagement in contests of wit when they were feeling social and their disengagement from the group and retreat to a docile, often empathic landscape when they were not. Duck punctures these common pastoral (mis)representations of the shepherd's life by defiantly countering them with practical examples from the threshers' reality: "Can we like Shepherds tell a merry Tale;/ The Voice is lost, drown'd by the louder Flail" (50-51). Using a preponderance of negatives, he also lists some of the pastoral stereotypes that are absent from his rural

landscape. His "list" is a catalogue of some of the pastoral's most resonant images; it is not the nouns in themselves but the pairing of nouns, verbs and adjectives that makes this attack effective: "No Fountains murmur here, no Lambkins play,/No Linnets warble, and no Fields look gay" (58-59). A stronger poet than Duck might have gone on at this point and offered an equally lengthy and detailed description of what was actually in the "melancholy" landscape, but he lets one relatively weak couplet do all the work: "'Tis all a gloomy, melancholy Scene/Fit only to provoke the Muse's Spleen" (60-61).

It is worth noting that Duck never alludes to or refutes a specific poem, unlike, say, Mary Collier in The Woman's Labour. It is the whole pastoral tradition which is his target. The fact that Duck is able to reduce the landscape of pastoral poetry to a few predictable clichés suggests the extent to which the form had become stylized and its artificiality "naturalized." He demonstrates that in the context of the economy in which he situates his poem, where time is money and is not one's own, where it is often too noisy to hear one's own voice, let alone the chatter of nearby "swains," it is these pastoral conventions which are "unnatural." More importantly, he reveals the extent to which the chimera of the pastoral genre is dependent upon the combination of very particular images within a contrived, controlled structure. Evoke those same images in a different structure and their "naturalness" becomes suspect. Through his attack on the pastoral, therefore, the speaker vigorously rejects it as a

form unable to accommodate his perspective on rural life. He asserts that the imagery of the pastoral has no place in the thresher's world.

Duck also offers a fresh perspective on the social and economic relations between labourer and "Master": the farmer who immediately supervised the worker and to whom he or she was answerable. In early eighteenth-century pastoral verse, this was a relationship that was rosily presented, if it was acknowledged at all. Neoclassical pastoral poetry, in particular, because it was attempting to reconstruct an image of the Virgilian golden age, tended not to reflect England's contemporary rural social relations. As a result, there is no Master or authoritarian figure present at all in such poems as Pope's Pastorals (1709). The shepherds have an autonomous and indulgent existence of the kind normally only enjoyed by the aristocracy, perhaps because most poets believed Pope and Rapin when they declared that in the glorious past only "the best of men" in society were shepherds⁵.

In pastoral poems where the Master was present, he was almost invariably depicted as being cheerful and paternalistic. An example of how this relationship was often represented can be found in Ambrose Philips's "The Second Pastoral," which

⁵ See Alexander Pope Discourse on Pastoral Poetry (1709): "So that we are not to describe our shepherds as shepherds at this day really are, but as they may be conceiv'd then to have been; when the best of men follow'd the employment" (25). In his Dissertatio de Carmine Pastoralis, Rapin argues that shepherding has an inherent dignity because David, Essau and other Biblical heroes were shepherds, and also because "Greeks reckoned the name Shepheard one of their greatest titles" (3); the translation is from Thomas Creech's 1684 translation as quoted in J.E. Congleton's Theories of Pastoral Poetry in England 1684-1798 (1952).

was published in Tonson's Miscellany in 1709. In this eclogue, two "swains," the aged Thenot and youthful Colinet, discuss the apparently unending woes of the latter. Colinet's litany of complaints abruptly ceases, however, as he tells of his joy at finally finding Menalcas's willing ear to listen to his "ditties." Menalcas, as it turns out, is Thenot's "Master" and Thenot delivers this effusive praise of him:

Menalcas, lord of these fair, fertile plains,
Preserves the sheep, and o'er the shepherds reigns:
For him our yearly wakes, and feasts, we hold,
And choose the fairest firstling from the fold:
He, good to all, who Good deserve, shall give
Thy flock to feed, and thee at ease to live,
Shall curb the malice of unbridled tongues,
And bounteously reward thy rural songs. (117-24)

As he is here described, Menalcas comes across as a benevolent, sonny man with a heart as big as his pocketbook. The concern and compassion he demonstrates towards the shepherds under his care (and even those that are not) make him more of a father figure than an employer. A hierarchy of condescension exists between worker and Master where Menalcas is aware of his obligations and responsibilities to those beneath his care: "He, good to all, who Good deserve." Most significantly, Menalcas exercises good management without exploiting his workers and, as a result, they enjoy bounteous rewards under his just patronage. Menalcas, of course, receives tangible compensations for his good management apart from the homage and undying gratitude lavished on him by his rural "subjects": feasts held in his honour, his pick of the choicest lambs. Moreover, like the fervent praise which Colinet "spontaneously"

offers, these gifts are not sought by Menalcas but extemporaneously bestowed upon him as a token of mutual good will. Workers and Master enjoy a harmonious, paternalistic relationship in which both reap the rewards of shared social obligation.

Duck's poem offers a harsher, less idealized version of the relationship between master and labourer. The Master -- who significantly enough remains nameless -- exhibits no concern and feels no social or moral responsibility towards the threshers. He values profit and productivity more than he values good will and good working relations with his employees. Because he evaluates the workers solely by their productivity, he displays little tolerance towards them. Duck's speaker views his employer in an equally narrow fashion, for the "greedy" Master is generally seen in postures of counting, measuring, and accumulating:

He counts the Bushels, counts how much a Day
Then swears we've idled half our Time away:
"Why, look ye, Rogues, d'ye think that this will do?
"Your Neighbours thresh as much again as you."
(77-80)

Duck depicts the relationship between Master and worker as a wage-mediated "industrial employer-employee relationship," bonded not by fealty or mutual social obligation but by a "cash nexus" (Bermingham 74).

It is worth noting that Duck never offers the reader a retrospective glance back to a time when relations between the thresher and their Master were more agreeable. He grounds the relationship firmly in the present and reveals that, far from being harmonious, social relations between the two are often antagonistic. The Master

is critical of the workers, deeming them "rogues" and "fools," which the threshers, naturally enough, resent (77). At one point, the speaker likens the Master to an angry schoolmaster and the threshers to "School-boys" with blotted copybooks (78-79).

Such an analogy deftly conveys the nature of the social and power relations between the two as seen from the perspective of the worker, the redoubtable authority of one, the vulnerable inferiority of the other. Even that remnant from the feudal system, the harvest feast, is depicted as a hollow ritual, a "cheat" used, as John Bull and John Barrell note, "to oil the routine of industry" (378). In The Country and the City (1973), Raymond Williams makes the distinction between a charity of production, defined as "loving relations between men actually working and producing what is ultimately, in all proportions, to be shared" and a charity of consumption, an "eating and drinking communion," where "all uncharity at work...could be redeemed by the charity of the consequent feast" (31). Initially, the speaker in the poem invokes the harvest feast as a charity of production:

OUR Master, joyful at the pleasing Sight,
Invites us all to feast with him at Night.
A Table plentifully spread we find,
And Jugs of humming Ale, to cheer the Mind;
Which he, too gen'rous, pushes round so fast,
We think no Toils to come, nor mind the past.
(271-76)

Ultimately, however, he is not fooled and cynically deems the feast a "Cheat" (277). One night where the social order is inverted and Master "serves" his workers cannot

"naturalize" or neutralize the hierarchical power relations in which labourer and Master engage every other day of the agricultural year.

Duck's use of pronouns also helps heighten the adversarial nature of the relationship between thresher and Master. Throughout this work, Duck consistently denotes the Master in the third person, which places him not only outside the community of threshers, but outside their shared values and experience. Duck, at times, uses this shift between first and third person very effectively, as in the following passage:

He calls his Reapers forth: Around we stand,
With deep Attention, waiting his Command.
To each our Task he readily divides,
And pointing, to our diff'rent Stations guides.
As he directs, to distant Barns we go; (17-21)

More succinct is the line: "He to appoint, and we the Work to do" (221). The pronouns play off one another, creating the distinction and reinforcing the division between these two classes, the individual who commands, the group which obeys.

It is also worth noting that Duck's years out of the field appear to have toughened, not mellowed, his opinion of the Master. Of course, the version of the poem that appears in the eighth edition of Poems on Several Subjects (1731) still depicts the farmer in an unflattering light. But that portrait is not as censorious as the one that emerges in the authorized version of the poem published in Poems on Several Occasions (1736). There are a couple of reasons for this. First, the unauthorized version of the poem contains a couplet that is missing from the authorized version:

Soon as the Harvest hath laid bare the Plains,
 And Barns well fill'd reward the Farmer's pains;
 What Corn each sheaf will yield, intent to hear,
 And guess from thence the Profits of the year;
Or else impending Ruin to prevent,
By paying, Timely, threat'ning Landlord's rent.
 (13-18)

The missing couplet placed the farmer more visibly in the context of a broader rural economic structure⁶. By invoking the spectre of the landlord, Duck had transformed the farmer from a figure of absolute authority to a mere intermediary figure in the hierarchy of agricultural economic relations. The fact that he was operating under the threat of "impending Ruin" and "Landlord's rent" made his position seem more precarious and his concerns about productivity and profit more explicable. The couplet's absence in the 1736 version simplifies the Master's behaviour, providing no context for his harsh behaviour toward his employees. Indeed, the impression that the Master is in the grip of an uncomplicated greed is also heightened by the addition of two couplets in the 1736 version, which replaced a derogatory couplet in which he (again) had made reference to the "chat" of the female workers:

Behind our Master waits; and if he spies
 One charitable Ear, he grudging cries,
 "Ye scatter half your Wages o'er the Land."
 Then scrapes the Stubble with his greedy Hand.
 (242-45)

⁶ E.P. Thompson and Marian Sugden speculate it may well have been one of Duck's "invigilatory patrons" who suggested the omission (28), perhaps because it reflected too unfavourably on the landowning class.

This last line in particular is one of the most powerful and accusing in the poem. Collectively, these sentiments ensure that the reader formulates an unequivocally negative opinion of the employer.

It must be emphasised at this point that Duck is no radical social critic. While he describes rural economic relations in a frank, often negative manner, he seldom permits the speaker in his poem to critique or challenge these governing structures, or even offer any alternative to them. Unlike Oliver Goldsmith, who looks to the past with such pathetic effect in The Deserted Village (1770), Duck does not offer an idyllic retreat back into an alternative "moral" economy. Nor does he promote or advocate social reform to establish a different, more hopeful economic order. Resignation, not protest, characterizes the tone of this work. Most of the things that the speaker in the poem complains about are tangible ailments that affect and afflict him and his fellow workers directly and often physically: the long hours, the unbelievable fatigue, the monotony of the work, being routed out of bed so early in the morning. He seldom evaluates beyond this parochial and personal level, the exception being when he implores the reader: "Let those who feast at Ease on dainty Fare/Pity the Reapers, who their Feasts prepare;/For Toils scarce ever ceasing press us now" (246-48). While these lines boldly assert that it is "the working poor who are the producers of wealth" (Williams 70), Duck still asks no other social action of "those who feast at Ease" than that they "pity" the reapers. In keeping with this narrow viewpoint, the speaker in the poem judges the Master, who is the most visible source

of the threshers' complaints, much more severely than the economic system in which he operates.

III.

The Thresher's Labour is not simply one long monody on the dismal lot of being a labourer. While the speaker in the poem complains about labour, he also celebrates the collective strength, vigour and skill of the threshers, as well as the "sportive" elements of the work. It is the fact that this poem is both a complaint and a celebration of labour that gives it authenticity and complexity. At times, this ambiguity creates tension, for it is sometimes difficult to reconcile the descriptions of strength and power with the feelings of powerlessness and resignation the speaker voices in other parts of the poem. When viewed in the context of the economy of "real" rural relations in which Duck situates his poem, this "power" becomes at most a compensatory power, but certainly one worth examining.

The significance of the poem's celebration of labour has to be considered in light of the diminished role the labourer had played in English rural poetry of the previous one hundred years. As James Turner documents in The Politics of Landscape (1979), a common ideology which operated in seventeenth-century rural poetry was that of a "naturally" bounteous landscape. Poets mystified rural production in their poetry to such an extent that the land appeared as if it were able to magically and

mystically bear a rich, abundant harvest without human labour or intervention. By making the harvest seem a magical act, and by constructing a Nature which could be bountiful without having to be worked, these poets made the presence of the labourers redundant and unnecessary. As a result, in such poems as Ben Jonson's To Penshurst (1616), the labourer was often invisible; if he was visible, he was able to work the landscape without any seeming exertion⁷. Duck's poem challenges this poetic convention by demystifying rural production. He affirms the importance of the agricultural worker by making him the central figure in the poem and in the landscape of the poem. By focusing intently on the worker and the conditions in which he works, Duck creates a poetic landscape where the fertility of the land is not presented as a tribute to a landlord's hospitality or just management of his estate: rather, the productivity the poem celebrates is unequivocally the result of the threshers' labours.

In affirming the importance of the labourer, Duck often describes him in a manner which accentuates (and, at times, exaggerates) his strength and physical power. The threshers are often aligned and compared to things which are themselves strong and powerful. At various points in the poem, Duck compares the labourers to a warhorse, Hercules, Sisyphus, a conquering Arabian army. They are able to handle their scythes with the skill of Cyclops (who forged thunder and lightning at the

⁷ See Chapter 6 of Turner's The Politics of Landscape (1979) for a detailed discussion of this tendency.

beginning of the world) and the power of Vulcan (39, 41). Duck refers to their scythes as "weapons" (105), and describes the workers in exalted postures of strength, which, as Donna Landry observes, are "more Homeric than Virgilian" (Muses 61):

Down one, one up, so well they keep the Time,
The CYCLOPS' Hammers could not truer chime;
Nor with more heavy Strokes could Aetna groan,
When VULCAN forg'd the Arms for THETIS' Son. (38-41)

Landry also notes that Duck "appropriates the Classical figures most easily allied with labour" (Muses 64), namely Sisyphus and Hercules. Despite the fact that Hercules is more positive and glamorous than the doomed Sisyphus, both figures are bigger-than-life paragons of male strength, fortitude and perseverance. Duck's use of these figures exemplifies the ambivalent attitudes towards labour which are found in the poem. The comparison of the labourers to Sisyphus conveys the futility, punishing nature and unending repetitiveness of labour: "Like SISYPHUS, our Work is never done;/Continually rolls back the restless Stone" (283-84). The reference to Hercules suggests the scope and rigour of the threshers' labours, as well as the power of the men who perform them: "Hard Fate! Our Labours ev'n in Sleep don't cease;/ Scarce HERCULES e'er felt such Toils as these" (257-58). Even though Duck chooses his allusions carefully, the fact that he does compare the threshers to figures from Classical mythology reveals the extent to which he was still influenced by the literary traditions of the dominant culture. As Linda Zionkowski notes, it is in its use of such

conventions that "the poem betrays signs of the strain involved in accommodating its subject to a polite audience of patrons and educated readers" (97).

The relationship the threshers share with the landscape also establishes them as strong and powerful. Duck never lets his readers forget that the threshers are toiling in a worked landscape, not an artistic prospect, and he gives that fact a powerful poetic significance. The labourers are not simply "working" the landscape; they are transforming it, and the speaker makes this point with peculiar force and energy:

YE Reapers, cast your Eyes around the Field;
And view the various Scenes its Beauties yield:
Then look again, with a more tender Eye,
To think how soon it must in Ruin lie! (222-25)

Duck presents this ability to transform the landscape as empowering for the labourers. Using epic simile, he actually compares the workers to conquering warriors (230-37). Of course, what they are conquering is "Nature," but it is a pliant, diminished and unresistant Nature, not dissimilar to that found in much pastoral verse. Nature in this poem is described and constructed in such a way that the threshers can easily dominate it and appear dominant in relation to it. She seems positively malleable in the hands of the threshers as they prepare to "assault" the fields:

For, once set in, where-e'er our Blows we deal,
There's no resisting of the well-whet Steel:
But here or there, where-e'er our Course we bend,
Sure Desolation does our Steps attend. (226-29)

There is a surprising confidence evident here. Both the imagery and the language with its suggestions of violence and destruction formulate a discourse of power and domination that offers a striking contrast to the resignation found in other parts of the poem. Duck's speaker seems to tacitly recognize that this power has its limitations, however, for this type of self-assured discourse never informs the relations between worker and master. It is only in relation to the landscape that the speaker views himself as powerful.

Duck affirms the strength and power of the male labourers more objectionably by contrasting them with the women who worked alongside them in the fields. The contrast is more implicit than explicit, for Duck never invites the reader to compare them directly. But he devotes so much poetic space to the indolent female worker that comparison is inevitable. As Gustav Klaus notes, although this poem is relayed from a first person collective point of view, Duck's speaker obviously "does not include the female agricultural worker in his 'we'" (15). He feels no solidarity with the women and looks upon them as a disapproving observer. His animosity stems from his belief that his female associates talk too much and that they shirk the tasks they were hired to perform.

The contrast between male and female becomes quickly apparent. While the male workers are relentlessly silent, sweaty, serious and industrious, the female workers are inappropriately carefree, irresponsible, unreliable and lackadaisical, too busy chatting to attend to the serious work at hand:

Our Master comes, and at his Heels a Throng
 Of prattling Females, arm'd with Rake and Prong;
 Prepar'd, whilst he is here, to make his Hay;
 Or, if he turns his Back, prepar'd to play:
 But here, or gone, sure of this Comfort still;
 Here's Company, so they may chat their Fill.
 Ah! were their Hands so active as their Tongues,
 How nimbly then would move the Rakes and Prongs! (162-69)

The speaker's deprecating and dismissive tone makes his attitude toward the women very clear. There are no lofty comparisons to "coursers" here; instead Duck likens the women to "a Flock of Sparrows" (191). The reader cannot help comparing the difference in the lunch breaks between the two groups. The male workers who are "quite o'erspent with Toil" can just manage to get the food into their mouths and "faintly eat" (139); then as soon as their lunch is finished, they (reluctantly) resume their work. The women, on the other hand, "still sit on the Ground" after their lunch is "dispatch'd" and renew themselves with "a brisk Chat" which culminates in a raucous din in which "Scarce puzzled ECHO can return the Voice" (175-76, 181). Because they are more disciplined, Duck intimates that the male workers are morally superior to the female workers. Women and the work that they do in the fields (when they do it) are trivialized as a result, for Duck's speaker refuses to acknowledge that women's work has the same inherent dignity, rigour and importance as the work the men perform. Indeed, it was her belief that Duck had totally misrepresented the work that women performed and the role they played in community and family life which

prompted Mary Collier to write The Woman's Labour: An Epistle to Mr. Stephen Duck in 1739.

Collier's indignation is supported by the research of historians. Both John Rule and Peter Laslett state that although women played a more significant role in cottage industries, they, along with their children, "were called...to work at harvest time" and could work as labourers through the whole agricultural year (Rule 110; Laslett 126). In his diary John Locke offers a lengthy description of one hundred year old Alice George of whom he recorded the following: "Her condition was but mean, and her maintenance her labour, and she said she was able to have reaped as much in a day as any man and had as much wages" (qtd. in Laslett 124). Moreover, K.D.M. Snell confirms that not only did women play a vigorous role in the annual harvest, but that men and women often did the same work. She states:

There is abundant supportive evidence for a very wide range of female participation in agricultural tasks before 1750 in the southeast, when their [women's] work extended to reaping, loading and spreading dung, ploughing, threshing, thatching, following the harrow, sheep shearing, and even working as shepherdesses. (52)

Snell also notes that the families often depended on the income that women earned to pay their yearly rent (62). In light of such historical evidence, Duck's dismissive attitude toward the female worker is difficult to understand.

Moira Ferguson suggests that Duck may have played up the women's chat and indolence as a way of more covertly conveying the speaker's antagonism for the

Master; only a fool, after all, would hire women to do this type of work (viii). But it is also true that when compared to the chatty, flighty female, the male worker appears more dedicated and hard-working. Most significantly, the females' indolence reveals just how far removed this poem is from common pastoral attitudes towards labour. It is interesting how Duck condemns, and wishes the reader to condemn, the female workers because they are not working. When viewed from the context of an economy of realistic rural relations, without the artificial pastoral structure to sustain it, the indolent behaviour of these new leisured figures in the landscape is not considered charming or delightful: it is judged to be reprehensible and intolerable. The speaker's condemnation of their indolence reveals the extent to which he himself places a moral value on industry. He values and judges the female workers solely by the criteria by which he himself was judged by the master: by their productivity.

Stephen Duck never wrote another poem like The Thresher's Labour. In fact, he wrote a staggering number of poems in which he utilized the pastoral imagery and the leisured shepherd figures he viewed with such derision in The Thresher's Labour⁸. And when he does revisit the fields, as he does in "A Description of a Journey to Marlborough, Bath, Portsmouth, &c." (1736), the distance between poet and worker has been reinstated. It is self-consciously as a retired outsider that the speaker

⁸ For example, in "Gratitude. A Pastoral" and "On Richmond Park, and Royal Gardens" in Poems On Several Occasions (1736).

takes up the scythe again, knowing full well that, unlike Sisyphus, his work will be done, for threshing is now simply a "sportive" diversion for him. And the harvest feast, which in The Thresher's Labour was cynically deemed a "cheat," is now presented more conventionally as an occasion to demonstrate the generosity of the landlord, whom the speaker calls a "prudent Nestor." In "Journey," it is the threshers, not their master, who come across as greedy and ungrateful.

On the whole, Duck offers a version of rural life that is stable. This is not only because he is describing routine, monotonous labour, but because he does not foresee any of the historical and social forces which would affect the agricultural labour force in the next century, including industrialization, mechanization and parliamentary enclosure. He concludes:

THUS, as the Year's revolving Course goes round,
 No respite from our Labour can be found:
 Like SISYPHUS, our Work is never done;
 Continually rolls back the restless Stone. (281-84)

Duck's speaker resigns himself and his fellow workers to a life of labour from which they can expect no deliverance. He predicts a future that will neither be worse nor better than the present he has so compellingly described.

CHAPTER THREE

"Virtue, Sunk to Poverty"¹: Oliver Goldsmith's Moral Dirge

In the Critical Review of June 1770, an anonymous reviewer of The Deserted Village (1770), while offering extravagant praise of Dr. Oliver Goldsmith's "excellent" poem, also challenges his claim that the countryside is in a time of "rank, unwieldy woe." He states: "He who reads the Deserted Village, and is not acquainted with the face of our country, may imagine, that there are many deserted villages to be found in it" (qtd. in Rousseau 76). It is his opinion that "England wears now a more smiling aspect than she ever did; and few ruined villages are to be met with except on poetical ground" (76). Such resistance to the poem's gloomy portrait of contemporary country life suggests that at the time of The Deserted Village's publication, only a sceptical minority had begun to acknowledge the impact that the burgeoning forces of commercial expansion and agricultural improvement were beginning to have on the "bold peasantry." A spirit of unreflective optimism as opposed to thoughtful pessimism reigned. In fact, Goldsmith actually prophesied that his portrait of

¹ This phrase is from James Thomson's The Seasons. See Autumn: "Together thus they shunned the cruel scorn/Which virtue, sunk to poverty, would meet/From giddy fashion and low-minded virtue" (186-88).

contemporary village life would meet with resistance. He notes in the "Dedication" to Sir Joshua Reynolds which prefaced the poem:

but I know you will object (and indeed several of our best and wisest friends concur in the opinion) that the depopulation that it [the poem] deplores is no where to be seen, and that the disorders it laments are only to be found in the poet's own imagination. (qtd. in Friedman IV.285)

The protestations of his "best and wisest" friends did not stop Goldsmith from passionately expressing his belief that the peasantry was in a serious state of decline. While the Irish villages known to him in his youth are his implicit model, he does not limit his poem to them, and contemporary readers assumed that he referred to the "English" scene². In The Deserted Village, which Thomas Percy deemed one of Goldsmith's two great "ethic" poems (Dixon 117), the poet challenges the tendency to see the contemporary English countryside as a "smiling," immutable retreat that was "far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife" and impervious to social and economic change (Gray Elegy 73). He believed that the boundaries between "country" and "city," "urban" and "rural" were beginning to blur and that the forces of luxury and "pride" had begun to infect country life and country people. As a result of these forces, the countryside has in Goldsmith's poetic world become the site of a

² Because of the awkwardness of switching between "Ireland" and "England" and the inappropriateness of "Britain," I have, somewhat politically incorrectly, used "English" throughout. I feel I am justified in doing so by Goldsmith's own comment in the "Dedication" where he declares: "I have taken all possible pains, in my country excursions, for these four or five years past, to be certain of what I allege" (qtd. in Friedman IV.285).

regrettable social transformation. He demonstrates the severity of the transformation by constructing a speaker who contrasts his memories of the smiling, productive village he grew up in with the deserted village that has replaced it. As in The Village (1783), the portrait of contemporary village life in The Deserted Village is a grim one. But it is accompanied by a sentimentalized vision of past village life which Goldsmith uses to heighten the contrast between past and present and make the poem even more powerful and poignant. In this chapter, I will attempt to demonstrate how Goldsmith uses the contrast between the sentimentalized past and the intolerable present to critique some of the social and economic forces which he felt had encroached upon the "old way of life" and occasioned the destruction of the village.

Like The Thresher's Labour, The Deserted Village defies easy classification. Critics cannot even seem to agree whether it is a "pastoral" poem or an "anti-pastoral" poem³. Goldsmith himself did not seem to think his poem pastoral; in fact, in the "Dedication," he maintains that his poem "deplores" depopulation and "laments" disorders (285). He also states that he "sincerely believed" that the "miseries" that he was "attempting to display" were "real" (285). These words hardly betray any type of pastoral intent, yet Edmund Burke would declare that "True and

³ For example, Roger Lonsdale argues that in The Deserted Village "the pastoral and georgic modes are devastated within the poet's imagination" ("Garden" 71); and John Bull and John Barrell contend that the poem is a "version" of anti-pastoral in The Penguin Book of English Pastoral Verse (1974). However, James Sambrook offers a different view, claiming that "Burke was correct" in designating The Deserted Village "a pastoral" (English Pastoral Poetry 116).

pretty Pastoral images has Goldsmith in his deserted village that beat all Pope and Philips and Spenser too" (qtd. in Rousseau 91-92); and The Deserted Village almost invariably receives consideration in texts discussing the pastoral. The poem's problematic relationship to the pastoral tradition seems to stem from the fact that Goldsmith utilizes pastoral imagery for an unconventional purpose. He uses a pastoral version of rural life not to celebrate the "golden age," but to mourn its passing, to create a powerful contrast which will heighten the "unnaturalness" and miseries of the present. As Annabel Patterson observes, this means that Goldsmith's poem can be viewed as either conservative (if the reader fastens onto the nostalgic portrayal of village life) or radical (if the reader focuses on his impassioned attack on commercial expansion and Enclosure). These conflicting political stances probably account for at least some of critical disagreement the poem has generated (228).

The Deserted Village is perhaps the best example of an important trend in mid-eighteenth-century poetry in which the "pastoral idyll" tended to be set "against the facts of social and economic upheaval in the countryside" (Sambrook English 115).

These poems⁴ used pastoral imagery retrospectively to lament the demise of a cherished way of life and to remonstrate against the forces which caused the destruction. It was the beginning of a new social way of using the pastoral. Most often, in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, if pastoral poetry had a political or

⁴ Examples include Lawrence Whyte's "The Parting Cup" (1740), "Ophelia"'s "Snaith Marsh, a Yorkshire Pastoral" (1754), and John Robinson's "The Village Oppress'd: A Poem" (1771).

social dimension at all, it was manifested in two ways: either in a tendency to praise or celebrate a landowner or sovereign who had been generous enough to patronize or recognize a particular poet; or in the belief that the contemporary countryside afforded relief from urban vice and corruption.

Critics such as Raymond Williams and James Turner have contended that seventeenth-century writers often used the literary pastoral, particularly the "country-house" poems, to endorse and defend the values and interests of a particular landowner who had found favour with the poet. At times, the "defence" was a complex, ambivalent one, the result of a strained reconciliation between the poet's desire to praise his patron and his recognition of the ethical implications of defending an estate which propagated troublesome social realities such as poverty and worker exploitation in order to secure his own financial prospects. But it was a defence nonetheless, with poets strategically surmounting their ethical dilemma by emphasizing the owner's charity, praising his exemplary management of his estate, and playing down the workers' productivity. In the eighteenth century, too, the pastoral was sometimes used politically to praise and promote the reign of favoured sovereign. For example, in "The Third Pastoral" (1709), Ambrose Philips offers a thinly disguised tribute to Queen Anne through the shepherd Albino. In the opening lines of the poem, Albino credits the ease and delight of life in the countryside to Queen Anne's expert management of England's affairs:

Since then, through Anna's cares at ease we live

And see our cattle unmolested thrive,
 While from our Albion her victorious arms
 Drive wasteful warfare, loud in dire alarms.
 Like them will I my slender musick raise,
 And teach the vocal valleys Anna's praise. (9-14)

Stephen Duck also recognized the value of the pastoral form to praise a patron. In a poem appropriately named "Gratitude. A Pastoral" (1736), he offers extravagant praise to Queen Caroline for "giving him a pasture" of his own. It can be argued, therefore, that the pastoral, like the georgic, was often used to promote and celebrate the social and economic status quo, whatever that might happen to be.

John Barrell and John Bull also note the emergence of the "retirement" poem in the late seventeenth century. Poets, both weary of and cynical about the political strife and instability caused by the civil war and the period of the Protectorate, began to see the countryside as an escape from the turmoil of the court and the city. Poets such as Charles Cotton sang the virtues of country life and made much of the contrast between the peace, simplicity, usefulness and "natural" beauty of rural -- and particularly estate -- life, and the "pomp," extravagance and artificiality of city life. For these poets, the country offered a place where they could retreat from the complexities of urban life⁵.

By the mid-eighteenth century, there was a detectable, although by no means uniform, shift that countered these tendencies to use pastoral imagery either to

⁵ Notably, Cotton wrote a sequel to Isaac Walton's The Compleat Angler, by far the best-known prose idyll of rustic tranquillity.

praise patrons or to envision the country as a "natural" retreat. Some poets were growing increasingly sceptical of estate owners, particularly the nouveaux riches, who were purchasing property in the countryside in unprecedented numbers. Their "unnatural" and vulgar extravagance and preposterous attempts to "ornament" property that had once been usefully employed as farm land made them easy targets for ridicule. For example, Alexander Pope's Epistle to Burlington (1733) is a satirical inversion of the seventeenth-century "country house" poem, in which Pope delivers a scathing account of his host's horrendous taste in decoration, food and literature: "In plenty starving, tantaliz'd in state,/And complaisantly help'd to all I hate" (164-65). Pope's attack, while caustic, is primarily an aesthetic one. But he does conclude that while such excessive consumption is aesthetically regrettable, it is redeemed by the fact that it keeps the poor clothed, fed, and working: "Yet hence the Poor are cloath'd, the Hungry fed;/Health to himself, and to his Infants bread/The Lab'rer bears" (169-71). That it also keeps the poor "poor" is not dealt with, and Pope, in a spirit of optimism, envisions a pastoral future in which "cheerful Tenants bless their yearly toil" (183).

Like the Epistle to Burlington, The Deserted Village protests against the values and actions of a particular estate owner, but within a much different social and historical context. The result is an intriguing inversion on the poetic practice of attributing plenty, prosperity and contentment to a landowner's generosity and good management. Goldsmith reinforces the link between the condition of the landscape

and the behaviour and values of the neighbouring landowner, but he does so in derogatory rather than flattering terms. He boldly establishes an unequivocal connection between the desolation and neglect in the landscape and the self-interested behaviour of the neighbouring landowner, who has failed to exercise social responsibility in his desire to acquire a luxurious estate for himself. In Goldsmith's poem, therefore, as the landscape itself articulates, the landowner is the cause not of harmony and contented rural social relations, but of social dissonance and dispossession; he has devastated, not created and sustained, the pastoral community and landscape. He mourns: "Amidst thy bowers the tyrant's hand is seen,/And desolation saddens all thy green" (37-38)⁶; and "Sweet AUBURN! parent of the blissful hour,/Thy glades forlorn confess the tyrant's power" (76-77). This is quite an ideological distance not only from the "country house" poems of the seventeenth century, but from the spirit of conventional eighteenth-century pastoral itself.

The Deserted Village also embodies a common ideological response to the decline of the old rural order. Raymond Williams identifies this ideology as "that very powerful myth of modern England in which the transition from a rural to an industrial society is seen as a kind of fall, the true cause and origin of our social suffering and disorder" (96). What precipitates this "fall" and introduces dissonance and desolation into the harmonious, contented community that the speaker "remembers" is the process

⁶ From The Deserted Village in Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith. Vol. 4. Ed. Arthur Friedman. Oxford: Clarendon, 1966. 286-304. All subsequent quotations are from this text and are identified by line number.

of Enclosure. There is, of course, a very real historical basis for Goldsmith's protest. Parliamentary Enclosure, which Pamela Horn deemed "the most important single movement affecting land usage" in the eighteenth century (Rural World 51), both figuratively and literally transformed the face of the English countryside. As England moved from a feudal agrarian economy, where small-scale farming was done for subsistence purposes, to a modern market economy where agricultural harvests were produced on a massive scale for sale and profit, Parliament began to expropriate vast acres of land to expand already existing farms into larger and ostensibly more efficient and productive holdings. Often, the expropriated property included the village commons, the tract of land which the agricultural labourers shared and on which they grazed their cows and sheep, kept their hens, gathered fuel and planted crops for themselves and their families. The loss of these commons, as George Sturt, K.D.M. Snell, and other historians persuasively argue, was devastating to the labouring poor, for the slight increases in wages that these workers received in the post-enclosure era did not, in the final tally, compensate for the diminished standard of living incurred by the loss of commons rights and privileges⁷.

⁷ Both Sturt and Snell offer compelling recorded evidence to support the claim that Enclosure did severely diminish the standard of living of the rural agricultural workers. The loss of grazing rights meant that not only were the actual animals surrendered, but that families could no longer provide and produce their own butter, cheese and, most importantly, milk. As well, the poor lost gleaning rights so that they could no longer grow their own crops (including wheat for bread); and they lost their easy access to furze, frequently used as fuel, which grew in the commons area. The cumulative effect of all these losses was that the poor were forced into the marketplace to purchase many of the things that they had once themselves produced. For a good description of pre-enclosure

Although enclosed land was most commonly used to increase the production capacity of farms, it was not used exclusively for that purpose. Sometimes enterprising land-owners subsumed expropriated property into their own estates merely to increase their size and value. Such is the case in The Deserted Village, where the unnamed "tyrant" has gobbled up what was once the village Auburn and used it as "Space for his lake, his park's extended bounds,/Space for his horses, equipage, and hounds" (278-79). The result was that the men and women who inhabited the village were left landless themselves and with no land to work. Auburn became "deserted" as pockets of these now migratory workers, "scourged by famine from the smiling land" (299), drifted toward the urban centres, and sometimes other countries, in search of alternative employment.

The speaker in the poem, an expatriate from Auburn who revisits his childhood village, describes the economic and social impact of Enclosure on the dwellers of the village -- and himself -- as he contrasts his own fond memories of Auburn's "smiling" past with the uncompromising gloom and loneliness of the present. Hence, several landscapes emerge in this poem: the retrospective, "smiling" landscape situated in the speaker's mind; the immediate deserted landscape before him; and the imagined landscape of the torrid Americas to which the exiled Auburnites are forced

days see George Sturt's Change in the Village (1912), "The Altered Circumstances" 76-111. For corroborative and much more detailed evidence of the above claims see K.D.M. Snell's Annals of the Labouring Poor (1985), "Employment and Enclosure" especially 167-81.

to emigrate. It is the contrast between these landscapes and the values that the speaker ascribes to each which structures the poem and gives it not only its pathetic but also its moral tone, for he views the transformation which has taken place not only as a social and economic "fall" for Auburn, but a moral one for all of English society.

Goldsmith fervently believed that the "bold peasantry" was being gradually but irrevocably destroyed, not only by Enclosure and emparking but also by industrialization and commercial expansion. This belief causes him to idealize and simplify the days before the impact of these forces began to be truly felt. This, apparently, is a common response to social upheaval. In his insightful article on the later paintings of John Linnell, Paul Street argues that periods of extreme social disturbance tend to generate an ideological need, both in the artist and society at large, to construct a "simpler" version of the past, against which they can attempt to cope with the complexities of the present (73, 79). And Morag Shiach observes that "nostalgia is a frequent enough accompaniment to social transformations that render the very relations valorized quite impossible" (41). But Richard Quintana argues that the nostalgia in The Deserted Village is not Goldsmith's nostalgia at all, but rather his speaker's nostalgia. He claims that Goldsmith's speaker sentimentalizes the past self-consciously, strategically and often at his own expense "to enforce the plea that is being made by the poem -- a plea for the redress of wrongs" (qtd. in Mahony 33-34). Ultimately, however, the radical potential of the work is limited by his nostalgic

portrayal of village life. How effective can a critique of the present be that relies on a falsified vision of the past?

II.

The speaker in The Deserted Village is not mourning merely the collapse of an economy; he is simultaneously lamenting the dramatic demise of a whole value system that he felt had been sustained by the old economic order: "Even now, methinks, as pondering here I stand,/I see the rural virtues leave the land" (396-97). These "virtues" included "Contented toil," "hospitable care," "kind connubial tenderness," "piety" and "steady loyalty" (403-6). It is to this retrospective, valorized time that the speaker anchors not only these particular, dearly-departed "virtues," but indeed anything positive that he values. By doing so, he creates a harmonious, idyllic and "naturalized" vision in which all that is virtuous, pleasant and benevolent is associated with the old economic and social order, alive only in the speaker's memory. Antithetically, all that is "rank," offensive and distressful is ascribed to the present landscape to demonstrate its "unnaturalness." Goldsmith also has a gloomy view of the "savage climes" to which many of the evicted villagers were forced to emigrate, and his imagined portrait of the Americas is also presented in a manner which stress its "unnaturalness."

The speaker makes liberal use of the pastoral tradition and the ideologies which tended to surround it as he sets out to recreate village life in a manner that will

reinforce his belief that it was a more "natural" and moral time. While using pastoral imagery certainly helps the speaker accomplish this, it does jeopardize his insistence that his reminiscences are personal and remembered. The images have a generic, artificial quality that renders them dangerously close to "literary reminiscences" (Williams 77). Certainly Goldsmith's descriptions would have been familiar ones to pastoral readers. As in pastoral poetry, Nature's darker side is never revealed. Spring scurries to bring its promise of plenty to the village and summer departs from there with considerable reluctance. There is no mention of autumn and winter, the harshest seasons of the year. Certain key words resonate throughout his description of village life, reinforcing his claim that this was a life of "humble happiness" and "repeated pleasures" (8, 23). In the first thirty-five lines, the word "sweet" recurs four times, "lovely" is repeated three times, and "smiling" twice; "charms" appears four times and "cheer" is repeated twice. This is hardly a subtle technique, but it is an effective one. Then there is the emphasis on village games and leisure. The speaker describes the villagers not during a typical "work" day, but on one of the (rare) occasions when the villagers ceased work for frolic and sport. Because it is a community at play as opposed to one at work, a pretty, seductive picture of gambolling mirth and charm, "gentle hours" and "healthful sports" emerges in which both old and young share the delights and jokes of such pastimes (69, 71). In lines 113-24, the voices of the milkmaid and the playing children harmonize with the "sober herd" and "noisy geese." These scenes of harmonic interplay heighten the sense of this being a connected

"natural" order, in which all manner of humans and animals are happily joined. And it is these images of uncomplicated rural delight which define life in the old economic order for the speaker. Goldsmith uses the undeniable aesthetic appeal of the "smiling" landscape and villagers in old Auburn to establish it as a more "natural" time.

While Goldsmith does place considerable emphasis on the delightful, leisured aspects of village existence, he is also careful to establish that it was an useful life. Indeed, given the fact that advocates for Enclosure argued their case by claiming that the poor living in unenclosed commons led "idle" lives from which they should be "rescued," it would be expeditious for him to do so⁸. Therefore, nestled among the "bowers of innocence and ease" and the "decent church" is a "cultivated farm" and a "busy mill" (5, 12, 10, 11). The farm and mill confer a sense of bustle and purpose to the landscape that is markedly absent in the neglected landscape of the present. As well, while images of leisure do dominate the speaker's "memories," he is careful to establish that the leisure has been earned. He begins his description of the village games by noting that the villagers are "from labour free" and ends the description with the claim that such sports "taught even toil to please" (17, 32).

⁸ This is an interesting issue. K.D.M. Snell quotes historical documents which establish that advocates of enclosure justified the impact this would have on the poor by adopting a "self-justifying moral rhetoric" in which they argued that people with access to the commons were leading corrupt and indolent lives and that society had a "moral" prerogative to redress this state of affairs. For the actual historical evidence, see Annals of the Labouring Poor (1985), 170-71.

Goldsmith's eagerness to establish the traditional agrarian economy as a more "natural" economy than the present one forces him to suppress or moderate many of the distressing social realities and problems that would normally have been a part of pre-Enclosure life. These realities include poverty, illiteracy, wage depression, inadequate nutrition and health care and a relentless work schedule that allowed little time for leisure. As a result, he is often forced to retreat into self-serving rhetorical strategies and methods of description which will help him establish past village life as a more "moral" time. Goldsmith insinuates that village life was useful and industrious, but in a muted manner which glosses over the facts and exertion of labour and emphasizes only its "benefits." There are no actual descriptions of toil in the poem; indeed, "toil" is only mentioned when it is appended with the adjectives "smiling," "remitting" and "contented" (222, 16, 403). It is never "gruelling" or "dissatisfied." In the second line of the poem, a generic reference to the "labouring swain" is followed by the information that he was "cheared" by "health" and "plenty." It is hence established early in the poem that this is a social and economic order where work is rewarded (and rewarding) because it breeds self-sufficiency ("plenty"). The speaker also confers an impression of business to the landscape by his references to the "busy mill and "cultivated farm" (10, 11), which imply that the villagers are industrious without describing the actual work they do. Finally, Goldsmith follows the pastoral practice of acknowledging the fact of labour only after it has been completed.

As Peter Dixon notes, the reader only "meets the village work force" in the evening after work, when they are relaxing over a pint of ale in the village pub (113):

No more the farmer's news, the barber's tale,
 No more the wood-man's ballad shall prevail;
 No more the smith his dusky brow shall clear,
 Relax his ponderous strength, and lean to hear.
 (244-46)

Whenever Goldsmith does hint at some of the less enchanting realities of past village life, he does so carefully, again to demonstrate that the past was a more moral time than the present. For example, he makes reference to the "vagrant train" (149), the "long-remembered beggar" (151), and the "broken soldier" (153), all of whom are the victims of uncomfortable social problems. These figures are introduced in the poem to demonstrate the charitable nature of the parson; but it is worth noting that Goldsmith only admits the "wretched" into the "natural" economy when there is a remedial figure present to alleviate their suffering. When the comforted soldier and beggar are compared to "yon, widowed solitary thing" who is left to fend for herself, this contrast becomes clear (129).

The speaker's feelings and attitudes toward the villagers themselves also demonstrate the "naturalness" and happiness of the old way of life. Morag Shiach observes that in the eighteenth century, there was a strong ideological tendency to locate "moral goodness in the uneducated and rural population" of England (39). This tendency is apparent in The Deserted Village, for the villagers always behave with exemplary propriety. The "bashful virgin" displays a seemingly mixture of modesty and

coyness towards her suitor; the presence of the admonishing matron ensures that the young lovers never get the opportunity to tryst alone (29-30). Goldsmith is careful to establish that the courting practices between the young men and women of the village are decorous and that his rustics never cross the boundaries of sexual propriety. He also confirms that the "village train" are regular church-goers, and that every Sunday they throng about the preacher, who is himself the embodiment of Christian virtue, "with steady zeal" (182). Even the evenings spent in the village pub, which could be potentially socially and morally perilous, are innocuous and convivial. "Smiling toil" and "grey-beard mirth" drink in one another's company and gossip with the same affable moderation they do the "mantling bliss" (248):

Low lies that house where nut-brown draughts inspired,
 Where grey-beard mirth and smiling toil retired,
 Where village statesman talked with looks profound,
 And news much older than their ale went round.
 (221-24)

In this village pub, there is none of the violent brawling, blatant drunkenness, and alienating behaviour that is instigated by the villagers in George Crabbe's The Village (1783) during their Sunday sojourn to the pub. The moral integrity of the villagers at all times remains beyond reproach. Goldsmith's most dramatic if hyperbolic manifestation of this tendency is when the speaker actually "witnesses" the eviction of the "rural virtues" of piety, tenderness, and charity, who along with the dispossessed swains are deserting England (403-06). Nowhere is his belief that Virtue resides in the "bold peasantry" made more evident.

Goldsmith does not grant the villagers an intelligence that matches their virtue, for if they are profoundly good, they are also profoundly simple. The exceptions to this are the preacher and the schoolmaster, to both of whom the speaker devotes considerable poetic space. With these two, particularly the schoolmaster whom he "knew...well" (198), the speaker appears to feel an intellectual kinship, the bond of the brotherhood of shared values, perspectives and goals. The condescension -- kindly though it is -- which informs the speaker's relationship with the rest of the villagers is missing as he reminisces about the preacher and teacher with respectful reverence and affection.

In relation to this intellectual triumvirate of schoolmaster, preacher and poet, the remaining villagers appear absurdly simple, naive, and uncomplicated. Their lack of introspection seems particularly marked when contrasted to the speaker's comprehensive musings on the state of world affairs. Annabel Patterson has aptly identified the speaker in The Deserted Village as "a philosophic outsider, who distinguishes his own fully meditated happiness from the unself-conscious pleasures of the rustics" (229). Certainly he tends to insert considerable social and intellectual space between himself and the "common" villagers. The speaker, it seems, has always been both somewhat detached and elevated from village society. Even in his youth, he appears to have situated himself outside the normal round of village life, for he presents himself as a leisured figure who spent more time pondering village business than participating in it. In the poem's opening lines, he declares "How often have I

paused on every charm," which suggests a studied, somewhat self-conscious posture of disengagement (9). The fact that he sees the "busy mill" and "cultivated farm" aesthetically as "charms" rather than as places of work emphasizes the social distance between the speaker-poet and the work force. This distance is reinforced later in the poem when the speaker observes:

Sweet was the sound when oft at evening's close,
Up yonder hill the village murmur rose;
There as I past with careless steps and slow,
The mingling notes came softened from below. (113-16)

The tableau of the speaker situated above the village on a hill musing on all he sees and hears is representative of his relationship to the village as a whole. In fact, the only time he actually pictures himself among the villagers is when he is sharing his dream of astounding them with his intellectual prowess:

I still had hopes my latest hours to crown,
Amidst these humble bowers to lay me down;
To husband out life's taper at the close,
And keep the flame from wasting by repose.
I still had hopes, for pride attends us still,
Amidst the swains to shew my book-learned skill,
Around my fire an evening groupe to draw,
And tell of all I felt, and all I saw. (85-90)

The speaker views this opportunity to share the fruits of his own experience as the most satisfying reward he can think of this side of "Heaven" (112).

There is similar intellectual distance between the "village train" and the schoolmaster. Goldsmith presents the villagers as being in awe of even the most

elementary of the schoolmaster's skills, an awe that he, as a poet and a "book-learned" man, obviously does not share:

The village all declared how much he knew;
 'Twas certain he could write, and cypher too;
 Lands he could measure, terms and tides presage,
 And even the story ran that he could gauge. (207-10)

The awe matures into downright astonishment:

While words of learned length, and thundering sound,
 Amazed the gazing rustics ranged around,
 And still they gazed, and still the wonder grew,
 That one small head could carry all he knew. (213-16)

This scene recalls the poet's earlier desire to astound the rustic with his "book-learned skill," heightening the intellectual affinities between poet and schoolmaster. A similar gap exists between the villagers and the preacher. Goldsmith notes that as the rustics throng about the preacher, his smile "a parent's warmth expressed" (185), strengthening the impression that in relation to the preacher, the villagers are like children. Despite their education in the "little school," it is interesting that the intellectual gap between the villagers and the "scholars" in the village is never bridged.

While the effect of this condescension is comic, it also helps to highlight some of Goldsmith's attitudes toward the "bold peasantry." The depiction of the common villagers in The Deserted Village is limited by the fact that uniformly they are not granted the powers of introspection, intellect and articulateness that characterize the parson, the schoolmaster and, of course, the speaker himself. More problematically, Goldsmith does not seem to concede that, given equal advantages,

they might even be capable of such thought. The speaker portrays the villagers as an amiable, non-threatening and simple people who enjoy rewarding, industrious and virtuous lives without wealth.

In summary, Goldsmith establishes that past village life was more "natural" and "moral" by emphasising its harmonious, benevolent, useful and leisured aspects and suppressing or masking those elements which could ultimately challenge his claim that it was a more moral time. The result is a vision of the past which, in his rhetoric, is more "real" than the grotesque, unnatural present.

III.

If the old economic order is characterized by blissful, if somewhat suspect, harmony and community, the new order is characterized by decay, neglect, solitude, "unnaturalness," and a lopsided distribution of "Nature's plenty," in that what had once been shared by many is now being monopolized by one. The speaker himself makes some evident parallels between the remembered and the present landscapes. The "lovely bowers of innocence and ease" are now "sunk" in "shapeless ruin" (5, 47); the "never failing" brook is "choaked with sedges" (42); the "cheerful murmur" of the community is displaced by an ominous silence, punctuated only by the mournful cry of the lapwings and the bittern (this latter being significant because, according to Keith Thomas, it was a harbinger of bad luck [76]); and the "smiling plain" has become a "pensive plain" (40, 136). Then there are the many references, luxuriantly

amassed, of decay and ruin. The lapwing flies among "desert walks" (45); the wall is "mouldering" and "o'ergrown" (48); the poet wanders on "tangling walks, and ruined grounds" (78). The paths are "grass-grown" (127); "torn shrubs" and wild flowers replace the preacher's mansion (139); the fence is "straggling" (193); the public house is "tottering" (238). This landscape is judged solely in terms of what it has displaced. The grassy brook is repugnant because it was once "the never failing brook" (11). The desert walks are grotesque because they have replaced the "cultivated farm" (10). The physical decay, wildness and neglect in the landscape function metaphorically to reinforce what the speaker perceives to be the present society's spiritual and moral decay.

Ronald B. Hatch posits that the work of many late eighteenth-century writers, including Goldsmith and George Crabbe, "embodies alternate or antithetic visions of the world which result from a conflict between consciously held ideas and those developed under the pressure of creative practice" (2). This conflict is evident in The Deserted Village in these descriptions of rampant decay. Auburn was, after all, ostensibly enclosed to become a park for the "tyrant" and, realistically, the desert walks would have been well-maintained and manicured. In his eagerness to use the aesthetic condition of the landscape metaphorically to reinforce the "unnaturalness" of present society, Goldsmith, at times, compromises the poem's realism.

But it is not only the landscape itself which has declined. It is the decline in the fortunes of the villagers themselves which saddens the speaker and unleashes

his moral outrage. The poet is haunted by the figures which no longer appear in the landscape, the vanished villagers who have been exiled by the "sons" of greed. Their fate is imagined in a most pathetic manner. They are either seduced and destroyed by urban corruption, as is the "poor, houseless, shivering female" (326), or exiled to the "ravaged landscape" and "horrid shores" of the Americas (358, 346).

It was a commonplace in the poetry of this period to depict city life as riddled with corruption, vice and misery. The city was felt by many poets to be an "unnatural" place in every sense of the word, a feeling encapsulated in William Cowper's oft-repeated truism that "God made the country, and man made the town" (The Task I.749). Goldsmith offers a predictable diatribe on the horrors of urban excess, pride and luxury (310-25). He also demonstrates the exploitive nature of city life by focusing on the young, "sweet" village girl who is "Now lost to all; her friends, her virtue fled,/Near her betrayer's door she lays her head" (331-32). Robert Markley has noted that the ideology of sentiment often "identifies the victims of social inequality...with 'feminine' powerlessness" (212). The fate of this girl symbolizes the fate of Auburn itself, for Auburn, too, has been betrayed and destroyed by the forces of greed and "luxury," as Goldsmith makes clear by way of an analogy in which he compares the fate of Auburn to an innocent female: "Thus fares the land, by luxury betrayed,/In nature's simplest charms at first arrayed" (295-96).

The speaker's description of the landscape to which the exiles must now flee is even more dramatically "unnatural." It is a topsy-turvy, menacing world where

everything familiar and natural has become transposed into something alien and unnatural. "The ravaged landscape" actually "mingles" with "the skies" (358); men are "savage" and "more murderous" than the tigers awaiting their "hapless prey" (355). It is filled with exotic -- and dangerous -- plants and animals: "poisonous fields" and "matted woods," bats, scorpions and snakes. This lack of order is meant to contrast with the relative orderliness and stability of past life. There are also implicit correspondences between the present contemporary English countryside and the Americas. Both landscapes are silent. In the deserted village, "the sounds of population fail" while in the Americas, "birds forget to sing" (125, 349). Both landscapes are unkempt and "matted" with vegetation (cf. 41-42, 349). And both are populated by unnatural, "savage men." Goldsmith obviously wishes us to pity those who are exiled to such a place. The irony, of course, is that often the emigrants who came to America enjoyed an improved standard of living and a greater degree of privilege than they had ever received in the villages they had left. In the "Introduction" to Annals of the Labouring Poor, K.D.M. Snell quotes from letters written by eighteenth and nineteenth-century emigrants to their relatives back in England. In these letters, they rejoice in their new lives. One man writes: "I think [sic] God my wife and I never found ourselves so comfortable in England as we do here, we have a comfortable house to live in, and a good cow for our use, and plenty of firing..." (qtd. in Snell 12).

Ironically, what "connects" the individuals who remain in the landscape fashioned by the new social order is their lack of community, their abandonment and isolation, both physical and social. The word "solitary" is used to describe and link the figures who are left to cope with the disintegration of the community. The one remaining villager, "yon widowed, solitary thing" (129) is pictured: old, in rags and starving in the environment that had previously only witnessed vigour, high spirits and "village plenty" (136). The dehumanizing elements of the new order, suggested by the fact that this woman is a "thing," are confirmed by her poverty and her abandonment. She is both a poignant reminder and affirmation of the demise of a more humane, moral society, when there were men like the preacher to administer comfort and relief to the poor.

As well, the "man of wealth and pride" surveys "solitary sports" from his position of privilege. The estate owner indubitably remains the villain of the piece. He is twice called a "tyrant" (35, 76), once a "spoiler" (49). He "usurps" and "grasps" the land and is identified as a part of "trade's unfeeling train" (64, 39, 63) and one of the sons of "pride" (275). He is described so accusingly because he has upset the balance of what was once a "natural" order. The speaker talks of the "poor's decay" (266) and the distressing fact that while "wealth accumulates" "men decay" (52). In his essay "The Revolution in Low Life" published in Lloyd's Evening Post June 1762, Goldsmith makes a similar observation: "Wherever the traveller turns, while he sees one part of the inhabitants of the country grow immensely rich, he sees the other

growing miserably poor, and the happy equality of condition now entirely removed" (qtd. in Friedman III.197). What Goldsmith is mourning and protesting in this poem is the demise of that "happy equality of condition," in which all men enjoy a moderate, modest lifestyle.

This perhaps explains the moral distinction Goldsmith makes between the "plenty" of the villagers and the "luxury" of the estate owner. Goldsmith uses the word "plenty" somewhat ambiguously; for although the villagers of Auburn have little money, they enjoy "plenty" (2, 327). Hence, "plenty" appears to refer to a frugal, although not uncomfortable, lifestyle that is bolstered by a morally appropriate set of values. In contrast, wealth and luxury are described as being "unnatural" burdens, "unwieldy" and "cumbrous" (66). Those who possess it also monopolize an unnatural amount of space, and Goldsmith's metaphorical use of space to dramatize the intrusiveness of the excessive lifestyles of the nouveaux riches is particularly effective:

The man of wealth and pride
Takes up a space that many poor supplied;
Space for his lake, his park's extended bounds,
Space for his horse, equipage and hounds;
The robe that wraps his limbs in silken sloth
Has robbed the neighbouring fields of half their growth. (275-80)

The difference in lifestyle becomes particularly marked when the preacher -- who the speaker ironically comments was "passing rich with forty pounds a year" -- and the "tyrant" are compared (142). The speaker cannot lavish enough praise on the preacher. He notes: "And even his failings leaned to Virtue's side" (164). In contrast

to the "tyrant" who remains isolated in his monstrous estate enjoying "solitary sports" (281), the kindly, pious preacher devotes himself to helping those less fortunate than himself socially, economically and spiritually. Goldsmith informs us with deftly understated irony that "to relieve the wretched was his pride" (163). The preacher's "space," therefore, is constantly invaded by others, and he is the willing host to a steady stream of down-and-out visitors: vagrants, beggars, the "ruined spendrift" and "broken soldier" (155). And all these "broken" men are comforted (if not healed) by the "reverend champion's" generosity (173). Goldsmith also establishes that the preacher is both a spiritual and a moral leader for Auburn: "He tried each art, reproved each dull delay,/Allured to brighter worlds, and led the way" (169-70). He offers them comfort, guidance "his heart, his love, his griefs" (187). The speaker ultimately constructs a simplistic social vision in which "rich" and "poor" represent contrasting moral, as well as economic, states of being.

Finally, the speaker makes his "solitary rounds" (77), for he also experiences personal loss as a result of this social transformation. The decline of the old social order has meant the loss of a community where considerable value was attached to a poet's intellect and "book-learned skill," and where those who possessed such qualities -- like the parson and the schoolmaster -- enjoyed the respect and trust of the rest of the community. The new social order with its emphasis on money and property places little value on such achievements. Hence, the speaker also mourns his own alienation and loss of social status, and questions the role that he can perform in

a society in which poetry is "neglected and decried" (411). In fact, Raymond Williams sees the disorder in the landscape as a manifestation of the poet's inward confusion (79). At the end of the poem, poetry is evicted from England along with the villagers and their virtues, and the speaker offers his hope that poetry will be able to relocate to other countries and instruct their natives to "[t]each erring man to spurn the rage of gain;/Teach him that states of native strength possessed,/Though very poor, may still be very blest (424-26). Goldsmith's speaker sees no role for poetry in England's future, for he, and men like the preacher and schoolmaster, have proven ineffectual. They have failed to "[t]each erring man to spurn the rage of gain." The poet, therefore, sees himself as much as a victim of the values of the new social order as the dispossessed peasantry.

The countryside can no longer be viewed as a physical and moral retreat from complexity and vice, for now it too has been infected with the degenerate forces that had previously only flourished in the city. In the poet's eye, rural life has been corrupted, almost irrevocably, by expansion and enclosure. The pessimism of The Deserted Village becomes evident when it is contrasted to Gray's Elegy. Gray's poem, melancholy though it is, still admits the possibility of a rural way of life that Goldsmith believes no longer exists. Despite the pretty images of delight and contentment which appear in the poem, Goldsmith's vision is a gloomy one. Ultimately, the poem is a wistful and nostalgic evocation of a declined community that the poet recognizes he is powerless to restore, except in his poetry.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Vice and Misery Now Demand the Song"¹: George Crabbe's Quest for "Truth" in Poetry

George Crabbe's poem The Village (1783) both satirizes and challenges the generic restrictiveness of the eighteenth-century pastoral tradition. Crabbe was irritated by the idealized view of country life promoted by the pastoral and georgic forms, which portrayed the rural labourer as amorous, leisured and contented in a harmonious, docile and empathic "Nature." The poem also challenges the tendency to sentimentalize the condition of the poor, a common practice in the poetry of this period. This sentimentality resulted in absurd suppositions, such as the very common belief that the poor were handsomely compensated for their long hours in the fields by the exuberant "health" they acquired from being outdoors. Crabbe responded to such poetic tendencies by "daring" to offer "the real picture of the poor" in his poetry (I.5)². Hence, the version of rural life he creates in The Village functions as both an alternative and a corrective to pastoral and georgic representations. In this chapter, I

¹ This line is from The Parish Register (I.167), which was published in Crabbe's Poems 1807.

² From The Village in Crabbe's Poetical Works. Vol 1. Ed. Norma Dalrymple-Champneys and Arthur Pollard. Oxford: Clarendon, 1988. 157-73. Unless otherwise indicated all quotations are taken from the 1783 version of the text and are identified by line number.

will explore Crabbe's attack on the conventions of pastoral and humanitarian poetry, his satiric use and inversion of pastoral strategies to promote his pessimistic beliefs about country life and human nature, and his "alternative" version of rural life.

Like The Deserted Village, The Village has generated a variety of conflicting critical responses. Annabel Patterson observes that while critics such as J.E. Conington and Oliver Sigworth see Crabbe as an important figure "in the defeat of the Golden Age pastoral by the new realism," other critics like Roger Sales and John Barrell see Crabbe as a "deeply conservative figure whose commitment to a factual account of the working poor was that of an 'overseer'" (228). Those who think Crabbe a radical "realist" tend to measure The Village's "realism" within the context of early and mid-eighteenth-century poetry. Certainly, when compared to poems such as James Thomson's The Seasons (1726-46) and John Dyer's The Fleece (1757), The Village does seem to describe the plight of the poor realistically. Those who perceive Crabbe as a "conservative" overseer generally point to the gap between the speaker's claim that his poem will create "a real picture of the poor" and the picture that he actually ends up "painting" (l.5). They claim that Crabbe's portrait of village life, with its myopic focus on vice and misery, lacks the balance and roundedness which could render it truthful. They also tend to question the trustworthiness of Crabbe's speaker. What reasons, after all, does Crabbe provide us for trusting his speaker? And does the speaker ever compromise that trust? These critics also raise excellent

points. Certainly, there does seem to be a discrepancy between what Crabbe had hoped to accomplish in his poem and what he actually does accomplish.

Crabbe's acute preoccupation with how the poetry in the past had portrayed (and had not portrayed) rural life means that The Village has to be carefully considered within the context of contemporary eighteenth-century poetry, particularly pastoral poetry. While many eighteenth-century pastoral poets and theorists, including Jonathan Swift, John Gay, Alexander Pope and Thomas Tickell, recognized that there was a pronounced gap between the pastoral conception of country life and the reality, they were not troubled by it. Pope, in his early critical essay, Discourse on Pastoral Poetry (1709) complacently observes: "[W]e are not to describe our shepherds as shepherds at this day really are, but as they may be conceiv'd then to have been; when the best of men follow'd the employment" (25). And both Pope and Thomas Tickell, who has been credited with writing an influential series of essays on the pastoral in The Guardian (Nos. 22, 23, 28, 30, 32), agree that making use of "illusion" and suppressing the miseries of country life were necessary strategies if the resulting poetry was to be "rendered...delightful" and aesthetically agreeable to both reader and poet (27)³. In fact, Pope thought the idea of a "naturalized" pastoral was ridiculous,

³ Pope claims: "We must therefore use some illusion to render a Pastoral delightful; and this consists in exposing the best side only of a shepherd's life and in concealing its miseries" (Discourse 27). Tickell makes a remarkably similar observation in Guardian No. 22 (1713) when he declares: "It is not enough that he [the poet] write about the country; he must give us what is agreeable in that Scene, and hide what is wretched.... Thus in writing Pastorals, let the Tranquility of that Life appear full and plain, but hide the Meanness of it; represent its Simplicity as clear as you please, but cover its Misery"

as he demonstrates in his satiric essay on the pastoral in Guardian No. 40 (1713). Pope and Tickell had publicly argued about what constituted "true" Pastoral, of course, but it was an abstract argument waged primarily on aesthetic grounds. Neither critic had actually questioned the integrity of a tradition which intentionally represented rural life "falsely"; nor had they pondered the implications of continuing to construct an idealized version of rural life that indulged the fancies of urban poets at the expense of realistically representing the economic and social conditions and concerns of rural workers.

As the opening lines of The Village make clear, these were the issues that preoccupied Crabbe and led him to challenge the pastoral tradition. He was disturbed by the discrepancies that existed between rural life as it was depicted in literary pastoral and the life of misery and hardship that he himself had witnessed while growing up on the Suffolk coast. As a result, he constructs a speaker who doggedly and impatiently questions the relevance that pastoral poetry, which promotes a rehearsed, celebratory vision of a golden age, could have for the present "iron" era. The speaker's frustration is evident as he complains:

Yet still for these we frame the tender strain,
 Still in our lays fond Corydons complain,
 And shepherds' boys their amorous pains reveal,
 The only pains, alas! they never feel. (I.11-14)

(qtd. in Stephens 106).

Crabbe's speaker compares golden age shepherds with contemporary shepherds. He observes:

Fled are the times, when, in harmonious strains,
The rustic poet prais'd his native plains
No shepherds now in smooth alternate verse
Their country's beauty or their nymph's rehearse; (I.7-10)

Crabbe's interpretation of the golden age is a simplistic one, in which "the poet and the solitary shepherd" enjoy a one-to-one relationship where they "mutually represent one another" (Alpers 125). This "mutual representation" does not exist in contemporary rural society where

peasants now
Resign their pipes and plod behind the plough;
And few amid the rural tribe have time
To number syllables and play with rhyme; (I.23-26)

Crabbe hence establishes that any correspondences between the golden age and contemporary England have been exhausted and that those who think they see similarities are merely perpetuating a "flattering dream" (I.17).

The reason this discrepancy exists, Crabbe feels, is that the rustics are no longer being represented in poetry by poets who are actually acquainted with the rigours of rural life. Instead, the poor are being "sung" about by "sleepy bards" who "never knew their pains" and who are too indolent to acquaint themselves either with those pains or the men and women who suffer them (I.17, I.22): "For no deep thought, the trifling subjects ask,/To sing of shepherds is an easy task" (I.33-34). Most poetic descriptions had become distorted and inaccurate as a result; they had

"widely strayed" from "truth" and "nature" (I.19). Here Crabbe draws the reader's attention to the tradition of invoking a Muse for inspiration instead "of referring to the empirical world for their evidence" (Hatch 4). Crabbe's speaker rejects the Muse as the source of the descriptions in his poem: "The Muse can give no more" (I.6). He relies instead on the "examples" he was "taught" while growing up, where he saw "other cares than those the Muse relates" (I.51). Crabbe makes a clear distinction between poetry which relies on direct or actual experience of the "real" world for its substance and poetry which relies on literary texts and traditions, and he appears to privilege a poetry formulated on the former because it is closer to "truth."

Of course, challenges to the pastoral were hardly new. Margaret Anne Doody argues that the eighteenth century was a time in which generic forms could not "resist re-stating... parodying and overthrowing" themselves and in which any formally conceived poetic genre could not "escape calumny and self-betrayal" (60). The pastoral's sentiments and conventions had already been both lampooned and thoughtfully questioned by writers as diverse as Jonathan Swift, John Gay, Mary Leapor, Samuel Johnson and, as Crabbe himself mentions, Stephen Duck (I.27). Crabbe believed that poetry ought to do more than simply delight and entertain: it should also have social relevance for contemporary society. Crabbe felt that England's poets, who were, after all, living in an imperfect "iron" age, had a moral imperative to reflect the concerns of the society for which they were writing. This meant, among other things, making the "real" concerns of the poor the subjects of their poems

instead of more congenial, less relevant topics. There were simply too many problems and too much misery in the countryside to concentrate only on its delightful aspects:

"Shall I dare these real ills to hide/In tinsel trappings of poetic pride" (I.47-48).

Crabbe suggests that, up until now, poets have failed the poor labouring classes by refusing to admit the concerns of the latter into their poetic texts and to make real distress, as opposed to manufactured literary distress (or no distress at all) the subject of their poetry:

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? (I.59-62)

Crabbe is determined that his poetry shall not fail the labouring poor.

Ronald B. Hatch maintains that "Crabbe feels the modern age needs poets to describe man's disappointments in everyday life" (3). Indeed, at the heart of Crabbe's impatience with the pastoral lies an intense pessimism and disillusionment about the society for which he is writing. Again, as Hatch argues, "grand and beautiful" poetic themes were appropriate to men like Virgil, who lived in nobler, if not better, times, but were completely inappropriate to the current degenerate, miserable age (3).

Crabbe believed that poets who suppressed the miseries of the lives of the rural poor in order to "delight" or achieve an agreeable aesthetic effect were practising a form of deception and he deemed the practice morally reprehensible. This may

seem a harsh judgement, especially when one considers that poets have never been compelled to be "honest" in their poetry. But Crabbe had rigid ideas about poetic "reality." Peter New sees Crabbe as an artist who believed in an "external reality" and who thought it was the "function of art to precisely copy that reality" (4). Not only did Crabbe perceive the need for a poetry that precisely and concisely described the "real" world rather than conventional fantasy; he actually believed that absolute reality could be reflected in poetry. This explains the otherwise curious adjective that Crabbe used to describe the "thresher-poet": "honest Duck" (I.27). Duck, Crabbe felt, wrote "honest" poetry; Classical pastoral poets may once have written "honest" poetry; but any poet who writes pastoral poetry to describe eighteenth-century England is writing "dishonest" poetry because pastoral poetry and the present countryside in no way mirror each other. While Crabbe may not have been the first poet in the eighteenth century to challenge the viability of the pastoral form, he was one of the few to object to and reject the pastoral on ethical, as opposed to merely aesthetic, grounds.

While the neoclassical pastoral tradition was Crabbe's primary target, it was not his only one. His poem also attacks other poetic practises, which, like the pastoral, steered poetry away from "truth." These included sentimental benevolence or sentimental humanitarianism and the tendency to sentimentalize the plight of the poor.

Robert Markley defines sentimental benevolence as the "affective spectacle of benign generosity" (211). Put more simply, this is the tendency to focus on either the pleasures of giving or the generosity of the giver instead of "the condition of the

poor" (Hatch 7). For example, in Guardian No. 105 (1713), Richard Steele indulges in sentimental benevolence when he visits a charity school and pleurably observes:

Such a numerous and Innocent Multitude, cloathed in the
Charity of their Benefactors, was a Spectacle pleasing both to
God and Man, and a more beautiful expression of Joy and
Thanksgiving than could have been exhibited by all the Poms
of a Roman Triumph. (qtd. in Copley 135)

Thomson's speaker in The Seasons also indulges in sentimental benevolence as he rhapsodically describes the feelings of elation that performing an act of charity can impart to the doer:

For you the roving spirit of the wind
Blows Spring abroad; for you the teeming clouds
Descend in gladsome plenty o'er the world;
And the Sun sheds his kindest rays for you,
Ye flower of human race! (Spring 887-91)

Both Steele and Thomson concentrate on the pleasures and the power that "Creative Bounty" bestows upon the giver or observer, while suppressing any discussion of why the charitable acts were necessary to begin with.

Closely related to sentimental benevolence was the tendency to sentimentalize the plight of the poor. Irvin Ehrenpreis maintains that "the need to shield one's eyes from disagreeable sights early produced the literary habit of substituting more malleable articles for the actual poor" (3). Often, the poet would cloak the real condition of the poor behind euphemistic and evasive language, or would redirect the reader's gaze to some less offensive object (or subject) such as poet, the poetry or the reader himself (3). The poets also focused on the perceived

compensatory advantages of living in the country, such as the simplicity of the lifestyle. For example, in Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard (1751), Gray's speaker alludes to the "chill penury" of the swains but he never elaborates on it; indeed, he successfully mutes the "chill" by his lingering descriptions of the crackling hearth and the warmth and agreeable simplicity of family life in the little home. Crabbe was dismissive of "gentle souls who dream[t] of rural ease" (l.172). As his satirical references to Goldsmith's The Deserted Village make clear, he also decried poets who described an intolerable present but who then idealized conditions in the past in order to make the contrast between them more poignant and powerful.

Closely related to sentimentalization was the common belief that any graphic account of human suffering discouraged rather than encouraged benevolence. Any spectacle of actual suffering had the adverse effect of disgusting, offending or alienating, as opposed to securing, a potential benefactor. The painter John Thomas Smith says in his diary, "In poverty nothing will more easily or more universally excite the attentions of benevolence than the appearance of neatness and cleanliness" (qtd. in Bermingham 108). Hazlitt too makes a similar observation in his luxuriant and witty appraisal of Crabbe's poetry in London Magazine (1821) when he observes:

By associating pleasing ideas with the poor, we incline the rich to extend good offices to them. The cottage twined round with real myrtles, or with the poet's wreath, will invite the hand of kindly assistance sooner than Mr. Crabbe's naked "ruin'd shed;" (qtd. in Pollard 303)

Poets who wished to excite in others feelings of compassion for the plight of the poor could better stir those feelings by anaesthetizing and sentimentalizing their portraits of rural life. Crabbe intuitively recognized that such ideological approaches to poverty were problematic because they encouraged "false" ways of seeing.

II.

The Village is immeasurably complicated by the fact that there is more than one village described within the poem. As well as the desolate coastal village, there is also a bountiful inland village, a winter landscape which is the setting for the old shepherd's soliloquy, and a generic workhouse and pub located in some indefinite village. Hence, Crabbe's village is actually an impressionistic composite of several villages and landscapes. For the sake of clarity, I concentrate first on examining Crabbe's construction of the coastal village; I then examine his construction of the inland village⁴, making comparisons between the two when appropriate.

In the first one hundred and thirty lines of The Village, Crabbe's speaker creates a portrait of rural life which challenges and satirizes the pastoral ideal. Life in the village is neither leisured, innocent nor contented; the villagers lead toilsome, unhappy and dissolute lives. What must be noted is how Crabbe's speaker establishes the facts of village life. He defiantly sets his version of rural life against the pastoral

⁴ Gavin Edwards makes the distinction between the inland and coastal village in George Crabbe: Poetry on Border Land (1990) Chapter 3.

ideal, puncturing it and revealing its fraudulence and irrelevance to contemporary country life. Margaret Ann Doody argues that by beginning The Village in such a defiant manner, Crabbe is announcing "his refusal to be restrained by traditions of genre and by stylistic expectations" (82). As Raymond Williams notes, "the energy of the new convention springs from the rejection of the old" (Country 87).

Crabbe begins with the landscape. He appears to have appreciated extraordinarily the extent to which the ease and delight imagined by pastoral poetry depended upon the benevolence and fertility of the external world. By situating shepherds in an external Nature that was idealized, empathic and benign, pastoral poets had not only made it easy for the shepherds to appear contented, but had actually given them a reason to be so, as most of the shepherds' "poetry" was devoted to their rapturous and attentive response to the idealized landscape. In the case of the elegiac pastoral, the collective grief of the shepherds was extended into and persuasively amplified by the external world, as "Nature" actively shared in the shepherd's mourning: "The balmy Zephyrs, silent since her Death, / Lament the Ceasing of a sweeter Breath" (Pope Winter 49-50). In conventional pastoral, shepherd and Nature were engaged in a harmonious and responsive relationship, in which Nature was neither threatening nor dominant.

Crabbe's speaker initially defies this stylized relationship by his uncompromisingly harsh, unconventional description of the landscape he grew up in, his childhood village of Aldborough, where he was "cast by Fortune" on a "frowning,"

depressingly infertile coastline (I.49). This landscape contains no "groves" or "happy valleys" (I.50). External "Nature," instead of submitting, responding to and flourishing under human endeavour, is defiant of human attempts to control and cultivate her: "Rank weeds, that every art and care defy,/Reign over the land and rob the blighted rye" (I.67-68). Far from being fruitful and bountiful, this parched land is a farmer's nightmare of "burning sand," "thistles," "sterile soil" and "withering brake" (I.65, I.69, I.72, I.63); the harvest it yields is "thin," "wither'd" and "sickly" (I.66, I.76). Only weeds flourish, and they savagely threaten and eventually kill many of the new growths before they can mature (I.75-76). The speaker uses unorthodox verbs and adjectives to describe this landscape. The poppies "mock" (I.71); the mallow is "slimy" and the tares are "clasping" (I.74, I.76). Perhaps the most powerful and unconventional natural image is the sea, which Crabbe describes in predatory terms. It is an ocean of "greedy waves" and "fierce" tides that seeks "miserable prey" and "devours" the shore (I.126, I.127, I.118). This is a Nature that cannot be transformed or dominated, but it can easily transform the lives of others. Crabbe does concede that this landscape has a certain beauty and "splendour," but it is a "sad splendour," likened to that of a beautiful but "betrayed" woman who knows she is powerless to restore herself to her former state of innocence and virtue (I.78, I.79-84). The splendour also "vainly" shines, for "splendour" cannot be harvested, and beauty cannot disguise the suffering and sterility in the land (I.78). Splendour ultimately offers little compensation to those who are forced to make their living in such an environment.

This passage is striking not only because it refuses to idealize "Nature"; there is also an unpredictability, precision and immediacy in the descriptions of the natural world which suggests first-hand observation. It impresses one as being an observed landscape, as opposed to one that has been extracted from pastoral verse. As well, it promotes a pessimistic view of the relationship between "man" and nature. The villagers seldom conquer Nature and when they do do so, the "conquest" is fleeting and short-lived.

Crabbe also emphasizes the drudgery and futility of farming in the coastal village. In so doing, he appears to be challenging the georgic tendency to glorify husbandry. In English georgics like The Seasons and The Fleece, labour was hard, but it was also invigorating and ennobling for those who performed it; the land was complaisantly fertile and those toilsome hours in the field were generally rewarded with a rich and bountiful crop. Thomson, for example, exalts:

Rich is thy soil, and merciful thy clime;
Thy streams unfailing in the Summer's drought;
Unmatched thy guardian-oaks; thy valleys float
With golden waves; (Summer 1446-49)

In Crabbe's poetic world, those who work the land spend more time struggling against Nature than succumbing to her charms. He emphasises the drudgery and gruelling labour of farming:

But when amid such pleasing scenes I trace
The poor laborious natives of the place,
And see the mid-day sun, with fervid ray,
On their bare heads and dewy temples play; (I.41-44)

The proliferating weeds and poor harvests in this particular landscape insinuate that farming is more often disheartening than it is rewarding and profitable -- "fruitless toil" in more ways than one (I.134). In fact, many are forced to turn to crime and smuggling to supplement their incomes.

Crabbe also challenges the view of industry articulated in georgics such as John Dyer's The Fleece (1757), where hard work is seen to be the panacea and salvation of the otherwise "idle" and "undeserving" poor. In Dyer's poem, the poor are ennobled by their hard work:

Nor less they gain
Virtue than wealth, while, on their useful works
From day to day intent, in their full minds
Evil no place can find. (134-35)

However, in The Village, the moral character of the villagers is definitely not improved by their gruelling hours of toil. Crabbe constructs an accusing portrait of a surly, antagonistic community in which every individual has been infected with an invidious hostility:

Here joyless roam a wild amphibious race,
With sullen woe display'd in every face;
Who far from civil arts and social fly,
And scowl at strangers with suspicious eye. (I.85-89)

And the community is not only guilty of inimical behaviour. It is literally lawless, for the people smuggle, plunder and accept bribes apparently without compunction. The engaging simplicity of the pastoral shepherd has been supplanted by a savvy "artfulness," as the villagers become embroiled in elaborate machinations to "foil their

foes by cunning or by force" (I.112, I.106). The stealthy pursuits which occupy the leisure time of the villagers contribute to the disintegration and dissonance in the community. This is quite a distance from the conviviality of the pastoral, as Crabbe himself suggests by a satiric, well-placed reference to "rural games" (I.92-100). The speaker establishes the community as an "unnatural" environment, where even Nature herself has been usurped by "Wrong" and "Fear" (I.110-11). Crabbe's vision of Aldborough is as uniformly dismal as the pastoral world was uniformly appealing.

The description of coastal village life is a gloomy one, and it is not simply because the speaker is defying pastoral convention. Crabbe's speaker regards the villagers with a hostility which equals their own. The speaker does not seem to be able to offer a balanced view of the villagers; he focuses exclusively on their vice and misery and refuses to ascribe to them any degree of moral good and decency. René Huchon, who has written the most comprehensive biography of Crabbe, sees the speaker as not just distanced but alienated from the village he is describing. He speculates that Crabbe's jaundiced view of the villagers is inextricably bound up in the hostile and often shabby treatment he received from them, both during his unsuccessful stint there as an apprentice surgeon between 1775 and 1780 and his unequally unhappy sojourn as the village pastor a year and a half later. This may well be, but we do not even need to rely on such speculative biographical readings, because the speaker hints within the text itself at his disappointments with village life. He confesses that while living in the village, he "sought the simple life that Nature yields"

(I.110), but in the end, he was forced to "flee" because the "simple life" had been "usurp'd" by "Rapine and Wrong and Fear" (I.111). The speaker lets his pessimism and disillusionment with village life infect his judgement and saturate his poetic descriptions of them. This creates difficulties when he later describes the workers more sympathetically labouring in the fields because it becomes difficult to reconcile "the poor laborious natives of the place" with the "bold, artful, surly savage race" (I.42, I.112; Edwards 47).

In lines 131-346, the speaker describes rural distress and hardship in a completely different setting: in a bountiful inland village. Crabbe's speaker continues to defy and challenge poetic and pastoral conventions by describing in excruciating detail labour, sickness, death and poverty. In fact, he actually parodies the pastoral monologue form, as well as the stock pastoral figure of the wizened but wise shepherd in lines 200 to 225. An example of such a figure can be found in Ambrose Philips's "The Second Pastoral" (1709). While age bestows wisdom and veneration in Philips's pastoral world, it brings precious little hardship. The old shepherd, Thenot, concedes that his body is deteriorating, but his physical frailty has by no means quelled his vigour: "Spite of my snowy head and icy veins,/My mind a chearful temper still retains" (23-24). Indeed, he is impossibly cheerful and chastises the mournful Colinet for failing to show a similar amount of spirit in the face of adversity. Far from being dependent on others for his welfare, Thenot shows a generous self-sufficiency, as he offers Colinet "new cream," "mild cheese" and "fruit," as well as a place to sleep.

In contrast to Thenot, Crabbe's nameless old shepherd is weary of life. He is poor, ill, and alone, spurned by rich and poor alike, no longer valued because he is no longer a productive worker. As in pastoral convention, he sees parallels between his emotional state and the condition of the landscape: "I, like yon wither'd leaf, remain behind, Nipt by frost and shivering in the wind" (l.210-11). But unlike the pastoral figure in distress, who always receives deliverance from his sorrow either from another good shepherd or from his own common sense, only death can deliver this old shepherd from his troubles. Far from detracting from his attack on pastoral poetry, Crabbe's parodic use of pastoral monody and the old shepherd figure creates an irony in which "the clash between what is and what poets pretend rings more loudly" (Chamberlain 29).

The inland village is crowded with descriptions of rural hardship and suffering. For example, the speaker offers an intense description of a hot work day which bears a striking resemblance to the threshers' toils in The Thresher's Labours:

See them beneath the dog-star's raging heat,
When the knees tremble and the temple's beat;
Behold them leaning on their scythes, look o'er
The labour past, toils to come explore; (l.144-47)

Where Crabbe's poem is "unarguably radical" is in its graphic accounts of suffering and poverty (Patterson 231). The description of the parish poor house, in all its sordidness, squalor and misery, was especially startling for Crabbe's contemporaries. In most descriptions of poverty, the images of suffering were organized in such a way

that they could solicit the reader's pity without offending him or her (Hatch 7). In contrast, Crabbe enlightens his readers with his descriptions of human suffering and does not concern himself about shocking or offending his audience. He calmly and dispassionately, with an uncanny eye for detail, informs them of the awful facts:

Thus groan the old, till by disease opprest,
 They taste a final woe, and then they rest.
 Their's is yon house that holds the parish poor,
 Where walls of mud scarce bear the broken door:

.....

There children dwell who know no parents' care,
 Parents, who know no children's love, dwell there;
 Heart-broken matrons on their joyless bed,
 Forsaken wives and mothers never wed;
 (I.226-29, I.232-35)

What is striking about such portraits is that they do not sentimentalize poverty and hardship; nor is Crabbe apologetic about offending the reader with such "base" poetic subject matter. He does not, like Goldsmith, describe poverty in a manner which is designed to beg a particular moral or emotional response.

Crabbe does not offer any convincing remedies or solutions to the poverty he so compellingly describes, however. Most of the potential causes that Crabbe posits for the rampant misery in the country are conventional, simple ones; somehow, he seems unwilling to describe the vices of the rich with the same "honesty" with which he describes the vices of the poor. As a result, the causes of poverty and misery in The Village seem curiously generic. Instead of blaming social injustice, the unequal distribution of property, the self-interested indifference of the rich, enclosure

and miserable wages for the poverty he describes, Crabbe blames either external forces or the (poor) individual. On the coastal village, for example, Crabbe's speaker claimed the cause of suffering was "Nature's niggard hand" (I.131); he also implied that the villagers' surly and savage natures also contributed to the joylessness of village life. Yet the speaker equivocates when he tries to account for the fact that the poor are "doubly poor" in such a fertile environment. He satirizes the thinking of contemporaries like Soame Jenkyns who, in his A Free Inquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil (1757) declared that "Poverty or the want of riches is generally compensated for by having more hopes and fewer fears, by a greater share of health, and a more exquisite relish of the smallest enjoyments, than those who possess them are commonly bless'd with" (qtd. in Copley 156). Crabbe mocks such attitudes, proclaiming "Or will you deem them amply paid in health,/Labour's fair child that languishes with Wealth?" (I.140-41). Crabbe also hints at worker exploitation in the lines: "Then own that labour may as fatal be/To these thy slaves as thine excess to thee" (I.152-53). But these intimations never ripen into a comprehensive critique of employers who exploit their workers and pay "slave" wages.

Robert L. Chamberlain believed that Crabbe was inclined "to blame human nature for man's unhappiness" while Wordsworth was more inclined to blame society (37). This is certainly evident in The Village. When Crabbe describes the bustling, vain doctor and the pleasure-loving pastor, he is implicitly critiquing the parish that would hire such men to care for its poor. But he emphasizes the failings of the men

working in the system, not the failings of the system or the society in which they were operating. Most objectionable of all is Crabbe's tendency to blame the poor themselves for their own suffering. For example, Crabbe condemns the villager's drinking without discussing the reasons why they are forced to turn to drink to begin with (II.33-38). The speaker accuses the villagers of weakness and vice without taking into account their distressing social and economic circumstances.

In the end, we are left wondering what Crabbe hoped would be achieved by his "new" empirical approach to poetry. Did he merely wish to make poetry truthful and honest, or was he hoping that the new "realism" in poetry would lead to and generate social reform? Did he merely wish to "improve" poetry or did he, through his poetry, hope eventually to improve society? These questions are never satisfactorily resolved in The Village. As has been indicated, certain sections of the poem suggest that Crabbe desired social reform: his speaker's indignation at worker exploitation (I.137-53); his heart-wrenching description of the parish poorhouse (I.262-73); his biting and cynical portraits of the village doctor and pastor (I.274-317); his satirical assaults on the follies and foibles of the advantaged classes (I.140-54, I.250-61). Collectively, these attacks suggest outrage at the failure of society to provide adequately and compassionately for its poor. But this implicit desire for social reform is complicated by the speaker's relentless description of village vices and his refusal to ascribe to the villagers moral decency and judgment, or indeed any redemptive virtues. Moreover, given his satiric tone and his apparent intolerance for the suffering he

exposed throughout Book I, his conclusion in Book II is both conventional and disappointing:

And you, ye poor, who still lament your fate,
 Forbear to envy those you call the great,
 And know, amid those blessings they possess,
 They are, like you, the victims of distress;
 (II.101-04)

His recommendation that the poor "take [their] lot in peace" is discouragingly close to the conclusions that Stephen Duck reached in his poem "On Poverty," which was published in 1736 (II.114). Duck, like Crabbe, reminds the poor of the "peculiar Distresses" and "burdens" of the rich: "CONTENTED Poverty's no dismal Thing,/Free from the Cares unwieldy Riches bring" (30-31). And again like Crabbe, Duck also preaches resignation as opposed to resistance: "'Tis nobler chearfully to bear our Fate,/Then murmur and repine beneath its Weight" (42-43). As the pronoun "our" indicates, Duck is speaking with the poor, not at them, and his advice, while lamentable, is at least consistently offered. This cannot be said of Crabbe, who uses this conclusion to launch into his obsequious eulogy to Robert Manners, the younger brother of Crabbe's patron, the Duke of Rutland. Crabbe's decision to eulogize an aristocrat in a poem otherwise dedicated to describing the hardships of village life is a mystifying one. It is impossible to reconcile the excessive and rapturous accounts of Sir Robert's virtue with the earlier descriptions of village vice and hardship.

In the end, Crabbe seems unable to reconcile all the competing tensions within the poem. While he succeeds in arguing the irrelevance of pastoral poetry to

eighteenth-century life and while he offers compelling, important individual descriptions of labour and suffering, Crabbe still fails to offer a "realistic" portrait of the poor because he focuses too relentlessly on "village vice." Crabbe's narrator lets his pessimism overwhelm his objectivity and, as a result, he is unable to convincingly amalgamate the diverse characteristics that define any human community. By the end of The Village, the reader is left wondering whether Crabbe's portrait of rural life is any more liberating or "truthful" than the pastoral conventions he had been critiquing.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

The pastoral and georgic forms enjoyed immense popularity throughout the early and mid-eighteenth century. Poets used the pastoral form for a variety of aesthetic and social purposes: to laud the intrinsic "natural" delight the country afforded; to celebrate the countryside as an idyllic retreat from urban excess and artificiality; to praise a ruling sovereign or generous patron. It was a century of agricultural reform and change for England, in which the economy irrevocably converted from a feudal subsistence system to a modern capitalist one and where productivity and yields in the manufacturing and agricultural industries soared. Poets of the early and mid-century were surprisingly unsceptical of such changes; indeed, many such as James Thomson enthusiastically -- and somewhat unreflectively -- embraced commercial expansion. From their "prospects," they looked at the fields teeming with activity and wealth and exulted in them. They wrote poetry celebrating England's "luxuriant and unbounded" "treasures," exhorting her to be "the exhaustless granary of the world" (Thomson Spring 70, 69, 77); if the poets actually witnessed "uncharity" at work and saw human hardship and exploitation in the fields, they tended not to include such details in their panegyrics to rural life. The georgic enjoyed a period of unprecedented popularity in the early to mid-eighteenth century, as

poets imagined they saw parallels between the contemporary age and the Virgilian golden age.

In the eighteenth century, poets tended to disparage, sentimentalize or glorify rural labour and rural labourers. The neoclassical pastoral poets of the early eighteenth century such as Alexander Pope and John Gay rejected the premise that descriptions of practical rural matters and actual toil could ever be considered serious, worthy topics for poetry. The georgic poets who saw farming as a noble profession tended to celebrate the "simple" life of the peasants and their closeness to Nature without giving equal consideration to the hardships and complexities of their lives. The poets either ignored the rigours of rural life altogether, or they glorified and sentimentalized the workers' lives and labours beyond recognition, often using a lofty poetic style. Because of the prevalence of these attitudes, there was little acknowledgement of the hardships of rural life within the poetry of the period. Few poets thought the subject was worth serious consideration.

The three poems examined in this thesis all, in some way, attempted to counter these tendencies to sentimentalize rural life and labour. Stephen Duck's The Thresher's Labour offers a simple account of the thresher's life from the perspective of a poetic persona who is himself a labourer. As a result, the poem emphasizes the labours, not the leisure, of rural life. When recounted from this point of view, the thresher's life is seen to be hard, although not miserable. Duck's speaker uses his unique perspective to critique the pastoral tradition, to criticize the "Master," with

whom the threshers had an antagonistic relationship, and to describe the rigour and monotony of the work; he also uses his perspective to celebrate his own physical strength and share the feelings of empowerment his work gives him.

The Deserted Village challenges the tendency to see the country as a retreat from urban vice and corruption. Like Cowper, Goldsmith felt that the country was gradually but irrevocably being "tinged" by the town. He passionately believed -- and feared -- that the "rural virtues" which had once distinguished country life from city life were beginning to disappear (398). In the poem, Goldsmith's speaker personalizes the transformation of the countryside by focusing on the destruction of his childhood village of Auburn, which had recently been enclosed by a neighbouring "tyrant." He contrasts his own fond memories of past village life, which was all benevolence and leisured bustle, with the appalling scene of decay and desolation now before him. The speaker uses both the aesthetic appeal of the past landscape and the neglect and decay in the present landscape metaphorically, to argue the "unnaturalness" of modern life. In so doing, he condemns the social and economic forces which have wrought the destruction. Yet even though there are elements of social protest in the poem, The Deserted Village cannot be considered radical because of its nostalgia and sentimentalization of past village life.

Of the three poems analyzed in this thesis, it is The Village which most deliberately and aggressively attacks the pastoral tradition, as well as the poetic tendency to sentimentalize the condition of the poor. Crabbe claims that his poem

will paint "Truth," not indulgent pastoral fancies, even though the "Truth" may be disconcerting or severe. The result is an impressionistic account of rural vice, poverty, labour, sickness and death, which demolishes the pastoral ideal. Crabbe's speaker is so determined that he will not sentimentalize the plight of the poor that, at times, he refuses to ascribe to the villagers any degree of human decency or moral good; as a result, it is sometimes difficult to reconcile the "bold, artful surly, savage" villagers with the poor, hard-working, often sorrowful "natives" he describes in other parts of the poem. Crabbe's poem, like Duck's, strives to make poetically conventional and acceptable a poetry dedicated to describing the hardships of rural life.

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