

*The Ethics of Reading:
Vast Gaps and Parting Hours*

A wicked book they seized; the very Turk
Could not have read a more pernicious work . . .

George Crabbe,
'The Parting Hour' (ll. 355–6)

A distinctive feature of literary study in America at the present time is its internationalization. The result has been a fissuring of what not too long ago seemed perhaps about to become a seamless whole, whether under the aegis of literary history and the history of ideas, or under the aegis of the New Criticism, or under the aegis of the archetypal criticism of Northrop Frye. The diffusion in America of new linguistic theories of various sorts, of Slavic formalism, of phenomenology, of structuralism, of continental Marxism and Freudianism, and of so-called 'deconstruction' has put an end, for the moment at least, to any dreams of unification. Nor can the various invading theories be reconciled among themselves. This penetration, fracturing, or 'crazing' has made the institution of literary studies in America a house divided against itself, its domestic economy invaded by alien hosts or guests from abroad. These foreign imports have been around long enough now for their disruptive implications to be at least partly understood, and we are in the midst of the predictable negative reaction against them.

My purpose here is to investigate the question of the ethics of reading in the context of this situation. The phrase 'the ethics of reading' might seem to be an oxymoron. The obligation of the reader, the teacher, and the critic would seem to be exclusively epistemological. The reader must see clearly what the work in question says and repeat that meaning in his commentary or teaching. He functions thereby, modestly, as an intermediary, as a midwife or catalyst. He transmits meanings which are objectively there but which might not otherwise have reached readers or students. He brings the meaning to birth again as illumination and insight in their minds, making the interaction take place without himself entering into it or altering it. It would seem that the field covered by reading involves exclusively the epistemological categories of truth and falsehood, insight and blindness. The teacher is a revealer, not a creator.

Nevertheless, ethical issues arise in all sorts of ways, both practical and theoretical, in the act of reading. Men and women have given up their lives over questions of interpretation, the reading of a phrase of scripture, for

example. One expects reading in one way or another to have moral effects, for good or for ill. To the couplets, truth and falsehood, insight and blindness, themselves not quite congruent, must be added the pair good and bad, both in the sense of aesthetic judgement and in the sense of ethical judgement, and the pair speech and silence. These pairs cross the others widdershins, and no one of them may be easily twisted to superimpose exactly on the others in a single act of critical judgement. It is impossible to divide, discriminate, sift, or winnow the wheat from the chaff, true from false, good from bad, in a single moment of parting.

As a result, difficult questions arise in the attempt to adjudicate between epistemological and ethical responsibilities. Does a teacher or critic have an obligation to choose only certain works to teach or write about? Who has the right to set the canon and to establish the Index? Should 'the state see to it,' as Matthew Arnold thought? Is a good work always moral? Should a teacher or a critic keep silent if he is led, perhaps unexpectedly, to ethically negative conclusions about a given work? Should certain aspects of a given work be suppressed at a preliminary level of teaching, or should there perhaps be a hierarchy of works of increasing ethical complexity in a given curriculum? How is the need for a firm ethical commitment in the teacher-critic compatible with that openness or 'pluralism' often said to be necessary to the sympathetic understanding of works from different periods and cultures? The commitment of both the scientific and religious strands of our American heritage to seeing and saying the truth fearlessly can easily, in a given teaching or writing situation, come to collide with concrete ethical responsibilities towards students and colleagues, no less a part of our heritage. Nor is this conflict external, between one critic and another, one teacher and another, one mode of criticism and another. The most intense conflict is likely to take place within the mind and feelings of a single person, in his or her attempt to fulfill incompatible responsibilities.

[. . .] The concrete situation of teachers of the humanities is changing at the moment with unusual rapidity. More even than usual it seems as if we stand within the instant of a crisis, a dividing point, a 'parting hour'. Aspects of the change include the increasing emphasis on the teaching of writing (which may be all to the good if it does not involve the imposition of narrow notions of clarity and logic), the decline of enrollments in traditional courses in literature and other humanities, the catastrophic reduction of the number of positions open to younger humanists, and a conservative reaction in the universities. This tends to declare certain kinds of speculative questioning anathema. Perhaps this reaction is confined within the universities and colleges, a response in the seventies to the sixties. Perhaps it is part of much larger political shifts in our society as a whole.

One form of the closing of ranks is a return to basics in the name of a reaffirmation of traditional humanistic values, perhaps in the name of a reaffirmation of the faith in reason of the enlightenment. This tends to be

accompanied by a rejection of 'theory' as such and in particular by a strong hostility to certain fairly recent methodological developments in Europe and America. The latter have converged to put in question the most cherished stabilities of traditional humanistic studies in the United States: the stability of the self, the coherence of story-telling, the possibility of straightforward referential language, the possibility of a definitive, unified reading of a given work, the traditional schemas of history and of literary history which have formed the bases for the structuring of curricula in the humanities, for example the objective and definable existence of literary 'periods.'

Some of the methodological innovations which have challenged the traditional bases of literary study in America are scientific or claim to be part of the so-called 'human sciences.' These would include insights about the way language works from modern linguistics, from psychology, from psychoanalysis, from anthropology, from semiotics, and from common language philosophy, Wittgenstein and his progeny. Some of these methodological innovations are ideological or have developed from recent historical pressures. An example would be the newer forms of Marxist literary criticism which are beginning to be institutionalized in America and to exert force, particularly over younger teachers. A curious and I think important fact should be noted, however. Marxist literary criticism, both in its somewhat more naïve traditional American forms and in the more sophisticated (sophisticated perhaps in the sense of 'adulterated' as well as 'wiser') newer forms influenced by semiotics, structuralism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and so on, tends, strangely enough, to join forces with that conservative reaction to affirm more or less traditional notions of history, of selfhood, of the moral function of literature, and, most of all, of its mimetic or referential status. For Marxism, literature cannot help but reflect social and historical conditions and the superstructure of ideology these have created. Marxism here joins forces with the most traditional 'humanism' against those methodological innovations I am describing.

Many of these have been imported from abroad, for example, phenomenology, structuralism, semiotics, and so-called 'deconstruction.' This is often held against them on the argument that methods brought in from old Europe cannot thrive in New World soil. Nevertheless, an internationalization in literary study is one of its most obvious features today, and this has concrete effects, for example in a tendency to weaken the departmental boundaries of the curricula devoted to national literatures. The transnational diffusion of literary theory and literary methodology occurs now more rapidly than ever before, in part because of technological developments, the rapidity of global transportation which can bring people together from all over the world for a conference anywhere in the world, electronic communication, the increased speed of translation, publication, and distribution, the improved teaching of foreign languages, at least in some schools and programs,¹ the development of international journals in the various branches of humanistic study.

The internationalization of literary study has, as I have said, generated attacks from various directions in defense of those stabilities which seem endangered. These attacks are more or less reasoned or cogent, but their existence is itself an important symptom of our current version of the problem of the ethics of reading. Whether a given anathematizing of these new developments as immoral, nihilistic, or un-American is based on an understanding of them and is a genuine going beyond the challenges they offer, or is only a coverup, a repression, can only be told by a careful study of each case. It can be said, however, that the excommunications, extraditions, or convictions of heresy seem often to take place without a careful reading of the documents involved. At least so it seems on the evidence of the inadequacy of what is often said of them: 'A wicked book they seized.' The texts of the new methodologies must be mastered before they can be discussed, no easy task, since in part they have to do with the impossibility of mastery. Most of all, the readings of particular works which are derived from these theories or from which the theories derive need to be confronted in detail. The efficacy of a theory is to be measured by its results in interpretations. A theory as such cannot be confuted in isolation, for example by deploring its presumed destructive consequences, but only by showing in detail that the readings to which it leads are inadequate or wrong, untrue to the texts. It can also be supposed that young teachers and critics are more likely to have taken genuine stock of the new methodological developments before trying to go beyond them or to return in a new way to the old verities of literary study. For better or for worse literary study in America can never be quite the same again. A difference, perhaps even a 'vast gap' has been introduced.

I propose to investigate the problem of ethics of reading in this moment of our history a little more closely. I shall do so by way of an example, though with an awareness that my example, like any other, raises the question of exemplarity or of synecdoche. Is this part an adequate sample of such a vast whole? That issue is in fact exemplified and thematized within the poem I shall discuss as well as in my use of it.

Suppose there should fall into my hands 'The Parting Hour,' a poem by George Crabbe (1754–1832) published in *Tales* (1812). Should I teach it or write about it? What will happen when I do so?

It might be said that this poem is a marginal part of the canon of English literature, even more marginal a part of Western literature as a whole. No one and no institution or curriculum force me to teach or to write about this particular poem. There may be something willful or perverse in my choice of this example. This is to some degree true of any choice of an item for a syllabus, however, and this particular poem may in fact be a good choice. If even Crabbe offers support to those who challenge the assumptions of traditional humanistic study in America, then there may be some force in the challenges.

Crabbe's place in English literary history is an honorable but relatively small one. He is seen as a writer of narratives in verse of idiosyncratic distinction. His

work moves across the transition in modes from eighteenth-century styles to verse stories by Wordsworth such as 'The Ruined Cottage.' There is a general sense that Crabbe's poems are of great interest and that he has perhaps not yet received his due. The debt of criticism to Crabbe will soon be at least partially paid off by Gavin Edwards of Saint Davids College, University of Wales. Edwards has a book on Crabbe in preparation, and my obligation to him is considerable. 'The Parting Hour,' in any case, is an admirable poem. It raises just those questions about the ethics of reading which are most my interest here and which, as I hope to indicate, are always present in literature and literary criticism in the West, for example in Aristotle's *Poetics* and Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. Crabbe's poem is a good example of the way an apparently peripheral and unproblematic example in literary studies, taken more or less at random, always turns out to raise again all the most difficult questions about literature and about literary criticism.

'The Parting Hour' opens with no less than five epigraphs from Shakespeare, about each of which there would be much to say, as well as about the fact itself of the multiplication of epigraphs. It is as though Crabbe must try over and over to find a precursor fragment which will be a solid foundation allowing him to begin telling the story he has to tell. The text proper begins with a double claim: the claim that any human life, however strange, hangs together, and the claim that any human life is therefore narratable. It can be retraced later on as a continuous story which makes sense, has a beginning, middle, and end:

Minutely traces man's life; year after year,
Through all his days let all his deeds appear,
And then, though some may in that life be strange.
Yet there appears no vast nor sudden change;
The links that bind those various deeds are seen.
And no mysterious void is left between.

(ll. 1–6)

The opposition here is between strangeness and mystery; minutely traced causal continuity on the one hand, and sudden discontinuous change on the other, across the 'void' or 'vast gap.' Though a given life may in one way or another be odd, if it is narrated with an absolute fidelity to detail it will hang together like the unbroken links of a chain. 'Minutely traced': the figure is of one image superimposed on an earlier image and following it over again, like marked tracing paper over a previously made design, tracking it again with the utmost care as one follows the spoor of a beast. This is the image latently present in the Greek word for narrative or history: *diegesis*. On the other hand, if there is any failure at all in this tracing, the life will appear not strange but utterly mysterious, unfathomable. It will be broken by the abyss of a blank. Crabbe's image for this is what happens if one juxtaposes a vignette from the early life of a person with one from his old age without tracing minutely every event between. The

opposition is between a continuous temporal line and the placing side by side of two spatial images separated by an unfilled temporal gap, like two portraits beside one another, in a diptych of 'before' and 'after'. This graphic figure of the picture or of two pictures side by side Crabbe himself uses more than once during the course of the poem:

But let these binding links be all destroy'd,
 All that through years he suffer'd or enjoy'd;
 Let that vast gap be made, and then behold –
 This was the youth, and he is thus when old;
 Then we at once the work of Time survey,
 And in an instant see a life's decay;
 Pain mix'd with pity in our bosoms rise.
 And sorrow takes new sadness from surprise.

(ll. 7–14)

This passage is curious in a number of ways. It opposes the line of the temporal continuity, within which binding links may be minutely traced, to the spatial juxtaposition, within a single instant, of two images from different times of a man's life. The two are separated by the blank of the temporal gap. The continuous narrative is by implication appeasing to the mind. It gives calm understanding, since the rationale of the movement of the person from here to there, from youth to old age, is all exposed. No gap for surprise and shock is left. On the other hand, the sudden exposure, across the gap, of the difference between youth and old age produces pain, pity, sorrow, a sadness generated by surprise. The terminology closely approximates that of Aristotle in the *Poetics* if we can understand 'pain' to involve some fear for ourselves as well as pity for the degradation exposed in the juxtaposition of the two pictures: 'This was the youth, and he is thus when old.' The same elements as those in Aristotle are present but apparently in a crisscross relationship, a chiasmus. In Aristotle's theory of tragedy it is the blinding revelation, the recognition (*anagnorisis*) of the links of connection binding apparently dispersed data together which produces the pity and fear appropriate to tragedy, for example in Oedipus' discovery that he has fulfilled the oracles, killed his father, and married his mother. For Crabbe, it is the vision of a non-connection, the confrontation of an unbridgeable gap, which produces these emotions, while the demonstration, by a careful retracing, of all the links of connection is appeasing. It abolishes mystery and satisfies the mind's need for rational understanding.

The chiasmus, however, is only apparent. After all, the Aristotelean recognition and reversal, showing how everything fatally hangs together and bringing the tragic hero down, not only produces pity and fear but also effects the catharsis of these emotions. This catharsis is a transformation or transport turning the painful emotions of pity and fear into the pleasure appropriate to a successful *mimesis*. This transport, as S. H. Butcher long ago recognized in his brilliant essay

on the *Poetics* (1951, 113–407; see especially ‘The Function of Tragedy,’ 240–73), is in effect a metaphor turning this into that or carrying this over to that, renaming pain as pleasure. The image of the ship is of course one of Aristotle’s basic metaphors in the *Poetics*. It serves not only as an example of metaphor but implicitly as a metaphor of metaphor. The same metaphor is woven into the text of his prime example of tragedy, *Oedipus the King*. It appears in the recurrent image of all the citizens of Thebes as frightened passengers on a ship steered, for better or for worse, by Oedipus. The chorus of Theban priests and citizens, all the citizens of Thebes, the actual audience in Athens watching Sophocles’ play, all those who have read it or seen it or tried to translate it, down through Hölderlin and Freud to readers and interpreters of today, are carried by the ship, the vehicle Oedipus steers. We are taken where he takes us, in the tragic transport of our witness of the self-blinded hero at the end. We are, strangely, the tenor of that vehicle, the subject of the metaphor. We are what is carried over by it.

Where we are carried we know: ‘How can we ever find the track of ancient guilt now hard to read?’ (*Oedipus the King*, ll. 108–9; trans. Gould 1970, 29). Oedipus is the type of the successful interpreter. He reads the various riddles and oracles right, puts two and two together to make a coherent story, the continuous track of a *diegesis*. He is so strongly motivated to obtain at any expense a rational understanding, an absolutely perspicuous vision of the whole line from here to there, that he is willing (or forced by his interpreter’s zeal) to convict himself of the most terrible of crimes, parricide and incest, in order to preserve the values of clear and complete seeing through. These are just the values Aristotle says a good tragedy offers its spectators. The beast whose spoor he follows is himself, but only if he follows the track wherever it leads can full enlightenment take place, the audience be purged of pity and fear, the land of Thebes be freed from Apollo’s plague.

In Aristotle’s theory of tragedy, in *Oedipus the King* itself, and in the narrative theory proposed by Crabbe at the beginning of ‘The Parting Hour,’ the unbroken causal continuity of the plot is the necessary means of a transport which transforms pain into pleasure by giving full knowledge. The pleasure of *mimesis*, or what Crabbe calls minute tracing, is both for Aristotle and for Crabbe the pleasure of learning the truth about what is imitated. It is also the pleasure of rhythm or of the harmonious hanging together of the elements of the work. Crabbe in the opening lines of ‘The Parting Hour’ implicitly affirms all Aristotle says in Section VII of the *Poetics* (1450 b 22–1451 a 15) about the primacy of plot. Plot is the soul of the work. For both, a good work should be like a living organism, with no discontinuities and nothing present which does not form part of an unbroken whole. It should have a beginning, a causally linked middle, an end, and an underlying ground or unifying soul binding all together and making it live. It should have a sufficient magnitude, ‘a length,’ as Aristotle says, ‘which can be easily embraced by the memory,’ so that it is ‘perspicuous’ (Butcher

1951, 33). The efficacy of a *mimesis* depends on our being able to see through it, to hold it all in our memory, or to 'embrace [it] in one view' (33): 'the beginning and the end must be capable of being brought within a single view' (91). This is just what Crabbe says in his emphasis on the need to see all the links that bind the various deeds of a man's life.

Crabbe's poem, Aristotle's *Poetics*, and Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* as interpreted by Aristotle are all versions of a certain system of concepts, figures, and narratives which have recurred in different ways throughout our history. That system includes just those assumptions about the continuity of selfhood, determinate univocal meaning in literary works, the sovereignty of reason, and the coherence of the march of history which, as I began by saying, seem most endangered by those methodologies imported from abroad. Crabbe's 'The Parting Hour' states those assumptions with elegant economy in its opening lines. It presents itself as a promise to fulfill once more these millennial claims for the possibility of a narrative coherence. These are based on the necessary though sometimes hidden coherence of each man's or woman's life from one end of it to the other.

Are the claims paid off, the promise fulfilled, the debt discharged, by the story Crabbe then tells? By no means. What happens, rather, is that the more the story-teller or his protagonist try to fill in all the gaps by a careful retracing, the more they discover that inexplicable gaps remain. The continuity of the story line and of the life is suspended, the line pulverized into static moments which do not hang together, like a rope of sand. Once the apparently innocent fissure of a parting hour has been inserted, the continuity can never be reestablished.

About the details of Crabbe's poem there would be much to say. Only an opening toward a full interpretation can be made here. Like others of Crabbe's narratives, 'The Parting Hour' is a poem about thwarted or inhibited sexual desire. It is almost, one might say, the Oedipus story in reverse. It is the story of a man who does not marry the woman he loves because of a bar which is, metaphorically at least, that of consanguinity. Though Allen Booth and Judith Flemming are of different families in their village, they have loved one another almost like brother and sister as children and, as Gavin Edwards says, there is some vaguely Oedipal taboo opposed by the parents on either side against their marriage. In their old age they live together in a relation shown as entirely innocent sexually. She cherishes him in his feeble state as mother, sister, wife, though she is none of these. She is connected even more closely to him, in a nameless proximity or alliance, across the gap of their permanent difference and distance from one another: 'No wife, nor sister she, nor is the name / Nor kindred of this friendly pair the same; / Yet so allied are they, that few can feel / Her constant, warm, unwearied, anxious zeal' (ll. 18–21). 'Few can feel her . . . zeal' – this seems to mean both that few people can experience anything like the strength of her feelings for him and that few people are so lucky as he in being the recipient of such zealous care.

'The Parting Hour' begins its narration proper with a reverse diptych. Not 'This was the youth, and he is thus when old', but first Allen Booth in old age, cared for by Judith ('Beneath you tree, observe an ancient pair –' [l. 15]), and then, in abrupt juxtaposition, Allen Booth as a child ('To David Booth, his fourth and last-born boy, / Allen his name, was more than common joy' [ll. 32–3]). The rest of the poem then attempts to fill in the void between the two pictures by showing the binding links joining the deeds between.

This attempt conspicuously fails. The way it fails turns on just that opposition, so important already in Aristotle, between what is conspicuous or perspicuous, what is theatrical, what can be seen or seen through, so that time becomes space, the diachronic synchronic, and, on the other hand, what can be told or narrated in a minute tracing which retains its diachronic sequentiality, like the links of a chain, one following another. Such a claim may be seen or seen through only metaphorically, as when one says. 'I see it all now.' The words 'prospect,' 'prospects,' 'picture,' 'feature,' and 'scene' echo through the poem. These words keep before the reader the visual image for understanding. To understand is to read a picture. The poem demonstrates, however, that all the attempts by the poet-narrator and by the hero to bring into the light of clear-seeing the continuity of his life only makes more evident the gaps within it. These make his life not like a picture but like a sentence of faulty grammar, an anacoluthon beginning with one person or tense and shifting suddenly and unaccountably to another. The hour during which Allen Booth parts from his beloved on the beach and fares forth by ship to seek his fortune so that he may marry her inserts a void between them and within his life which can never be filled by any retrospective narration. His subsequent betrayal of Judith and of his community by marrying a Spanish Catholic maiden, fathering Catholic children, and converting to Catholicism only reaffirms the betrayal which occurred when he parted from Judith in the first place. Once he has left her he can never return to her and never return to himself, nor can he explain how he came to differ from himself, how he came to betray both Judith and himself;

They parted, thus by hope and fortune led,
 And Judith's hours in pensive pleasure fled;
 But when return'd the youth? – the youth no more
 Return'd exulting to his native shore;
 But forty years were past, and then there came
 A worn-out man with wither'd limbs and lame . . .
 (ll. 181–6)

Two of Crabbe's four epigraphs from Shakespeare, chosen with admirable insight, provide models for this discontinuity. The first is from Imogen's speech in *Cymbeline*, I: 3. It opposes a 'parting kiss' as the jointure between two words to the abrupt intervention of her father: 'ere I could / Give him that parting kiss, which I had set / Betwixt two charming words – comes in my father.' A 'parting

kiss' is an oxymoron combining joining and separation. The entrance of the father only anticipates the separation the kiss would have signalled, just as the loving separation of Allen and Judith is imposed by their parents' disapproval. They cannot marry until he has a fortune. Once something which does not fit the sequence has been inserted between two words, even a parting kiss, the grammar of the sentence of which they are part can never be satisfactorily completed. The sentence becomes a failure in following, which is the etymological meaning of the word *anacoluthon*.

In the second epigraph, from *Comedy of Errors*, V: 1, Aegeon tells how 'careful hours with Time's deformed hand / Have written strange defeatures in my face,' just as time changes Allen Booth from hopeful youth of fair prospects into an old man in no recognizable way like his former self. Far from being that principle of irresistible force making for form, for continuity, and guaranteeing them, as Crabbe's opening lines promise, time is for Crabbe, as for Shakespeare, a deforming power making things differ from themselves. The figure for this is the changes in a face, its 'defeating,' in Shakespeare's use of a word of which this is the first example in the *OED*. The word shifts the understanding of a face from a visual image to an image of reading. This parallels the clash between picture and story, scene and narrative, theater and discourse, in Crabbe's poem. The face is not an image to see but a set of signs or features, a written text to decipher. The distinctive feature of the text written by time on a face is its unreadability, its disconnection from itself, its discontinuity with itself, its defeating. Allen Booth tries in vain, when he returns to his native shore after forty years' exile, 'to trace / Some youthful features in some aged face' (ll. 221–2).

Time for man is not a natural or organic continuity, nor is it ever a picture which can be seen at a single glance. Time for man is always experienced as some kind of sign, as a track to be followed, a line to be retraced, a face with features to be read. This means that time is always experienced as an incongruous repetition. It is experienced as a picture with gaps or as two pictures side by side which cannot be reconciled. This means also, as Crabbe's story-teller and his protagonist find out, discovering those gaps, discontinuities, incongruities, and incoherences which are intrinsic to any repetitive structure of signs. When one tries to retrace the line it never can be made to hang together. Far from doing what he promises at the beginning, showing the continuity of a life, all Crabbe's story-teller's efforts only make the 'mysterious void[s] . . . between' more evident. His narration presents discontinuous vignettes rather than a continuous chain of events. There is no way to explain how or why Allen Booth came to differ from himself, why he married someone else, abjured his faith, failed to come back sooner, postponing from day to day and year to year the reunion that would heal the gap opened by the parting hour.

The temporal structure of 'The Parting Hour' is strange enough. First the narrator presents the 'ancient pair' beneath the tree. Next he leaps back to Allen Booth's childhood and the events leading up to his parting from Judith

Flemming. Then he leaps forward forty years to Allen's return and to his attempt to pick up again the continuity of his life by returning to Judith. This he can do only if he can satisfactorily account for the intervening years and bring the past up to the present.

The narrative responsibility at this point shifts to Allen himself. He is shown compulsively telling his story over and over to Judith, 'running it through' in the phrase from Othello's narration of his life to Desdemona Crabbe uses as his fourth epigraph (*Othello*, I: 3). Allen tells his story repeatedly in a hopeless attempt to get it right, to justify himself in his eyes and hers. The key term for this narration is the word 'relate'. It is a word for connection, for telling, and for family tie. The signal of the temporal incoherence of his 'relation' is the shift back and forth between the past tense and the historical present. Only if his narrative can turn the past sequence of events into a present simultaneous possession can the relation succeed, but this can never happen, and so his relation vibrates between the two tenses, and must be repeated over and over without any hope of ever succeeding: 'To her, to her alone, his various fate, / At various times, 'tis comfort to relate' (ll. 309–10); 'First he related . . .' (l. 313); 'He next related . . .' (l. 372); 'Here his relation closes . . .' (l. 434). Far from connecting the past to the present by a minute tracing of the intervening events, Allen only succeeds in bringing himself back to a present in which he is two persons, the faithful husband of his Spanish wife Isabel, father of her children, and at the same time the faithful fiancé of Judith. Whichever way he turns he must betray one or the other of them. Each is the dream which makes the other impossible as waking reality, and so his selfhood, his 'life,' is irrevocably divided, parted from itself. With that parting goes any hope of a coherent narrative with beginning, middle, and end:

. . . how confused and troubled all appear'd;
 His thoughts in past and present scenes employ'd,
 All views in future blighted and destroy'd:
 His were a medley of bewild'ring themes,
 Sad as realities, and wild as dreams.

(ll. 429–33)

Separated from his origin by his betrayal of his childhood love, Allen has no certain prospects or views toward the future. He can only hope for the 'little earth' Cardinal Wolsey asks for in the passage from *Henry VIII* (IV: 2) Crabbe uses as his fifth epigraph to the poem. Allen Booth returns to 'his native bay / Willing his breathless form should blend with kindred clay' (ll. 189–90). The old folk of his native village say, 'The man is Allen Booth, and it appears / He dwelt among us in his early years; / We see the name engraved upon the stones, / Where this poor wanderer means to lay his bones' (ll. 279–82). Only when Allen Booth is a dead body buried in a little plot of earth, a tombstone over his head with a single name engraved on it joining him to his family already buried

there, can he be related enough to himself to be joined to anything or to anyone else without danger of parting from it or from her. He can be indissolubly wedded only to the 'kindred clay.'

'The Parting Hour' ends where it began, with the aged Allen Booth sleeping under a tree watched over by the unwearied care of his beloved Judith. Far from being an unequivocal ending tying Allen Booth's life together, this picture, the reader now knows, is the image of Allen Booth's disconnection from himself, as he dreams of his Spanish wife and children in the presence of the loving Judith whom he cannot help but betray as long as he is still alive. The poem ends with his waking from his dreams of Isabel to face Judith and cry, 'My God! 'twas but a dream' (l. 473).

'The Parting Hour' provides one striking image for this failure of narrative continuity. Allen is exiled for heresy from the Spanish colony where he has married and prospered. While he is poor no one pays any attention to him, but when he is wealthy they notice him and single him out for punishment:

Alas! poor Allen, through his wealth was seen
Crimes that by poverty conceal'd had been;
Faults that in dusty pictures rest unknown
Are in an instant through the varnish shown.

(ll. 361–4)

It was lack of money which drove Allen away from England in the first place. If he had had enough of it he could have married Judith and maintained his continuity with himself and with his sworn fidelity to Judith. Money in the first life of Allen Booth stands for the missing principle of coherence. In his second life, however, when money is obtained it becomes the instrument of discontinuity, separating him forever from Isabel, from his children, and from his second self. The figure Crabbe uses seems an especially striking one when the use of the image of the 'picture' elsewhere in the poem as a metaphor of a given state of a man's life is remembered. The attempt to varnish over a dirty picture only brings out its 'faults.' 'Faults' – the word recalls 'gaps' and 'void' in the opening of the poem. Varnish may be taken as a figure for narrative, for the attempt to relate one thing to another in a sequential discourse. This attempt at varnishing over only brings out its impossibility. It reveals unbridgeable gaps, like geological faults in a terrain. Crabbe's 'The Parting Hour,' in its attempt to fulfill its promise of being able to show how a life hangs together, reveals the impossibility of fulfilling this promise. Any attempt to do so is a coverup, a varnishing over. This infallibly betrays the hiatuses it tries to obscure.

'The Parting Hour,' almost in spite of itself, deconstructs two of those cherished certainties of humanist literary study, the continuity of the self and the organic continuity of narrative from beginning to middle to end. It might be claimed that the poem is an aberration among those by its author or among those of its period, but this could be shown not to be the case. One need only

think of the doubts raised about the unity of the self and about the cohesion of time by Locke, Diderot, or Hume, or in their different ways, by Rousseau and Wordsworth, to recognize that Crabbe's poem is a miniature version of one of the distinctive features of Pre-romanticism and Romanticism. This feature is the copresence of a powerful affirmation of the system of metaphysical assumptions of which Greek thought was one version, along with an equally powerful disarticulation of that system. This double affirmation and denial, tying and untying, in fact characterizes our own moment as I began by describing it. Without denying that there have been vast gaps and new beginnings both in linguistic history and in cultural history, this affirmation and denial may by hypothesis be said to form the unity in disunity of any 'period' in Western intellectual and literary history, even that of the Greeks. The distinctiveness of any historical period, 'the Renaissance,' 'Romanticism,' 'Modernism,' or whatever, lies in its special combination of certain recurring elements rather than in its introduction of anything unheard of before. The gaps and discontinuities making linguistic and cultural history a vast anacoluthon are within each synchronic expression, making it heterogeneous, as well as in the diachronic movement from one expression to another.

[. . .]

Beginning with an apparently marginal or innocuous example, Crabbe's 'The Parting Hour,' I have been led to recognize that in this poem the system of assumptions about selfhood, history, and literary form I began by describing is both affirmed and dismantled. If one should dare to extrapolate from this example, one might formulate this hypothetically as a general law for all texts in our tradition. If this law holds, then the conflict at this moment in American literary study between conservatives and deconstructors is only the latest example of a recurrent pattern in Western literature and literary criticism. If this should be the case, what then follows for 'the ethics of reading'?

Two related provisional hypotheses about this may be briefly made in conclusion. The first is that neither the challenges to traditional humanistic certainties in contemporary American criticism nor the defensively aggressive reaffirmation of those certainties is willful, malicious, or blindly ignorant, nor is either something unique to our epoch, some unheard of nihilism, the 'end of man,' in one case, or a 'new humanism' special to these far Western shores, in the other. Each position repeats operations of writing and reading which have recurred throughout our history. The perhaps necessary error or blindness of either is not to recognize the necessity of the other.

The second conclusion is embodied in that word 'necessity.' Both sorts of reading are necessitated by the words of the texts they treat. This means that reading is always an epistemological necessity before it is a matter of ethical choice or evaluation. More radically, it means that the ethics of reading is subject to a categorical imperative which is linguistic rather than transcendent or a matter of subjective will. Epistemology must take precedence over ethics in

reading. One cannot make ethical judgments, perform ethical actions, such as teaching a poem, without first subjecting oneself to the words on the page, but once that has happened, the ethical operation will already necessarily have taken place. As Hölderlin says, in a phrase quoted by Paul de Man in a recent essay, *Es ereignet sich aber das Wahre*. As de Man says, this can be freely translated, 'What is true is what is bound to take place,' which means that 'reading . . . has to go against the grain of what one would want to happen in the name of what has to happen' (de Man 1978, xi). A reading is true as an acute angle is true to its model, or as one voice or word is true to another voice or word. The ethics of reading is not some act of the human will to interpretation which extracts moral themes from a work, or uses it to reaffirm what the reader already knows, or imposes a meaning freely in some process of reader response or perspectivist criticism, seeing the text in a certain way. The ethics of reading is the power of the words of the text over the mind and words of the reader. This is an irresistible coercion which shapes what the reader or teacher says about the text, even when what he says is most reductive or evasive. *Es ereignet sich aber das Wahre*. The ethics of reading is the moral necessity to submit in one way or another, whatever one says, to the truth of this linguistic imperative.

Note

1. The recent statistics are appalling enough. In 1964 only one high school student in four studied a foreign language. Now the ratio has dropped to one in seven. In 1966, thirty-four percent of American colleges required a foreign language for admission. Now only eight percent do. (*The New York Times*, Saturday, 10 November 1979.) Nevertheless, the techniques of teaching foreign languages have greatly improved in America, and some students, in public as well as in private high schools, are given excellent foreign language training.