The Pastoral Victim’s Progress: Crabbe to Britten

Ian Dennis

English Department
University of Ottawa
Ottawa, ON Canada, K1N 6N5
idennis@uottawa.ca

But let us approach “progress” backwards, along lines of development and filiation, towards a half-forgotten aesthetic innovation. I begin with a twentieth-century operatic masterpiece, and end at a minor, late-eighteenth-century poem, its ancestor. There I stop, confident that my readership in *Anthropoetics*, at least, can manage the further leap 50,000 or so years back to an even more originary moment. I will confine myself to an attempt to assess the functionality and heritage of the poem’s rhetoric. “Without rhetoric, ethical revolutions would never take place.”(1) Undoubtedly a revolution has occurred, but the extent to which this particular poem contributed to it is beyond my ability to measure here. But perhaps we can glimpse, at least, the potential effectiveness of the strategies it seems to have pioneered.

1945

In “The Borough, A Small Fishing Town on the East Coast of England,” a boy, apprenticed to the fisherman Peter Grimes, has died. An inquest determines “accidental circumstances” but the community murmurs, and Grimes is bitter, feels victimized by their suspicions. But he has his friends, including retired skipper Balstrode and schoolmistress Ellen Orford, who help get him a new apprentice. Grimes wants to marry Ellen, but needs money and status first–he’ll “fish the sea dry” to get them. The second boy also dies, accidentally, falling from the cliff by Grimes’s hut. The townspeople form a vengeful posse and twice pursue Grimes. Eventually Balstrode tells him to take his boat out to sea, sink it, and drown himself. He does. The Borough returns to normal.

In Benjamin Britten’s *Peter Grimes*, these three deaths are not represented directly on stage; “this is not what the opera is about,” a critic tells us. It is about “the individual in conflict with society,”(2)the crowd against a single man, scapegoating.

Grimes cannot leave, he is “rooted here,” and this, like his dream of marrying Ellen, is just one more normal and innocent desire both prompted and thwarted by the communal Other. If he drives his boys too hard, he does so because he is obeying the community’s demands for money, for respectability. But no, even so, he didn’t kill them, exactly. If he strikes Ellen it is in a moment of maddened frustration, provoked by the community’s implacable opposition to his desires. All such violence originates in the community and, in the moral accusation of the opera, is returned to it, indignantly and directly. “The more vicious the society,” explained the composer, “the more vicious the individual.”(3) *Peter Grimes* was widely received as a tragedy.

Britten seems indeed to have insisted on the purity of this vision of scapegoated man, of “vicious society,” over-ruling his librettist’s attempts to introduce other perspectives.(4) Biographical critics identify the composer’s own victimizations, as homosexual and pacifist in wartime Britain.

The music is complex, but more accessible to contemporary audiences than many twentieth-century scores, conveying sadness but also menace, alternating passages of compelling dramatic power and exquisite lyrical beauty. It was an immediate and lasting success.

It is not really a tragedy, of course. One might characterize its achievement as the dressing up of its own and its audience’s fairly straightforward resentments in a flattering fabric of modernist psychic analysis, moral seriousness and above all what we might call the lyricism of alienation–far and away, I would judge, the most effective and pervasive of modern lyricisms. What looks like a modernist penetration into the deep interior is, in fact, an exhilarating broadening of perspective, a breathtaking glimpse of a universe instinct with victimhood, an abysm of victims, of victims of victims, victims victimizing, all human life itself ostensibly victimized by a cosmos that beckons tormentingly with cruel promises of unrealizable transcendence–but that in fact, in its beauty, opens up unimaginable realms of potential, the potential for obtaining what Generative Anthropology has taught us to call centrality.

In the opera’s best-known and most-praised aria, the hitherto inarticulate Grimes turns Romantic poet and sings implausibly of “the Great Bear and Pleiades.” Daring this implausibility, this lack of realism, is an act of considerable artistic judgement. Peter’s inability to speak coherently to his community, to account for himself–again, a result of his frustration, his helpless rage at their power over his desires–is exactly correlative to the monologic eloquence of the aria, and as such is the very core of his victimhood–a point the community immediately reinforces on stage, by mocking him for it.

Now the Great Bear and Pleiades
where earth moves,
are drawing up the clouds
of human grief
breathing solemnity in the deep night.

Who can decipher
in storm or starlight
the written character
of a friendly fate —
as the sky turns the world for us to change?

But if the horoscope's
bewildering
like a flashing turmoil
of a shoal of herring
who can turn skies back and begin again?(5)

This is the universe as modern victims see it, the very sky formed of condensed "human grief," absorbing it all, an infinite repository of suffering. The only human action conceivable, longed for, is one which by definition can never be performed: to "turn [the] skies back and begin again." What Peter cannot know, and in a familiar double perspective the audience *does* understand, is that such an aspiration is futile not because of his flaws or irretrievable actions, nor because all such returns are impossible, but because of his indestructible innocence, that the beauty of the aria shows us. How should he begin again to be more blameless than he already is? This very desire, in all its noble futility, is the final emblem of his status, of his immunity from the grubby social criteria of actions and accountability.

Indeed, in a likewise familiar modern logic, actions are subsumed into identity, and the identity of victim (even if everyone implicitly may have his or her turn) is finally imposed by others, by the victimizers. In one of the opera's best dramatic moments, just before his final "destruction by the conformists" as one critic puts it, the pursuing villagers call out to him by name in the fog, and he roars back, in furious and bitter irony, that name: "Peter Grimes! Peter Grimes! Peter *Grimes*!"

He speaks for a whole world. You made me what I am, and now *you* accuse *me*! You pretend I have an identity, after you ever and again deny it to me. "I think we hate the chorus in this closing scene" mildly remarks the same critic.(6) Indeed we do.

1810

An obscure clergyman poet–England has a goodly number of them–has recently reappeared after some 20 years of silence, his name kept alive only by a few striking passages in a popular anthology. Now George Crabbe has a new poem, almost epic length, *The Borough*. Into an aesthetic field conditioned by the formal and thematic innovations of Coleridge and Wordsworth he obtrudes a shapeless mass of character sketches, local description and moralizing tales, all rendered in heroic couplets, the idiom of the previous century. One section, some 400 lines, is entitled “Peter Grimes.”

The eponymous Peter feels the gravity of new desires. His prohibiting father brandishes the Bible.

> “It is the word of life,” the parent cried;
> –“This is the life itself,” the boy replied.(7) (18-19)

Of course, the life itself, as Peter experiences what René Girard characterized as the passage from external to internal mediation, has its own obstacles.

> Now lived the youth in freedom, but debarr’d
> From constant pleasure, and he thought it hard;
> Hard that he could not every wish obey,
> But must awhile relinquish ale and play;
> Hard! That he could not to his cards attend,
> But must acquire the money he would spend. (34-39)

He wants an apprentice–Crabbe says in order to vent his sadistic frustrations, but clearly also because he cannot operate his fishing boat alone–and obtains one from London, where poorhouse clearing men sell them, orphan paupers, to masters in the countryside. Crabbe gives us perhaps his most famous lines, whose chilling final couplet will form the moral core–or excuse–for the opera’s attack.

> Such Peter sought, and when a lad was found,
> The sum was dealt him, and the slave was bound.
> Some few in town observed in Peter’s trap
> A boy, with jacket blue and woolen cap;
> But none inquired how Peter used the rope,

Or what the bruise, that made the stripling stoop;
None could the ridges on his back behold,
None sought him shiv'ring in the winter's cold;
None put the question,–"Peter, dost thou give
The boy his food? –What, man! The lad must live:
Consider, Peter, let the child have bread,
He'll serve thee better if he's stroked and fed."
None reason'd thus–and some, on hearing cries,
Said calmly, "Grimes is at his exercise." (65-78)

The re-iterated "None" designating the community and its sin of omission, is ontologically transformed in the opera into the "posse," the mob, who are no longer calm, and who repeatedly chant the Grimes-is-at-his-exercise phrase. Crabbe's careful wording, his qualifications disappear: "None *could* the ridges on his back behold"–as indeed how could they? And the interventions that the community in *The Borough* does eventually make are precisely the crimes the opera angrily dramatizes. Nonetheless, a bleak view of the market world's disengagement and indifference is powerful enough in the poem. His father cannot, and his town will not, interrupt the cascading sequence of the modern man's resentments and desires.

The boy is soon dead. Another is found. He too dies, and murmurs of alarm and indignation rise in the town. Then a third. Britten's alienated poet is a serial murderer, although the rural justice system cannot prove or punish it. The judge at least prohibits more boys, instructs Grimes to hire a freeman, warns him of legal vengeance. But informal strictures take over–a pariah, if not a pursued scapegoat, Grimes is shunned. None will work with him, none will help launch his boat, the women berate him in the street, the children run from him. As well they might.

The relationship of the poem's readers to this spectacle of the many against the one is much more complicated than the one induced by the opera. For one thing, where the opera will silence the voices of the boy-victims, in Crabbe they speak, are seen in poignant moments of terrified oppression, and particularized one from the other. For another thing, it is clear that the world that hears Grimes at his exercise but does not act is the world of "the life itself," the world of individual autonomy and freedom, the world organized into private and public, free agency and law. What many concerned readers in 1810 took from the poem was the implication that the laws and regulations governing poorhouses and apprenticeships must change, that the trade in boys must stop. That the traditional informal sanction of rural opinion was fading and inadequate, that such places as the Borough must progress. Crabbe's remote community was emphatically not cloaked in the golden Romantic

glow of the past, of the marginal and authentic, the sort of glow many readers, only half accurately, took from the contemporaneous poetry of Sir Walter Scott, and would also take, with even less cause, from that author's famous and vastly influential novels, works themselves considerably influenced by Crabbe. But nor is it innately vicious. Morally, it is sound enough–its women shun the active criminal, but pity him in his final madness and death–but it is ethically inefficient. For example, it needs an institution still a decade away as Crabbe writes, although Sir Robert Peel is making his case: a professional police. It needs a Children's Aid Society.

Alone now, Peter languishes passively in his boat, in a memorably malign natural scene.

> Thus by himself compell'd to live each day,
> To wait for certain hours the tide's delay;
> At the same times the same dull views to see,
> The bounding marsh-bank and the blighted tree;
> The water only, when the tides were high,
> When low, the mud half-covered and half-dry;
> The sun-burnt tar that blisters on the planks,
> And bank-side stakes in their uneven ranks;
> Heaps of entangled weeds that slowly float,
> As the tide rolls by the impeded boat. (171-80)

He starves in mysterious inanition, at one point strikingly imagined through the eyes of tourists from London, whose telescopes fix on a single man motionless for hours upon the water. Brought in at last to the poorhouse, he reveals something of his nightmarish inner condition, what he has seen.

> "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." (348-53)

Finally,

> Then with an inward, broken voice he cried,

"Again they come," and mutter'd as he died. (374-75)

In short, the poem investigates the implications of victimhood and violence, of desire and resentment, with remarkable subtlety. "Freedom" for the operation of his desires is what Peter seeks and obtains, and yet he dies murmuring of the invincible power of the father. But the tale is no simple sermon, from this least sermonizing of preacher-poets. Peter's victimhood is plausible enough, even as its transit through sadistic violence is traced with the grim clarity Crabbe is known for. The passages which link the marshy landscape to his psychic state are deeply affecting, and for all that Peter's entry into the free market of desires is recognized as a terrible moral wandering, there is an unmistakable current of sympathy for this questionable Romantic hero. His sufferings themselves are profound, and the ostracism of his society is ultimately as impersonal and commensurate as the effect of the pitiless sea, upon whose surface he goes mad. Perspectives change. Victim to victimizer to victim again, and at each stage the reader is invited into a multi-faceted and shifting engagement with him, him alone, that moves through registers of sympathy, near-envy, resentment, even to the point of loathing–or what at times feels like understanding.

One might be tempted to feel that the story Crabbe actually tells reveals the opera's melodrama as a confused, self-indulgent hash. That Crabbe sweeps aside Romantic victimhood with a bracing Eighteenth-Century moral clarity. But this would not be quite right. True, the opera's alterations, if seen as a tinkering with some kind of realist truth, would be indefensible. Three boys reduced to two, their causes of death fudged, their voices silenced.(8) Indeed, there might be good reason *not* to pardon the opera's complicity in the evasion of individual responsibility for child abuse and murder–it sings only too solemnly the song of much twentieth-century psychological determinism, playing the Met, as it were, to Leonard Bernstein's Broadway parody: "Officer Krupke, I'm depraved ['cause] I'm deprived!" But if the opera is condemned on such grounds, so must be Crabbe's poem.

"The realist's claim of empiricism is meant to fend off the danger of romantic subjectivism,"(9) Eric Gans has noted, and the fundamentally "real" feature in both works, their very tender of authenticity, is the violence of Grimes. That, really, is why it is there. The degree of Grimes's bad behaviour is the measure of each work's awareness of a very specific risk of victimary rhetoric: that it may be seen to be overplaying its hand; that the desire for centrality may betray itself, and thus lose its power. The not-entirely-sympathetic victim disarms resentment. In the instance we are tracing, anyway, this is how I would construe the "danger of romantic subjectivism." Empiricism is the ultimate "cover" for such desires–or to be more

sympathetic to their goals–the ultimate justification, or authentication. And subtler forms of empiricism, that gather evidence from multiple perspectives, for example, compensate for less subtle ones, modify, adjust, refine, as the market for them develops. Of such increments, in the distinctions of each from the previous, the knowledge we can reasonably expect to gain from realist art consists. The struggle to cover or even to escape desire produces, dialectically, that art's "facts." Taken as a whole process, that is surely a revolution.

But such an analysis also implies that the violence which legitimates not Grimes's claim to centrality, but that of the two works about him, is in a sense directed outwards. The subjectivism being fended off is ultimately that of the audience, in either their mimicking of the works' desires, or worse, in their detection and scorn of those desires. The artist *must* stay ahead. Crabbe's later poetry is such "cover," for an earlier, cruder act of defensive aggression, still further back.

1780

A naive young man from a particularly bleak stretch of Suffolk coastline, son of a salt warehouseman, throws off patriarchal restraint, ignores fatherly advice, even outright scorn of his useless learning, and sets out to London with a few pages of verse and three pounds in his pocket. He wants to be a poet. His London landlord warns him of the fate of the wonderful boy Chatterton, would-be poet, suicide. In the midst of the newcomer's struggles to write a play, a novel, anything, before his uncomprehending eyes, an explosion of arson and mob violence, the Gordon Riots flame out around him.(10) His little rebellion, his little access of anti-patriarchal desire, has precipitated him into an exuberant, violent, rivalrous world he is utterly unprepared for. Starving, desperate, one step away from debtor's prison, he writes to a total stranger, the greatest man of his day, Edmund Burke, asking, begging, for succor. Enclosed in the letter is a poem entitled "The Village," an anti-pastoral.

> The Village Life, and every care that reigns
> O'er youthful peasants and declining swains;
> What labour yields, and what, that labour past,
> Age, in its hour of languor, finds at last;
> What form the real picture of the poor,
> Demand a song–the Muse can give no more.
> Fled are those times, when, in harmonious strains,
> The rustic poet praised his native plains. (1.1-8)

The times demand such a poem, young George Crabbe proclaims, the muses can do no more, so "shall I dare these real ills to hide?" (1.47). Indeed the ongoing history

of victimary rhetoric since this date tends to make the aesthetic of “The Village” feel more inevitable and unsurprising than perhaps it ought to. It had a few precedents–the poet Charles Churchill for one–but not so many that its assault on pastoral poetry and those who took comfort from it should not register sharply and be widely remembered, with Crabbe’s name, as proclaiming the death of an ancient genre.

“The Village” is not a narrative but a survey of what seems at first the generalized reality of rural life, but quickly emerges as a particular place, a fishing town on a “frowning coast,” the unnamed original of *The Borough*. The poem’s argument is precisely that of Peter Grimes with his father: this is the life itself, which your book precludes. And why?

> . . . the Muses sing of happy swains
> Because the Muses never knew their pains (1.21-22)

Necessarily, the author of the present poem *has* known such pains–has been “by such examples taught” he tells us–and is thus modeling the superiority of position that suffering can provide. It is not an individual, but the collectivity that here suffers, however, a community whose environment, the same in which Grimes languished, is epitomized by Crabbe’s famous and wonderfully bleak botanical catalogue of “blighted rye” and thistles, the “blue bugloss” that “paints the sterile soil,” the “slimy mallow” and “clasping tares.” Their oppressor is explicitly the very force that the pastoral poets celebrate: nature, or “nature’s niggard hand.” Operative nonetheless is the same qualification of the victimized clients, the same “cover,” as I just called it. They may have their pains, but this is “a bold, artful, surly, savage race,” skilled only

> . . . to take the finny tribe
> The yearly dinner, or septennial bribe (1.113-14)

and who haunt the beaches to plunder ships wrecked along the coast, or engage in smuggling.

But this “realism,” this fundamentally *literary* protest against the inaccuracy of conventional representation cannot long conceal its broader accusation, its impetuous extension of the ever expanding circle of those guilty of an ever-expanding catalogue of sufferings and victimizations. There is no trace of any genuinely causal argument in the poem, however, of the sort levelled against

ideology or ideological constructs in later years. In “The Village,” the accusation, the violence, is less displaced.

“The realist esthetic includes for the first time a critical model of its implied audience”(11) Gans also reminds us, and in “The Village” this audience is repeatedly and pointedly connected to the victimhood described. Admittedly, there is a context of cultural and philosophical rivalry that the poet must be understood to address. Critics have, for example, pointed to Oliver Goldsmith’s elegiac “Deserted Village” (1770) and even Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” (1751), or to a still prevalent sentimental moralism which found vice in the city and virtue in the country. And parts of “The Village” do attack other poets specifically, accusing them of writing pastoral because it is “easy” or, more ferociously and irrationally, of failing to feed and comfort the victimized poor, whom young Crabbe briefly addresses:

> Can poets sooth 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? (1.59-62)

Not, as we shall note, that Crabbe explains how his own, more bitter poem would be able to perform these functions. But it is not rival poets or ideologues but mere *readers* who emerge as the true target. Here, too, there are apparent distinctions. Some modern critics have taken Crabbe at his seeming intention that the addressees of the poem are the rich or their sympathizers. But this is a screen, behind which a more general aggression hides.

First, they are the weak and self-indulgent readers of other poets’ criminal effusions:

> Ye gentle souls, who dream of rural ease,
> Whom the smooth stream and smoother sonnet please; (1.172-73)

But as these are invited to observe Crabbe’s realities, they slide unmarked into his own readers:

> Or will *you* deem them amply paid in health,
> Labour’s fair child, that languishes with wealth?
> Go then! And see them rising with the sun,

> Through a long course of daily toil to run. . . (1.140-44; emphasis added)

There may *you* see the youth of slender frame
Contend with weakness, weariness and shame (1.156-57; emphasis added)Reading his corrective, indeed, we find ourselves accused of various things. Self-interested insensitivity.

Or will you praise that homely, healthy fare,
Plenteous and plain, that happy peasants share? (1.166-67)And worse.

> . . . Trifle not with wants you cannot feel,
> Nor mock the misery of a stinted meal. (1.156-69)

To such cruel mockery we, the better fed and better off, add the harm of provoking (of course helpless) resentment, as "the wealth around them makes them doubly poor" (141). (Or perhaps not so helpless. At least one modern critic has detected "hints" of the coming "class struggle."(12) Which, as we find the rural poor designated by the poem, explicitly and rather astonishingly, as our "slaves," we ought certainly to fear.)

All this, as the poem's dudgeon rises, must help justify the barely veiled threat a few lines later–"How would *ye* bear in real pain to lie, / Despis'd, neglected, left alone to die? (1.258-59). The animus of these words is inseparable from that intuition of symmetry fundamental to all resentment, and resentful violence. (Gans, as we know, argues it is fundamental to language and the human itself–but in this context its application quite clearly seems to be not just that first shall be last, as it were, but that victimizer may easily enough become victim or, from a perspective at least provisionally outside resentment, vice-versa.) The attack here is on comfort, on gratified desire, and only secondarily–or as a pretext–on a genre, ideology, social practices or even "attitudes." The target of such rhetoric is, Gans notes, "from the beginning . . . not the other's utterance but his *position*, vulnerable through its excessive claim on the center."(13) "The realist version of esthetic universalism," Gans thus also observes, "has a deliberately aggressive air," and we might add, not only in its provocative choice of "unsavory subject matter."(14)

It is worth remarking, though, how early, in the English context, we can detect a distinctive version of this familiar game of escalating realist provocation. Samuel Johnson helped revise Crabbe's poem, and his own *Rasselas* (1759) and "The Vanity of Human Wishes" (1749) also attack the desires and aesthetic comforts of their readers, albeit in a more generalized and certainly displaced mode, a neo-classical

mode. And these works, like “The Village” were very well received. Burke admired the latter poem sufficiently to take the trouble, in busy times, of saving Crabbe and setting him up in a parsonage. Indeed, Crabbe’s poetic reputation, for the time, was made by the poem. This should remind us that something else is in play, certainly in *The Borough* but even in the earlier poem, with which we are also familiar.

To wit, we know *we* are being offered the chance to opt *out* of the readership so excoriated. *We* need not be such readers–in short, we are offered a model, through the mediation of the poet, of a morally superior perspective. Together we can scorn those who self-servingly idealize a rural diet. As we gratefully accept this boon, we may be only glancingly aware of the way this modeling elevates the truth-telling poet over his literary predecessors. We may hardly register, that is, the way we have been coopted into his party, or more precisely, his alliance, with the victims against his rivals. This kind of alliance too he is modeling, though, and it is much more broadly extensible. If there is a political application to be derived from a poem which, as one recent critic rightly observes, “gives no advice,”(15) it begins here.

As Gans notes, “realism is the Romanticism of the left,” and curious as it might be thus to align an old-fashioned Anglican parson and his outdated heroic couplets, it may indeed be possible to glimpse here one form of that re-circulation of resentment which GA identifies generally as the distinguishing and crucially protective mechanism of market relations. One may detect, that is, an impetus for an ethically productive left-liberal politics in the choices Crabbe eventually offers his readers. Every reader, in the society which is emergent in Crabbe’s day and dominant in ours, is vulnerable. Vulnerable to the imagined as well as the practical resentment generated by his or her position–always excessively comfortable from *some* perspective. Every reader or consumer of culture has need of the cover provided by the swallowing of a regular and at least putatively bitter dose of realist art, even when the rivalrous indignation generated by the pastoral is a distant memory (except for undergraduates subjected to historically oriented literature courses).(16) The sharing out of victimary centrality, that is, in the form of a tempered, “realistic” alliance of sympathizers, is one of the market world’s more effective vehicles of social progress. (Indeed, let us thus denominate the so-called “troubled conscience.”) The influential critic Francis Jeffrey, writing in 1808, speaks of men of his acquaintance who can henceforth never pass a workhouse without thinking of Crabbe’s evocation in “The Village.”(17) Workhouses would certainly last many decades yet. But a critical mass of such sentiments–and the potent modeling of attention that generates them–are essential preconditions, surely, for the practical, political alliances needed to enact such measures as the abolition of the slave trade in apprentices. Essential, at any rate, if perhaps not sufficient, as the harshly pessimistic tone of “The Village” itself implies.(18)

Can the same function be granted the opera? A re-staging of the old Romantic trope of heroic victim and oppressing collectivity in the midst of the British collectivity's most intense historical danger can perhaps prompt either admiration or dismay. As that danger has faded and we have moved into and then possibly through another era, our perspective on the work must doubtless change. It can be expected to serve different purposes. Perhaps ultimately, one might only say it seems still that the opera provides less cover than do either of Crabbe's poems–and that this is the source and measure of the latter's ethical superiority. And that of an enduring realism in many arts. The opera's lack of such realism is reflected both in the implausible persecution of an implausibly beatific victim, and in the resultant absence of any imaginable measure which could ameliorate the suffering thereof. Or, to put it another way, stripping the scapegoated Grimes of his violence transfers that violence back to *us*, where Crabbe's "Village" had originally and naively vested it, and we are likely to respond to this imposition either with passive abnegation (the kind of cultured masochism common enough in arty venues in the modern world), or reciprocal resentment. Neither are much use, now. The opera posits a society which is *essentially* "vicious"; its non-victims are *all* essentially so; only its victims are saved, and only as long as they remain victims. Sympathy (except for oneself) is offered no social rewards. By contrast *The Borough*, the opera's never entirely effaced, realist ancestor, is a place where there are institutions like poorhouses, that are ineffectual, but could be better. There is work to be done.

The opera's manipulative plot, its single focus, smack almost of a kind of greed, by which term I mean a too-obvious desire, too openly betrayed, and too ugly–unaesthetic. And perhaps from this we can tentatively derive a way to assess kinds of victimary rhetoric: the more it does indeed "fend off" subjectivism, the more cover it provides, the more its realism permits an alliance with at least part of its audience, the more effective or productive it can be. The opera's undeniable "high art" moments of aesthetic contemplation, of focus on the beauty of the sign, of the music, are betrayed, or at least weakened, paradoxically enough for the genre, by a lack of that realism, leaving it to partake of popular art's fantasy of resentment, "proceeding," as Gans puts it, "as if the market had not destroyed the ritual center."(19) This seems exactly how the opera does proceed, at the level of its narrative. And how Crabbe's poetry, in the details we have highlighted above, pointedly does not. Perhaps the opera therefore confirms the Gansian binary, and is of the right–if not exactly the "art for art's sake" that Gans identifies, perhaps "beautiful victimhood for its own sake." But concealing beneath this formula its selfishness, that is, its relative unwillingness to offer alliance to sympathy, to share its splendidly articulated victimary centrality, it implicitly forces its entire audience into the role of oppressors–it is "passive-aggressive." Its "conservative" interest in preservation of the old social order, in other words, is entirely self-serving and elitist–that order is essential to the beauties of its unshared victimhood.

There are probably a number of ways in which what might be broadly designated "liberal" behavior is generated in a de-sacralizing world. All, I would assume, do involve a certain fending off of dangers, a generating of viable identity, of centers of self tolerable to those around them. But an *evolved* realism, like that of *The Borough*, whatever its roots in defensiveness and aggression, a realism that has reflected upon its own generation–thankfully still with us in art and thus still modeled into the arts of individual and social life–may perhaps also be described in more positive terms. From its human knowledge, ultimately its *self*-knowledge, not just safety individual and collective, but progress material and ethical. Britten's *Peter Grimes* premiered on June 7, 1945, helping to usher in the era of high victimhood which GA has so signally defined and critiqued. But in these sixty years the achievements of a busy liberalism, a persistent, intellectually unspectacular liberalism perhaps not that different from the one supported by the esthetic of the great nineteenth-century novelists from Sir Walter Scott onwards, have also been immense. To pick just one instance, we might remember the Marshall Plan, most forgiving, most realistic and most successful of all post-war treatments of a vanquished enemy. The most grimy and violent of all national Grimeses, as it were, controlled but then succored, lifted to his feet. A trend of almost unprecedented improvement of material and social conditions launched itself and spread astonishingly across the globe, even as elite thought was almost unrelievedly tragic in tone. Now, as this supposedly *post*-modern period ends, we are perhaps better able to measures the relative values at least suggested in two artistic treatments–left and right, or not, as one prefers–of a representative victim-agent of modern resentment. If one Grimes sings his own sufferings into the very heavens, leaving us far below, the other in his crimes and compunction, and our response to them, teaches us, even now, of our capacities for human community, and for action in support of it.

Notes

1. Eric Gans, *Signs of Paradox: Irony, Resentment, and Other Mimetic Structures* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 168. (back)

2. Patricia Howard, *The Operas of Benjamin Britten: An Introduction* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1976), 5. (back)

3. Britten speaking to *Time* magazine, 1948. Quoted in Philip Brett, "'The More Vicious the Society, The More Vicious the Individual': *Peter Grimes* and its Message" (Decca, CD-Recording Insert, 2006), 13-14. (back)

4. The librettist, Montagu Slater, published his own version a year after the opera's premier. Brett, 11. (back)

5. Brett, 55 (back)

6. Howard, 23. (back)

7. Quotations of Crabbe's poetry are from Norma Dalrymple-Champneys and Arthur Pollard, eds., *The Complete Poetical Works* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988). (back)

8. One recent critic speaks of how "Britten attempted to mitigate the social and sexual violence implicit in Crabbe's "Peter Grimes." Claire Seymour, *The Operas of Benjamin Britten* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2004), 43. But this is disingenuous. The violence is not mitigated but moved, from individual to society. (back)

9. *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 176. (back)

10. The worst civil disturbance in London for three centuries, the Gordon Riots were triggered by anti-Catholic sentiment in response to a bill for Catholic relief, but turned to general, anarchic violence and looting. June, 1780. (back)

11. *Originary Thinking,* 179. (back)

12. Ronald B. Hatch, *Crabbe's Arabesque: Social Drama in the Poetry of George Crabbe* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1976), 18. (back)

13. *Signs of Paradox*, 169. (back)

14. *Originary Thinking,* 178. (back)

15. Hatch, 19. (back)

16. Although a few industrious resenters, starved perhaps for fodder, do reach back to any literature once and supposedly still capable of generating comfort amongst the unworthy. In the 1970s I threw away, now much to my regret, a book-length antiwar poem entitled, if I recall correctly, "Option Three," which raged against readers weeping at the death of Little Nell while innocents were being napalmed in Vietnam. One must have a heart of stone, I suppose, and to adapt Oscar Wilde, not in turn to weep for a writer who so dearly wished to be the Dickens of his day, and yet whose name I have completely forgotten. (back)

17. Arthur Pollard, ed., *Crabbe: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), 55 (back)

18. One might compare the sentimentality of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "The Cry

of the Children," written sixty years later, when it could much more reasonably expect to see its indignation validated in an already mobilized legislative agenda. The unacknowledged expectation of just such an effect animates that poem's every victimary flourish, and makes reading it now almost embarrassing. Crabbe does not see himself mirrored in the good works his poem would set in motion. Indeed, he showed, throughout his life, comparatively little practical interest in reform. (back)

19. *Originary Thinking,* 171. (back)