

THE POETRY OF GEORGE CRABBE AS IT  
REFLECTS THE BURKIAN CONCEPT OF SUBLIMITY

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B. A., Southern State College, 1968

9984

A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

1972

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The poetry of George Crabbe reflects the eighteenth century aesthetic of the sublime as it is defined by Edmund Burke. The element of sublimity appears in Crabbe's earlier works and continues throughout his literary career. A necessary preface to my examination of Crabbe is a review of the concept of the sublime as it is developed by the most influential theorists from Longinus to Burke.

The term is not used by Shakespeare or Spenser, but Milton uses it frequently and Coleridge writes in Table Talk, "Could you ever discover anything sublime, in our sense of the term, in the Classical Greek Literature? I never could. Sublimity is Hebrew by birth."<sup>1</sup> It would be interesting to know what his sense of the word was exactly. The word's Latin root, sublimis, means "uplifted, high, lofty, exalted, elevated" and was used most often in a poetic context.<sup>2</sup> In the Greek treatise Peri Hupsous, which William Smith in 1739 translated as On the Sublime, the term is used almost as a synonym for "greatness," although the author makes a distinction between the two words. A work may be great without being sublime. The difference lies in the emotive response of the reader. If the work inspires awe then it surpasses greatness to become sublime. The treatise, which is most often attributed to Cassius Longinus, is more a study of the grand style. Longinus recognized and praised the rhetorical style that was an instrument of emotional transcendence. His treatise is a discussion of stylistics, but it was not the rhetoric of the sublime that interested the eighteenth-century in Longinus. Samuel Monk writes:

The abiding interest of Longinus for the eighteenth century . . . lay in his conception of the sublime that underlies

sublimity of style and that is an expression of a quality of mind and of experience. To write on the sublime style is to write on rhetoric; to write on sublimity is to write on aesthetic. The sublime style is a means to an end; sublimity is an end in itself. It is the latent aesthetic aspect of Peri Hupsous that was Longinus's contribution to eighteenth century thought . . . .<sup>3</sup>

When Longinus begins an aesthetic discussion of sublimity he emphasizes the correlation of the sublime to emotion. Of five qualities that create the sublime, three are achieved through techniques of rhetoric ("the proper handling of figures," "noble phraseology," and "dignified and spirited composition") and two are created through a natural ability: "First and most potent is the faculty of grasping great conceptions, as I have defined it in my work on Xenophon. Second comes passion, strong and impetuous. These two constituents of sublimity are in most cases native-born . . . ." <sup>4</sup> This pronouncement led Longinus into a discussion of the mind that is capable of lofty creations which touch emotive chords in the reader. He associates sublimity with emotion although to him emotional response was not an absolute characteristic of sublimity. The influential critics who took up Longinus's theories overlooked this fact and presented him as a Classical authority for their view that the quality of sublimity depended solely upon a work's ability to stir the reader's emotions.

The theories of Longinus were known throughout English literary circles during the seventeenth century but the term sublime was still used to imply a lofty, metaphorical style. It was not until Boileau's translation, with his accretionary Preface, that England's critics began to consider the sublime as an aesthetic concept. In his Preface he offered a definition of the sublime, as he understood it from Longinus:

It is necessary then to understand that by sublime Longinus did not mean that which the orators call the sublime style, but that which is extraordinary and marvelous, that which moves one in the discourse, and which makes a work elevate, enrapture, transport. The sublime style always demands the "grands mots," but the sublime is found in a single thought, in a single figure, in a single phrase. An idea can be in the sublime style and yet not be sublime, that is, it is nothing extraordinary or astonishing. For example: 'the supreme sovereign forms the light by a single word.' That is in the sublime style, but, nevertheless, it is not sublime because there is nothing forceful or marvelous in the description. But, 'God says; "Let there be light" and there was light.': this is the height of extraordinary expression which marks so well the obedience of the creation to the Creator. It is truly sublime and is something divine. Longinus intends, therefore, by sublime, that which is extraordinary, astonishing, and, as I have expressed, marvelous in discourse.<sup>5</sup>

Thus Boileau distinguished sharply, for the first time, between the sublime style and the sublime spirit of a work of art. The first statement is a simple declaration, although it employs eloquent language, and Boileau does not consider it to be sublime. In the second statement there is the spirit of powerful action, of divine fulfillment, of awe, that transcends the simple expression. It is the astonishing, the powerful, the wonderful that evoke strong emotional responses. He had set up a Neoclassic code that was left for the the critics to expand and develop into an aesthetic concept of great importance. The sublime was no longer a rhetorical quality, but a term applied to a lofty idea that awakens powerful emotions in the reader. Boileau had given the word a renewed significance, and the English found it worthy of their speculation. The idea was adopted by such critics as Dryden, Hobbes, and Sir William Temple, but it is to John Dennis that one must turn to see what the English did with the definition Boileau had left them.

Boileau had presented the cause of sublimity, the process by which the height of the sublime was reached. John Dennis was interested in

the effects of this elevating quality. In The Grounds of Criticism (1704) he is concerned with the "Enthusiastick Passions: that are aroused in a reader of poetry. In a discussion of Longinus's sublimity he theorizes that the height of sublimity is reached when one or more of the six "Enthusiastick Passions"--admiration, terror, horror, joy, sadness, desire--is awakened. Dennis's most original idea to emerge was the introduction of the passion of terror as a conductor of the sublime. His discussion of the passion of terror, "a Disturbance of Mind proceeding from an Apprehension of an approaching Evil, threatening Destruction or very great Trouble either to us or ours,"<sup>6</sup> is a lengthy one. After giving examples from the Iliad and the Faerie Queen, and after discussing the precepts of Longinus and Cecilius, Dennis supports his own theories by turning back to Longinus:

All the examples that Longinus brings of the Loftiness of the Thought, consist of terrible Ideas. And they are principally such Ideas that work the Effects, which he takes notice of in the beginning of his Treatise, vis. that ravish and transport the Reader, and produce a certain Admiration, mingled with Astonishment and with Surprize. For the Ideas which produce Terror, are necessarily accompany'd with Admiration, because ev'ry thing that is terrible, is great to whom it is terrible; and with surprize, without which Terror cannot subsist; and with Astonishment, because every thing which is very terrible, is wonderful and astonishing; and as Terror is perhaps the violentest of all the Passions, it consequently makes an Impression which we cannot resist, and which is hardly to be defaced: and no Passion is attended with greater Joy than Enthusiastick Terror, which proceeds from our reflecting that we are out of danger at the very time that we see it before us.<sup>7</sup>

Dennis is original in his assertion that all truly sublime literature inspires the emotion of terror. He enumerates ideas producing this "Enthusiastick Terror"--Gods, demons, tempests, thunder, storms, fire, raging seas, serpents, tigers, famine and most terrible of all, the wrath of an angry God.<sup>8</sup> This theory is the most fascinating and most influential of Dennis's philosophy. The idea of the bizarre coadunation

of terror and delight appealed to the Eighteenth Century, and the emotion of terror plays an important part in the literature of the era. To the critics Milton becomes the poet of the sublime, and his verse awed the reader with delight and terror. John Armstrong in 1758 writes in "Of Turgid Writing" that "Noise and Bluster is what passes for Sublime with the great Majority of Readers . . . ." <sup>9</sup>

David Hume's Treatise of Human Nature in 1739 applies human psychology to the aesthetic of the sublime in his discussion of the theory that pleasure and pain are the essence of beauty and deformity. <sup>10</sup> In an issue of the Spectator, after describing the ocean in a tempest, Addison writes that "it is impossible to describe the agreeable Horrour that rises from such a Prospect." <sup>11</sup> In a 1739 translation of Longinus, William Smith was enthralled with the element of terror in poetry. He believes that "agreeable sensations" can be rendered by the images of terror, such as the storm scene in King Lear. He writes:

"It is not the blue sky, the chearful sun-shine, or the smiling landskip, that gives us all our pleasure, since we are indebted for no little share of it to the silent night, the distant howling wilderness, the melancholy grot, the dark wood, and hanging precipice. What is terrible, cannot be described too well; what is disagreeable, should not be described at all, or at least should be strongly shaded." <sup>12</sup>

With Dennis's speculation that sublimity is the result of those ideas which are terrible, the concept of the sublime as an aesthetic quality was further secured. The notion that the element of terror produced sublimity continued to fascinate Englishmen of the eighteenth century.

Monk comments that

the aesthetic of terror . . . is the aesthetic of the ugly, for neither the ugly nor the terrible is agreeable. It is in this connection that the English show their independence. The paradox of the pleasure of pain held great attraction for them, and French neoclassicism offered no explanation. The problem was attacked through the sublime by Dennis, and during the whole century it remained in the sphere of sublimity.

This is an historical fact of some importance, for terror is the first of several qualities that, finding no very happy home in the well-planned, orderly, and carefully trimmed domain of neoclassicism, sought and found refuge in the sublime, which constantly gathered to itself ideas and emotions that were to be prominent in the poetry and prose of the romantic era.<sup>13</sup>

In 1757, twenty-four years before George Crabbe was to introduce himself to Edmund Burke,<sup>14</sup> Burke published A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful. Boileau had severed the idea of sublimity from the realm of the grand style. Dennis had advanced the theory that terror is conductor of the sublime spirit. It was the young Burke who reinforced this paradox of the delight in terror and who shaped the early taste for terror into a substantial aesthetic creed that was to stand throughout the last half of the century. He eliminated all emotions but fear as possible conductors of sublimity.

Burke is intrigued with the idea that pleasure can be produced by pain and danger: "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analagous [sic] to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling."<sup>15</sup> It was this emotion that Burke placed securely in the theory of art. He elaborates by writing that if pain or danger comes too close it is not capable of giving pleasure, but, he was convinced that at certain distances humanity enjoys to no small degree the misfortunes and pains of its fellow man. To Burke the supreme conductor of sublimity is in all cases terror. He does not restrict the effect of sublimity to the ideas that are grandiose, but he believes that the emotions that are produced, not the ideas which

produce them, contribute to the creation of the sublime. Burke proceeds by citing ideas that are most capable of producing the effect of sublimity. There are seven:

(1) Obscurity. The passion of fear is aroused by the terrible, and he believes that obscurity is necessary to make anything appear terrible. He discusses at length the idea of obscurity, rather confusingly, opposing it to clarity, in an attempt to elucidate his theory. He defines neither very satisfactorily. By obscurity, he most probably means the dark, the gloomy, the frightening and mysterious elements that make up the aura of intrigue and suspense.

(2) Power. This is another element found in "the common stock of everything that is sublime."<sup>16</sup> Power, to Burke, means the strength behind a superior force, such as God, or such as an angry sea, that arouses fear and awe in the mind of the reader.

(3) Privations. "All general privations are great, because they are terrible; vacuity, darkness, solitude, and silence."<sup>17</sup> Fear can most easily result from an atmosphere of emptiness and loneliness. The loftiness of sublimity is evoked quickly in a midnight setting or the eerie howl of a hungry wolf.

(4) Vastness. Length, height and depth are the dimensions that produce the sublime. The vastness of a calm sea or a deep canyon, the wide expanse of the sky--these are powerful causes of the sublime.

(5) Infinity. Burke considered this a distinct dimension of vastness which "has the tendency to fill the mind with that sort of delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect, and truest test of the sublime."<sup>18</sup> The infinite is the thing of which the eye cannot see the bounds or the mind cannot fathom an end.

(6) Difficulty. Burke believes that any work of art that



required great labor, that was the result of endless hours of toil and trouble, that exhausts the soul of its creator, that work of art is truly sublime.

(7) Magnificence. There are those things that are forever splendid and astonishing and that always excite the mind with the idea of grandeur. He gives the stars as an example and explains, "The apparent disorder [of the stars] augments the grandeur, for the appearance of care is highly contrary to our ideas of magnificence. Besides, the stars lie in such apparent confusion, as makes it impossible on ordinary occasions to reckon them. This gives them the advantage of a sort of infinity."<sup>19</sup> This discussion of disorder as having a positive value in art is a distinct addition to the elements that contribute to the aesthetics of art.

He notes other visual phenomena that may produce the sublime emotion, such as brilliant light, quick transition from light to dark or from dark to light, and dull colors. Likewise, loud or recurring sounds, or low sounds, cries of pain or fear, cries of wild beasts, excessively bitter tastes, or intolerable odors are all capable of arousing the lofty emotion of fear.

In summary, Burke's theory of the sublime is this: When terror is presented to the reader, by the quality of the above seven forces, the mind is filled with thoughts of greatness and grandeur which in turn vibrate and arouse the soul.

The Enquiry was praised continuously for nearly half a century by such critics as Sir Joshua Reynolds and Samuel Johnson, although most critics agree that Burke had gone too far in his pronouncement that no emotion but fear could produce the sublime. As the century came to an end the popularity of the treatise lessened but Burke's influence is

evident through the early nineteenth century. Monk believes that

the work which had influenced so powerfully English aesthetic thought and taste during its formative years, and which had shaped some of Johnson's thought on poetry, was ultimately to be regarded coldly, as when Coleridge dismissed it as 'a poor thing.' But it had done its work by turning the attention of theorists to the sensations and the psychological influences that accompany and determine the aesthetic experience, and by helping to spread the cult of romantic terror throughout the literature of that era that just precedes the rise of romantic art.<sup>20</sup>

Needless to say, the above summary of the development of the concept of sublimity is by no means complete. Its purpose is to provide a general knowledge of an important eighteenth-century theory with which a poet such as George Crabbe would have been familiar. Burke's theory as to what elements are necessary in order to produce the effect of sublimity has been presented. It is my contention that Burke, Crabbe's patron, provided a partial criterion on which to construct the poet's aesthetic sensibilities. There is an element that is evident throughout all of Crabbe's verse that can be considered sublime, as Burke defined the term. This is not a major element, but it is a consistent one, and one well worth noting. In the following discussion the most logical order of presentation is a chronological one since Crabbe does not stress sublimity in any one period of his writing.

If George Crabbe is recognized as belonging to any particular literary movement it is most generally the school of realism to which he is assigned. He is a descriptive poet who painted scenery and portrayed people with a minuteness that became his hallmark. One of Wordsworth's passages in The Excursion was said to be "sketched with all the truth of Crabbe's descriptive pencil."<sup>21</sup> Twentieth-century critics, if they know Crabbe at all, recognize him as a descriptive poet who was gifted with an inexorably realistic manner of handling ordinary life and extraordinary people and who refused to exalt the

world or gild its people in a time when poetry was supposed to be an escape from reality.

The first poem to contain Burke's elements of sublimity is Sir Eustace Grey, a 437-line poem that was published in 1807. It was after this poem that "The dark and terrible pencil of Crabbe" became a common phrase.<sup>22</sup> He began a reputation as a writer of force and power who was capable of "harrowing up the soul" by his own brand of strong effects. A reviewer of the Edinburgh Annual Register writes that "the dark and sublime conceptions of the visions of 'Sir Eustace Grey,' . . . are almost too powerful for perusal."<sup>23</sup> We have the tale of a gallant and wealthy man who, having killed his unfaithful wife, goes insane, and imagines himself the prey of "two fiends of darkness" who plague him after he is condemned by the "royal wretch of Babylon":

Then was I cast from out my state;  
 Two fiends of darkness led my way;  
 They waked me early, watch'd me late,  
 My dread by night, my plague by day!  
 Oh! I was made their sport, their play,  
 Through many a stormy troubled gear;  
 And how they used their passive prey  
 Is sad to tell; -- but you shall hear.

The fiends chased him over the world:

Through lands we fled, o'er seas we flew,  
 And halted on a boundless plain;  
 Where nothing fed, nor breathed, nor grew,  
 But silence ruled the still domain.

Upon that boundless plain, below,  
 The setting sun's last rays were shed,  
 And gave a mild and sober glow,  
 Where all were still, asleep, or dead;  
 Vast ruins in the midst were spread,  
 Pillars and pediments sublime,  
 Where the grey moss had form'd a bed,  
 And clothed the crumbling spoils of time.

There I was fix'd, I know not how,  
 Condem'd for untold years to stay  
 Yet years were not; one dreadful Now  
 Endured no change of night or day;

The same mild evening's sleeping ray  
 Shone softly a solemn and serene,  
 And all the time I gazed away,  
 The setting sun's sad rays were seen.<sup>24</sup>

This is one of the most obviously "sublime" passages in the works of Crabbe. The description of "that boundless plain" produces the exact sensation of vastness and infinity that Burke had in mind. The madman's casting out implies a fall to a great depth, and depth is the most fearful extension of vastness. Horror arises from the privations of the setting--the darkness, the silence of the domain. The abrupt transition from rapid movement over lands and seas in the preceding verse to the sudden stillness, the "mild and sober glow, / where all were still, asleep, or dead;" where time itself appears still, a "one dreadful Now," presents a landscape Burke would definitely have considered capable of producing the psychic sublimity. Likewise the "vast ruins" and "the crumbling spoils of time" would fill the reader with awe, the same awe that Addison experienced as he looked upon the ruins of the colliseum. He writes in the Spectator, "How fills my eye with terror and delight," explains that "We are flung into a pleasing Astonishment at such unfounded views, and feel a delightful Stillness and Amazement in the Soul at the Apprehension of them . . . ."25

Crabbe continues amazing the soul with the haunting and macabre description of the madman's dreams:

Those fiends upon a shaking fen  
 Fix'd me, in dark tempestuous night;  
 There never trod the foot of men;  
 There flock'd the fowl in wint'ry flight;  
 There danced the moor's delightful light  
 Above the pool where sedges grow;  
 And, when the morning-sun shone bright,  
 It shone upon a field of snow.

They hung on a bough so small,  
 The rook could build her nest no higher;

They fix'd me on the trembling ball  
 That crowns the steeple's quiv'ring spire;  
 They set me where the seas retire,  
 But drown with their returning tide;  
 And made me flee the mountain's fire,  
 When rolling from its burning side.

I've hung upon the ridgy steep  
 Of cliffs, and held the rambling brier;  
 I've plunged below the billowy deep,  
 Where air was sent me to respire;  
 I've been where hungry wolves retire;  
 And (to complete my woes) I've ran  
 When Bedlam's crazy crew conspire  
 Against the life of reasoning man.

I've furl'd in storms the flapping sail,  
 By hanging from the topmast-head;  
 I've served the vilest slaves in jail,  
 And pick'd the dunghill's spoil for bread;  
 I've made the badger's hold my bed,  
 I've wander'd with a gipsy crew;  
 I've dreaded all the guilty dread,  
 And done what they would fear to do.

And then, my dreams were such as nought  
 Could yield but my unhappy case;  
 I've been of thousand devils caught,  
 And thrust into that horrid place,  
 Where reign dismay, despair, disgrace;  
 Furies with iron fangs were there,  
 To torture that accursed race,  
 Doom'd to dismay, disgrace, despair.

(I, p. 246-247, 11. 268-299, 308-315)

It is known that Crabbe was a user of opium, and some critics categorize Sir Eustace Grey with those works which were thought to be composed in hallucination. There is no proof of this assertion, and it is my conclusion that Crabbe was attracted to Burke's principles of sublimity and was successfully exercising them. Sir Eustace Grey is the first work in which he deals with the psychology of insanity. His interest in the insane continued beyond a degree that most Neoclassicists would approve. It was frightening to step over certain boundaries into the unknown and unexplainable. Crabbe did not hesitate and attempted to justify his experimentation in the 1807 Preface to the poem. He

observed that most people consider only Shakespeare to be great enough to deal with insanity; then he comments, "Yet be it granted to one, who dares not to pass the boundary fixed for common minds, at least to step near to the tremendous verge, and form some idea of the terrors that are stalking in the interdicted space: (II, pp. 21-22). Descriptions of the insane and their wild and furious actions would belong to Burke's element of obscurity. The unexplained and intriguing mysteries of the mind, controlled by an unknown powerful and evil force, would cause terror within the staunchest minds.

A kind of companion piece to Sir Eustace Grey, which was also included in the 1807 edition of poems, is The Hall of Justice, a poem in two parts that was labelled "a tale of excessive horror and abomination" by a critic of Eclectic Review in 1809.<sup>26</sup> In a melodramatic manner, Crabbe details the story of a gypsy woman, a vagrant who is the illegitimate daughter of unknown parents. She falls in love with Aaron:

His father was our party's chief,  
And dark and dreadful was his look;  
His presence fill'd my heart with grief;  
Although to me he kindly spoke.

(I, p. 254, ll. 69-72)

Aaron's father had also conceived passion for the vagrant and drives Aaron away "with wicked hand" and forces the girl to surrender to him:

The night was dark, the lanes were deep,  
And one by one they took their way;  
He bade me lay me down and sleep,  
I only wept and wish'd for day.

Accursèd be the love he bore,  
Accursèd was the force he used;

(I, p. 255, ll. 89-94)

Aaron returns, kills the father, and marries the girl who is about to have the father's child:

But I had mightier cause for fear;  
 For slow and mournful round my bed  
 I saw a dreadful form appear--  
 It came when I and Aaron wed.

When waking, on my heaving breast  
 I felt a hand as cold as death;  
 A sudden fear my voice suppress'd,  
 A chilling terror stopp'd my breath.--

I seem'd--no words can utter how!  
 For there my father-husband stood--  
 And thus he said:--"Will God allow,  
 "The great avenger, just and good,  
 "A wife to break her marriage vow,  
 "A son to shed his father's blood?"

I trembled at the dismal sounds,  
 But vainly strove a word to say;  
 So, pointing to his bleeding wounds,  
 The threat'ning spectre stalk'd away.

I brought a lovely daughter forth,  
 His father's child, in Aaron's bed;  
 He took her from me in his wrath;--  
 "Where is my child?"--"Thy child is dead."

(I, pp. 256-257, ll. 17-20, 35-52)

The child is not dead; it has been sold by Aaron to some strangers. Many years later, after Aaron is dead, the woman is taken to prison for some offense where she meets her daughter who "sail'd a convict o'er the main, / And left an heir to her distress" (I, p. 259, ll. 11-100). It is the crime of stealing food for her grandchild that brings the old vagrant to the hall of justice where she is relating her story to the magistrate.

To a sophisticated twentieth-century reader the tale is mundane and not much more than soap-opera theatrics, but eighteenth- and nineteenth-century readers had a strange fondness for the horrible and mysterious, and the tale was read and enjoyed because it was capable of stirring the emotions. First of all, the dark and furtive gypsy was enough to excite the reader. The roving gypsy was one of those things that belonged in the sphere of the obscure and the enigmatic. They



were all considered "dark and dreadful;" they were people of the night. If gypsies did not properly frighten the reader, ghosts always succeeded. The "chilling terror" of that "dreadful form" was a powerful stimulant to the reader's sensitivity. The gypsies, the bloody ghost, the wrath of Aaron, Crabbe's audience enjoyed. He had succeeded at producing Burke's sublimity by touching readers with his vivid pictures of the supernatural and of its suffering victims.

In The Borough, which appeared in 1810, Crabbe continues to write tales concerning the extraordinary man, and even Oliver Sigworth, who believes that "there is no particular reason to suppose that Crabbe was consciously endeavoring to achieve this latter quality [of sublimity]"<sup>27</sup> agrees that in a few places in The Borough Crabbe approaches what was to the eighteenth century the concept of the sublime. Sigworth evidently does not relate the sublime to the terrible, because he does admit that Crabbe "did paint darkly, more darkly than any modern poet writing in English before his time."<sup>28</sup> Perhaps best-known to the general public of Crabbe's works is "Peter Grimes," a tale of The Borough that was made into an opera in 1945 by Benjamin Britten. Once more the protagonist is a madman, a fisherman renowned for his cruelty. Even as a child "His father's love he scorn'd, his power defied," and when he was grown he would obtain pauper orphans to help on his boat and would beat them until they died. Three boys died while working for Peter, and after the third the Mayor of the borough decreed that "Henceforth with thee shall never boy abide." From that time nothing went right for him.

Cold nervous tremblings shook his sturdy frame,  
And strange disease--he couldn't say the name;  
Wild were his dreams, and oft he rose in fright,  
Waked by his view of horrors in the night--  
Horrors that would the sternest minds amaze,  
Horrors that demons might be proud to raise;  
And though he felt forsaken, grieved at heart,



To think he lived from all mankind apart;  
 Yet, if a man approach'd, in terrors he would start.  
 (I, pp. 497-498, ll. 222-230)

Peter is taken to the workhouse, "and to a parish-bed, / Follow'd and cursed, the groaning man was led" where, made eloquent by terror he relates his hallucinations. He was in his boat on a still, silent day when suddenly spirits began appearing:

In one fierce summer-day, when my poor brain  
 Was burning hot and cruel was my pain,  
 Then came this father-foe, and there he stood  
 With his two boys again upon the flood;  
 There was more mischief in their eyes, more glee  
 In their pale faces when they glared at me.  
 Still they did force me on the oar to rest,  
 And when they saw me fainting and oppress'd,  
 He, with his hand, the old man, scoop'd the flood,  
 And there came flame about him, mix'd with blood;  
 He bade me stoop and look upon the place,  
 Then flung the hot-red liquor in my face;  
 Burning it blazed, and then I roar'd for pain,  
 I thought the demons would have turn'd my main.

Still there they stood, and forced me to behold  
 A place of horrors--they cannot be told--  
 Where the flood open'd, there I heard the shriek  
 Of tortured guilt no earthly tongue can speak:  
 "All days alike! for ever!" did they say,  
 "And unremitted torments every day!"--  
 Yes, so they said;--but here he ceased and gazed  
 On all around, affrighten'd and amazed;  
 And still he tried to speak, and look'd in dread  
 Of frighten'd females gathering round his bed;  
 Then dropp'd exhausted and appear'd at rest,  
 Till the strong foe the vital powers possess'd;  
 Then with an inward, broken voice he cried,  
 Again they come, and mutter'd as he died.

(I, p. 501, ll. 348-375)

Crabbe had succeeded in displaying that habitual terror which comes from the internal punishment for evil deeds. Crabbe is never relenting to evil; as Huchon writes, "And never a sign of pardon, never the faintest gleam of hope! From the day when man enters on the path of vice, he goes straight to an inevitable and irremediable ruin."<sup>29</sup> Peter Grimes' horrendous monologue is able to transport the emotions to the height of sublime reaction, a reaction brought about by the

magnificent eloquence of the monologue and by those terrible visions that the old man describes so vividly. His details of the "fierce summer day" that burned his brain, the "father-foe" who "scoop'd the flood" up into his hands, the flame mixed with blood, the horrors of hell—all of these fall into the awe-inspiring realm of obscurity, that undefinable, unfathomable depth that is Burke's primary necessity in order to "make anything very terrible." "Peter Grimes" has been described as "improperly horrible" and it is to "Peter Grimes" that Jeffrey refers when he writes that he finds characters in Crabbe that are disgusting, "creatures in whom everything amiable or respectable has been extinguished by sordid passions or brutal debauchery. The characters arouse no pity or horror, only disgust. We feel our imaginations polluted by the intrusion of any images connected with them."<sup>30</sup> Crabbe's popularity contradicts the harsh criticism of Jeffrey. His readers found him capable of "harrowing the soul" by his striking descriptions of demons and hellfire, and if characters such as Peter Grimes did not arouse pity, they surely did arouse horror.

Also in The Borough is the tale of Ellen Orford. Unlike Peter Grimes or the gypsy vagrant she is not a victim of a love of dissipation, but more a victim of transient errors. After an unhappy, poverty-stricken childhood, at the age of twenty Ellen had fallen in love with a man superior in station and had had an illicit affair with him which resulted in the birth of a daughter. She was nursing her child the day she saw from her window her seducer and his new bride. She finally married a tradesman and had five sons, but her husband's business faltered. He turned Methodist, but because he did not feel the mysterious calling that was supposed to accompany salvation, he hanged himself, much like another man in The Borough, Abel Keene.

Three of Ellen's sons died, one was hanged as a criminal, and she suspected the youngest son of committing a crime against the daughter she now knew to be an idiot. After the death of the two remaining children Ellen becomes blind and lives on relief in the parish house until her death. A reviewer of the Eclectic Review in 1810 likened the tale to "a ghostly corpse, a frightful spectre in the background of a picture, not very obvious, but the moment it is discerned chills the blood."<sup>31</sup> On the surface the plot does not seem to fit any of Burke's criteria for the production of sublimity. Ellen does not fit into the company she keeps in the last tales of The Borough--Abel Keen, Jachi, Peter Grimes. Her only crime was bearing an illegitimate child. How then can emotion be elevated to the height of sublimity by such a dismal, unfortunate biography? Chamberlain explains that "the terrors of a fall into poverty, much greater in Crabbe's day than in ours, makes such a fall a powerful moral metaphor intended to encourage us to believe that some system of significant merits and demerits does exist."<sup>32</sup> Crabbe is impressing the reader with the terror of poverty, but he also emphasizes Burke's force of power. There is that distinct and frightening, omnipotent, deific force that dispenses damnation to the sinner. The presence of the controller of destinies hovers over the entire poem. This is sublimity that Burke would recognize. The hand of justice is felt as Ellen describes her bastard child:

Lovely my daughter grew, her face was fair;  
But no expression ever brighten'd there.  
I doubted long, and vainly strove to make  
Some certain meaning of the words she spake;  
But meaning there was none, and I survey'd  
With dread the beauties of my idiot-maid.

(I, p. 466, ll. 212-217)

and as she watches her son go toward the gallows:

I cannot speak it--cannot bear to tell  
 Of that sad hour--I heard the passing bell.  
 Slowly they went; he smiled and look'd so smart,  
 Yet surely he shudder'd when he saw the cart,  
 And gave a look--until my dying-day,  
 That look will never from my mind away;  
 Oft as I sit, and ever in my dreams,  
 I see that look, and they have heard my screams.

(I, p. 468, ll. 288-295)

In 1812 Crabbe published a collection of twenty-one stories. Tale XI of Tales relates the biography of Edward Shore. Young Edward was a genius who could find no meaningful employment. He disliked trade and for a while turned his attention to law, "But who could plead, if unapproved the cause?" Ministers were dreamers and physicians were cynical and dismal. He took it upon himself to work upward through life, guided by Reason; his purpose was to wage a personal war on crime and grossness. He came to be "studious, serious, moral, grave, / No passion's victim, and no system's slave; / Vice he opposed, indulgence he disdain'd, / And o'er each sense in conscious triumph reign'd." He began a drama but the work was too tedious; he began a serious story and "grew ashamed of ghosts, and laid it by" (l. 114). He lost himself in his books and became averse to joys and cares and the affairs of the world. Edward had a friend with whom he discussed the problems of the world. This old atheist enjoyed the company of young Edward, as did the old man's young wife. The three enjoyed many evenings together, and often Edward would walk in the gardens with Anna while her husband slept. They fell in love and took the opportunity offered them by her husband's absence to consummate their love. The husband returned and, because of Anna's "strong distress" and Edward's guilty absence, guessed the truth. Edward had fallen and he felt the fall bitterly. He prayed, but no relief was found. His shame and distress led him to wine, to folly, to poverty and, finally,

to insanity:

Struck by new terrors, from his friends he fled,  
And wept his woes upon a restless bed;  
Retiring late, at early hour to rise,  
With shrunken features, and with bloodshot eyes.  
If Sleep one moment closed the dismal view,  
Fancy her terrors built upon the true;  
And night and day had their alternate woes,  
That baffled pleasure, and that mock'd repose;  
Till to despair and anguish was consign'd  
The wreck and ruin of a noble mind.

(II, p. 156, ll. 382-391)

He went back to his friend to explore the truth, and the old man both aided and advised him. He could not take the kindness the man offered:

He bore it not; 'twas a deciding stroke,  
And on his reason like a torrent broke:  
In dreadful stillness he appear'd awhile,  
With vacant horror and a ghastly smile;  
The rose at once into the frantic rage,  
That force controll'd not, nor could love assuage.  
Friends now appear'd, but in the man was seen  
The angry maniac, with vindictive mien;  
Too late their pity gave to care and skill  
The hurried mind and ever-wandering will;  
Unnoticed pass'd all the time, and not a ray  
Of reason broke on his benighted way;  
But now he spurn'd the straw in pure disdain,  
And now laugh'd loudly at the clinking chain.

(II, pp. 156-157, ll. 410-423)

As his wrath subsides, he is freed to roam through the streets mindless, harmless. He plays with the children, spinning the tops or playing their games innocently, "And heedless children call him Silly Shore" (II, p. 158, l. 467).

Crabbe's depiction of the gradual psychological deterioration is very skillfully done--and very realistic. Burke's sublime fear in the mind of the reader comes from the despair and anguish that Edward Shore experienced which is so vividly detailed. The reader is made to fear that perhaps his own sins are to be punished in such a manner. Crabbe's theme, that evil deeds lead to punishment by an offended God and that the punishment is often the retraction of that which is most dear to

the sinner, comes through with the power of a Puritan sermon.

Crabbe does tend to moralize; he felt it was a poet's duty to instruct. He does not want to portray the vices of man so that they are respected or admired by the reader. In the Preface to his last collection of tales, Tales of the Hall, which appeared in 1819, he wrote:

It is grievous when genius will condescend to place strong and evil spirits in a commanding view, or excite our pity and admiration for men of talents, degraded by crime, when struggling with misfortune. It is but too true that great and wicked men may be so presented to us as to demand our applause, when they should excite our abhorrence; but it is surely for the interest of mankind, and our own self-direction, that we should ever keep at unapproachable distance our respect and our reproach.

(II, p. 301)

He did not seem to intend that his readers pity characters such as Edward Shore or Ellen Orford, but one does feel pity, perhaps because their mistakes were human and their punishment too harsh. There is also admiration for the man who is able to "excite our abhorrence" to such a degree that the eighteenth-century critics called him a poet of the sublime.

Tales of the Hall is a collection of tales told by two brothers, George and Richard, about their lives and their travels. There are several stories in the collection that arouse the emotion of terror. There is the story of Ruth who has a bastard child and was cast out of her home by her angry father. As the night grew darker and "The east-wind roar'd, the sea return'd the sound, / And the rain fell as if the world were drown'd" (II, p. 357, ll. 424-425) the father, his anger subsided, went out to look for his daughter. He found her:

And she was gone! the waters wide and deep  
Roll'd o'er her body as she lay asleep.  
She heard no more the angry waves and wind,  
She heard no more the threat'ning of mankind;

Wrapt in dark weeds, the refuse of the Storm,  
To the hard rock was borne her comely form!

(II, p. 358, ll. 444-449)

Crabbe's ability to present melodramatic scenes in such an effective manner is admirable. Along with his bizarre subjects of suicide and madness he also included his ghost tales. One of the most intriguing of the Tales of the Hall is a group of recollections told around the fire of an old decay'd mansion. It is entitled "The Cathedral-Walk." The setting is eerie. The owner of the house recalls his walks in the surrounding yards "With blighted trees in hoary moss array'd, / And ivy'd walls around" (III, p. 149, ll. 57-58) where his neighbors had seen in the past "Figures of lords who once the land possess'd, / And who could never in their coffins rest; / Unhappy spirits! who could not abide / The loss of all their consequence and pride" (III, p. 150, ll. 68-71). The time is dusk, and the silence is broken by "frighten'd bat's low shriek, the beetle's hum" (l. 85) and nameless sounds. Neighbors sit around the fire of brushwood and look at the worm-eaten frames and canvasses displayed on the wall of the dull room. They tell the stories behind the pictures of the famous warrior, and then tell of the infants who died because

A witch offended wrought their early death;  
She form'd an image, made as wax to melt,  
And each the wasting of the figure felt;  
The hag confess'd it when she came to die,  
And no one living can the truth deny.

(III, p. 151, ll. 119-123)

The fireside chat turns to ghosts. Some deny their existence, and others chide that "God has not promised that he will not send / A spirit freed to either foe or friend" (III, p. 152, ll. 175-176).

An old woman who had been listening quietly to the controversy speaks and asks to relate a personal incident. She had had a young lover whom she had nursed diligently while he suffered from a fever. Before



his death, he swore his love to her and vowed to return to her if it were possible. Sad and alone, her uncle, a Bishop, asked her to live with him, and "In his cathedral's gloom I pass'd my time, / Much in devotion, much in thought sublime" (III, p. 154, ll. 247-248). She waited for the return of her lover's spirit. She walked the aisles of "The silent mansions of the favour'd dead" (III, p. 155, l. 272) crying for her lover. She could not sleep and would steal into the dark church at night and await his coming. As she slept one night in the sacred grounds she heard a sound and

I saw a figure rising, but could trace  
No certain features, no peculiar face;  
But I prepared my mind that form to view,  
Nor felt a doubt--he promised, and was true!  
I should embrace his angel, and my clay,  
And what was mortal in me, melt away.

O! that ecstatic horror in my frame,  
That o'er me thus, a favour'd mortal, came!

(III, pp. 156-157, ll. 334-341)

She approached slowly the shadowed form, not fearful but awful, and began to speak to him of her overwhelming love. She was ecstatic as she whispered into the darkness, but then he turned to face her:

It turn'd, and I beheld  
An hideous form, that hope and zeal expell'd:  
In a dim light the horrid shape appear'd,  
That wisdom would have fled, and courage fear'd:  
Pale, and yet bloated, with distorted eyes  
Distant and deep, a mouth of monstrous size,  
That would in day's broad glare a simple maid surprise.  
He heard my words, and cried, with savage shout,  
'Bah!--brother!--blarney!--What is this about?

Love, lover, longing, in an instant fled,--  
Now I had vice and impudence to dread;  
And all my high-wrought fancies died away  
To woman's trouble, terror, and dismay.

(III, pp. 157-158, ll. 371-383)

The woman had surprised and scared an old graverobber.

The humorous conclusion surprised the reader because the extraordinarily mood-provoking imagery set the stage well for the appearance of an apparition. In such a bizarre setting as Crabbe presents--the



bats, the full moon that shined through the thick and dusty panes of glass, the worm-eaten canvasses staring morbidly at all the guests--fear and dread are instilled into the reader. He has once again utilized the theory of his patron to move the reader.

To what extent Crabbe's talents for instilling fear into his reader were appreciated, one may only surmise from the critics. Francis Jeffrey, Crabbe's most admiring critic, was most generous in his praise of Crabbe's reality and humor although he thought Crabbe often went beyond good taste in his strokes of realism. Jeffrey was uneasy that he ventured into the "forbidden" subjects although he defended Crabbe by writing that it was the poet's duty to present all of life even those horrific studies of insanity that kept appearing. Likewise, Leigh Hunt recognized Crabbe as a man of genius who possessed the powers to arouse sublimity, but Hunt also found Crabbe to be "singularly deficient in taste, his familiarity continually bordering on the vulgar, and his seriousness on the morbid and shocking."<sup>33</sup>

George Crabbe's works do not dwell on the horrible or on the misfortunes of his people. The larger portion of his four volumes of tales is not concerned with the terrible or the horrible. He is not preoccupied with cruelty and insanity and with the bizarre elements of life. But he does recognize their presence, and he refuses to ignore them; they constitute a real part of human existence. Men are cruel; men are driven to madness; men are punished for wrongs they have committed, and, as a poet of realism, he certainly cannot overlook these people. It is in this small segment of his portrait of the world that one finds him attaining the height of sublimity as it was defined by his friend and his patron Edmund Burke. His exploration into the psychological realities of terror results in

some of the most intriguing and awe-inspiring tales to come out of  
the Eighteenth Century. In a late poem entitled "Tragic Tales, Why?"

Amusements, pleasures, comforts, days of Joy,  
May a Man's Mind, but not his Muse, employ;  
Marriage and Births of Heirs are pleasant things,  
But seldom help a poet when he sings.

. . . . .  
But, my dear Richard, when this transient Joy  
Some sudden Ills and dire Events destroy;  
When the fond wife [or] faithful husband [dies]--  
Fate unforeseen!--when Wealth takes wings and [flies];  
When by Deceit a Maiden's peace is lost;  
When tender Love by cruel fate is crost;  
When groaning Poverty and fell Disease  
Upon the happy and the Wealthy seize,  
And when on Man's soft Heart these Evils press:  
The awakened Poet paints the due Distress;  
Tells how it came, and presses on the Mind  
That we are Men, and of the Suffering Kind.  
We own the grieving and opprest as Friends;  
The Mind enlarges as its Grief extends;  
And Grief that's painted true improves the Heart it rends.

(II, pp. 474-475, ll. 14-17, 24-38)

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Coleridge's Miscellaneous Criticism, ed. Thomas Middleton Raysor (Cambridge, 1936), p. 412.

<sup>2</sup>Charles T. Lewis, ed., A Latin Dictionary for Schools (Oxford, 1962), p. 1025.

<sup>3</sup>Samuel H. Monk, The Sublime (Ann Arbor, 1960), p. 12.

<sup>4</sup>Longinus on the Sublime, trans. A. O. Prickard (Oxford, 1906), p. 13.

<sup>5</sup>Oeuvres Complètes de Boileau, ed. Paul Brodard (Paris, 1913), pp. 123-124. The translation is mine.

<sup>6</sup>Edward Niles Hooker, ed. The Critical Works of John Dennis (Baltimore, 1943), I, 328.

<sup>7</sup>Dennis, I, 361.

<sup>8</sup>Dennis, I, 372.

<sup>9</sup>John Armstrong, quoted in Monk, p. 63.

<sup>10</sup>David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, 3 vols., ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford, 1958).

<sup>11</sup>Joseph Addison, The Spectator, ed. Donald Bond (Oxford, 1965), no. 489, IV, 229.

<sup>12</sup>William Smith, quoted in Monk, p. 68.

<sup>13</sup>Monk, p. 54.

<sup>14</sup>After sending the following sympathetic appeal to Burke, Burke became Crabbe's patron:

I know those of rank and fortune are teased with frequent petitions, and are compelled to refuse the requests even of those whom they know to be in distress: it is, therefore, with a distant hope I ventured to solicit such favour: but you will forgive me, sir, if you do not think proper to relieve. It is impossible that sentiments like yours can proceed from any but a humane and generous heart.

. . . My existence is a pain to myself, and every one

- <sup>15</sup>Edmund Burke, The Works of Edmund Burke, ed. Little, Brown and Company (Boston, 1965), I, 110.
- <sup>16</sup>Burke, I, 138.
- <sup>17</sup>Burke, I, 146.
- <sup>18</sup>Burke, I, 148.
- <sup>19</sup>Burke, I, 154.
- <sup>20</sup>Monk, p. 100.
- <sup>21</sup>Walter E. Broman, "Factors in Crabbe's Eminence in the Early Nineteenth Century," Modern Philology, 51 (1953-54), 46.
- <sup>22</sup>Broman, p. 48.
- <sup>23</sup>Broman, p. 48.
- <sup>24</sup>Poems by George Crabbe, I, 243, ll. 172-179; 244, ll. 192-211. (Hereafter, volume number, page number, and line number of quotations will be cited in text.)
- <sup>25</sup>Addison, from Monk, pp. 56-57.
- <sup>26</sup>Broman, p. 49.
- <sup>27</sup>Oliver Sigworth, Nature's Sternest Painter (Tucson, 1965), p. 43.
- <sup>28</sup>Sigworth, p. 37.
- <sup>29</sup>René Huchon, George Crabbe and His Times 1754-1832 (New York, 1907), p. 299.
- <sup>30</sup>Francis Jeffrey, quoted in Lillian Haddakin, The Poetry of Crabbe (London, 1955), p. 66.
- <sup>31</sup>Broman, p. 48.
- <sup>32</sup>Robert Chamberlain, George Crabbe (New York, 1965), p. 90.
- <sup>33</sup>Sigworth, p. 156.

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THE POETRY OF GEORGE CRABBE AS IT  
REFLECTS THE BURKIAN CONCEPT OF SUBLIMITY

by

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B. A., Southern State College, 1968

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

1972

This paper explores the poetry of George Crabbe in order to detect a reflection of the eighteenth century aesthetic of the sublime as it is defined by Edmund Burke. A preface to the examination is a review of the concept of the sublime as it is developed by the most influential theorists from Longinus to Burke.

The Greek treatise, Peri Hupsous, which is attributed to Cassius Longinus, was translated in 1739 by William Smith as On the Sublime. Although Longinus's treatise was concerned primarily with the grand style, a rhetorical style that was an instrument of emotional transcendence, it was the latent aesthetic aspect of Peri Hupsous that was Longinus's contribution to eighteenth century thought.

Boileau's translation of Longinus in 1674 included a preface which offered a definition of the sublime, as he understood it from Longinus. In this preface he distinguished sharply, for the first time, between the sublime style and the sublime spirit of a work of art. Boileau presented the cause of sublimity, the process by which the height of the sublime was reached.

John Dennis, in The Grounds of Criticism (1704), considers the effects of this elevating quality. Of the six "Enthusiastick Passions" that are aroused by a reader of poetry, he focuses his discussion on the passion of terror. His most original idea in the advancement of the aesthetic of the sublime was the introduction of the passion of terror as a conductor of the sublime. He is original in his assertion that all truly sublime literature inspires the emotion of terror.

In 1757, Edmund Burke published A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful. This work reinforced the paradox of the delight in terror and shaped the early taste for terror

into a substantial aesthetic creed that was to stand throughout the last half of the century. Burke listed seven ideas that were most capable of producing sublimity: 1) Obscurity 2) Power 3) Privations 4) Vastness 5) Infinity 6) Difficulty 7) Magnificence. After a summary of the development of the concept of sublimity the paper discusses the poetry of George Crabbe, whose patron was Edmund Burke, in order to prove that Burke provided a partial criterion on which to construct the poet's aesthetic sensibilities. The discussion of Crabbe's poetry follows a chronological order since Crabbe does not stress sublimity in any one period of his writing. The following poems are chosen to illustrate Crabbe's use of Burke's seven ideas which produce the effect of sublimity:

- 1) Sir Eustace Grey, a 437-line poem that was published in 1807.
- 2) The Hall of Justice, a kind of companion piece to Sir Eustace Grey included in the 1807 edition of poems.
- 3) Peter Grimes, a tale of The Borough, which appeared in 1810.
- 4) Ellen Orford, another tale from The Borough.
- 5) Edward Shore, a tale from the 1812 collection entitled Tales.
- 6) The Cathedral Walk, a story from the 1819 collection entitled Tales of the Hall.

The larger part of Crabbe's four volumes of tales is not concerned with the terrible or horrible. He is not preoccupied with cruelty and insanity and with the bizarre elements of life. But he does recognize their presence, and he refuses to ignore them. It is in this small segment of his portrait of the world that one finds him attaining the height of sublimity as it was defined by Edmund Burke.