

Cultural Synthesis in Research Pedagogy: The Puzzle of George Crabbe's "The Voluntary Insane"

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Abstract

One of the most direct approaches to addressing perceptions of a lack of disciplinary communication in higher education between the humanities/arts and the sciences, both social sciences and natural sciences, may be to encourage educators to construct pedagogies that extend beyond the traditional boundaries of their disciplines and that emphasize synthesis as both a methodology and an objective for student researchers. This essay models such a synthesis by drawing upon disciplines from within all three intellectual "cultures," as C.P. Snow referred to them, to examine the mystery of an unpublished work by English poet George Crabbe.

Introduction

The 1995 publication of "The Voluntary Insane" (c. 1822), a 1,208-line poem by George Crabbe (1754-1832) discovered in a notebook among the papers of Crabbe confidante Sarah Hoare (1777-1856) in 1989, immediately introduces a mystery that might initially seem to be of interest only to a literary historian: why would a successful poet compose such a substantial work and never submit it for publication? The following essay addresses this puzzle by working from the premise that a diverse spectrum of disciplinary methodologies—consulted to address specific facets of the preliminary research inquiry—can form an investigative synthesis to reveal connections not otherwise accessible to the researcher who relies primarily or exclusively on a single methodology.

Modeling this synthesis as a research pedagogy is one way to prompt a rethinking of the lingering cultural tendencies to retain disciplinary boundaries in higher education that C.P. Snow (1964, 23-4) was lamenting nearly half a century ago. Specifically, Snow addressed a dichotomy between "literary intellectuals" (1964, 11)—a generic category conflating the disciplines of the arts and the humanities—and scientists, characterizing the former as maintaining that scientists, "brash and boastful," are "shallowly optimistic, unaware of man's condition" (1964, 12). The latter are depicted as thinking of colleagues in the arts and humanities as individuals "totally

lacking in foresight, peculiarly unconcerned with their brother men,” and anti-intellectually “anxious to restrict both art and thought to the existential moment” (1964, 12). When he returns to his 1959 lecture in 1963, Snow seems curiously unable or unwilling to articulate the social sciences as a “third culture,” though he acknowledges some “social historians, as well as being on speaking terms with scientists, have felt bound to turn their attention to the literary intellectuals, or more exactly to some manifestations of the literary culture at its extreme” (1964, 67).

Recognizing the counterproductivity of characterizing methodological differences in such mutually alienating ways, I am proposing a synthesis that seeks to acknowledge the advantages of employing a diverse range of disciplinary approaches when examining any research question, toward achieving a more comprehensive cognitive understanding (that is, an understanding founded upon empirical knowledge) of that question, of its implications, and of its potential solutions. As Edward O. Wilson has noted, the only way to unite the “two cultures” is “to view the boundary between the scientific and the literary cultures not as a territorial line but as a broad and mostly unexplored terrain awaiting cooperative entry from both sides” (1998, 126). Hence I have selected six areas of inquiry to demonstrate the significantly distinctive nature of the insights that can be gleaned from each (including the social sciences), towards demonstrating how they may be synthesized into a rewardingly insightful, unified perspective.

Textual Exegesis: *What can be determined by reading the source text(s) closely, both for literal and for metaphorical content?*¹

¹ This first investigative question reflects the humanities’ emphasis on what is often called “close reading,” a formalist derivation of *what* a text says that also takes note structurally of *how* it says that. Ultimately, this involves the same kind of accounting for content that follows data collection and observation in the natural sciences and social sciences. Decisions about what, specifically, to do with the data that one has collected depend first upon assumptions we make about what we are examining. While exegesis may be the favored methodology of theologians and classical scholars, etymologically it is derived from Greek and means “to lead” (*-hēgeisthai*) “out”

'Tis Affectation to despise
What has such visible Effect:
Improbable and senseless Lies,
We coolly and at once reject.

What Notions shall we then Embrace?
But let us hear the Tale Again,
Then calmly judge the Case
And thus the latent Truth obtain.
(ll. 5-8, 29-32)

In four sections subtitled “The Character Before,” “The Change,” “Explanation,” and “Conference,” Crabbe employs eight-line stanzas with a consistent rhyme scheme (*ababbcbc*) to describe the devastating effects on Matilda, a young woman admired by her community (“A Pattern, an Example she; / No Want, no Weakness, no Excess” [ll. 39-40]), of the emotional pressures that eventually contribute to her decision to smother her widower uncle’s ailing infant son (“‘It will not die!’ I said, and pressed . . . / My God forgive . . . and it had rest” [ll. 1028-9]). Depicted as intelligent, calm, well mannered and independent, Matilda laughs at women who don’t know their own minds (ll. 55-6) as she resists succumbing to romantic crushes (ll. 49-52, 73-80). The poem’s narrator, an acquaintance of Matilda, dramatically shifts in the second section to a description of Matilda as a pale and sickly individual, who frequents “the restless Sea, / The marshy Ditch,” and “the bleak broad Fen” (ll. 14-50) trying to find refuge from troubled thoughts. Whether she’s wandering the shore where bodies from a shipwreck have washed up, not pitying their loss, but envying their repose (“Will you their happy State deplore, / The lasting, pure, unruffled Sleep?” [ll. 175-6]), or haunting “new-dug Graves” to “hold strange Converse with the dead” (l. 195), Matilda is clearly no longer the young woman noted for

(*ex-*)—and researchers in any culture and discipline begin by looking for some kind of connection between what is literally contained in a particular data set and what that content, literally or figuratively, may mean. The “close reading” performed by a mathematician, for example, might subject Crabbe’s poem to a frequency analysis, to generate a table of its statistically most meaningful (that is, most frequent) words and phrases. This kind of data collation is what “leads out” the researcher into the next phase of analysis.

nursing injured animals (ll. 209-16) and for comforting frightened children (ll. 225-32). Not only is she unmoved by the prospect of death, but her “stern and ghastly Smiles express / Contempt of all who fear to die” (ll. 262-3).

The third section of the poem opens by questioning the cause of such a radical change and concludes that it must have come from the shock of having witnessed the death of her infant cousin (l.284); while neighbors and Matilda’s uncle “have ceased to grieve,” the memory of the dead child “cannot leave” the young woman, though she’s deemed entirely sane: “She is, as she has ever been, / Not wild, nor vain, nor rash, nor weak” (ll. 294, 296, 311-12). Friends advise her to speak with a preacher and she frankly informs him (“nor deviates in her Tale” [l. 345]) that she is constantly tormented by the image of “this thing, / This bloated Infant, wan and pale” (ll. 346-7). With pragmatic reason, she also attacks the ineffectuality of the preacher’s claims that he can alleviate her distress through promises of supernatural intervention² (“But make this fiend depart, / And I will then thy Creed profess!” [ll. 465-6]), leading the narrator to conclude that the agile mind reflected by such arguments is completely sound (ll. 489-96), and the third section closes without a comprehensive solution to Matilda’s psychological transformation.

The final section opens two years later with Matilda “sinking to the grave” (l. 522), alienating friends who try to empathize with her suffering, until the narrator hears that she’s on her deathbed and visits her—prompting her to identify the catalyst for her decline, since “I would not in Deception die, / Nor leave a spotless Name, a Lie” (ll. 732-3). She hearkens to the time when she first heard herself named the future heir of her uncle’s (and adoptive father’s) fortune and

² It seems unlikely that Crabbe is simply reflecting his own religious skepticism here since he allows the preacher/priest (and reference to the figure is made variously with both terms), when attempting to persuade Matilda of her potential for salvation, to concede the palpability of her suffering through a learned allusion to the words of *King Lear*’s blinded Gloucester (“As flies to wanton boys are we to th’ gods, / They kill us for their sport” [4.1.36-7]): “Think you some Power above at Will / Inflicts Pains useless and severe, / As Flies the wanton Children kill?” (ll. 638-40). On the other hand, Ronald Hatch has argued that Crabbe and his contemporary, William Wordsworth, naturally experienced certain kinds of religious doubt in “attempting to bring their ‘scientific’ views of man—where he is to be studied as a natural phenomenon—into harmony with their Christian convictions” (1976, 138).

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pretended to have no interest in it (ll. 777-84; 799-800). Freed from all future financial worries, she was able to become the carefree, well-read, freethinking young woman so widely acknowledged and praised at the opening of the poem. However, her uncle eventually fell in love, remarried, and his new wife delivered a son—whose sickly constitution took a fatal toll on the worried mother, leaving Matilda to care for him, a responsibility which made her feel “repelled, repressed!” (l. 856). She found the shift from assured to uncertain financial future traumatic (l. 866), and though her uncle despaired of the boy surviving infancy, Matilda felt resentfully certain he would do so (ll. 884-88).

Just as the child showed signs of recovering—sending the uncle off to the local inn to celebrate—Matilda witnessed him experience an apparently fatal convulsion. This so restored her to her accustomed confidence that she was doubly devastated when the child began to move and to breathe again. At that point, reasoning that no one would suspect her, she deliberately planned and carried out the smothering of the child (ll. 1001-1032). Her prediction proved accurate—her uncle blamed himself (“behold upon that bed / My Sin and punishment” [ll. 1069-70]), while Matilda recognized that “My Safety was the Part I played, / And I was saved by that I seemed” (ll. 1119-20; she also anticipated and handled rumors: ll. 1129-32), so she feigned sadness and torment—which, in time, became all too real. Haunted by “That spectre-Infant” (l. 1146), as she lays dying, Matilda, like Marlowe’s Dr. Faustus, both wants to be saved by God and cannot bring herself to believe in the efficacy of divine mercy (ll. 1193-1200). When she dies, the narrator observes that the mysteries associated with her action and her decline die with her, for “no Eye could see / The Signs without of Thoughts within” (ll. 1205-6).

Medical Pathology: *Is there a pathology that could conceivably predispose an individual to the atypical actions of this individual?*³

But for the Cause—th' unhappy Maid,
Whose Pains we mourn, Whose fate we dread,
A Visit to some Cousin paid:
And there an Infant on its Bed
Saw dying, when alone! and this has led
To all that now disturbs and grieves. (ll. 281-6)

It's difficult to square Matilda's widely observed kindness and benevolence, recorded by members of her community, with her decision to commit murder apparently for reasons of financial gain. This reasonably raises the question of whether there might be an ultimate cause for her action separate from the proximate causes articulated by Matilda herself. Crabbe gives us the public view that the intelligent, pragmatic Matilda (ll. 41-56) began her mental and physical decline after witnessing the death of her infant cousin (ll. 281-6). Arnold Sorsby cautions that a medical biography is not synonymous with a personal medical history since it is "not constrained by the professional secrecy of the consulting room," and it necessarily suffers an implicit limitation resulting from the fact that "technical evidence from the past is not always adequate

³ This particular research question could reasonably be directed at any variety of individuals relevant to the central inquiry: the author of a focal work, or a specific historical figure, or even at a fictional character. It could also address an analogously wide range of pathologies, from the psychological state of such individuals, to their physical infirmities, to contracted illnesses (or even the acknowledgment of them). I've turned to the natural sciences and medical pathology in order to prompt some possible explanations for the seemingly contradictory behaviors exhibited by the protagonist of Crabbe's poem. One of Snow's insights about the scientific method has some important implications for what he refers to as the culture of the "literary intellectual," too. Arguing that science "has two motives: one is to understand the natural world, the other is to control it" (1964, 64), he illustrates the former with the example of cosmogony and claims that medicine typifies the latter. But there are parallels to these motives in the arts and humanities, where the objective of scholarship is to understand or to communicate—and by communicating, to control—*meaning*, rather than the natural world. Attempting to understand *meaning*, for example, might be the motive behind someone examining why it is that generation after generation of readers and theatergoers feel that Shakespeare's King Lear is indeed a man more sinned against than sinning, despite the fact that the playwright gives us ample evidence that in his younger days, Lear was likely a tyrannical monarch. While the *control* of meaning can take forms as different as political propaganda, commercial advertising, and public relations, it remains analogous to Snow's notion of the scientific objective of controlling the natural world because it is predicated upon being able to extrapolate a phenomenology from the hypotheses the researcher is able to corroborate through observation. To control the natural world, one must first understand its principles; the same is true for the control of meaning. And acknowledgment of the pejorative connotations of "control" (as in "hegemony," for example) to student researchers is useful as a rationale for their analysis of it, regardless of which of the three "cultures" one is employing as specific reference point.

for a retrospective diagnosis” (1974, 11). These concerns are compounded when the subject of the medical biography is a fictional character—but since the pressures affecting that character are both concrete and plausible, assessment of their contribution to some kind of underlying pathology may assist us in understanding Crabbe’s own positioning regarding the narrative’s details.

Medical pathologists describe Munchausen Syndrome as an individual’s conscious desire to gain attention by feigning illness or by inflicting personal injury that necessitates medical attention; Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy (MSBP), however, is their term for an individual who inflicts harm upon others, specifically upon children, in order to receive attention and sympathy. When Matilda is questioned about her cousin’s death, she replies “wildly” (l. 1084), and consequently the representative of the law “looked on me and pitying Cried, / ‘Unhappy Lady! dreadful Fate!’” (ll. 1086-7). MSBP is also “almost exclusively the province of women who find themselves in maternal roles, either as biological or adoptive mothers or as babysitters or caretakers” (Pearson 1998, 94), as in Matilda’s case. It manifests as a “form of abuse, in that the caretaker fabricates or induces illness in a child, and then presents the child for medical attention, denying any knowledge of the symptoms” (Raitt and Zeedyk 2004, 260). The contemporary mortality rate in such cases is approximately nine percent (Feldman 1998/2006, 1).

A number of factors potentially relevant to the shaping of Matilda’s portrait surface upon examination. In a letter to Edmund Burke, dated 26 June 1781, Crabbe reveals his own financial concerns⁴ and notes that he has been supported generously by the widowed mother of his dear friend, Sarah Elmy, despite “concealing the severity of my Situation, for I would not involve in

⁴ The net effect of this lengthy letter was that Burke assisted Crabbe in publishing his third long poem, “The Library,” that same year. In a letter to Burke written in March that same year, Crabbe had referred more obliquely to Sarah Elmy, merely referring to “a Friend in Suffolk on whom I can depend for every little Help that can be afforded” and taking comfort from the fact that “there I can reside at any time when it would be expensive & not necessary to me to be elsewhere” (Faulkner 1985, 7).

my Errors or Misfortunes a very generous & very happy family by which I am receiv'd with unaffected Sincerity" (Faulkner 1985, 16). Crabbe married Sarah Elmy in December, 1783, and their first child, born in 1784, survived only "a few hours" (Crabbe, Jr. 1947, 112); their son, George Crabbe, Jr. (d. 1857), was born in November, 1785, followed by John Waldron Crabbe (1787-1840; the only other Crabbe offspring to survive childhood), Sarah Suzanna Crabbe (b./d. 1789), Edmund Crabbe (1790-1796), Sarah Crabbe (b./d. 1791), and William Crabbe (1792-93). Recreating the event from stories told by his father, George Crabbe, Jr. recalls that Edmund Cartwright, Jr., a poet and inventor, invited George and Sarah to visit him at Doncaster in 1787. When Sarah entered the residence and witnessed Cartwright's many machines and devices operating "under the apparent management of children, the bare idea of the inevitable hazard attendant on such stupendous undertakings, quite overcame her feelings, and she burst into tears" (1947, 117-8). This apparent display of empathy for the children in question may have been contextualized by a complex of responses connected both to the emotional issues underlying MSBP and to pressures within the Crabbe family.

Intrafamilial Dynamics: *How might the observed responses be influenced by family relationships?*⁵

⁵ To expand the hypotheses made possible by subjecting the core data to contexts drawn from the phenomenology of the natural world, I turn to sociology with the investigative question at the bottom of p. 4, as a response to the significant presence of interpersonal relationships in Crabbe's poem. For my inquiry, this functions to foreground the dynamics of the relationships that were identified as being potentially significant in the preceding section of the essay. In dismissing the myth of the pre-industrial world as an Edenic place, Snow asserts that it is unconscionable to teach what one "believes" to be right while ignoring the facts staring one in the face, of indoctrinating rather than informing and enabling students, "teaching them with that special insistence which strains the voices of priests of a dying religion" (1964, 78). This remains one of the most comfortable and hence insidious dangers in higher education: the unchallenged perpetuation of one's accustomed methodologies. Academic freedom makes this possible, but a heinous byproduct of it is precisely the kind of intellectual insulation that Snow was challenging. Self-conscious experimentation with the assumptions of one's discipline (and of disciplinary boundaries generally) can lead to the development of entirely new disciplines and methodologies, as in the example of Dr. Bill Bass, founder of the "Bone Farm" at the University of Tennessee, where cadavers are subjected to a variety of effects in a field laboratory that examines the minutiae of the biochemical processes of decomposition. Bass realized that traditional anthropology, once treated as a disciplinary subdivision of the humanities, could be given a more comprehensive scope through reinforcement from the hard sciences. This synthesis yielded the now invaluable field of forensic anthropology (Bass and Jefferson 2003, 33-45).

Hope, when deferred too long, destroys;
Fear, Sorrow and Despair will kill;
Love bears away our Girls and boys,
And Hatred lives Men's blood to spill[.]
(ll. 929-32)

When Drs. Tilly Reid of the University of Central Lancashire and Ros Bramwell of the University of Liverpool conducted a 2003 study of immediate post-natal pressures on mothers of pre-term infants, not surprisingly they found extremely high correlations between maternal anxiety and feelings of helplessness in terms of being unable to protect their infants from pain. In particular they noted that the stressful experience of worrying about hypervulnerable infants is initially “global in nature,” but there subsequently occurs a “shifting of concerns from the mother (e.g. birth trauma, separation and alterations to the parental role) to the infant (e.g. long-term concerns about chronic disease)” (2003, 288). The dynamics of this shift may have had implications for the experience of Sarah Elmy Crabbe, given the context of her losing a total of five of her seven children, three of them dying in the first year after birth. Responding to the death of his infant daughter, Sarah Suzanna, Crabbe wrote to Cartwright on 24 October 1789, lamenting “the continual sickness we have had here” for “my poor little Girl died of the Hooping Cough which was attended with Convulsions”—precisely the symptoms of the child in “The Voluntary Insane”—“and my Boys have scarcely [*sic*] recovered” (Faulkner 1985, 39). In that same letter, as a relative afterthought following the concerns he expresses for his children, Crabbe apologizes for not being able to act on his previous acceptance of an invitation to visit Cartwright at his property in Claxby, Lincolnshire, leaving the circumstances of his indisposition curiously vague: “the reasons which keep M^{rs} Crabbe at home will have their Effect upon me”

(1985, 40). The formality of these words may point to an emotional divide, present even early in the couple's relationship but perhaps exacerbated by the deaths of successive Crabbe infants.

Sarah Elmy had been living at the Parham residence of an uncle named Tovell, with her mother and two sisters, in an environment that predisposed her to a love of the arts and literature, when she was introduced to George Crabbe in 1772. While supporting his nascent literary aspirations, she also tried unsuccessfully to share her own "passion for music" with Crabbe (Crabbe, Jr. 1947, 26), who, following their marriage, seemed to have increasingly little to do with her in any sphere but the domestic, pursuing his own three great passions—for poetry, for the pulpit, and for botanical studies and horticulture—while frequently traveling away from home to pursue patronage or to repay former patronage. If violence or emotional trauma are the likely outcomes when women "suppress their anger and ruminate about unresolved interpersonal conflicts" (Thomas 2001, 137), it's hardly surprising, given the evidence in her deathbed confession (ll. 737-1200) of her attempts to suppress her deep resentment of her uncle's infant son, that Matilda finally succumbed to acting out her aggressive emotions. But what about Sarah Elmy Crabbe?

The women who engage in MSBP are characterized as individuals who "mask feelings of loneliness, inadequacy, incompetence, and low self-esteem by assuming the role of dedicated parent," and although such women do this for the consequent attention or feeling of importance associated with the caretaking of sickly or accident-prone children, they quite often appear "to be model parents" (Ewing 1997, 54). At some level, Matilda's uncle recognizes his complicity in the emotional crisis that leads his niece to her desperate act to regain her position of centrality in his life when he expresses feelings of guilt when his son's health declines—following his wife's death: "The Father said, 'It is decreed, / I thus my Punishment shall find; / It was my Sin, I am

resigned—” (ll. 875-7). Could Crabbe have been identifying with the uncle while imagining his wife in the position of Matilda?

Historiographical Analysis: *What historical records may be consulted for cultural contexts or period-specific data?*⁶

The Child was sick, nor seemed to love
The World to which he came of late;
And while the Mother fondly strove
T’ avert, she met her Infant’s fate:
As with the Wailing Boy she sate,
Languid and pale and faint she grew;
Ate not, slept ill, and mourned her State,
And from her daily Cares withdrew.
(ll. 833-40)

Setting the tone for his character’s personality with a popular culture allusion, Crabbe tells us that Matilda enjoys reading Gothic novels (ll. 57-63), acknowledging the literary genre’s popularity in early nineteenth century England; unlike most of her female reader contemporaries,⁷ however, she is never frightened by them (ll. 63-4). Reading Matilda in the

⁶ Since examining the mechanisms of family relationships in the third section of the essay identified some potentially meaningful corollaries for the Crabbe family, it seemed logical to augment this connection with some additional primary data. I located this data by returning to the humanities and to analysis of historical records—both of the nineteenth century broadly and of the Crabbe family specifically. If I were pursuing this process with a class, I would discuss my use of the term “historiography” in the essay to signify the subjective recording of history (distinct from the actual occurrence of events in time) and explain why its very subjectivity justifies both skeptical and serious consideration as primary data. The emphasis on both subjectivity and skepticism here is vital in helping students to avoid the trap of cultural and intellectual relativism, particularly given their dependence upon the internet and its function as a nexus of such relativism. One of the histories I consult in this section of the essay, a biography of Crabbe and his wife, Sarah Elmy Crabbe, written by one of their sons, George Crabbe, Jr., is by definition subjective—but the author’s unique familiarity with the lives of his subjects also makes him privy to insights and details unavailable to others. The lesson for students is that a responsible researcher will scour that source, pondering the significance both of reliable and of suspect information.

⁷ In trying to assess the emotional and intellectual impact of Gothic novels on female readers from the late 1790s forward, when “women began to produce and read Gothic novels in unprecedented numbers” (Clemens 1999, 41), Ann Ronald notes a pattern which equates to female psychosexual development: a journey into the unknown/adulthood, which features a “sterile wasteland (pre-sexuality—a break with the past)” that moves into a fairy-tale idealization of courtship before arriving at the mature sexuality of female adulthood, though the emotional trepidation associated by women with this development is modeled linguistically in the novels: “The tone says terror, the alliteration suggests fear, the diction points to agony, the syntax indicates hesitation and evasion” (1983, 179). That Crabbe’s Matilda “at such Midnight Horrors, pale / At Midnight Reading—never grew” (ll. 63-4; cf. Crabbe’s “Misery” [1988, 2:476]) is interesting historically for two reasons: first, it tells us that Matilda apparently doesn’t

context of historiography about the nineteenth century aids the researcher in appreciating the kinds of cultural pressures and social realities that may have influenced both Crabbe and his portrait of Matilda. Because Matilda was well-read and acknowledged as a talented author in her own right (“I wrote, and Men approved the Style, / And meekly I the Praise approved” [ll. 747-8]), she formed expectations for herself that were predicated on economic stability: “But I had Views, and dearly loved / To hear how wealthy I must be” (ll. 751-2). Kate Ferguson Ellis has noted that Gothic novels written by women like Anne Radcliffe were often the leisure reading of women who were supported by men working in “the ‘world’ of early industrialization” and hence the novels encouraged their readers to disparage the emphasis on profit of the male workplace in favor of philosophical ideals and unrestrained emotional expression.⁸ Only the male and female villains of such novels “crave the stimulation of meteoric profits and conspicuous consumption” (101). To Matilda, it “seemed an everlasting Law / That Riches kept Mankind in Awe-- / I dreamed of Jewels, Garments, Gold” (ll. 764-6), till desire for the acquisition of wealth inevitably “possessed my Heart” (l. 776). Consciously or not, Crabbe presents Matilda’s masculine emphasis on economic ambition as the fatal flaw in her otherwise exemplary character. Displaced as her uncle/guardian’s beneficiary by his new son, she becomes resentful and possessive of what she’d already come to think of as her own. When the mother, weakened by the birth and worried about her infant son’s fragile health (ll. 833-47),

identify with—and hence doesn’t feel threatened by—the patterns of female sexual development that stimulate anxious responses from her peer readers. Additionally, she forms no romantic or erotic attachments in the poem, as though proudly impervious to either. This clearly identifies her as an outsider, despite the poem’s early praise of her unconventional qualities. But her reaction also tells us that Crabbe the poet/preacher is considerably more aware of the popular fiction reading taste of women contemporaries *and* of their conventional reactions to the genre than we might otherwise expect of a clergyman of the time.

⁸ Encouragement of similar female response occurred in the political as well as the literary realm: in *Brief Reflections Relative to the Emigrant French Clergy* (1793), for example, Frances (Fanny) Burney calls for activism from women, for while “however truly of the latter to withdraw from notice may be in general the first praise . . . they may with yet more dignity come forward: for it is here that their purest principles, in union with their softest feelings, may blend immediate gratification with the most solemn future hopes” (1793, v).

eventually dies, Matilda's subsequent transformation into a predacious Gothic villain seals the infant's fate.

Consultation of historical documents also yields a number of intriguing parallels between the events of "The Voluntary Insane" and the lives of Crabbe, his wife and his in-laws. According to George Crabbe, Jr., his father dreaded facing the consequences of the 1789 death of Jane "Jenny" Tovell, fourteen-year-old daughter of Sarah Elmy's uncle, for Crabbe's fiancée "might now be considered as, in part at least, Mr. Tovell's heir," and hence Crabbe "well knew what she must suffer from the first bitterness of minds too uncultivated to suppress their feelings" (1947, 35-6). Indeed, the embittered Tovell is credited with having commented, "She is now out of *everybody's* way, poor girl!" (1947, 36). This dynamic of benefiting financially from another's death was replicated with Tovell's own death. In another letter to Edmund Cartwright, Jr., dated 15 September 1792, Crabbe reports expectation of "a very serious Call" from the Tovell estate in Parham, "where one of our nearest Relations will either expect us, or will have past the Bounds of all mortal Expectation" (Faulkner 1985, 49), an allusion to John Tovell's pending demise, which occurred less than a month later. The modest income Crabbe drew as a curate in Aldeburgh (1781) or as chaplain to the Duke of Rutland (1782), coupled with his aspiration to write poetry that was personally meaningful rather than popular and profitable,⁹ ensured that he was regularly drawn away from home in pursuit of patronage for his efforts. Sarah Elmy Crabbe, then, was acutely aware of her husband's limited income and of the continual strain upon their family resources. The desperate association of financial security and personal identity by

⁹ A letter to Walter Scott in 1813 notes that an individual of only "modest fortune" is forced to respect "the necessity of a profession," or regular living, even to a "Lad of Genius" (that is, someone concerned with the creation of art rather than of commercial success): indeed, "I am flattered by what you mention of my *Patron*: your Praise is Current Coin: it is useful" (Faulkner 1985, 115). On the accusation by Crabbe's contemporaries that his work was too engaged in the realm of ideas to be entertaining, and that as a result it was "deficient in poetic imagination," see Faulkner (1985, xxix-xxxi).

Matilda might be construed as a projection of George and Sarah Elmy Crabbe's own related anxieties,¹⁰ compounded by the notion that a "successful" poet and his family should be free from such concerns.

Cognitive Science: *What insights into the agents and agency can be prompted by study of biological mechanisms?*¹¹

“But O! there might have been a Day
When I so sweetly might have died
An Infant, in the Lap at play—
One Grasp had squeezed my Life Away;
Or at the Worst, some friendly blow
Had placed me with my Kindred Clay!—
That cannot think, fear, feel, or know.”
(ll. 658-64)

Recent incorporation into literary criticism of the mechanisms of evolutionary biology and of identification of the biologically-driven causes behind much human behavior has yielded new insights into the actions of characters and the attitudes of the authors creating them. This seems to be as logical as it is practical, since these areas of inquiry seek to explain fundamental motivations in human agents (whether characters or authors) who all share certain essential

¹⁰ Note, for example, Crabbe's description to Cartwright of what it felt like to be living in the home of John Tovell: "I am in this place my dear Sir, neither as a Tenant, an heir nor an Executor but in some measure, as all these. I am neither Master of the House, nor Guest" (Faulkner 53). Compounding this was the Elmy family's history of emotional instability, which must have exerted its own palpable influence on George and Sarah. Sarah's brother James, a failed artist, experienced severe depression that culminated in the thirty-eight year old's death, while their sister, Eleanor, had to be cared for by their other sister, Mary, due to her dementia. Faulkner describes Sarah Elmy's own deteriorating "manic-depressive" (1985, 394) condition prior to her death in 1813.

¹¹ Synthesis of the cognitive sciences and the humanities has produced new subfields like neurophilosophy (Churchland 2002, 2-32), which draws on conclusions from research into the body's neurochemical and neuronal networks to bring a new framework to the question of how we learn about the external world and how our brains create a functional interface between introspection and the world outside the self. For the purposes of pursuing the Crabbe inquiry, thinking about the decisions made by Crabbe and by the characters in his poem from a neuroscience perspective helps to clarify the significance of stresses identified and discussed earlier in the essay.

human biological needs and mechanisms (Barash and Barash 2005, 1-13, 245-51).¹² Since neuroscience, for example, includes examination of stress and related psychiatric disorders among its foci when studying the brain, any primary sources treating these topics may yield additional insights when scrutinized with the lens of concepts drawn from research literature on the cognitive sciences. The stress we've already noted between the Crabbes and John Tovell begins to seem even more significant when assessed from this perspective. Cliff H. Summers has demonstrated that in a wide range of male vertebrates (fish, reptiles, and primates), aggressive social interaction can be damagingly stressful for both dominant and subordinate males (rather than just for subordinate males, as most studies preceding Summers had argued), noting that persistent subjection of males to dominance/subordination dynamics results in "chronically elevated glucocorticoid concentrations"¹³ (2002, 592) that in extreme cases can lead to death by social stress (2002, 593). Days before the death of John Tovell, Crabbe wrote Cartwright from Parham that "nobody is satisfied, but Everybody agrees it is a miserable place" where "everything & Everybody are huddled together": "I confess [that not] my Judgment nor even my Hope can penetrate thro' the Mists which at present surround us" (Faulkner 1985, 53-4).

The palpable stress of this situation may comprise part of the emotional foundation of "The Voluntary Insane," though letters written at about the time of the poem's composition do not reveal analogously distressing encounters between Crabbe and others (see Faulkner 1985, 280-99). The first hints of stress on Matilda occur at the close of "The Character Before," where she frequents her father's table when his brothers and friends visit to discuss "Subjects grave" that

¹² And since neuroscience examines the relationship of the nervous system to behavior and learning, with specific emphasis placed on the subjects of stress, on sensation and perception, and on psychiatric disorders among its foci when studying the brain, any primary source like "The Voluntary Insane" that treats these topics may yield fresh insights through consultation of disciplinary literature addressing those topics. Given the topics above most frequently addressed by scholars in the discipline, consultation of neuroscience theory and practice seems particularly apt for the examination of individuals or groups in conflict.

¹³ For a concise discussion of the physiology of stress response, see Reeder and Kramer (2005, 225-6); on the significance of glucocorticoid analysis, also see Reeder and Kramer (2005, 227-8).

fascinate and trouble her: “she listened till she feared” (ll. 118, 120). The subject that frightens her most, as revealed in her conversation with a preacher, is death—though not her own, as she narrates a fantasy of her own infant mortality, wishing that “some friendly blow” might have “squeezed my Life Away” (ll. 661-2). This death wish is a self-imposed punishment for what she acknowledges as the unnatural resentment of her infant cousin (ll. 921-36). The behavior of cognitive systems and the internal processes that make such behavior possible are often assessed discretely by cognitive scientists in order to demonstrate that “the characterization of how a system relates to its environment” is conceptually distinct from a “processing model that explains how it is able to accomplish this” (Bechtel 1988, 75).¹⁴ By analogy, it’s useful for us to examine Matilda’s anomalous behavior even if we are unable to characterize all of the catalysts contributing to it.

Matilda feels guilty about her meditations on financial security while she maintains what she imagines to be a death-vigil over her uncle’s son (ll. 889-94); consequently, she experiences “Vexations, Trouble, Pain / Trial and Torment” (ll. 897-8) when he rallies and appears to grow stronger. These violent mood-swings intensify until her uncle’s hopeful response to his son’s improving health sets off an irrational chain reaction in Matilda of escalating hatred toward father, son, and anyone who’s sympathetic to them, culminating in another violent fantasy: “Did I in Magic deal, / The Ropes about your Necks should fly” (ll. 947-8). Once she smothers the infant, however, she is further disoriented by the stress of maintaining her “voluntary insanity,” of pretending to be distressed by the child’s death rather than by her active agency in causing it (“The Guilt, the Trouble, and the Pain / Of Conscience!—Judge! Informer! Spy!” [ll. 1157-8]),

¹⁴ To illustrate this distinction, William Bechtel offers the example of describing a yeast cell performing fermentation in physiological terms as “metabolizing sugar to produce alcohol,” while the reaction is explained in biochemical terms as a product “of enzymes and cofactors which together make it possible for a cell to metabolize the sugar” (1988, 75).

and that complex conflict of guilt, conscience, and the effort required to deny her involvement inevitably destroys her health. Not entirely coincidentally, it is after 1793, following the deaths of his own children and of Jenny Tovell, that Crabbe became “subject to vertigoes”; after a particularly troubling collapse, however, his doctor prescribed opiates, with the result that, as his son George, Jr., describes, “his constitution was renovated; a rare effect of opium, for that drug almost always inflicts some partial injury” (1947, 138). One wonders whether Crabbe was taking the opium primarily as a painkiller for the migraine-like suffering that can accompany bouts of vertigo, or as a euphoric to escape the pain of the losses he’d endured.

Semiotics: Are there particular signs (images, words, ideas) that recur with sufficient frequency to suggest a systemic relationship between them?¹⁵

“And now farewell! The Power that broke
The Rock and made the Waters flow
May give the Heart an healing Stroke.
And I, even I, may Mercy know, [”]
...
Alone she died; no Eye could see
The Signs without of Thoughts within—
(ll. 1193-6, 1205-6)

¹⁵ This section actually employs a synthesis of Snow’s “literary” culture and his sociological “third culture” (an association which has been challenged by numerous scholars, including Victoria Vesna’s proposal of the visual arts as the intellectual structure most suited to “bridge-building” between literary and scientific cultures, noting that “the greatest danger is for artists to look to literary, philosophical, and theoretical circles for interpretations of scientific data and then further reinterpret these versions without checking back with the scientists” [2001, 122]). Roland Barthes asserts that the “sociological scope” of semiotic systems “is obvious,” but cautions that consideration of the systemic relationship between meaning and the vehicles for delivering it should be balanced with recourse to linguistics and philosophy, too (1967, 24-5). For a model of such a balance, drawn from a synthesis of chaos theory and philosophy, see Mazis (1999, 219-41). Semiotics’ systematic assessment of the significance of anything that functions as a sign—that is, as a vehicle for signification—is as popular now in the social sciences as it is in art history or in literary studies. I suspect that this popularity has something to do with semiotics’ pragmatic method of analysis, developed from linguistics; as parts of speech can be identified and assessed, so can the components of any coherent system. In other words, I believe the recourse by humanities scholars and social scientists to semiotics over the past two decades has much to do with a hunger for the kind of objective analysis that was associated through the majority of the twentieth century as the exclusive domain of the natural sciences.

Semiotics, the science of signs, often seeks to construe meaning by first identifying and assessing discrete signs, only subsequently establishing the relative probability of those signs' collective coherence as a signifying system (Barthes 1967, 24-5; Eco 1986, 38-9). In addition to the images, the motives, and the context of personal history informing our discussion of "The Voluntary Insane," there are corollaries in some of Crabbe's other poetry that cumulatively constitute a coherent semiotic pattern. While a number of Crabbe's early ("minor") poems (written 1776-1782) express his love for future wife Sarah Elmy in the persona of Mira, who is lavished with his narrator's devoted passion (see, e.g., 1988, 1:4, 17, 19, 20, 49, 50, 89), following the deaths of their children, as Sarah was "attacked" by "a nervous disorder" of "an increasing and very lamentable kind" (Crabbe, Jr. 1947, 140), darker female figures, sharing characteristics that would eventually compose Matilda in "The Voluntary Insane," gradually displace the idealized model of Crabbe's early work.

"The Mother," from his collection *Tales* (1812), opens with a dialectical portrait of female influence implied by epigrams drawn from Shakespeare's *As You Like It* and *All's Well That Ends Well*, the former describing the effects of Petrarchan tradition's beautiful-but-cruel women who exploit the power of their beauty to torment lovestruck men and the latter describing the idealized wisdom and loyalty of the play's heroine, Helena. The title character of Crabbe's poem, Dorothea, as sole surviving child of her parents ("Sons they had lost, and she alone remain'd" [1988, 2:111, l. 4]), is named heiress of her parents' fortune and subsequently spoiled, so her superlative qualities of mind and beauty¹⁶ ensure that "with her fame her vanity was fed" (1988, 2:112, l. 15). Once the longsuffering man who marries Dorothea is hounded to his grave by her verbal attacks and complaints (ll. 33-64), she allows one of her two daughters—Lucy, a

¹⁶ Like Matilda, she's also the recipient of universal praise for her extraordinary qualities: "Each word, each look, each action was a cause / For flattering wonder, and for fond applause" (1988, 2:112, ll. 16-17).

plain, thoughtful girl—to be raised by her sister-in-law, while she cares for the other daughter, a beauty like she was. Just prior to his revelation that the elder daughter dies in the mother's care (l. 176), the poet describes the workings of "stern Fate" with images reflecting quite clearly the experiences of George and Sarah Elmy Crabbe: "The early prospect in the glory dies, / As the soft smiles on dying infants play / In their mild features, and then pass away" (1988, 2:116, ll. 173-5). Though "no heiress to her mother's face" (2:116, l. 192), Lucy is effectively the heiress of the mother's fortune and returns home to live with her, only to have her hopes of marrying a young rector foiled—until she, too, is hounded to her grave by the cruel mother (ll. 335-40). The mother, possessed of her dead husband's estate, surrounded by portraits and mirrors, solicits the attentive devotion of others because she "has enough to buy / Th'attentive ear and the submissive eye / Of abject natures" (1988, 2:120, ll. 341-3). While everyone else around her dies, she endures through the end of the poem.

The absence of pity shown by this predatory mother is curiously complemented by the lack of affect expressed in a later poem, "Infancy," by a narrator who demonstrates the emotional damage resulting from the death of an infant sister: "For then first met and mov'd my early Fears, / A Father's Terror's and a Mother's Tears" (1988, 3:243, ll. 64-5). With this archetypal loss in mind, even the hopes ordinarily invested in marriage and the prospect of children become inaccessible as "Pleasures die, and Pains become Repose" (1988, 3:243, l. 38), and the narrator, finding no solace from the haunting memories of the death of a child, can see nothing in other children's promising beginnings but the threat of endings (ll. 126-7, 134-5), so the narrator is all-too-conscious of the emotional damage wrought by such thoughts: "my Heart was dead" (1988, 3:245, l. 119). The poem "Misery," composed sometime between 1818 and 1821 (1988, 3:476),

sharing the same stanza structure and rhyme scheme of “The Voluntary Insane,”¹⁷ includes an analogous assertion of its subject’s fearless enjoyment of gothic fiction (ll. 3-8) as well as of her joyless isolation following a traumatic catalyst: “It was her Evil Fate to view / Some dying Wretch” (1988, 3:478, l. 97-8) and the memory of that death becomes an obsession that destroys her faith in God (and a “reverend Priest” who tries to counsel her). In the penultimate stanza, we learn more precisely the provocation of her depression: an “Infant had expir’d / That caus’d this Terror and Surprise” (1988, 3:482, ll. 241-2).

In noting how semioticians often read narratives as Freudian analysts read dreams, Kaja Silverman explains that the manifest content of dreams/narratives are related to their causal, or latent, content by virtue of similarity and contiguity, where images “either resemble or in some way adjoin” (1983, 101) the meanings they signify. It’s hardly surprising, given the family’s background, that Crabbe’s poetry associates a significant level of anxiety with infant mortality and the pain of seeing a child’s promise cut short by death, while the frequent allusions to “legacies” remind us of the sensitivity of George and Sarah to the pressures of the Tovell inheritance. Yet the contiguity of a pattern regarding depressive disorders (with an associated deficiency of affect),¹⁸ personal observation of the deaths of infants and older children, and negative portraits of maternal figures seems to suggest the pattern’s relationship to the fragile mental health of Sarah Elmy Crabbe, who died in 1813, a year after the publication of “The Mother.” In a letter to Alethea Brereton Lewis (25 Oct. 1813, 4 days after Sarah’s death), Crabbe comments that his wife “has been dying these ten years” and concludes concerning his

¹⁷ The poem’s editor, Felix Pryor, notes that the association of the longer poem with the “Misery” lyric was clearly intentional (34).

¹⁸ This lack of affect is pervasive in the portions of “The Voluntary Insane” describing Matilda’s depression, particularly involving her complacent acceptance of the horrific violence associated with a shipwreck (see ll. 169-76, 185-90).

“poor Sally” that “it is best: She is gone” (Faulkner 1985, 117). George Crabbe, Jr. laments that “so large a portion of her married life was clouded by her lamentable disorder” (1947, 182).

Conclusion

Acknowledging that Sarah Hoare’s father, like Sarah Elmy Crabbe, “suffered from acute depression” (1995, 39), Felix Pryor, editor of “The Voluntary Insane,” speculates that the poem was not published during Crabbe’s life, nor after his death in a posthumous 1834 edition of his poetry, either because it was too personal and Miss Hoare empathized with his suffering a loved one’s emotional and mental deterioration (1995, 43), or because it was “far too shocking” (1995, 44) for nineteenth-century readers expecting something else from a Church of England minister. Either way, Pryor concludes, the narrative is ultimately “based on the history of the late Mrs. Crabbe, sent mad by the death of her children” (1995, 45). The synthesis of analytical methods and objectives by which we have examined the lives of George and Sarah Elmy Crabbe, the pressures and changes in their lives and the ways in which those influences may have functioned as catalysts of action, suggests that “The Voluntary Insane” is more than just a reflection of depression and loss.

An exegetical reading of the poem presents a cause-and-effect relationship between Matilda’s heightened expectations and the despair resulting from the frustration of them by her cousin, prompting the act for which her conscience subsequently destroyed her. An examination of the pathology of Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy suggests the possibility of mistreatment of children as an expression of a mother’s/caregiver’s desire for attention (perhaps in competition with those children as usurpers of attention she’s previously monopolized), a motive consistent with the descriptions of Matilda. By establishing connections between post-natal and

environmental pressures, and subsequent personality dysfunction and emotional exhaustion within the family, we were able to propose that Crabbe may have recognized his own behavior contributing to the growing alienation of his wife as he became more engaged in the public sphere. Scrutiny of written historical records reveals anxieties associated with additional pressure in the form of financial concerns and increasing dependency on the anticipated legacy from Sarah's uncle, John Tovell, as additional common ground between the character of Matilda and the life of Sarah Elmy Crabbe. Neuroscience studies reveal that the stress of anxiety experienced over extended periods of time creates a destructive environment for any subject; the stress that leads Matilda to murder seems similar to that oppressing Sarah, and one wonders to what degree the empathy of her husband with her suffering and their mutual losses contributed to the afflictions that he sought to treat with opium. Finally, the patterns formed by recurrent images in Crabbe's later poetry suggests that Matilda's yielding to extreme emotion when searching for an immediate solution to her problems is not limited to a single, invented, persona, but rather pervades a number of Crabbe's late lyrics.

In a project like my essay's examination of Crabbe's poem, interpolation of additional disciplines within the cultural divisions of the essay could open up additional avenues of hypothesis: an analysis of gender demographics in the historical record could be pursued to determine whether Sarah Elmy Crabbe's bouts of depression were common or uncommon among the wives of nineteenth-century English clergymen; an analysis of identifiable environmental hazards might yield theories about chemical causes of irregularities in Mrs. Crabbe's behavior (recall the monks and the lead-based paint in Umberto Eco's novel, *The Name of the Rose*); results of the psychoanalysis of the family relationships described in "The Voluntary Insane" could be juxtaposed with a parallel analysis of the relationships in Crabbe's

family, to identify normative and deviant patterns within Crabbe's immediate circumstances. Collectively, a synthetic approach to examining the original problem of why "The Voluntary Insane" was never published by Sarah Hoare, a family confidante, collates the initial evidence towards an argument that the poem is George Crabbe's chronicle of a suspicion that he could not publicly articulate, perhaps for fear of damage to his family's reputation, that his wife, Sarah, may have surrendered to the same emotional anxieties and doubts that prey upon the character Matilda, and that she consequently may have been more than mere spectator at the deaths of five of the seven Crabbe children.

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